



How Long is a Customer's Memory?

Staying top of mind between seasons is crucial to keep customers coming back.



By Stan Pohmer

What's the scientific response to the question of how long a customer's memory is? It depends! And the answer will become more critically important as it's forecasted that inflation, stagflation and recession will all play a significant factor in consumer spending behaviors for the foreseeable future.

Most independent garden centers operate in distinct seasons — spring, fall and holiday (in this case, Christmas). For most of us, there's little continuity in our offerings from season to season. And add to our challenge that the average customer will only visit your operation maybe once per season (our best customers might shop us two or three times in the spring and once in the fall and holiday seasons), so your garden center isn't exactly top of mind when they are thinking about where to shop (unless you've provided such an exceptional experience on their last visit that they still remember you, months after — more on this in a minute). Unlike some other categories and retail venues, we just don't have a high frequency of shop to stay in the front of customers' memories.

Peaks and Valleys

In most parts of the U.S., our business is start/stop, with high peaks transitioning to deep valleys and considerable time lags

between the peaks and the valleys. Most customers don't really know when you start a season, so it's almost as if we have to re-engage with the customer to let them know what's going on in the business, when seasonal product is arriving, and what your assortments might be. From my experience, we do a pretty good job of marketing to the consumer in the spring season, but we're much weaker in marketing in our smaller and shorter second (fall/harvest) and third (holiday) seasons. We're not leveraging our spring traffic to benefit our later seasonal peaks, meaning we're leaving sales on the table in the second half of the year.

Another challenge we face is that, based on the nature of our products and services, we don't have much residual subliminal marketing effect; once the consumer takes our products out of the (maybe) branded container, most of them can't recall what the plant is or where they purchased it after a few days or weeks. Even if they are super successful with the performance of the plant, we don't get much credit for being the provider of the product or service (but trust me when I suggest that they WILL almost always remember where they purchased a plant or service they weren't successful with!).

To understand the power of subliminal marketing, think of laptop computers where the manufacturer's name is engraved in the cover; every time you open the case, you see their name or logo — a constant reminder of the brand. Or think about your refrigerator ... the manufacturer's name is on a small plate where, every time you reach for the handle to open the fridge, you are reminded of the brand. Unfortunately, our products and services don't get this powerful benefit.



I think it's safe to say that most of your customers have short memories, and they become even shorter in the third and fourth quarters, when they are bombarded with advertising messages from every other retailer, both brick and mortar and online, all competing with you for their attention. So how can you remind your customers about your seasonal programs and timing? How can you gain "mind share" that will bring them to your garden center?

Stay Top of Mind

First and foremost, seize the opportunity to make every interaction at every point of contact with your current customers exceptional, from the in-store experience (including the purchasing process, complaints and returns) to their success with the products they purchased (customers remember where they bought a product they had a great experience with, but not the price they paid for it!). Consistent and repetitive great experiences generate trust in your brand, trust breeds loyalty, and loyalty leads to a relationship that makes you the supplier of choice and top of mind when they're in the market for products you offer, carrying over from season to season.

Hopefully, you've been capturing your customers' email addresses and have a robust loyalty program. Using these email addresses as the basis for digital marketing to communicate timely and helpful information is an excellent way to stay in contact and stay top of mind with your customers throughout the year.

And note that these emails shouldn't be a "hard sell," but rather educational and informative in content and tone, featuring topics that your customers find helpful and beneficial. Remember that these communications represent your brand, so be professional in your presentations. Once you have your email database set up, it's pretty easy to create digital mass mailings at minimal cost.

Here are a few examples:

- "It's time to ..." monthly or seasonal messages to remind your customers about what activities they should be doing at that time. For instance, a spring pre-season checklist to get their yard and garden cleaned up and prepped for spring

planting. Another one might focus on a "Fall is for planting" theme, explaining the benefits of fall planting and offering variety suggestions. And you can use each month's email to telegraph what's coming up next month in your garden center, planting the seed to keep their attention.

- "Flash" messages. Earlier this past spring, we had a few nights where the temperatures were forecasted to be freezing. A local garden center, who had my email address as a loyalty member, sent out daily emails reminding customers of the forecasted freezing conditions and advising the customers to cover the tender plants in the ground or move the pots/trays inside for protection. These communications were urgent and actionable, and reinforced the image of this garden center as caring, helping to ensure their customers' satisfaction and success, and built trust for their brand.

Another tool to leverage your current customer traffic to promote the next season is to hand out flyers advertising what's coming up. As your spring season winds down, have your cashiers give flyers to customers that provide the dates you expect to bring in your fall mums and pumpkins, the dates of any fall events you may be hosting, and, possibly, a coupon offering a small discount on fall products. In addition, you could print up full-color 22-by-28-inch posters to place by your exit doors as a reminder of what's coming soon.

And then employ these same tools during the fall sales period to promote your holiday programs.

So how long is a customer's memory? In reality, pretty short, especially when we don't have many opportunities during the year to physically interact with them. But, with some imagination, initiative and commitment from you, there's a real opportunity to stay top of mind with your customers throughout the year that will pay big dividends for your business.

How long is a customer's memory? As long as you choose to make it! 🌸

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group in Minnetonka, Minnesota. He can be reached at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com or 612.605.8799.