



What Customers Know (or Don't Know!)

By Roger C. Styer

This past May I had the delightful experience of working in a couple of local garden centers helping customers find what they wanted. I try to do this every year, just volunteering my time (in exchange for some plants), and finding out what people want and buy. The biggest piece of information I get is what questions people ask in order to buy what they want. What I have found out is that not all garden center workers know what questions to ask or how to really help customers in a timely manner.

TYPICAL CUSTOMERS

I believe you should greet every customer as soon as they enter the garden center. With eye contact and a smile, ask them if you can help them find anything in particular. Some customers may have specific items they are looking for, whereas most people do not really know what they want. They have a specific area to fill, and they want something beautiful to fill it with.

For the first group of customers (the ones who know what they want), it is easy enough to direct them. But sometimes, they want more than they know they want. Sound confusing? Follow up by asking if they are interested in other items. Good signage, clean layout and handy carts definitely help with this type of customer. If you do not meet these requirements the customer is liable to get frustrated in the first five minutes and walk out, buying nothing.

The second group of customers (the ones who don't know what they want) require the

above necessities, but also some good questions. The first question should be: Do you have a sunny or shady location? If sunny, is it morning or afternoon sun? Once you can get them to define their location, you can direct them to the appropriate plants and ask if they want flats, containers or hanging baskets. Do they have a color preference? What did they grow there previously? Did it do well for them? Never ask them how much they want to spend! Always inquire about their specific needs, preferences and previous experiences. You are trying to solve their problem (empty space). The better you do this, the more they buy. But guess what? If you don't help this customer in the first five minutes, they will either buy something and have a terrible experience (plants die) or get frustrated and walk out.

Customers in the third group (the just-lookers) have specific needs but are either shy about divulging them or have not totally clarified them in their own minds. Sometimes, these customers are checking your plant quality and prices. Again, greet them warmly, but don't stop asking questions when they say they are just looking. I find they appreciate you indicating all the areas where they can look. I may still ask a few further questions, either right then or after they have had a chance to look around a little (again, no longer than five minutes). Asking the above questions will get them to divulge what they want. Sometimes, they are afraid to purchase because they worry about cold or wet weather. Help them through these worries, and you will get more sales than you thought.

CUSTOMER CATCHERS

Some customers will want to know what new plants you have this year. Do you have a list or special display prepared for them? I try to get growers to incorporate 10 percent of their product mix as new every year. Why not specially mark those items for customers? Product life cycle on some new items may be as short as 2-3 years before customers get tired of them. For independent garden centers, increase your order on these items (as

long as demand is high) until they start showing up in the box stores. Meanwhile, you have other new items to increase. To get an idea of what new items customers are wanting, try checking out all of the gardening magazines. I was surprised to find so many magazines, all touting the latest items or combinations to the buying public. Do you know what those items are? Find out at your nearest Borders, Barnes & Noble or other large bookstores.

Follow up with your customers by asking them how the plants are doing that they purchased on their last visit to your store. Or send out a survey to your customer base; make a few phone calls or even visit some of your customers' homes. How far you want to go with all of this will depend on you.

Another way of finding out is to use tie-ins. These would include coupons good for purchases in the fall season or for poinsettias at Christmas. You can quickly gauge how your customers like your store, products and service by how they respond to these tie-ins. Can you also provide some educational seminars or demonstrations during the spring or fall season to help your customers have better success with your products? Open houses help, but provide them with the tools to have more pleasure with your products.

Wow! That sounds like a lot to do just to sell a few plants. But if you don't do these things, your customers will be buying fewer and fewer plants from you. They have a lot of choices about where to buy plants, and a lot of competition for their discretionary income from other stores and entertainment sources. So remember, you are in the service industry! Quality plants are a given. Excellent service will be what brings customers back. So, treat each customer as if your livelihood depended on it. Because it does! Spend a few minutes finding out what they know or don't know. GPN

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