

Lead Like the Mouse

By Russell Clayton

Learn about some of “the Disney difference” techniques that independent garden centers can apply to their stores.

From an early age on through my teenage years, I have fond memories of making the drive with my family from our central Alabama home to the vacation capital of the world. I always looked forward to our annual family trip to Walt Disney World in Florida because there was always something new to see and old favorites to revisit.

From an early age, I realized that Disney did things differently — a good kind of different. Throughout my childhood, we would go to other amusement parks and vacation spots, but I could always tell “the Disney difference” during our Disney vacations.

These childhood trips made such a positive impression on me that I now take my own family to Disney parks on a regular basis. Our visits these days are filled with princess meet and greets, attractions like It’s a Small World and the Frozen Sing-Along Celebration, and crowd favorite Dole Whip ice cream — all favorites of my two daughters.

I still notice the Disney difference during each of our visits, but now I tend to see it with my “college professor” and “workshop facilitator” hats on, noticing practices Disney uses (many of which are common sense yet often overlooked in business) to create quality service and engaged employees.

Doing so allows me to share some of what makes Disney so great with the attendees at workshops I facilitate. I’ve shared these Disney best practices with groups ranging from an international steel company to a university in Canada, and now I am scheduled to share this information at Cultivate’20

this July during my session “Lead Like the Mouse: Using Disney Best Practices to Impact Your Organization.”

The Disney Secret

So what is it that Disney does so well? One of the things is Disney’s amazing attention to detail. Walt Disney himself referred to this as “plussing,” an attraction in his first theme park, Disneyland. To Walt, plussing something meant attention to detail with an eye on quality.

One of the most often used examples of him plussing something is related to the early years of Disneyland’s existence. Not only did Walt want to hold a Christmas parade, but he wanted to hold a \$350,000 parade! (That’s over \$3 million in today’s money!) Of course, his financial advisors tried to convince him not to spend this amount of money on a parade, noting that “no one is expecting it” to happen. Walt’s response was that Disneyland should do the expensive parade precisely because no one is expecting it.

Does this mean we need to spend tons of money “plussing” our business? Not necessarily. There are many, many examples of attention to detail that Disney parks and resorts “guests” see on a daily basis that are not nearly as extravagant as a million-dollar parade.

Two small, but impactful, examples of Disney’s attention to detail are on the floors of the Magic Kingdom. The first is the presence of bear claw marks on the wooden floors to the entry of the Country Bear Jamboree show. The backstory

is that the bears were so excited to get into the show that their claws scratched up the wood floors. Another example is in front of Tony's Town Square Restaurant, themed after the hit "Lady & The Tramp" animated movie. In front of the steps leading up to the restaurant, guests may notice a heart drawn in the cement with both Lady and Tramp's paw prints in the middle.

Cast Members' (Disneyspeak for employees) common purpose is to "create happiness."

Details in the Garden Center

How does this attention to detail translate to your garden center? Do you decide to plus the in-store experience so that you create a lasting memory for your customers that a big-box store cannot? Is there something subtle, yet impactful, that your garden center can do to stand out in a crowded marketplace?

Another Disney best practice is providing highly intentional training for their Cast Members (Disneyspeak for employees) that clues them into their common purpose for working at Disney — and that purpose is to "create happiness."

Recently, I went in search of a large planter along with some greenery to go in it. My green thumb is non-existent, so I went to a local garden center, where I assumed I would get better advice compared to a big-box retailer. I was right. The employee who assisted me treated me like I was the most important person on property that day and asked several questions about where I would put the greenery and how often it would be in the sunlight.

She treated me as if she were the owner of the store and I was her most important customer. However, she was not the owner (I asked her). But it was clear that she wanted me to be happy with both my purchase and my experience at the store. I cannot help but think that is a function of her training. 🌸

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Editor's note: As this issue was going to press, Russell Clayton was originally scheduled to present "Lead Like the Mouse: Using Disney Best Practices to Impact Your Organization" at Cultivate'20 in July. With the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) situation, please check www.cultivateevent.org for the latest scheduling info on the virtual event.

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