

Do Sweat the Small Stuff

Your business is on trial and your customer is the judge. Learn how to tell if your store is making a good impression.

By Debbie Allen



Can you imagine being on trial for a crime? Imagine how scary it might feel to put your future in the hands of a judge and jury. That is what you do every day when you open the doors to your garden center. Every customer who enters through those doors is judging your business, down to the last detail. They notice the condition of your plants, how your staff treats them, visual marketing, signage, cleanliness and much more.

Your customers notice these details both consciously and subconsciously. They may even be noticing many details that you miss. Since you know your business well and spend so much time inside during the week, you most likely miss some of the obvious mistakes that your customers see. Therefore, you need to start sweating the small stuff to be successful in your customers' eyes.

Put yourself in your customer's shoes. How many times have you entered a business that you didn't like for some reason? Did you take the time to talk to the owner or manager and tell them what turned you off? Probably not! Your customers probably won't tell you either — they just won't come back. Even though you feel you can evaluate other businesses well and often do, does not mean you can accurately evaluate your own garden center.

A GREAT FIRST IMPRESSION

In your business, you routinely conduct assessments of your financial health through month-end bookkeeping procedures. In addition, you do an annual inventory to maintain correct internal financial records. This is your financial audit. ►

Top: Every entrance to your garden center should be inviting like this side entrance at Portland Nursery, Portland, Ore. Bottom: Conduct visual audits to find out what your customers are seeing in your garden center. Photo taken at Cornell Farm, Portland, Ore.

You may understand why it's convenient to put a certain display in a certain spot, but your customer doesn't. Make sure the layout makes sense to your customer first, even if it means it's not quite as convenient for you.

Obviously, the financial health of your company is extremely important. However, you should also conduct a periodic audit, preferably monthly, of your business's visual appeal to customers, because the visual image of a business will have significant impact on customers' buying decisions.

Think about it: A set of well-organized financial records benefits you, not your customers. But your overall visual image will certainly have a dramatic impact on your customer and therefore your bottom line.

Start by making a list of the different areas of your business. Think about important elements that would help your garden center pass a visual audit from your judging customers. Make sure your list includes every area that impacts the overall character of your business.

Some detail elements include:

- healthy, thriving plants;
- clean water features;
- complete displays brimming with flowering plants;

- visual marketing of all areas in the store;

- water areas and hoses safe for customer traffic;

- interior and exterior signage;

- exterior and interior entry;

- plants displayed outside the store;

- attractive and spacious parking lot;

- identifiable, well-staffed, merchandised checkout counters;

- traffic flow and/or layout of garden center;

- overall cleanliness of store, windows, restrooms, etc.;

- inventory current and restocked; and

- neat, helpful and friendly staff.

Next, visit and examine every area on your list and write down your first impressions. Ask every member of your staff to walk the store and make their own evaluations. Compare notes at your next staff meeting and, together, decide how to change for the better. Ask everyone on your team to be accountable for areas they help to improve. Make note of

each employee's plan of action and post the date that they plan to implement the task. Also, be sure that they take over this job and follow up with the details each week.

Evaluating your business provides you with benefits such as:

- identifying areas in which you can gain over other garden centers, big box stores and discounters;

- helping you to see those aspects of your business that make you unique;

- giving you a head start in identifying problems that need to be addressed; and

- helping you to focus on your customers and their needs — not yours.

BEFORE YOUR CUSTOMERS ARRIVE

Gender studies have shown that it takes a woman approximately nine seconds to decide if a business is inviting enough to enter. A man may give you a little longer — about 13 seconds. That is not a very long time to make a ♦

great first impression that may win over your judge and jury.

Let's examine some of the ways customers judge your garden center before they even visit your location, starting with the first place you might meet a potential customer — possibly a networking function. In this context, it is your personal image and how you represent your business that is most important. You must be able to communicate your business concepts and



Walk through your store step by step, seeing through your customers eyes. Photo taken at B&C Greenhouses, Kalamazoo, Mich.

services to your new acquaintance succinctly and clearly.

Having a catch phrase about your business is extremely important to make a good impression. Don't just say, "I own a garden center," and stop at that. Get people excited about what you do by sharing the experience you create in your garden center. For example: "Our garden center showcases the best and most unique plans in a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere. Our customers say they love to stop by to relieve the stress of a busy week, and they tell us that they even feel their mood change as soon as they enter our doors. We would love to have you stop by and experience it for yourself."

Now let's examine your advertising. This may be the first clue or judgment about your business. What communicates to prospective customers viewing your ad that your garden center is worth visiting? Why is it special, unique and valuable to them? What experience and benefits can you offer them that makes them want to get in their

car and drive to your store or pick up the phone to learn more details about your business?

The telephone is another way customers may reach you before they come to your business. Though a telephone is not visual, most people create a visual in their heads about your professionalism and attitude. Even a brief phone call for directions may make or break a new customer relationship. Telephone and listening skills should be included as a very important part in the training of your employees. This important detail is often overlooked by businesses. But, remember, you are being judged from the first contact with your customer to the last.

Too often, employees are busy waiting on customers and take a phone call in the middle of a transaction. This is not only a distraction to the customer they are waiting on, but it comes across to the caller as a negative as well, since the employee might not be "all there." Keep this in mind and communicate this to every member of your staff. ♦

TOUR YOUR GARDEN CENTER

Tomorrow, when you arrive at your garden center, don't park in your usual spot; park where the customers park. Sit in your car for a moment and look around, see what your customers see. Does that first view of your location create a positive impression? Now step inside and take a visual tour from your customer's point of view, paying special attention to the impression your store gives when viewed from just inside the front doors. What message does your store give? Are overgrown sale plants the first thing you see? Is there anything to draw the customer in and pull them through the store?

Walk through the store step by step, seeing through your customer's eyes. Make sure you don't miss a single detail. Pretend it is the first time you've ever been inside. What attracts you? What turns you off? What details do you notice that need to be improved upon? You may understand why it's convenient to put a certain display in a certain spot, but your customer doesn't. Make sure the layout makes sense to your customer first, even if it means it's not quite as convenient for you.

Turn on the lights, put on the music, then turn around and walk back outside. Now, take a deep breath and look around you. Are the windows full of fingerprints? Are there too many signs at the entrance? Are those signs giving off negative messages? The lights are on, but is it still too dark? Or is your store welcoming and inviting to your customers?

Now how about your other senses? What is the first thing your hear? Is it relaxing music that sets the tone of your store? Water moving in a water feature? What do you smell? Is it the wonderful aroma of fresh flowers and plants?

Do all these components make the statement you want to make to your customers? If not, you can fix many of the problems now that you are aware of them. Do what you need to make sure that the first thing your customers' eyes meet is fresh, new and visually appealing.

THE BEAUTY OF VISUAL MARKETING

One thing that is good about visual marketing is that if it doesn't stimulate sales, you can try something different. Yet, the only thing that should be consistent with your visual marketing is change. Remember, you are working to build a strong visual image for your judge. As your image emerges, the customer will look to you with a sense of confidence. Those positive impressions will keep you miles ahead of the competition.

Conduct in-store evaluations on a regular basis, and you'll notice significant differences in your business. When you commit to this exercise you'll see the progress you have made in your business and overall design. Your customers will notice them too and start complimenting you on how good things look and feel. You'll start to see the biggest benefit payoff — an increase in sales and profits! 🎉

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