

Retail Ready: What's Not Working: Impersonal Communications

| Judy Sharpton

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RETAIL ready
Judy Sharpton

For the past two issues I've been focusing on what's not working for independent garden centers and suggesting alternatives. Our industry is one of many in the wider world of changing retailing. When Walmart announces it is reducing SKUs, that is a response to consumer demand for fewer choices. For us, that translates to too many heuchera causing the consumer to walk away in confusion. When major box stores announce reductions in store square footage, that change reflects the time-starved consumer's desire for a more compact, shoppable environment. For us, that means eliminating the springtime jungle of flats, 4-in. and overhead baskets. If she can't find her way through the jungle, she buys less or, worse still, buys nothing. Our 10-year mantra of more varieties and more selection has bitten us on the retail butt.

Customers have voted with their pocketbooks in all retail segments in favor of product over process. The Apple Store offers the world's most sophisticated communications equipment in a box with a carrying handle. IKEA sells whole apartments based on the local rental market. Container gardening departments are flourishing in many garden centers with take-out products, make-and-take products and maintenance programs, most based on the customer's color preferences. At the same time, many stores insist on filling endless tables with 4-in. material arranged by variety or, worse still, in alphabetical order. There are still alphabetically ordered perennial departments.

Nimble independents have responded by reducing inventory (a plus for their bottom line) and limiting choices to products the store can offer with complete confidence. These same stores have developed gardening products like containers, garden installation and irrigation kits in a box to remove some of the process (read: work!) from gardening.

So, how are we communicating with our customers? The following two examples from actual garden center e-blasts illustrate just how communications can support or ignore these trends.

Communication Option No. 1:

"Wondering what to do for your fall garden? First, start with some basic clean up. Remove dead stalks and weeds. Of course, this is a good time to treat your lawn for spring weeds with a pre-emergence herbicide. After that, wait three weeks to seed your lawn. Aerate your soil, sprinkle seed, and water well until frost.

"This is also a good time to add compost to your flower and veggie garden, too. If you love the look of mulch in your garden, try this: Put wet newspaper under the mulch and then soak mulch after spreading. This keeps the mulch where you want it!

"There's still time to seed or plant cool weather veggies (spinach, cabbage or Asian greens). This is also the time for mums and ornamental kale to brighten your floral garden. Fall pansies also give lots of color and like the cool nights, as well. These make great replacements for fading summer annuals. Don't skip fall as a gardening season. Relish it."

Sounds like work to me! Further, there's little here that's local or authentic; this piece could be in any market. And, which pansies and kale and mums are on offer? Any suggestions for products in fall containers?

Communication Option No. 2:

"Do you smile when you drive in your driveway?"

"Four mums. That's all it took. Our summer container gardens were looking like, ummm, summer container gardens. I was thinking they needed a little something. Fortunately, I am married and my wonderful wife was doing something about this. One recent night, sometime between when I walked in at 10 p.m. and when I left at 8 a.m. my wife had "redecorated." Two mums, in each pot. Oh, and there is a kale in each to set off the mums too. Wow, what a difference. Now I do smile again. I need to put new crushed stone in the driveway, fix the corner piece of siding, and redo the steps, but in the meantime I still smile. Just four mums."

Just four mums to create a smile? That sounds like something I could enjoy. The personal contact with the customer comes across with all the warmth of a hot cocoa and my favorite sweater; sounds easy and sounds inexpensive. Just four mums. Anybody can do that.

The question is, can you communicate “easy” to customers and then offer the ready-to-use product when the customer walks through the door?
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Judy Sharpton, LEED Green Associate and member of ARCOSA, is a garden center design and renovation specialist with 35 years experience in advertising and promotion, and is the owner of Growing Places Marketing.