NURSERY SALES

Adapted From the California Retail Nurseryman's Manual
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Revised by the Montana Nursery and Landscape Association 2002
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Selling involves assisting customers in making buying decisions, which benefit both the customers and the nursery.

Nursery owners and employees who are asked why customers go to garden centers and retail nurseries usually reply that homeowners are looking for help, information and, above all, assurance that what they are buying is right for their yard. Customers take this help and guidance much more readily from a fellow human being than from a sign or a label.

Maintaining a yard is essentially a leisure pastime, which means that spending money on plants, lawn mowers, or chemicals comes after spending money on food, clothes, and gasoline. Customers are usually at a garden center because they want to spend money, rather than because they have to spend money. Discretionary purchases are different from purchases of staples in three ways.

1) Customers are less price sensitive about discretionary items in proportion to their monthly paychecks.

2) Customers have more time to choose.

3) Customers respond more to personal assistance.

True selling is a skill embracing product knowledge, effective communication, technical assurance, and problem solving, all carried out professionally within a pleasant customer-salesperson relationship. There are many stores that carry plants and more which sell chemicals and other dry goods. Customers always have choices for where they spend their money.

In order to identify the effects of various "turn-offs" which businesses can give to customers, garden centers in New York conducted a survey. Customers were asked if they had returned to shop at a particular garden center since their first visit. Those who answered "No!" were asked why. The results of the survey are shown below.

Question: "What deterred you from shopping at the same store, having been there once?
<u>Percentage of replies</u>

68% gave "discourteous treatment" as their prime reason

14% said that their problems or complaints were not dealt with satisfactorily

9% said that lower prices elsewhere were the cause

5% were persuaded to change by talking to other people

3% moved away from the area

All people involved in retailing should memorize the above results. What the survey showed is that 82% or 4 out of 5 people were turned-off by HUMAN rather than economic factors. The results demonstrate how important the personal touch is in leisure shopping and how relatively unimportant prices are.

HOST - CONSULTANT - SELLER

A successful salesperson should be aware of the three roles they play - the welcoming host, the informative consultant, and the assuring seller. These three personalities are closely linked and are also inter-dependent. In other words, if a salesperson is a rude host, he or she will not be taken as a credible consultant or a believable seller.

HOST - The Welcome

Customers are guests of a business and should be treated accordingly. Salespeople should give them a smile and a greeting when they enter a store. There are no "welcome" signs or audio messages that can reverse the damage done by a miserable or disinterested salesperson. The greeting serves to show customers that they are welcome and identifies a friendly face among the staff. Identification is particularly important if uniforms are not worn in a particular garden center. All customers should be spoken to on arrival, if possible. Even on a busy spring Saturday, salespeople should try to make eye contact with customers as they pass. Even if you are getting an order for a customer, never walk past new arrivals with eyes fixed on the floor; always take time to return a smile, a glance or a "Hi".

A host should look the part. It doesn't matter how much money a store puts into advertising. If the salespeople look sloppy or shabby, a business's image becomes shabby. Salespeople must look well groomed and self-confident at all times. Salespeople do represent a company to most customers. By establishing a good rapport with regular customers, salespeople also will find their job more rewarding.

First impressions work both ways. As a salesperson, don't judge customers as being big spenders or small spenders by the way they dress or behave. Be careful not to let prejudices play a part in sales responsibilities. By developing courteous and enthusiastic service for all customers, salespeople can create satisfied and permanent customers.

As the nursery industry is based upon environmental and leisure activities, managers spend a lot of time and effort making their stores look good. It is important that customers are given the time to browse and take in the color and beauty which surrounds them. Creating a comfortable environment will relax customers and predispose them to buying more than if they are immediately assaulted with a sales pitch. So without intruding into their personal space, greet customers with a word and a smile and answer any of their immediate questions.

CONSULTANT - Informative and helpful

Most customers patronize a retail nursery because they believe the employees there are knowledgeable about plants, lawns, chemicals, etc. The name "garden center" suggests that it is the place to go for expert advice and information, rather than a discount store or supermarket that sells everything. Customers expect a professional, reliable, and knowledgeable team of salespeople to help them decide which plants and garden products are best for their yards. A successful salesperson in the consultant role is honest and credible, in addition to being skilled in problem solving and dealing with complaints.

As a consultant, honesty is most definitely the best policy to eliminate after-sale complaints. An honest salesperson who says, "I'm not quite sure whether potentilla can tolerate wet conditions - let's see what the book says," is at once being human and open without being ignorant or incompetent. It's far better to do this than to let a customer take a potentilla with your blessing, only to find that the site was too wet for a potentilla. After a bad experience, a customer will, at best, come back to complain or, more likely, won't shop at your store again.

If honesty means advising a customer against the plant which he or she has fallen in love with because it will not perform well in their particular landscape, then honesty must be followed. Don't be shy in advising customers that the plants, which they've selected, won't thrive in their particular landscape. It's far better to lose a higher margin on one sale and build respect and reputation for the company, than it is to allow people to take away something that will cause dissatisfaction. Be ready to suggest an alternative that would be appropriate. Customers who are advised honestly will regard the place of business as being a fair and informative nursery. Honesty will help to provide the steady stream of loyal customers which garden centers continually strive for.

There's always a temptation to "show-off" technical knowledge and talk to customers about "pH", "liners", "pre-emergence", or "23-3-3". This is trade talk and in the proper place it's fine, but is not suitable for most customers. A good salesperson uses language and explains a topic so that his or her customers easily understand it. People visit garden centers to get clear and up-to-date information. Most gardeners are interested in learning more about how and why plants do or do not grow. Teach them the language but don't overwhelm them with it.

A customer looking for a chemical to kill aphids on a prize viburnum may be bewildered by the sheer number of products claiming to be effective against this pest. For a salesperson to merely repeat what labels say is not giving a customer any assurance or help. The salesperson must properly explain the label in detail. Always remember that the label on any product is a legal document, and it is unlawful to recommend anything that is in direct conflict with the label. Suggest least toxic alternatives whenever possible.

Nursery customers often seek help in solving problems associated with their yard or garden. To be able to help customers, a consultant must know how to get the facts and how to listen. To be a good advisor, first find out what sort of problem exists and listen carefully before formulating a solution to the problem. There could be several good reasons why a problem exists. Getting to the truth will take time, patience, prompting, and asking the right questions. These questions will start with "what, why, where, how many, how much, and how often."

Providing useful answers takes time and, in busy periods, cannot be done at the expense of other customers. Not all customers will need extended consultation. Recognizing customer's needs is important. Anxious facial expressions, customers "hovering" near a salesperson or the cash register area, or a customer reading label after label with a pronounced frown on his face are good indications that a consultant is needed.

Sooner or later, sales personnel will be on the receiving end of a complaint about merchandise or service. The main objective must be to turn an unhappy customer into a happy one who will return to the garden center. Personal feelings regarding the value or the deal the customer received must not enter into the situation. Make a judgment according to company policy. If this does not satisfy the customer, politely refer the matter to the manager who will have to further interpret company policy and make the decision.

In dealing with complaints, a salesperson's job is to defuse potential or actual conflicts between the business and customers. Unless they are obnoxious or abusive, all customers' complaints should be heard, but not at the cash register area or in the middle of the store. Take them aside to a quiet part of the nursery or ask them into an office. This will not only stop other customers from hearing about the problem, but it goes a long way towards defusing a customer by isolating him or her from an audience. Whenever possible, observe the following guidelines with a complaining customer.

1. Listen and look as if you are listening. Maintain eye contact.

2. Show sympathy by nodding your head occasionally and by the tone of your voice.

3. Avoid justifying. The customer is not interested in excuses. All the customer wants to know is what you're going to do about his or her complaint.

4. Ask questions. Probe the situation with open questions to obtain facts ("How much water did you give it each week?"). Check facts with closed questions ("So you've had it for six weeks?").

5. Avoid antagonizing. Do not lead a customer into increased anxiety by such phrases as, "You claim you have sprayed it but..." or, "You didn't spread it on the lawn in full sun or anything like that, did you?"

6. Agree to a course of action. This will depend upon many factors, which include company policy, the customer's attitude, and terms of the sale. You must know all of the terms of a sale in advance of serving customers.

7. Inform all other staff members who need to know. A customer who is stopped at the cash register by a salesperson who didn't know that a plant was a replacement is likely to voice a serious complaint.

8. Keep a record. When you have a spare moment after having dealt with a complaint, jot down the details of the customers name, the nature of the problem, how you dealt with the problem, and the date.

9. Never, never argue. It may sometimes be extremely hard to stay calm, but if you lose your temper, you will lose a customer and perhaps your job.

Advertising and public relations are only part of the battle to obtain regular, happy customers. The enthusiasm, knowledge, communication skills, and positive attitudes of the staff members are the best ways to instill confidence and loyalty towards a particular garden center.

SELLER - Approach, Determining Needs, Tie-in Sales and Closing Sales

Selling is the process of finding out what a customer needs or wants and, by using product knowledge, matching the product whose benefits come the closest to fitting those needs. For instance, a customer may come in saying that she would like a lilac tree similar to one seen in bloom elsewhere. By asking the correct probing questions, it becomes apparent that she plans to put it on the edge of the patio in full shade so that the fragrance can be enjoyed inside the house. The customer must be advised that the lilac would not thrive in full shade, but would tolerate a location that received partial shade.

In selling, there are many areas where mistakes can be made and customers lost. Before the actual sale occurs, there are many potential hurdles to avoid, which may stop customers from spending money in a particular center.

A "cold" atmosphere, lack of merchandise, poor labeling, and unattractive displays are some of the hurdles which make a salesperson's job difficult. Selling requires a team effort. If a store merely takes money for merchandise picked out by the customer, it is taking orders and not selling.

A competent salesperson knows how to approach a customer, read their signals, find out their needs, assist and assure them in their choices and close the sale. With the exception of a person waiting for the store to open to buy a bag of lawn fertilizer before going to work, most customers want to browse around before making buying decisions. Respect the customer’s personal space, but be available. Each salesperson will develop his or her own approach, but they must <u>all</u> be friendly, sincere, helpful, inviting, and professional.

One skill a salesperson needs to develop is that of being able to read a customer's facial expressions and body posture. A customer with his eyes on the floor or the merchandise is not ready for a salesperson. Similarly, those customers who turn their backs to the salesperson are saying, "not yet". The "help me" signals are such things as making eye contact with, following, or turning to face the salesperson. Being able to read customers comes from experience and being aware of these signals.

One of the most common approaches is asking a customer if they need help. A customer may be in the plant area looking across the beds with a "help" signal and in this instance, the approach may be, "Hi, is there something I can help you with?" This, however, is a closed question. It can still get a "No thanks, just looking" answer. It is far better to use an open question, which makes the customer give a lead into an approach such as "Hi, what type of shrub are you looking for?" Or “How can I help you?” Once a closed question has been answered with a "No," it will be very hard to reestablish contact without seeming to pressure the customer.

If someone is obviously examining the different types of products by picking them up and putting them down again. Approach with an affirmative statement agreeing with the customer that the product he is examining is worth buying like: "Aren't those azaleas attractive? They really brighten up a shady corner in spring." This approach is a natural introduction and does not seem "pushy". It can lead into a friendly conversation in which the salesperson's knowledge and enthusiasm can be conveyed, while finding out what the customer wants and needs.

Determining a customer's needs takes time and can be difficult during busy times when a number of people are waiting for service. It is, however, the best way of creating customer loyalty. Determining customer needs is a process employed by many professionals who use both open and closed questions to extract information, rather than just listening to what the client (customer) thinks is important. Open questions are essential in order to get details and often begin with the words: what, where, how, when and why. For example:

What trees do you have in the lawn?
Where do you intend to plant these begonias?
How do you feel about vines?
When do you plan on replanting your lawn?
Open questions and leading statements explore details and feelings. You might ask, "Could you explain a bit about the style of yard you have in mind?" or, "Tell me how you visualize the finished design."

The danger with open-ended questions is that some customers tend to be vague or don't know when to stop. Use closed questions to gently bring them back to the subject or prevent them from telling the family history. For example, "Is your lawn facing north? Do you have a dog? Do you have children? Can you keep these plants moist? Would you like a flowering or foliage plant?"

Closed questions check facts and keep the conversation within boundaries. This is important due to the limited time you have for each customer.

Many customers will be uncertain about their needs. Salespeople must overcome doubts and sales resistance by interpreting product usage and benefits. All too often, salespeople talk about features or functions while ignoring the benefits. Customers want to know the benefits of buying a product and what it will do for them. Generally, customers don't want to associate working in the yard and garden with effort. Base discussions about benefits around how the product makes life easier, more enjoyable, or more convenient. Matching product benefits with customer needs helps to ensure both sales and customer satisfaction.

In most retail trades, the principle of selling a second product with a direct link to another purchase has been firmly established. These are referred to as tie-in sales. Shoe stores offer shoe polish to protect the new investment, or purses to match the shoes. In garden centers, tie-in selling may be done conveniently and appropriately on a regular basis without involving high-pressure tactics. Fully meeting customers’ needs enhances both your sales and their success and satisfaction.

When a salesperson feels no other potential sale is possible with a particular customer or when there are other people waiting for help, it's time to close the sale. Closing is the most important part of a sale, since the whole process of dealing with a customer is non-productive if no sale occurs. Sales will be lost if a salesperson lacks the discipline to stop talking and recognize the signals of customers intent upon making purchases. Customer actions such as picking up and putting down an item, setting plants aside in the pathway, and reading a label two or three times are good signs that a close is imminent - all the customer needs is that final assurance. Remember, however,

that assurance must be given with sincerity.

For a simple closing, you might simply restate the main points in which a customer has shown interest, end with a confident, "I'm sure you will enjoy the color of this plant," and walk him or her towards the cash register area.

An affirmative close will be useful when a customer has doubts about a purchase. In such a case, a nice personal, "This product is the best on the market and will serve your purpose very well." may do the trick. When a customer is wondering whether to put off a decision to buy and asks, "Do you always have these in stock?", use a close which stresses that now is the best time to buy, since a product may not be available in future weeks - the so-called "fear" close. Other closing remarks such as, "Can we deliver this for you?, Do you prefer the one gallon or the five?" or "Is this to be cash or charge?" also have their uses but only when one reads the signs of readiness on the customer's face.

Make sure that each customer gets what he or she needs and leaves satisfied. If customers are undecided, or do not wish to buy, still thank them for coming and express a desire to help them with their future needs. All people leaving the store should be sincerely thanked and encouraged to return.

From a proper greeting, to interesting the customer, to answering questions, to interpreting the benefits, to overcoming objections, the most important aspect of being a good salesperson is attitude. The words and feelings of each individual reflects on that person and the store. Each individual needs to be a professional listener, problem solver, and socializer. He or she needs to look the part and will need tolerance and a positive attitude. A good salesperson is enthusiastic from the welcome to the thank you. Above all else customers appreciate courtesy.

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Review

A. In a retail nursery, what two things are important for customer's first impressions?

1. _____

2. _____

B. What are the three main roles of a salesperson?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

C. Define the main aspects of the Consultant role in a retail nursery.

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D. Describe the difference between and open and closed question.

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E. What is the most common reason people do not return to a retail store.

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F. What three things should you avoid doing when dealing with a customer's complaint?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____