

Passion: Is it Working For or Against You?



By Stan Pohmer

Passion (n.) — any powerful or compelling emotions or feelings; the emotions as distinguished from reason.

In the past six weeks, I've attended a number of state and national horticulture seminars, trade shows and conventions. And from each one of them, I came away with a renewed recognition that the people who are an integral part of the fabric of our industry are almost fanatically passionate about what they do and the product they work with every day.

If you asked the attendees at these events why they do what they do, I can almost guarantee you'd hear responses like, "I love the science of growing," "I love the nature of it, being part of watching and nurturing a seed or plug and seeing it mature" or "I love to manage the process of production."

I'd also wager that most garden center owners and managers would say that it wasn't their desire to run a business or provide solutions to their customers' needs that drove them to this career; rather, they wanted a way to become and stay involved in some way with plants or share their passion for the plants, trees and flowers with customers.

The management books say to find your passion first, then find a job or career that allows you to enjoy and apply it. And it's abundantly clear that the people in our industry have done just that! When properly channeled, passion can be a positive tool and motivator, especially when shared.

Strike a balance between following your passion and managing your business, so that you make good and better business decisions.

Share the Love

Think for a moment of the tremendous sales opportunity that would arise if we instill our own passion and excitement for our product in our customers. Excitement is contagious, and customers respond to seeing it in others by getting more personally involved with that product or activity. And once they "catch the fever," they become more loyal as they move from the transactional relationship — focused on simply buying stuff — to the development of a relationship with you and the products you sell. They no longer buy just trees, plants and flowers; they're buying a lifestyle, solutions and an opportunity to be more involved for psychological, emotional and physiological reasons.

These "converted" consumers will visit your garden center more frequently, looking for new, different products and the opportunity to become more involved, and to interact with people who share their passion. And these converts become public advocates of you and our industry's products, spreading our positive message by word of mouth, the most powerful form of credible advertising.

Though we readily share our passion with our peers — as evidenced at trade shows or conventions — how many of us communicate this same passion with our customers, where it really has the opportunity to count financially? How many of us look for ways to express our passion in one-on-one customer interactions, the words we use in our signage or ads, or in the way we present and display our products, especially the new and unique? Is it because we're afraid of appearing overexuberant or overzealous? The reality is that most customers don't develop passion or excitement on their own or through osmosis; they need to catch it from others, to see examples they want to emulate. If you want your customers to become more passionate, it's up to you to show them the way! And don't fear that by sharing your passion, you'll deplete your own reserves: Passion is a renewable resource you can never run out of!

That said, I want to share two caveats with you regarding passion.

Passion Can Be Taught

First, do you hire garden center staff because they share your passion for our product or for their customer service skills? We constantly hear that one of the key factors that motivates customers to shop at local businesses instead of megaretailers is better customer service, yet in general, the expectations for good customer service are decreasing. As the boxes become better and more competitive with the independent garden centers in terms of assortment and presentation (and they already have the price advantage), one of the biggest differentiating areas that we still have is in customer service.

My experience is that it's far easier and more effective to hire someone with exceptional customer service and sales skills, and then teach them about the product, than it is to hire a passionate, product-knowledgeable individual and then try to teach them to deal with and sell to customers. And fear not, as you teach the customer specialist superstar about the product and

show your excitement, it won't be long before they catch your fever — and then you end up with the best of both worlds, an individual who is passionate about both your customers and our product!

Don't Get Crazy

My second caveat is to distinguish between the two types of passion: positive passion and blind passion. What we've discussed so far in this article is positive passion,

and I hope you see the benefits of sharing it with your customers to help develop relationships with them and get them more involved in our products.

As noted in the definition in the

headline above, passion can also be viewed as emotions as distinguished from reason, and when the emotions overtake reason or good judgment, it becomes blind passion. As I mentioned earlier, from what I see, your passion is for the product and not for the business of running a business; too often, we view the mundane yet essential tasks of inventory management or reading and reacting to balance sheets and other financial reports as getting in the way of us following our product passion. But we sometimes fail to consider that unless we operate profitable businesses, we can potentially lose the opportunity to follow our product passion.

If we allow blind passion to cloud sound business judgment and make less than objective and rational business decisions, it can have devastating impacts. Blind passion and being overly optimistic individually can be problems; when both are in play at the same time, it can be disastrous, especially in today's challenging economic environment.

I'm not suggesting that you become less passionate about the reasons most of you came into and stay in our industry or to suggest the impossible for most, that you develop a second passion for managing your business. What I am suggesting is that you learn to strike the right balance between following your passion and managing your business, so that you make good and better business decisions.

The people in our industry are more passionate than I've seen in any other industry, and that's a tremendous advantage we have in the marketplace — if we channel it wisely. Positive passion is an extremely powerful force when harnessed and leveraged, but blind passion can be detrimental to good decision making.

Passion: Make it work for you, not against you...

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