



# TURNING CUSTOMERS INTO CONSUMERS — ONE APPROACH



By Stan Pohmer

You can make yourself a better alternative  
for

I love the definition of a customer that I saw in a marketing textbook some years ago: "A customer is someone who has yet to find a better alternative." With all of the competition out there, both from within the horticulture industry and from outside it, your customers are bombarded with a myriad of choices on how and what to spend their time, effort and dollars. And the customer's choice can't be taken for granted: If they vote in your favor this time, it doesn't necessarily mean that they'll vote your way again next time — all you've done is set the choice bar a little bit higher, and you need to continue exceeding it versus your competition.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that you are that better alternative for the customer on a consistent basis.

## BUYING CRITERIA

What are customers really looking for? Are they comparing when they are considering a purchase decision? Get beyond the products you offer and try thinking with a customer's mindset, looking at things through their eyes — what are the fundamental drivers in their decision to buy or not buy? Though you may hear many different answers to this question, it's my opinion that the whole decision process boils down to four things. If you deliver on

these points, you can turn a customer into a loyal consumer.

**Solutions.** People buy because they believe you (or the product or service you sell) can respond to a problem or need they have. This "need" can be what brought them to your store or something they identified while in your store after seeing the product or service displayed. It's basically an impulse purchase.

**Confidence.** People have to believe that the product or service you sell them will work and meet their expectations of performance. This confidence can be a "wish" or a "hope" that they can follow the directions, or it can be based on their past, positive experiences.

**Success.** People don't want to be disappointed with their purchases; they want to feel good about what their purchase accomplished for them.

**Satisfaction.** What I'm talking about is the positive feeling one gets from the entire transactional experience and the product/service performance — from the moment the customer decides to enter your store to the time they sit back and enjoy

the beauty of the plants in their yard.

## CUSTOMER V. CONSUMER

So what's the difference between a customer and a consumer? A customer is someone who just buys a plant, many times a purchasing decision based on price value. A consumer is someone who is looking for the total package — solutions, confidence, success and satisfaction — someone who is open to being convinced that, to best satisfy her needs and expectations, she may look beyond simple price value. This person will reward the provider of this "total package" with future and repeat purchases. My delineation between a customer and a consumer may walk a fine line with many of you, but I truly believe there is a difference — one that can change the way you look at the things you do. One that can tremendously differentiate you from your competition and build a loyal consumer base.

Let me give you an example of two approaches that may help demonstrate the difference between customers and con-

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sumers.

Orchids have recently become a very popular plant, even in the mass market, but they are plants that carry some baggage: People still believe that orchids are difficult to maintain, that you need specialized expertise and knowledge to grow them. And I agree that the little instruction booklets that many growers are now affixing to the plants provide much more information than is available with other types of plants. But in the case of a retailer who is just selling the plant, what is the likelihood of success and satisfaction for the person who buys the orchid and simply follows the directions provided, especially when they have no confidence in their abilities?

Compare this with the retailer who sells the same orchid plant with the same information guide, but merchandises the plant in a display with a book on orchids, orchid food, moss, a wood crate for

planting and orchid planting mix. This retailer is not just selling a plant; with the tools or accessories that will increase the likelihood of that purchaser being more successful and satisfied with their orchid purchase, this retailer is also selling confidence.

This second retailer accomplished two objectives. The first was thinking like a consumer, understanding that they do not have the knowledge that you do, that there are some feelings of inadequacy on their part that had to be compensated for. And selfishly, this retailer understood that by taking a "project-based" approach to merchandising, he increased the opportunity to leverage the total transaction value as well as the profit value (since the hardline items in the display usually carry a higher margin than the plant itself). Granted, these hardline items <sup>GNR</sup> are probably carried in all retail stores, but in most cases, they're spread all over — the orchid mix with the soils, the food with the fertilizers and the books in another

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