

Why Are You Special?



By Stan Pohmer

Are you worth a special trip for the consumer to make? At the end of the day, that's the one question that looms largest in the consumers' minds and that will make the difference between success and failure for your business.

By definition, your garden center is a destination, a venue that the consumer must make a predetermined decision to expend or invest his/her time, effort and money to travel to; in other words, a special trip.

What compels a consumer to make this conscious decision to select your store instead of all of the others available to him or her, not only other purveyors of garden products but also of all other categories of merchandise unrelated to our industry? After all, the consumer has more different opportunities to purchase, both in physical stores and online, than ever before.

What makes you special?

One of my favorite marketing gurus, Seth Godin, explained it this way, "Now that more and more is ordered online, the only trips we make are special trips. If your offering or service or your place isn't worth a special trip, it's likely we won't be coming any time soon."

A pretty ominous statement, isn't it? However, rather than looking at this with a sense of doom and foreboding, consider it as a challenge to give the consumer a valid reason to make you a destination of choice!

It's tempting to try to be the best at everything you do or think is important in appealing to the consumer psychology, having excellent service, prices, product, location, convenience, marketing, experiences, services, sustainability, (and everything else you can think of!) and doing it all better than any of your competitors.

The reality in this approach, however, is that either you try to be the best at everything and have to settle for mediocrity on everything, or there's so much going on simultaneously that the consumer simply can't get focus on anything you're doing.

Five Key Attitudes

It's been proven that a better approach is to match up your core values and what you do best with what is most important to the consumer.

For example, here are five key attitudes identified by researchers and interpreted through a consumer's perspective:

1. We think price; the consumer thinks, "Honesty" is more important than "lowest," because consumers are increasingly more time-starved, they don't have the time or desire to shop around

for the best deal. Rather, they are gravitating to the retailer who can provide consistency, honesty and fair value (not to be confused with lowest price), even if it means paying a little more.

Bottom line: eliminate the hassle factor for them.

2. We think product; The consumer thinks, "Good is good enough." Most customers can't detect, appreciate or value the small differences between what they perceive to be good, functional products from the very best, high-end products, and, more importantly, won't pay for only incremental differences. They will, however, pay more for significant, discernible and better-explained differences and benefits, but they have to be effectively communicated and understood.

Bottom line: today's consumer wants good products that are well signed (think features and benefits), merchandised and in-stock.

I would offer that, in the real world, perhaps two out of 100 customers who shop your store even know the comparable prices in other retailers for the item they are interested in purchasing.

3. We think service; the consumer thinks, "Back to basics." Not a surprise to anyone, today's time-pressured consumer wants things quick, easy, simple and hassle free. Studies have found that the expectation of or desire for a high level of customer service has decreased, resulting in a trend toward a new paradigm of "self-service, with a little help."

Bottom line: ensure that the product is easily accessible, well signed, and well merchandised and displayed.

4. We think access; the consumer thinks, "Make it easy for me." Logical adjacencies, effective signing, easily navigated with wide and uncluttered aisles, and a clean, well-lit environment are all important to the consumer. Consider "project-based" merchandising, with all of the individual items needed to complete a given task or project displayed together, not only to make it easier to pick up everything needed but also to help build consumer satisfaction and confidence.

Bottom line: don't confuse them and remove any barriers to purchase.

5. We think experience; the consumer thinks, "Skip the entertainment, just respect me." While this element is the most difficult to deliver on because it's emotional rather than pragmatic, it has the most potential for differentiating your store from all of the consumers' other venue choices and to build loyalty. Major elements in this are courteous employees who respond positively to questions and challenges such as returns, and who value consumers as valued customers.

Bottom line: it's all about them, not you or your products or services.

It's simply not realistic or practical to think that you can effectively address all of these five attributes as absolute priorities or equally; you don't have the time, money, energy or people to do so.

A more intelligent approach is to match up your capabilities with the consumer criteria measured through a consumer's experience into three levels of proficiency ... exceeding expectations, meeting expectations and operating below expectations.

You Can't Do it All

One might expect that the most successful retailers exceeded consumer expectations in all five focus areas.



But the reality is that the successful retailers consciously dominated or chose to focus their resources on exceeding expectations in just one or two (maximum!) areas, while meeting expectations in all of the other criteria.

Fred Crawford, the co-author (with Ryan Matthews) of "The Myth of Excellence," states, "What do customers want? For businesses to 'wow' them in one key area (say, service), while the firm differentiates itself in a second (say, product). Put the lion's share of your time and resources into excelling in two areas, and it's OK, even advisable, merely to meet expectations in the other three.

"In other words, dare to be average in the other three, resisting the ever-present temptation to spend just a little more on things your customer probably doesn't care that much about anyway.

"In fact, if you're spreading your precious assets peanut butter-style, evenly across all five attributes, you're either wasting money or, worse, condemning all five to mediocrity."

Your opportunity is to identify those attributes and the components that are behind them that you can incorporate into your business that address these attitudes to improve your customers' perceptions of what you offer.

Your challenge is to select those attributes where you want to dominate and differentiate those where you simply want to meet customer expectations, and determine what you need to do to take those underperforming attributes up the level of meeting expectations, and then allocate enough resources ... time, money, energy, and people ... to reach your goals.

And remember that, in addition to going through this

assessment process for your own operation, you also want to honestly benchmark your key competition so you can take advantage of their weaknesses and compensate for their strengths.

Never forget that your store is a destination, a conscious, pre-determined choice, needing to convince the consumer

why they should make the trip. So, again I ask, why are you special? ... **LGR**

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THINGS TO CONSIDER: FIXING THE PROBLEM: HOW TO TURN BIG PROBLEMS INTO GREAT REFERRALS

It's your worst nightmare. A customer asks to speak with the manager. While on the floor, that customer begins berating the manager and all of the employees within earshot. You didn't have an item in stock. Someone promised delivery. Somehow, the delivery was delayed several weeks. A birthday was missed. This is all your fault. You can see all the customers waiting in line a stone's throw away trying to decide if they really want to buy from you. You know this person is going to complain to everyone and on every website where public reviews can be left. This one-time issue is going to mar your business forever.

Or is it?

Those people who have seemingly catastrophic problems during or after shopping with you might just become your best mouthpieces. They will tell everyone how wonderful and considerate and above-and-beyond your service is — if you fix the problem the right way the very first time. Your problem customers will always be your best advocates when you turn it around and make them happy.

Making problems become referrals isn't easy, but if you follow these steps, you'll see the mistakes put money in your pocket:

- 1 Empower your staff to fix problems without chasing you down or putting the customer off.
- 2 Take the customer aside; the customer will not feel the need to be bellicose and you won't feel the need to be defensive.
- 3 Ask the customer how they would like the issue resolved.
- 4 Focus on them alone and take their solution seriously. Customers with problems expect a hassle and are astounded when the first person they talk to fixes the problem to their satisfaction.
- 5 Log the problem, the solution and the customer's contact information.

6 As the owner or manager, follow up with a phone call and ask the customer if the problem was taken care of to their satisfaction.

7 Send a thank you card that includes a discount coupon or a gift that they can use or pick up on their next visit.

8 If the fix requires that a replacement item be ordered, do it that day and rush the order. Reliable vendors like Kay Berry always have products in stock and can ship replacement goods the same day if you call in the morning. Then, call the customer and advise them when to expect it and give them the tracking information.

9 Monitor online reviews of your business. If you see a negative review online, ask the reviewer how you can fix the problem to their satisfaction. Anyone reading the interaction will know you care about your customers and are willing to help.

10 Review the problem log for recurring issues that you can "manage" out of your business, then work on a solution. You may also find that a particular customer has recurring issues at which time you may want to work with that VIP customer yourself to be sure that their next buy is the right one!

Once you add these behaviors to your arsenal, you're going to start to see those problem customers start telling everyone they know about how amazing you and your team are.

Doing something small — that may only cost you \$20 — can turn into a source of customers and sales because of these customers' referrals. When you make experiences great — especially after an error or problem — you will be rewarded with word-of-mouth recommendations, which is the biggest reason people shop where they do!

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