

## Customer Service Helps Local Small Pond and Water Garden Businesses Excel

Monday, Sept. 21, 2009, 5 p.m., EDT

I recommend hiring friendly people, like Marvin here who loves to sell, because you can teach them everything else they need to know. Customers told me recently that they WANT to buy from us. Why? Because they realize that they need local small businesses to achieve a real sense of community.

Who wants to eat every meal at a chain restaurant? When we go to the beach, we don't head to Ruby Tuesdays. Instead, we join all the other tourists at the 'greasy spoon' on the canal. The 'greasy spoon' has the ambience and the local flair that says we're at the beach -- somewhere special and different.

We want our pond and water garden stores to be like that, too. We offer a greater selection and more options for customers than chain retail stores. The large chain retail stores offer a short list of SKUs from any one vendor, usually with little supporting knowledge. Customers need us.

My wife refuses to shop at one well-known electronics store because during one visit a salesperson offended her when she asked questions about a television set she was interested in buying. After asking the salesperson some basic questions about the product, he told her that he didn't work on commission, as if that might justify his lack of knowledge about a product he was supposed to be selling.

Perhaps he was trained to remain unbiased by pointing out his lack of financial stake in a certain product. The message my wife received was that he wasn't interested in helping her, and he didn't care whether or not she bought anything.

Customers are tired of poor service. They are prepared to pay for good, knowledgeable, friendly, local service.

In a certain sense, we all work on commission. The single most important thing pond and water garden retailers can do to grow our businesses is to step-up customer service.

Train your employees to understand what customer service is. Service starts as soon as the phone rings, the e-mail reaches your computer or the customer arrives in your parking lot. The speed of which your employees answer the phone or the e-mail adds to the perceived service value.

We are only as good as our last transaction. You must be self-critical about your business to maintain and improve good service. Too often we hear excuses as to why the customer was the reason for the poor service. No customers equal no business.

While customer service proves paramount, customers also demand value for their money. This does not necessarily mean the cheapest price but a fair price coupled with good service.

Talk to your customers. Ask them what they need. Ask customers what they like about your business. Ask them how you can improve your business. Encourage customers to be a part of your business. If they spend money with you, they already are a part of your business.

Invest money in training your employees so they are friendly, pleasant and knowledgeable. Only hire friendly people because you can teach them everything else they need to know.

The return on your investment is higher with well-trained employees. It will make your customers want to shop with you, too.