

# Recruiting from retail

**Cougar Irrigation staffs up with former Nordstrom employees to deliver excellent customer service.**

By SARAH PFLEDDERER

**M**atthew Stamm is no farmer, but he sure knows how to cherry pick—employees, that is.

The president of Cougar Irrigation, Austin, Texas, has hired the bulk of his irrigation technicians from Nordstrom on the philosophy the customer service skills they derived from the luxury retailer are translatable to the Green Industry or any industry.

“Whatever it is, you’re providing a service to people,” Stamm says. “So you really want people to have good customer service skills, not necessarily technical skills.”



Matthew Stamm

Nordstrom is renowned for its customer service. The company’s processes have been assessed and reiterated by experts for years. (See, “The book on service,” at right.) That’s why Stamm boasts that three of his five irrigation techs deliver “Nordstrom-level customer service.”

“Anybody can go out and fix a sprinkler head,” Stamm says, and adds he taught his retail hires those technical skills. They, unexpectedly, taught him “everything” he knows about customer service.

Stamm says he also benefits from being able to teach former retail employees technical skills from scratch rather than having to break them of “bad habits” picked up from previous industry employers.

## SERVICE SMARTS

For Stamm, recruiting his first Nordstrom employee was happenstance. In fact, he doesn’t even shop at Nordstrom. Stamm met Nick Linzenmeyer at a dinner party hosted by one of his neighbors who also worked at Nordstrom.

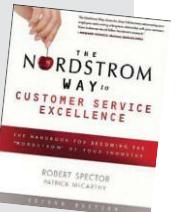
That was in 2008. Linzenmeyer now is a project manager at Cougar Irrigation. Recounting his first few years as a technician, Linzenmeyer’s telling confirms Stamm’s logic:

“My (performance) as an irrigation technician was terrible. But the thing that saved the customer from a terrible experience was my good communication and customer service,” Linzenmeyer says. He recalls the following customer service “protocol” from Nordstrom and how he’s applied it at Cougar Irrigation:

- 1. Greet the customer.** In irrigation, the key is to make them feel comfortable because they’ll likely be spending a lot of

## THE BOOK ON SERVICE

In step with this month’s cover story, we give a nod to the book *The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: The Handbook for Becoming the ‘Nordstrom’ of your Industry* by Robert Spector. He has written four books on the retailer’s customer service.



money, Linzenmeyer says. “Respect that, and make them feel relaxed.”

**2. Find out why they’re there.** “The more information you have as a salesperson, the better you can service that customer,” Linzenmeyer says. He cautions to not be forceful in getting the details.

**3. Make them realize you’re the expert.** “Don’t be rude or abrasive, but establish there’s a better way to do things,” Linzenmeyer says.

**4. Establish trust.** For example, if a customer is wary of drip irrigation but it’s the best fit for the property, Linzenmeyer ensures he’ll replace the system if it’s insufficient. When it works satisfactorily after installation, you’ve established trust and the client is open to future suggestions.

**5. The follow-up is key.** Keeping the follow-up personal is crucial, Linzenmeyer says. At Nordstrom this meant calling the customer to see if his or her purchase worked for an occasion. At Cougar Irrigation, he follows up in person to explain to clients how the irrigation system operates and urges them to reach out with any concerns.

Due to bringing Linzenmeyer and other Nordstrom employees on board, Stamm says he’s looking to improve the sales on the recurring service options his company provides. It serviced 700 of the 2,500 clients in the company database last year and, this year, is introducing service agreements to customers to better track retention.

## The Ticker: IRRIGATION



**Hunter** introduced a family of pressure-compensating drip emitters for its micro-irrigation line. Featuring flow options of up to 6 gph, they are available in three inlets: self-piercing barb, 10/32 thread and 1/2-in. female thread. The barb and 10/32 thread models are offered in .5, 1, 2, 4 and 6 gph models; the 1/2-in. female threaded model is available in 1 and 2 gph.



Nick Linzenmeyer