

When's the Last Time You Worked Retail?

I've heard this talked about by the "experts" in publications for years, but does anyone in our industry actually follow through with it? To me it seems like a logical process and exercise for our industry professionals to experience a couple weekends in the garden center every April and May to help get a pulse first hand on what our consumers really want. It's a very interactive way of surveying our end consumer.

There are many different jobs and positions in the horticulture industry, and, no matter how you fit in, it can be a great way to cultivate ideas and come up with different ways of approaching how you move forward with your own personal plan in the upcoming year.

I have been a sales representative for the Henry F. Michell company in western Michigan for the last 10 years. Approximately eight years ago I started working retail on the weekends in April and May at a garden center, and it has been very satisfying and helped my outlook on sales and my relationship to my customers. When I'm at the garden center I use

my time wisely being in front of the customers, working with them on creating perennial beds, planting combinations and helping them with any questions they might have (and they have a lot).

DISCOVERING CONSUMER TYPES

Working retail has made me realize how much our consumers absolutely love plants. They adore them. It's a passion and hobby that will always be in them. Over the last eight years I have observed that there are a few types of consumers. All of them love plants but couldn't be more different — passionate gardeners, impulse buyers and clueless buyers. Without fail this is how most of them enter the garden center for the first time every year.

The passionate gardener walks in, gushes over how beautiful everything is and after five minutes of walking around they say how overwhelmed they are and that they won't be able to make any decisions because everything is so gorgeous. After a while of walking around the aisles with no cart you can see them come down from their high, grab a cart and start to formulate their plan of action. The next question out of their mouth is "What's new this year?"

The impulse buyer walks in with a cart, mentions how things look nice and then goes directly for the displays you made that

morning or all the pre-made combinations sitting nicely for them to load their cart up with.

The clueless buyer walks in and is, well, clueless. This is where you can really help guide and impart some of your knowledge of plants and ideas.

CONSUMER INTERACTION

Interactions with the passionate gardener and the impulse buyer are where you can gain a lot of information for your benefit. The clueless buyer is where you can showboat and impress. With all these consumers you can use your knowledge from California Spring Trials, which you will have just arrived back from in mid April.

Ultimately, you can break them all down to plant and flower consumers that are excited to be at the garden center and ready to purchase something.

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We all know plenty of garden center owners that would love to have a free volunteer sales associate to work their sales floor on the weekend and sell product to all three of the consumers I explained above. The free t-shirt and name tag they give you is well worth it for the help you will be offering!

For those of you that haven't experienced this yet, I'm going to be bold and call out some positions in our industry that should try this. Well, maybe it's easier if I do it this way ... if you attend Cultivate as a vendor each year and aren't selling a machine I guess I'm talking about you. I'm sure some of you reading this are already spending time at retail in the spring but many aren't. Consider it an investment in your business.

By no means am I an expert when it comes to consumer relations, but I do know the more time we spend with our consumers in their "buying" element the more knowledge it will give us in our jobs and positions within this industry. [gpn](#)



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