

HOW DO OUR CUSTOMERS BEHAVE?

Your garden center is made up of hot and cold spots:
Determining which is which and merchandising appropriately is just as important as knowing your customers.

By Stephen Head

Do we really know our customers? Retailing today is becoming more and more of a science. Consultants monitor shoppers from the point they enter a store until they leave, noting and analyzing every action. There are focus groups and customer surveys all designed to help us understand how people shop. Exactly how much do we really know about the shoppers who visit our stores?

Here are five things you might want to consider:

1. Which way do shoppers travel the store?
2. Who buys the products?
3. Are customers attended to promptly?

4. How many shoppers actually buy?

5. How long do shoppers spend in the store?

Do the big stores purposely place merchandise in a specific location at a particular time? Is it pure chance that signs in fast food restaurants are placed at particular locations or facing specific directions? Is a shopper who is eager to get to the plant area to buy a tree going to notice more on the way out or on the way back once he or she made a decision? When would be the best time to present customers with the idea of some peat moss and fertilizer to plant their trees?

Displays and signs facing shoppers' direction of approach, once you have their attention, can often

have quite an impact on sales. The approach direction can sometimes surprise us; it may not always be from where we expect.

Studying and correctly interpreting the way shoppers travel a store, how they browse, if they buy, what they buy, how long it takes and many other factors can give retailers valuable information to help plan a retail environment. From the parking lot to product placement to the checkouts and exits, all of this can assist in selling product and creating a better experience for shoppers.

Awareness of how shoppers react in stores to the layout, displays and products can also help retailers become more effective merchandisers. This information can help you plan displays, position products, identify

key selling areas and determine the less-traveled store areas. In short, maximize on the opportunities the store can offer.

Finding The Hot Spots

Within each store, there are a number of areas that can provide better selling opportunities than others. These usually occur at points with the best exposure to shoppers and are often referred to as hot spots or 100-percent areas. The 100-percent areas tend to be those that get the heaviest traffic, adjacent to the entrance and exits, and where a store has a major featured spot such as meeting areas, coffee shops or restaurants.

As displays in these areas tend to be very visible, they can lend themselves to impulse shopping and



Left: Use height in your displays to help attract consumers to them. **Right:** Hot spots usually occur at points with the best exposure to shoppers. (Photos: Stephen Head)

should be changed frequently. Frequency can vary from business to business and with the time of year. Some stores have even changed displays in these locations by time of day. Changing displays is important to target a specific audience or keep a fresh, interesting look for regular visitors to the store.

Hot spots can occur throughout a store along the most frequently traveled routes, and there are many hot-spot possibilities in each store. Consider these:

- Points of exit and entry between covered sales areas and plant areas.
- End caps facing the main traffic flow.
- Island and feature displays in main traffic areas.
- Displays in direct line of sight to shoppers.
- Points where the traffic flow naturally slows down.

As hot spots offer excellent potential for sales, special attention and planning should be given to these areas. Consider these sections for hot spots:

- Seasonally topical merchandise.
- Advertised specials and promotional items.
- Products mentioned by the media.
- High-impact products.
- Products that help set an image.

Creative Merchandising Counts

Creative use of merchandising hot spots, feature displays and end caps can also be an invitation to browse, taking shoppers on a journey from the time they enter the store to the time they leave and showing off the merchandise in stages.

Use displays like steppingstones; move customers from one display to the next, presenting as much of the merchandise as possible on the way. The objective is not necessarily for the shopper to see everything at once, which can be somewhat overwhelming or even confusing. Just try to creatively and interestingly show as much as possible during their visit. This can also help limit the less traveled areas of the store, the "cold spots."

To attract attention to displays in a plant area, consider the following:
Color. Striking colored foliage or flowering plants to attract attention.

Yellow particularly draws the eye or can brighten a dark spot.

Focal points. Use height, maybe a specimen plant or a prop. When ▶



Seasonally topical merchandise works well when placed in hot-spot areas.

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using props, take care not to create obstructions to other areas.

Fragrance. As shoppers pass

one display, they could be drawn to another by a heady fragrance of roses or lilacs, for example.



End caps facing the main traffic flow are perfect hot spots for merchandising products.

Sound. Moving water, such as a waterfall or fountain, adds interest to a display.

As hot spots tend to invite impulse purchases, when merchandising these areas, you should have a clear purpose and message in mind. Consider these ideas when merchandising prime locations:

- Limit the selection to a maximum of three related items; use one primary product and cross merchandise with up to two other related products. Ideally, use at least one product that could be purchased in addition to the primary product rather than as an alternative to it. A third item could perhaps be a larger size. For example, a primary product might be a lawn sprinkler with a garden hose and a trigger sprayer as tie-ins.

- A single item en masse can be very effective, especially with colorful plants.

- Use appropriate signs to reinforce the message as required.

- Maintain the displays well, as they are in high-profile locations.

- Keep it looking as full as possible. As items sell out, restock or replace them with another item or dress forward according to the season.

- Change stale, dated displays and point-of-purchase material as soon as the promotion or theme ends.

Coming And Going

As shoppers enter a store, there is usually an area where they first familiarize themselves with their surroundings, an orientation area. Merchandise placed too close to the entrance, usually within the first 10-13 ft., can go largely unseen (this can vary with store layout and size). By placing merchandise a few feet further into the store, often slightly to the right (in North America, we have a tendency to go right as we enter a store), it has a better chance of being noticed.

Last-Minute Reminders

The checkouts are another good spot for last-minute reminders. Product selection needs to be made

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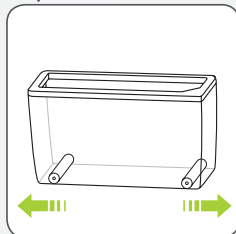
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carefully, as these would largely be pick-up/impulse purchases. Products here tend to be items that customers may have forgotten, smaller consumable items and seasonally topical.

Overcoming Cold Spots

These tend to be areas less frequently visited by shoppers, subsequently generating fewer sales. For example, they may be off the beaten track, long or dead-end aisles with nothing apparent to draw shoppers, dark or hidden areas, or against the normal traffic flow. There can be many reasons why shoppers do not frequent these areas. Some problems we can try and overcome by perhaps re-merchandising or reducing visual obstructions, others can be more challenging.

In working with cold spots, there are many things to consider:

- Keep aisles as wide as practically possible and resist the temptation to merchandise the floor with overflow product.
- Use focal points to draw shoppers down dead-end and long aisles.
- Creative lighting helps draw attention to darker areas inside a store.
- Sound and movement from a water feature or fountain attracts attention.
- Creative merchandising, such as color, signs and interesting props, draws customers.
- Maintain visibility and use lines of sight.

There are many possible products for cold spots:

- Advertised loss leaders.
- Commodity/demand items.
- Colorful items that attract attention.
- Service items, product that has to be held to provide full range and service.
- Out-of-season plants.
- Clearance merchandise.

Understanding consumer behavior can help merchandising efforts. Identify your key selling areas. Recognizing if, how and when they change and determining problem areas can contribute to capitalizing on potential sales opportunities. This is not intended to offer suggestions on how to gather specific information or its interpretation.

Although many principles remain the same, key selling areas and merchandising techniques may vary according to each store and location. An excellent publication on consumer behavior is *Why We Buy – The Science of Shopping* by Paco Underhill.

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