Every consumer has expectations when they enter a store or purchase merchandise.

Whether it is a hamburger or a new car, there is always a preconceived idea of what is expected. That expectation is directly tied to its value. For example, would you expect the same tenderness of a $5.49 per pound filet mignon as a $1.89 round steak – a big difference in expectation. What is the expectation of the customer that enters an independently owned garden center? Is that expectation the same as the customer who goes to a mass merchant for plant materials? I would not think that the two have comparable customer expectations. Surveys have shown us that the main reason shoppers prefer garden centers is because of the selection of plant materials. The customer expects the garden center to have a better assortment of plants than the mass merchant. There are some other expectations for the garden center shopper. They expect the customer service to be superior; well informed staff with the right answers, able to talk gardening, and available when they are needed. That service should include help in handling and loading vehicles, delivery for large items that can’t be taken, and plant materials that are well taken care of and located in easy-to-get-to displays. The signage should be easy to read and informative. Information and the ability to educate the customer excites the gardening enthusiast.

Are we doing alright if we only meet the expectation of our clientele? The difference in a good garden center and a great garden center is that not only are expectations met, but that the expectation of the customer are exceeded. Exceeding the performance and expectations of the customer should be an ongoing goal. By consistently amazing your customers, the loyalty relationship will perpetuate. Only meeting expectations will leave you vulnerable to the price issue, on which the independent garden center should never compete. Whatever your company decides to adopt in order to leap beyond the customer’s current expectation level, be sure that you are in the position to perform every time, for everyone. Unkept promises, inconsistency, and haphazard policies will do more damage to customer relations than doing less and doing it well. One of the biggest downfalls to growth is when growth exceeds excellence. Whatever you do; do it well. Meet and exceed the customer expectation every time. If you don’t know what your customer expects when they enter your store, consider doing a little survey of your own. Each business is unique and sways their customers in various ways. Find out why the people who shop your garden center prefer coming to you. Build on that information, and use it to capitalize on, as a core competence for your business. If it is selection, make sure selection is a priority. If it is personal relationships with customers, go for it. If it is convenience, information, store lay-out, services, unusual merchandise, promotions, value perceived, go for that too. Find out where you exceed expectations, magnify it, and add to it.

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