

BUILDING A BETTER RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

Recent eye-tracking research offers valuable data on how your customers shop from the minute they pull into the parking lot until the minute they leave the store.

By Bridget K. Behe

Time is one of our most valuable commodities; we never seem to have enough of it. With so many things to do and not enough time to do them all, it seems our attention gets scattered. But when it comes to customers shopping in the garden center, they are focused and have all the time in the world, right? Wrong!

In thinking about the customer shopping experience, we tend to think that the shoppers are focused and keenly interested in many of the products and services we have to offer. That statement probably isn't very close to the truth.

Some research at Michigan State University brings to light just how fast consumers make decisions and how little information they sometimes use to arrive at that decision.

You can build a better retail environment by incorporating some of these research findings into your garden center.

From the Car to the Store

Online consumer focus groups tell us that the independent retail garden center is not one of the top things on consumers' minds, regardless of age. So, building that better retail environment begins outside of the store and just beyond the parking lot.

What do consumers see when they whiz past your business at 55 miles per hour? Hopefully, they will see colorful plants that are well maintained, integrated with some (potentially) food-producing

plants that they can easily relate to like ornamental kale or fennel. Perhaps there are some striking succulents (that may need to reside indoors during cooler periods of the year).

While following local zoning ordinances, place some colorful plants or something else eye catching to grab their attention. It just could be the difference between them stopping at your IGC or accelerating past it. Entice them to stop and shop.

Next, consider helping them transition from the street/highway/road to the interior of your store. While there never seems to be enough parking spaces in spring, are there a few empty parking places at other times of the year? No visible or easy parking may be another reason for consumers to move on and not stop.

Also, how well laid out is your parking lot? With the spaces you do have, can traffic easily flow in and out? If not, consider rearranging some space to make it easier for customers to drive in and drive out. If they park, you are one step closer to the sale.

But the transition doesn't end in the parking lot. Most likely, your potential customers are still thinking about other things and need some space to land in your store.

Where do I enter the store? Many IGCs were not constructed all at one time, and the front entrance might not be clear. Use a chevron or peaked gable entry to literally point the way. Subconsciously, consumers will view this as the way in. You can literally point the way into the store with one of



Poster façades at Gerten's Greenhouse and Garden Center in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, can be repurposed throughout the year for numerous applications.

these visual arrow entries. It can help with that transition from a million things on their “to do” lists to buying some products at your retail outlet.

Once in the Door

Ever notice how grocery stores place large, seasonal items that may not have a big profit margin at the front of the store? That is because most consumers are looking past the front entrance to the next 20 to 50 feet. This looking ahead is still part of their transition from the car to the store.

Most consumers don’t see what is on either side of a store entry because their focus is ahead of them, or on buying that one thing they need to solve a problem or meet a need. Give them a smooth transition with a landing space.

Use the first 20 to 80 feet of your entrance to line with big blocks of color. These color blocks, we found from our research, are pleasing to the eye and help engage them with the products on display. The color blocks help move their focus on your products and this trip. Just like airplanes, consumers need that landing strip at the store entrance to shift their focus from other things to this shopping experience. Give them a landing strip with some colorful seasonal items.

Somewhere in this landing space, they may think to look for a cart to hold their potential purchases



An eye-catching entry at White Oak Gardens in Cincinnati, Ohio, draws customers in from the street.

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MERCHANDISING



Koetsiers' Greenhouse in Grand Rapids, Michigan, integrates hard goods and green goods in its displays.

before they move to the cash register. Carts can be a limiting factor. Those large grocery carts work well for supermarkets because most Americans will fill them.

Size may not be the only issue for carts at the IGC. For your carts, how well do they accommodate hanging baskets or mixed containers? Most consumers will stop shopping when their cart is full because they have nowhere to “hold” more plants as they go to the register to pay. Think about not only the size of your carts, but also the functionality of them. People will stop when the cart is full.

Make Shopping Easier

Paco Underhill in “Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping” says the longer we can keep a customer

engaged in the store, the more they are likely to spend. We need to be thinking minutes, however, not hours.

What would make your IGC a bit more comfortable for a few more minutes? Think about having a few spots where someone could sit and regroup their thoughts for a few moments. Give them a spot to rest and catch their breath.

As the American population ages, they might need more breaks. Parents with children might need a spot to sit for a moment. Even the busiest professional working might want to sit for a moment to check email or Facebook. Give them that respite and make sure it is priced to sell!

How kid and pet friendly is your store? Many stores are becoming more child friendly with some

play area (very visible and central so parents won’t worry) or coloring tables. Some even have planting areas just for kids.

Most Americans think of their pets the same way they think of children. If possible, they don’t want to leave their pets at home. Especially if you sell pet supplies (and even if you don’t), why not have some free biscuits to offer shoppers with pets?

We recommend that retailers place price to the left of the display if it is a sale but to the right of the display if it is not.

Segregate areas of the garden center to display sun versus shade plants. That, typically, is the first big distinction in the home garden. After that, most people shop by color (for ornamentals) or by flavors they like (for edibles).

In terms of arranging the colorful ornamentals, segregate plants by color then form (filler, thriller, spiller, etc.). Don’t forget to integrate potting media, gloves, fertilizer and containers in these displays. Some cross-merchandising in many parts of the IGC will help sell more products.

Simple Versus Complex Displays

Now the real shopping fun can begin. Some of our recent research shows that consumers make a decision about products (yes to buy or no and move on) within three to five seconds. That isn’t much time to engage and inspire.

Our work also shows that customers are more likely to buy from complex displays but enjoy looking at simple displays. Simple displays are those large blocks of color, often of one plant genus. Think big swaths of petunias, calibrachoa or pansy. Complex displays have multiple plant genera, multiple colors, and often have hard goods integrated into the display.



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16

Speaks 5 languages fluently.

Dominates at outdoor sports.

Hand-crafts her own jewelry.

Prepares meals that make the above look like child’s play.

Circle 107

Near the store entry, use more simple displays and move to more complex displays as consumers move further into your store. You are priming them for a purchase because they like to see big color blocks.

However much they like looking at big blocks of color, they are more likely to buy from complex, integrated displays. One type of complex display models or shows consumers how to use products or just how they work together. Show and tell worked so well in kindergarten because people like to know the story behind something.

Think about the effectiveness of show and tell for your endcaps. These high-value areas should have green goods and hard goods integrated. It is in these integrated or complex displays where you can inspire them and also the type of display they are more likely to buy from.

Angle benches from the main aisle to a 30- or 45-angle to improve the sight lines and use that chevron pattern to move consumers through the main aisle. Here, again, chevrons help direct our visual gaze and improve the quantity of product that a consumer will likely see. Those angled benches improve sight lines.

Color contrast endcaps for even more visual drama. Consumers see products best that are from knee height to eye level. For our products, having some downward perspective shows more of the plant. To give them this perspective, lower the bench height, especially for the endcaps.

For an island type display, one that is viewed from multiple sides, consider a modified picnic table type display. This gets most of the product between a consumer's knee and eye level.

The leap from our products to most consumers using them at home is a rather large one. Having displays that show use goes a long way to captivating and inspiring consumers. Facades help show use. These show-and-tell moments can help consumers understand how a product is meant to be used.

Don't have time to build a fence or front door? Try what Gerten's Greenhouse and Garden Center in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, did. Use posters! It's almost as convincing and requires less time and



Shoppers are more likely to buy from complex displays such as this inspiring example at Graf Growers in Akron, Ohio.



A modified picnic table display bench at W&W Greenhouses in Hudsonville, Michigan, gets as much product between the knee and eye level as possible.



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A fun photo opportunity at Countryview Greenhouse in Kalamazoo, Michigan, encourages shoppers to snap a photo and post it on social media.

money. They can be recycled for different times of the year.

Many consumers need help integrating plant material. So many consumers want a ready-to-buy garden or mixed container. Some are open to new and novel mixed containers. When merchandising some of your mixed containers, don't fear crossing botanical lines. Integrate edibles with ornamentals or woody shrubs with perennials. You will create a look that is novel, relatable and potentially highly profitable and one that they most certainly will not see at the neighborhood box store.

Ready to Buy

We know many people don't read signs and most of us are guilty of that in some retail operations. Still, sign information in displays is important. Our research shows that people will see a price faster if it is on the left side of the sign or if it is a high price.

That is why we recommend that retailers place price to the left of the display if it is a sale but to the right of the display if it is not.

Other research shows that consumers are more likely to buy a product if they see someone like them using the product, whether in real life or in images. This is called image congruency. We don't see much of that in the garden center, and we really need more.

Rather than highlighting some cool plants, think about hiring a photographer to help you capture people interacting with some of the products you sell. Think about the age and ethnic diversity in your community. If you can show more images of people like your consumers interacting with your products, you are more likely to win them over as customers.

Make the shopping experience potentially more fun with a photo or selfie spot. Be sure to include

your business name somewhere in the potential image or selfie. If you offer free Wi-Fi, this would be a good place to tell your customers and encourage them to post the image on their Facebook page. It makes for great conversation, and you may recruit a new customer from that. If nothing else, it will make your customers smile!

When the cart is full or they have their problem solved, they want to exit quickly. In the spring, there never seem to be enough open cash registers. Still, at other times, how can the wait or perceived wait be reduced?

One way to reduce the perceived waiting time is mounting a computer monitor over the register and play some video loops. These might be videos you have on your YouTube channel or commercials of products you sell. It's another great place to ask consumers to login and give you a recommendation. Maybe you could offer curbside service after they make an online purchase.

There are several ways you might think about smoothing the path to purchase for your customers this year. An easier, less stressful visit may lead to another one. **LGR**

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