



# What Your Customers Should Hear

Use these telephone tips to engage potential shoppers and brand your business as soon as someone calls you.

By Mark Williamson

The importance of a good brand image is high on the agenda for garden centers.

Businesses know that seeing wilted plants or poorly maintained facilities aren't going to be a selling point for customers so they focus their attention on making their center look as good as possible.

However, it's not just visual branding that needs to be considered when forming a brand identity, but audio branding too.

Hearing is one of our most dominant senses, with humans associating the sounds they hear with emotions and feelings.

It can also have an intense impact on our subconscious. Take, for example, the phenomenon of earworms and how a song can lodge itself in your head on an endless loop.

Sounds also can be used to spark recall. A piece of music can easily transport the listener to a past time or place, such as their wedding or a memorable vacation. Similarly, sounds can trigger brand recognition, so it is particularly effective for businesses wanting to strengthen their image and stand out from the crowd.

One way garden centers can use audio branding is over the telephone.

## A Positive Caller Experience

Research by PHMG of 2,234 Americans discovered half of respondents would rather call a business for information than look online.

While we have entered a digital age, these results demonstrate the importance of not neglecting traditional methods of communication like the telephone.

But what happens if the customer doesn't have a positive caller experience?

Answering the phone in an unfriendly manner or leaving a caller waiting on hold with only poor-quality music isn't going to stand your garden center in good stead when it comes to customers picking your business over another.

Humans are naturally built to size up and evaluate others quickly and first impressions are near impossible to undo. In fact, 59 percent of consumers

wouldn't give repeat business to a company if their first call wasn't dealt with satisfactorily.

Providing staff with telephone training and best practice guidelines represents a good start in ensuring positive caller encounters with customers. However, it isn't the only thing that should be considered.

## Engage and Entertain

"You are in a queue and will be connected to staff as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience."

These words can represent a threat to any potential sales enquiry with consumers simply unwilling to wait in an automated line listening to silence or poor music.

Yet there are times garden centers have no other choice but to put callers on hold. For example, a potential customer may call for information that isn't readily available or they may have to be transferred to a member of staff who is more equipped to answer the query.

In these instances, it is important to make sure the experience is not viewed as an inconvenience or a negative.

Making sure callers are kept engaged and entertained ensures they don't switch off or, even worse, get put off completely.

This doesn't mean just playing generic sounds, however. Subjecting callers to repetitive beeps or poor music can leave them feeling underappreciated as a customer and will lead to hang-ups, impacting on business profitability.

One effective method of evading caller boredom is on-hold marketing, customized voice and music messages played to customers whenever they are put on hold.

## A Golden Opportunity

U.S. businesses have been found to leave callers on hold for an average of 29.83 seconds before they reach their intended destination. The typical television commercial lasts around the same length of time, so why not view hold time as a similar opportunity to communicate key messages?

Unlike most advertising which can often be ignored, on-hold marketing messages are highly targeted and offer a golden opportunity to speak directly to an attentive audience in a way that perfectly represents the brand image and values.

They also can help build client satisfaction levels in the process. Not only do the messages help decrease the perceived amount of time the customer is left on hold, but they also have been shown reduce caller hang-ups by 79 percent.

For garden centers, the messages can be particularly effective in cross-selling and upselling products and services. For example, the messages may advertise an on-site restaurant, prompting the caller to make a reservation next time they visit the center.

To help your garden center gain a competitive edge, you could also offer advice to listeners on gardening matters, such as how to grow your own fruit and vegetables or what tools you need to keep your lawn healthy.

Choosing an on-hold marketing solution that can easily be updated is also vital, especially for garden centers.

Plants come and go with seasons, as do certain garden issues, so by refreshing the messages regularly, it means that the content stays relevant.

In summer, the messages could advertise barbecues and garden furniture, while in fall, the content would be best promoting products to help with leaf clean-ups or preparing the garden for winter.

## Brand-Congruent Sounds

When it comes to implementing an on-hold marketing solution, it isn't just as simple as playing a piece of commercial music or having a random voice read off a script.

Employing the wrong sounds in your audio branding can convey a completely different company image and values. It not only contradicts the existing visual branding but also creates a lasting, unwanted perception of the business.

Instead, it is important to consider your desired brand image and values and work forward,

constructing an audio brand that not only perfectly represents the business but also helps generate a positive impression and boosts service levels.

### What a Voice Says About a Company

Age, gender and delivery style are just some of the attributes to consider when picking a voice for your business.

Garden centers want to provide a welcoming retail environment for their shoppers, so it is perhaps to be expected that the voice of the industry tends to have warm tones and a friendly delivery style.

The voice also tends to be in the 25-to-40 age bracket. Customers want to know they are purchasing from a trustworthy, knowledgeable vendor so an older voice can help reinforce its expertise and dependability. On the other hand, if your center is marketed as a fun, vibrant store then a younger voice may be more suitable.

As garden centers usually cater to a local clientele, many use a regional accent in their audio branding to help connect with customers on an emotional level. This can help gain a competitive edge over another business due to the dialect providing a sense of reassurance.

### Hit the Right Notes

How many times have you called a business and been met with a popular music track?

While this may seem like a good idea, the way commercial tracks are received completely depends on the listener's previous experience. For example, a song may remind one person of a happy moment in their past, whereas to another person it could prompt thoughts of a negative time.

The best course of action is to, like voice, start with a blank slate and construct a track based on the company's desired brand image and values.

Research has found garden centers to use predominantly live tracks, making use of traditional instrumentation, such as pianos, acoustic guitars and string sections. This helps to give an uplifting, wholesome feel to productions, reinforcing the welcoming nature of the voice.

### A Vital Tool

From how phones are answered to what customers hear when they are put on hold, it is essential that garden centers control every aspect

of the caller experience. Yet many businesses are still overlooking audio branding as an integral part of the marketing strategy.

By using it as an everyday marketing tool, garden centers can stand out among their competitors and gain that business advantage. **LGR**



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