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Survey of Garden Center Customer Informational and Marketing Needs¹

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Abstract

A survey of garden center customers was conducted to identify what plant information and method of information presentation were most important, and reasons why customers shopped at a particular garden center. Two hundred and eighty (280) customers were surveyed at three garden centers in the Phoenix, Ariz. metropolitan area. Results indicated that plant culture and description were the most important informational aspects. The two most preferred methods of presentation were that each plant be tagged with care information and the availability of a plant expert for consultation. The most important reasons for selecting a garden center were plant quality and selection, helpful sales personnel, and well-labelled plants. Only 17% of respondents had a specific idea of what plant to purchase indicating the need for garden centers to supply customers with information.

Index words: retail nursery, sales, landscape plants

Significance to the Nursery Industry

Garden centers need to know how to meet their customers' needs to effectively market plants. Results of this study revealed that plant information was a principle desire of consumers and that only 17% of customers had a specific idea of what plants to purchase. In accordance with consumer preference, informational needs of consumers should be met by tagging individual plants with cultural information, having a plant expert available for consultation, and by supplying take-home pamphlets. Garden centers should offer a wide selection of quality plants with the requisite cultural information to encourage repeat customers as well as to attract new customers.

Introduction

The need for improved marketing strategies for garden centers is widely recognized by the nursery and garden center industry (3, 6, 7). This is becoming increasingly true in light of competition for customers due to participation of mass merchandisers who often sell plants at lower prices. This paper will focus on identifying the informational needs of garden center customers. By identifying customers' needs in plant sales, nurseries will be able to make the plant purchase a more satisfying event and encourage repeat business.

Homeowners cited unsuccessful gardening experiences and lack of knowledge about trees and shrubs as obstacles for purchasing plants and landscaping (1, 5). However, homeowners also expressed a desire to have nicely landscaped yards and indicated a need for information, advice, and suggestions when making plant purchases. Garden center customers expressed a need for information relative to planting, selection, and maintenance of plants (4, 8). Similarly, a national sales plan developed by the Horticultural

Research Institute considered nursery consumer education to be the most essential element in achieving sales (5).

Garden center managers are faced with the issue of how to educate the consumer in an efficient manner. During busy weekend periods, customer to personnel ratio is very high, and managers attempt to fulfill their customers' informational needs while maintaining a cost efficient labor force. Becker and Poorbaugh (1) noted that verbal consultation between salespeople and customers is time-consuming, and its effectiveness depends on employee knowledge. This author (1) suggested that providing visual materials citing essential plant information could be helpful to customers as well as employees. Plant sales accompanied by relevant care information were greater than sales without information (1).

Customer preference for a particular garden center is very much related to providing affiliated plant information. A California nursery industry study (9) found the reasons for buying plants at garden centers included: high quality, knowledgeable salespersons, convenient parking, and availability of garden supplies. A market survey for the Arizona Nursery Association (unpublished) indicated similar reasons, and 96% of respondents rated "information" as the prime reason for shopping at a particular garden center. Providing such information also increased repeat business and improved consumer attitudes toward the garden center (1, 4). Thus, satisfying consumer informational needs is essential for promoting plant sales and encouraging repeat business. An exception to information being the prime reason for shopping at a particular garden center may be the mass merchandising market where plant sales occur on the basis of low price. Interestingly, anecdotal reports of retail garden centers getting phone calls requesting information about plants purchased at mass merchandisers are quite common.

Since previously mentioned studies did not reveal specific information and methods of information presentation that garden center customers desire, the objectives of this study were to determine: 1) what information was of greatest importance to customers, 2) how to best convey this information, and 3) reasons for shopping at a particular garden center. Data were analyzed to determine if the market could

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be segmented (age, sex, level of gardening experience) according to the informational needs of customers. The study, while conducted in the Phoenix, Ariz. metropolitan area, may be applicable to other areas in the U.S.

Materials and Methods

This research project was conducted as a market survey. The data collecting instrument was a questionnaire which respondents answered themselves. For most survey questions, respondents indicated degrees of relative importance or helpfulness of a subject. Responses were arranged as a scale of ordinal levels from one (least important) to five (most important) designed to measure attitudes and intensity of feelings (2). The survey was divided into four sections according to subject. Sections dealt with 1) relative importance of plant related information, 2) methods of information presentation, 3) reasons people shop at a particular garden center, and 4) respondent characterization such as age, sex, level of gardening expertise, and number of visits per year to a garden center.

The sample population was defined as garden center customers who visited three garden centers between 0930 and 1330 HR on March 5 and 12 (Saturdays), 1988. These dates coincided with peak sales during spring. The three garden centers, located in Mesa, Scottsdale, and Tempe, Ariz. (Phoenix metropolitan area), were of a similar size and located in relatively densely populated areas. Customers were surveyed as they entered or left the garden center. Potential respondents were offered a complimentary plant as an incentive to participate. No time limit was placed on completing the questionnaire. Total sample size, 280, was determined by the number of completed questionnaires that research teams could collect in four hours at each garden center.

Since we wanted to identify which factors evaluated in the survey were most important to customers, questions receiving the strongest response (4 and 5 rating) were separated from those of lower concern (1, 2, and 3 response rating) by using the one-tailed z test ($z = 1.645$) at the 0.05 level. Response means and standard errors for questions in the first three sections were calculated. Means were also segregated into the categories of sex, age, and level of gardening experience. Within each category, differences between means were analyzed using the Student T-test, 0.05 level.

Results and Discussion

Section I. "What information or service do you think is important?" There were three relatively discrete stratifications of information which were ranked as most important (ranked 4 or 5) by at least 70% of the respondents (Table 1). The dominant (ranked 4 or 5 by 90% of respondents) concern was "place plant grows best." The dominance of this exposure aspect reflects gardeners' concerns for plant performance and survival in the extreme heat and solar radiation of the desert. The second grouping (78%–80%) was "watering," "maintenance," and "planting instructions." The next level (70%–74%) of concern was "frost/heat protection," "plant picture and description," and "flower and fruit description." Again, the climate aspect is regarded as important as well as plant physical attributes which was regarded as very important in Section II.

Table 1. Percent of respondents who rated the importance of information or service as most important (rating of 4 or 5).

Information or service	Respondents rating as most important (%)
Place plant grows best (sunlight exposure)	90.1 a ^z
Watering instructions/plant	80.1 b
Maintenance required/plant	79.6 b
Planting instructions (how, what, when)	78.0 b
Frost/Heat protection necessary/plant	74.2 c
Plant picture, description, size, growth	72.0 cd
Flower or fruit description	70.0 d
Low water requirement/desert plants	64.8 e
Fertilizer/pest information	63.5 ef
Prices per plant	60.2 fg
Soil care information	59.1 g
Plant problems and solutions	51.9 h
Unconditional guarantee	49.1 h
Plant name	32.5 i
Tool selection use and care	7.9 j

^zPercentages with same letter are not significantly different according to one-tailed z test, $P = 0.05$.

Section II. "How would you like the information presented?" Each plant tagged with care information" and "plant expert in nursery" were deemed very helpful by at least 78% of respondents (Table 2). "Bed signs" and "take home leaflets" were ranked as very helpful by at least 56% of respondents. These findings indicate that garden center customers want specific plant information and plant literature that can be taken home.

Section III. "What are the reasons you shop at the nursery you most often go to?" "Plant quality" and "good plant selection" received a 4 or 5 ranking by at least 90% of respondents while "helpful sales personnel" was third in importance (Table 3). Thus, maintaining plant appearance is a very important aspect in drawing customers to a garden center. In the opinion of the authors, the high ranking of plant quality and good plant selection and relatively low ranking of price (only 53% rated "prices" as a very important reason to shop at these three particular garden centers) most likely differentiate garden center customers from mass merchandiser customers. Garden centers that employ

Table 2. Percent of respondents who rated method of information presentation as most helpful (rating of 4 to 5).

Method of presenting information	Respondents rating as most helpful (%)
Each plant tagged with care information	82.5 a ^z
Plant expert in nursery	78.0 b
Plant group (bed) signs with care information	59.9 c
Take home leaflets per plant	55.7 d
Information booth (manned)	41.8 e
Landscape display with information	36.1 f
Information center (literature only)	36.4 f
Centrally located plant booth	29.3 g
Classes or talks held at nursery	27.8 g
Bulletin boards	27.7 g

^zPercentages with same letter are not significantly different according to one-tailed z test, $P = 0.05$.

Table 3. Percent of respondents who rated reasons of importance for shopping at a garden center as most important (rating of 4 or 5).

Reason for shopping	Respondents rating as most important (%)
Plant quality	92.5 a ²
Good plant selection	90.4 b
Helpful sales personnel	81.2 c
Good signs, labels or literature per plant	68.1 d
Good location	61.1 e
Prices	53.7 f
Responding to an advertisement	28.8 g
In area (driving by)	21.3 h
Recommendation by friend	17.5 i

²Percentages with same letter are not significantly different according to one-tailed z test, $P = 0.05$.

salespeople who have passed a state nursery certification exam will serve customers better and can use the certified status in promoting their garden center. “Good signs, labels, or literature per plant”, “good location”, and “prices” were ranked a 4 or 5 by 68%, 61%, and 54%, respectively. Again, the preference for information-tagged plants was expressed as a main reason for shopping at a garden center.

Section IV. Respondent profile. In general, there were relatively few aspects of each section that were different when segregated by respondent characteristics such as sex and age (data not shown). When different, means usually did not differ by more than 1.0. The ratio of men to women respondents was approximately 1:1 (55% female:45% male). With regard to age distribution, 70% of respondents were between 21 and 50 years old, 29% were older than 50, and < 1% were younger than 21. More than 40% had gardened in Arizona for less than five years, and only 6% noted that their plants always survive the climate. Seventy-one percent shopped at a garden center five or more times a year. In

response to “what kind of gardener do you consider yourself to be?”, 89% rated themselves as a beginner or had some experience while only 8% regarded themselves as an expert gardener. In response to “do you usually know what plants you want before you go to a nursery?”, 79% had a general idea, 17% had a specific idea, and 4% had no idea of the plants to be purchased. Characterization data from the previous two questions demonstrate that a very high percent of retail customers needed plant information to aid their purchase, and survey sections I and II showed that information presentation and customer assistance were of paramount importance. Thus, a garden center that satisfies customers’ informational needs and offers quality plants will maximize the potential for repeat business.

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