

Do Customers See You as You See Yourself?

It's human nature. We want our customers to see our operations, our marketing and our image through the same set of eyes that we see ourselves. But there's an old adage that says, "you can't see the forest for the trees," meaning sometimes we're too close to

the situation to view ourselves objectively.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter one iota how we want the consumer to view us. It's all about how the customer views or perceives us, not only in terms of looking solely at who we are, but more importantly, in terms of their comparison of

us versus all other retailers and sales venues — including our locally-owned garden center and big box competitors, and any other business competing for the disposable income of the consumer.

It's human nature. When I was a retail executive, I'd take my store teams to walk the competition, and we'd look at the images and operational activities as individual components. We'd look at the condition of the parking lot, the maintenance of the exterior of the facility, the front check out displays, the quality and maintenance of the inventory (especially the live goods), the ways and types of fixtures used to display the products, the signage and educational materials, and the number and quality of the staffing. Then we'd compare these elements to our own stores. But when I objectively looked at what we were doing, we were always more critical of the competition than we were of ourselves and what we were doing. We tended to offer excuses as to why we weren't doing things as well as our competitors.

And then I had one of my many epiphanies. I came to the realization that what I personally liked or disliked really didn't matter. What was important was what the consumer, the one who voted with their hard earned dollars, liked or disliked. And this changed my whole perspective of what was important and, even more critical, what was not important in the customer's eyes.

Looking at things from a consumer's perspective, I recognized there was a major disconnect between what we were focused on and what the consumer was really looking for; this realization was the major impetus for us to change what we did and why we did it, resulting in dramatically improved customer response and increased sales.

You've heard me and others talk about the need to become relevant to the consumer. And today's consumer is far different from that of just a few years ago. What they buy, why they buy it, what motivates them to buy, where they buy and how they want to communicate are all major elements that we need to understand. Once we understand, we need to adapt to become relevant to the consumer's needs, wants and desires. And because the consumer is ever-changing, we need to anticipate and be positioned to change with them in the future.

For example, there's a disconnect between

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what we're selling and what the consumer is buying. Most garden centers, both locally owned and mass market, are still selling plants. But what the customer — especially that huge potential younger generation that doesn't have a lot of experience with our industry's offerings — is buying are solutions, satisfaction and success.

Our customer is buying lifestyle and quality of life enhancements, and plants can be a means of delivering this. But if our competitive value proposition is based on price and we don't do everything possible to make the consumer successful and satisfied with their experience in your store and, even more importantly, after they get the product home and planted, then we've made a one-time sale and lost the potential to build lifetime value with that customer.

If we don't do everything we can to ensure their total success and satisfaction with their purchase, the best case scenario is they don't come back to our store and we've just driven them down the street to one of your garden center/big box competitors. Worst case is we lose that customer to another industry that does a better job of meeting the customer's needs.

The consumer has too many product choices to spend their money on, and they'll quickly seek out and find the product and venue that deliver relevancy with them and not look back.

So, we've talked a bit about the relevancy of our product to the consumer's lifestyle, but relevancy has a second dimension: relevancy to your garden center. What are the compelling reasons the consumer should shop your store instead of the big box around the corner? What do you offer in services, product, education, facilities, product display or guarantees that your competition doesn't? What messages are you sending and how are you communicating so it appeals to your existing and potential customers?

In my not so humble opinion, building and maintaining relevancy for the product and services you offer, as well as for you as a retailer, is the first step to connecting with your consumer. The next step is to create excitement and believability, or more appropriately, authenticity.

Sometimes we don't give the consumer enough credit for being discerning, for being able to read between the lines and separate the real from the BS. Simply stated, we need to not only talk the talk, we must walk the talk!

For example, if you talk about your brand image as being high service and high quality in your advertising and promotional materials, and customers don't see or feel this when they come through your front door, they will conclude that you are not being authentic, or true to your core values.

Authenticity means delivering on the expectations you've established in the consumers' minds. And only you can determine what these expectations are. As long as you consistently live up them, that's okay.

For instance, the expectation or brand promise for Kmart is low-price focused, low service, and limited assortments. The consumer understands what they stand for and, as long as Kmart delivers on this level of expectations, there's no disconnect in the consumer's mind. Likewise, Nordstroms has established a significantly higher level of expectation and brand promise, and the



Stan Pohmer



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experience the Nordstroms customer has must be consistent with this high level of expectation or they feel disappointed.

It's sometimes hard to look at things through a different set of eyes and with someone else's mindset, but we need to be brutally honest with ourselves if we want to build relevancy with consumers and earn their trust by being authentic and walking our talk.

Human nature is that we want everyone to see and believe what we see through our own eyes, but you are not your customer! You might need to ask a trusted friend for candid comments and feedback, or conduct a blind focus group. Ask a business class at a local college to take this on as a class project or challenge your employees to give you feedback, maybe anonymously, so you can get a more

objective picture.

At the end of the day, it's all about meeting the consumer needs, wants and desires, and delivering the solutions, satisfaction and success they're looking for. The closer you can get in sync with the way your customers think and their expectations, the better relevancy and authenticity you can achieve.

Sometimes the truth hurts and you might not like what you hear, but it will make you stronger!... **LGR**

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group in Minnetonka, Minn. He can be reached at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com or 952.545.7943.

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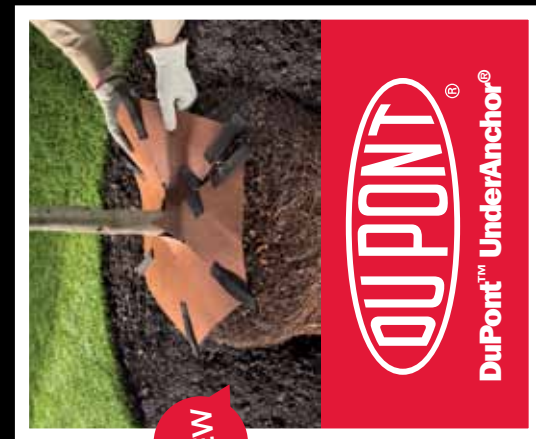
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