Business owners do not spend as much time on the front lines of the garden center as they might like. Business concerns take a great deal of time and concentration. Customers are usually met by staff, landscape crew or delivery personnel.

A look at the average retail garden center customer reveals a key to their experiences. The customers at most independent garden centers are educated, middle-aged, middle to high income, and are more discerning about quality and service. Plants and landscapes are luxury items, so they would not be a priority for shoppers with low incomes. In many cases our consumer comes to our business with depths of experience and information.

How do we approach and communicate effectively with this market segment? Garden centers should train employees to meet the customer on a higher level of experience and information. The people you hire to interact with customers should project an image acceptable to the customer. Proper appearance and hygiene are a must. Customers appreciate employees who are knowledgeable, polite, and speak proper English.

In a 2003 study of successful garden center strategies, a garden center owner provided avenues for employees to gain experience and knowledge of horticultural topics. One way to increase knowledge is to read travel magazines about places customers may have experienced. A broader perspective puts the employee on a more equal plane with the customer. Many of us do not have the time or resources to learn through extensive travel or association with a diverse clientele, but we can learn from books and other people about our world.

There must be a desire for knowledge before learning can take place. This desire can be nurtured by example and incorporated in the company culture. Do not let day-to-day demands become a stumbling block for a long-term goal of expanding knowledge. Learning will embrace change and lead to efficiency, communication and effective sales techniques.

Garden center leaders have seen the benefits of sending employees to trade shows and to tour other garden centers. Paying tuition for employees to attend classes and providing communications training has been shown to increase employee effectiveness.

A great book about travel experiences is “Chasing Summer” by Erik and Jennifer Niemann. This book is a detailed journal of places, people and adventures of an 18-month honeymoon around the world. It is available at Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble booksellers. The book can also be ordered directly from www.chasingsummer.com.

Don’t let the last person who comes in contact with your customer be ineffective. Invest in education and training.