

Knowing customer needs before they do

YOU'VE GOT A great location. You've got massive inventory lined up on nursery benches. Perhaps, you even have indoor lines of merchandise, such as home décor and clothing. As far as you can tell, you've got everything a good nursery or garden center should have.

So, why aren't people buying anything?

Accurately anticipating your customers' needs can sometimes seem like

mind-reading magic, but here are some practical steps you can take to impress your customers by knowing exactly what they want before they do:

Understand what brings a customer in. Maybe you're running a special sale — or the merchandise you're selling is unique or of a higher quality than anywhere else. Perhaps you have a great reputation for providing the best customer experience. The actions you take and the choices you make have a strong influence on what brings people in — and the better you understand the reason they're there, the better prepared you'll be to meet their expectations.

Analyze your sales data. If you've been open for at least a year, your sales history can be an enormous asset in helping you determine your best-selling products for each quarter. What items were your best sellers last spring and summer? Now would be a good time to make sure you've got all you need for the upcoming months. Focusing on what has sold well in the past can be a good clue to managing your inventory going forward.

Study the needs and behavior of current customers. To help you predict what they'll be looking for in

the future, pay close attention to what your customers are doing right now. And remember, returning customers are gold-standard sources of information because they're living representatives of what you've been doing right.

Collect feedback.

Use every tool available to record customer experience, such as satisfaction cards, email surveys, online forums, and phone conversations. Be open to all communication. Use every

opportunity to communicate with your customers (and potential customers) and pay close attention to their responses. Whether they realize it or not, they'll often let you know exactly what you can do to bring them back.

Use social media. Having a good presence on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, allows customers to stay up to date on what's happening in your store — and to respond. Social media lets them tell you directly what they like, what they want, and what will bring them in the store. Many won't connect what they said online with what you've provided onsite and they'll be stunned that you've *somehow* read their minds.

Stay up to date on current trends. Seizing the moment when a new gardening trend appears can be fun, exciting, and financially rewarding. Great sources for keeping current on hot new trends include consumer magazines, online forums, and popular gardening websites. But keep in mind that what's hot now will almost always cool down eventually as current trends become passing fancies.

In case you haven't noticed, good understanding of your customers is strongly reliant upon good communication



Andy Peterson

Andy Peterson is a copywriter with Pivot Group, a Portland-based marketing and customer experience (CX) agency that helps clients engage their customers through research, marketing and training.

— from putting out the proper message to draw people into your garden center or soliciting direct information that tells you exactly what they'll be looking to plant in the upcoming season.

Other considerations that will convince your customers they've come to the right place:

Give deep thought to who your best customers really are. Are you truly meeting their needs or are you trying to sell to a generic gardener? Maybe it's time to challenge some stereotypes. If you're only focused on older homeowners, you might be missing out on younger apartment-dwelling plant enthusiasts. Customers like to see themselves reflected in your business when they enter your store, whatever their age or ethnicity.

At the same time, remember:

You can't be everything to everyone. Therefore, make intention-based decisions about the products you carry. Some retail shops go down the road of being a quasi-gift shop, which can take up a lot of real estate and distract from the products they have that have a better margin.

There are many ways to determine the needs of your customers. When you pay attention to the information they provide and plan appropriately, the impact can be enormous. Customers feel as if you're reading their minds because the choices you make are relevant to them, which builds trust and comfort, key components of the modern customer relationship. ☺

