



Liz Lark-Riley is the managing director of Rockledge Gardens.

Photos by Danielle Taufer.

# The Secret to Keeping Promises

Learn about the practices that Rockledge Gardens uses to authentically support, empower and educate its staff at Cultivate'22.

By Liz Lark-Riley

I was at a restaurant with a friend and she mentioned that she had never waited tables. She said, “When you first start working it seems like you either go the restaurant route or the retail route and I went the retail route.” She may be onto something; I most definitely went the restaurant route ... which is why it’s amusing that now, several years into my career, I’m in retail.

Through my teens and 20s, I loved waiting tables while I was studying and working in theater. I loved the tips, I loved the pace and I loved the people. At age 21, I could honestly say I was living my best life when I had a full section and was involved in several budding relationships with multiple tables of diners at once. I’d leave work with a purse full of cash and a smile on my face, proud of myself for juggling everything and energized by all the interactions with people.

## Taking the Retail Route

When I was hired at Rockledge Gardens in my early 30s, it was the very first time I had ever worked at a retail establishment (and I immediately managed to turn it into a service industry gig for myself with an intense focus on events).

In my current role as managing director, I see it as my job to make sure that my team can honestly say that they are living their best life at work and that they can leave feeling proud of themselves and what they are learning as well as energized by the interactions they have with each other and our guests.

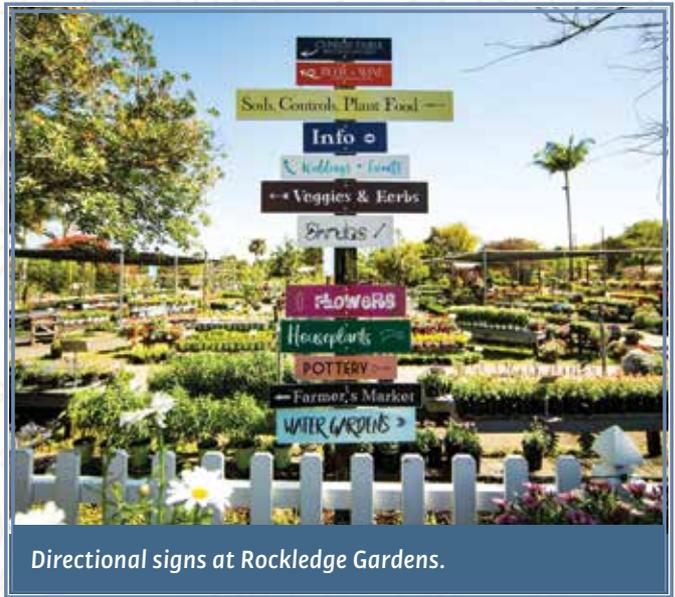
Following a discussion with AmericanHort’s Community Connectors about customer service, the amazing Tammy Behm (owner of Maypop Coffee & Garden Shop) pointed out that we retailers can learn a lot from the restaurant industry

Liz Lark-Riley’s presentation, “The Secret to Keeping Promises: Customer Service 101 for Garden Retailers,” is scheduled for **1-2 p.m. on Sunday, July 17.**

when it comes to customer service. That’s when I shot my hand in the air and volunteered to share what I know about customer service at Cultivate’22.

**Making Magic**

Currently on Google, Rockledge Gardens has an average rating of 4.7 out of 5 stars from 465 reviews. Nearly all the positive reviews mention our staff in some way: “Staff were beyond helpful and an absolute pleasure to work with!” and “Very friendly staff and willing to help & answer all my questions. Highly recommended.” And my personal favorite: “This place is magical. I have been going here for 26 years. As a child with my mom and now as an adult.” And though that last one doesn’t specifically mention staff, it is clear to me that our team is responsible for making the magic this guest feels at our store.



*Directional signs at Rockledge Gardens.*

Fostering a staff that creates magic for our guests is rooted in supportive management practices. Our customer service secret sauce goes beyond scripts and pleasantries. Its foundation is an intentional company-wide culture based on support, education, candor and kindness. Maya Angelou famously said: “... people will forget what you said but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Customer service can create powerful emotions in your guests —



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Lark-Riley says Rockledge's company-wide culture is based on support, education, candor and kindness.

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both positive and negative. We have an opportunity through service to develop fierce advocates among our customers while at the same time growing our skills and feelings of satisfaction in our work.

**Back to Basics**

I recently had the opportunity to present on the topic of customer service with AmericanHort for its “Back to Basics: Retail Team Training Essentials” webinar. This was aimed at every team member from cashiers to loaders to sales associates and included the tenets of my personal customer service philosophy: 1) The customer is always human. 2) We are healers and solvers. 3) Make it personal ... but don't take it personally. We'll get into this a bit at Cultivate, too. But unlike the team training, my session at Cultivate, “The Secret to Keeping Promises,” is aimed at decision-makers because, for truly memorable and effective customer service, the team must be empowered and supported by leaders.

I'm beyond excited to share the practices that we use at Rockledge Gardens to authentically support, empower and educate our staff, as well as how we organize our service resources to make them user-friendly and helpful to our guests throughout their gardening journey. But don't worry, I'll also be sharing some easy anybody-can-do-this-right tips and takeaways too. I can't wait to see everyone at Cultivate! 🌊

*Liz Lark-Riley is the managing director of Rockledge Gardens in Rockledge, Florida.*