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## **Caring for the customers**

By Cam Sivesind

Customers. Without them, where would any business be? Perhaps nowhere is care for the customer more important than in the independent garden center.

People come to their local garden centers and nursery retailers looking for help. What should they plant where and when? Gardeners come in holding a sickly plant, again looking for advice and, perhaps more importantly, assurance they won't kill every plant they own in the same manner.

"A customer who comes in with a dead plant wants to know a person is taking care of them," said Lynn Snodgrass of Drake's 7 Dees Nursery in Portland, Ore. "So ask questions. Draw from them the facts you need so they can be successful with the next one."

Snodgrass shared her thoughts on customer service with the OAN Retail Chapter at its March dinner meeting hosted by Tanasacres Nursery in Hillsboro, Ore. She was joined by Deby Barnhart of Cornell Farm in Portland.

"The first impression is the way a place looks when they drive in," Snodgrass said. "Is it clean? Just saying 'Glad to have you here' is helpful customer service. Wave to every customer."

Don't overlook the last impression. A sign saying "thank you for shipping with us" goes a long way, Snodgrass said.

Phone etiquette is important. "When a customer calls in, they are a potential customer, so be courteous when answering the phones," she said. "And employees need to dress appropriately for the workplace and not hide behind sunglasses."

Snodgrass ran down a list of the "little things that matter" when it comes to customer service: making eye contact, waving, getting a cart for a customer, offering to take a plant to the register (even if they are not ready to check out), pointing out a bench to a shopper's tired spouse, having a TV for the spouses, remaining positive about the job in front of customers and saying thank you.

Barnhart is the new president of the Northwest Nursery Buyers Association, which represents 60 Oregon and Washington independent garden centers. She had plenty of statistics to support her customer-service tips.

"Your business thrives on the first-line person," she said. "We're in a fight with the box stores. How do we make ourselves special? Customer service is one very important way."

The way you approach a woman and a man in a garden center is very different, Barnhart said, citing a national study that shows men spend much less time in stores and that 39 percent of shoppers come to a garden center with their spouse. Why are they visiting? Thirty-two percent are at retail nurseries to buy plants, 12 percent are looking for what's new, and 11 percent are in search of ideas.

And why are shoppers gardening in the first place? For fun, relaxation and the personal reward they get from the activity. "The bottom line is focus less on the stuff you are selling and more on the experience," Barnhart said. "The auto industry has taught us why people buy; it's 'emotion on wheels.' We offer 'emotion in their yards.'"

How Barnhart deals with a customer depends on their body language. For example, if a person looks like they are in a hurry, then help them complete their mission.

Rather than seeing extra profits, think of tie-in sales as "what will make the customer successful with plants," she said. A happy, successful gardener will come back.

Some checkout counter knowledge nuggets: employees should not be talking with other employees while ringing up customer purchases, and keep your counter clean and have lots of pens nearby (preferably boxes of them).

Snodgrass and Barnhart each noted customer service as being at the heart of their businesses. While good customer service is easy to do, it's also easy to take for granted. So don't think of it as work.

Customer service is more than just helping customers, and it improves your own life simply by going through the act of being courteous, Snodgrass said. "If you get that point across to your team, you'll be better off," she said.