

STABY

LEND AN EAR TO CONSUMERS

*Listen to find out
what customers really want*

By Jean Adamczak

CUSTOMERS ARE FICKLE. JUST WHEN YOU THINK YOU HAVE THEM figured out, they change their minds. Florists can learn to manage and profit from unpredictable consumers by practicing one simple skill—listening. Do you know what your customers *really* want? Ralph Snodsmith does, because he listens to consumers. A widely respected floriculturalist and horticulturalist, every week Snodsmith listens to America's gardening problems and doles out advice during his three-hour talk radio program, "Garden Hotline," heard nationwide on ABC radio. In 26 years of broadcasting "Garden Hotline" and as garden editor on "Good Morning, America," Snodsmith claims to have "heard it all" concerning the floriculture/horticulture industry.

"Recently, a woman called my radio program and asked how often she needed to water her dried flower arrangement; it wasn't using much water," Snodsmith recalled, speaking to a group of industry members gathered in Cincinnati for the 1992 International Floriculture Industry Short Course held July 11-15.

Although Snodsmith joined the audience in chuckling at the caller's floral naivete, he quickly pointed out the seriousness of her call, saying it was a good example of the way some retail florists fail to pay attention to customers. Obviously, all the woman wanted

were some dried flower care and handling tips. "Yet there were no tags, nothing attached to it, no information telling her how to care for the arrangement," when that's just what the customer wanted.

Snodsmith noted. "Do you know what your customers really want?" Snodsmith asked the audience. "Have you asked them lately? Or, are you just guessing as to their needs and desires because what you are merchandising or providing as a

service is selling? We pay big money for consultants to tell us the latest consumer trends, hoping they are right. Yet, the most overlooked source for helpful and useful information is your customer."

To discover what flower-and-garden consumers really want, Snodsmith conducted a survey last spring. Approximately 110 "Garden Hotline" callers participated by answering a three-page questionnaire designed to gain general information about the lifestyles, needs and desires of consumers as they relate to floriculture, horticulture, and landscape industries. The results reveal a mixed bag of comments about the industries, which is not unusual considering the unpredictability of consumers, Snodsmith said. "The answers fit with many of the comments I receive about our industry," he said. "Some are positive and some are negative."

On the up side, survey respondents were complimentary about the quality and variety of products purchased from florists, and the "great job" industry professionals do when servicing customers. On the down side, survey respondents said they wanted more care and handling instructions included with purchases, better labeling of all products and more information on how to buy flowers on a budget.

When asked if they had a favorite florist, 48 respondents said "yes," while 46 replied "no." Those responses should trigger a marketing blitz by florists, Snodsmith noted.

"Apparently we have a lot of consumers out there that haven't picked a particular florist to use," he said. "Maybe this is a real marketing opportunity in your area—how to become 'my favorite florist.'"

THE SURVEY SAID...

Characteristics of survey respondents:

- 82 percent were homeowners
- 92 percent garden indoors or out
- 37 percent compost wastes
- 48 percent live where water use has been restricted
- 88 percent read labels before buying products

**HARD TO GROW**

- African violet
- Poinsettia
- Gardenia
- Miniature rose
- Bonsai
- Orchid

Respondents played favorites with flower colors though, naming red and pink (tied with 27 votes each) as the flower colors of choice, followed by (in order of preference) yellow, white and blue. Tops in cut flower variety was the rose, followed by carnation, freesia, daisy mum, iris and spider mum, in order of preference. The rose also took honors as respondents' favorite garden flower, followed by impatiens, begonia, geranium and marigold.

While respondents evidently have specific preferences when it comes to flowers and flower colors, they aren't so quick to purchase their favorite flowers on a regular basis. Asked when they purchase flowers, 40 respondents said they buy flowers for holidays, 25 said they purchase flowers for special occasions and 35 people specifically noted they do not buy flowers at all.

"This bothered me," Snodsmith reported, referring to the fact that almost one-third of the respondents never buy flowers. "I gave them [respondents] the opportunity to say they purchase an arrangement on a weekly basis, monthly, on holidays, for special occasions and not at all. Not one survey respondent purchases an arrangement weekly. Not one person purchases an arrangement monthly, with the exception of one business that had purchased a flower arrangement on a monthly basis, and they stopped because of economics."

The reasons respondents fail to purchase flowers on a regular basis stumped Snodsmith, who vowed to do further research on the topic. "I think we need to know why people do not purchase flowers, so we can turn that around," he explained.

Another aspect of the industry that needs attention is consumers' understanding of wire services. According to Snodsmith, several survey respondents commented negatively about sending flowers by wire in general.

"People are not sure of what

they're getting when they send flowers by wire," he reported. "They're not sure they can trust our industry. What's exactly coming out on the other end of the flowers by wire? We've got to provide some consumer education to teach consumers and then make sure they're getting quality flowers when they do send by wire."

The affable, self-avowed flower lover was heartened, however, when it came to the subject of cut-flower quality. "Excellent" and "good" responses were up in the 60 percent range, and what really impressed me was not one person made a comment about the quality or freshness of cut flowers being poor," Snodsmith related. "That's really impressive for our industry, I think."

In summing up the floriculture section of the survey, Snodsmith shared these tips on how florists could better serve their customers:

◆ **Provide more care information.** "People want more information, whether it's on a cut flower or an arrangement," Snodsmith said. "You've got to remind them to add water to their cut flower arrangements. I hear comments about that every time I do the 'Garden Hotline'."

◆ **Label products better.** "Better labeling is a must," Snodsmith stated. "We have to label our plants. Whether they're living plants, cut flowers or dried arrangements, people want to know about them."

◆ **Train your staff.** There's no excuse for a poorly trained, uninformed worker in your shop, Snodsmith said. All workers should be able to field any question a customer may have about products or services offered.

◆ **Educate customers.** "Teach people how to get the most for their dollar in your shop and get them in the habit of regularly buying flowers," he advised. "Tell people they don't have to buy a dozen of anything, they can buy just one, or two, or five. Let's see if we can't en-

courage our customers to buy more and to participate in the industry."

♦ **Conduct follow-up calls.** After a sale is made, Snodsmith told the audience to call the customer and/or recipient to ensure the person was satisfied with the product. Doing so builds customer loyalty and respect.

♦ **Build trust in wire services.**

Educate consumers in how flowers-by-wire transactions work. Tell them about guarantees enforced by some wire services (such as FTD) that ensure consumers sending flowers by wire can do so confidently, without worrying about the quality of the flowers the recipient will get.

Florists who sell green and blooming plants should find interesting the survey results concerning indoor gardening. Respondents answered questions that sought information about consumers' favorite plants, plant acquisition and container preferences. The survey results revealed the following information about consumers' indoor gardening habits:

- ♦ Approximately 97 percent of the respondents grow houseplants.
- ♦ Respondents annually spend from \$10 to \$300 on houseplants. Eight of the respondents said they spend an average of more than \$300 per year on houseplants.
- ♦ The average number of plants per household is 20.
- ♦ Respondents purchased or received their plants from (in order) garden centers, florists, friends.
- ♦ About 94 percent of the respondents indicated the plants were labeled and 54 percent said the plants were labeled with cultural information.
- ♦ The types of containers most often used in indoor gardening are plastic, glazed/clay, and self-watering, in order of preference.
- ♦ Approximately 94 percent of the respondents use prepared potting mix for indoor gardening purposes.
- ♦ When asked if they feed houseplants, the responses were, in

descending order, "rarely," "once a month," "according to the label," "depends on plant," "depends on time of year," and "never."

One item of particular interest that Snodsmith pointed out concerned the poinsettia. When respondents were asked which houseplant was their favorite and which was hardest to grow, the poinsettia turned up on both lists.

"I think I know the answer to this after dealing with poinsettias and the consumer end of it," Snodsmith said. "The reason poinsettias get on the 'hard to grow' list is the plants aren't hardened off and ready to go on the market. I think some of the smaller growers throughout the United States don't harden the crops off—not just poinsettias, but many others—before they're taken for retail sale. The poinsettia goes into shock and I think a lot of these people who responded 'hard to grow' were in the northern climes where it can be more difficult to keep poinsettias healthy."

To better serve customers, Snodsmith suggested florists who sell green and blooming plants and related products do the following:

- ♦ Label plants with their proper names.
- ♦ Provide information about how to care for plants.
- ♦ Provide pest control information and products.
- ♦ Educate workers to properly answer questions about houseplants.
- ♦ Provide the latest in natural and organic pest controls.
- ♦ Provide information to consumers about plants and their importance in our environment.
- ♦ Provide top-quality product to consumers.

Perhaps the most important advice that Snodsmith relayed to the audience was to listen to customers, even if they don't listen to you.

"People hear but they don't listen," Snodsmith pointed out. "I've talked about using egg water on spider plants. When you boil eggs,

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CHART TOPPERS

Respondents' favorite houseplants (in order of preference):

- Cactus
- Poinsettia
- Chinese evergreen
- Beaucarnea (ponytail palm)
- Sansevieria (mother-in-law's tongue)
- Aspidistra



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save the water and use that for watering spider plants. It provides calcium and calcium helps reduce the browning on the plants' leaf tips.

"Well," he continued, chuckling, "I had a lady call the 'Garden Hotline' madder than a wet hen! She said, 'Mr. Snodsmith, I did exactly as you said to do. I put boiling egg water on my spider plant and it

cooked it!"

"People hear, but they don't listen," Snodsmith reiterated. "How many times have you talked about [caring for] gardenias? How many times have you talked about maintaining flower arrangements? Until they get that specific problem, people just don't listen."

Snodsmith cautioned florists and other industry professionals in the audience to be careful not to fall

into the same trap. "Keep an ear to consumers and know what they really want," he instructed. "In today's business environment, know as much as you can about your clientele, whether they be customers for garden supplies, landscape services, nursery stock or flowers and flower supplies. Paying attention to your customers can give you one-up on your competition."

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

When purchasing green and blooming plants, consumers expect retailers to provide the following:

- Labels on plants

- Plant care information

- Natural pest controls

- Top-quality products

LABOR LAW

PLAYING FAIR WITH LABOR

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may not begin before 7 a.m. nor end after 7 p.m., except from June 1 through Labor Day, when the evening cut-off time is extended until 9 p.m. However, at any age, children may work for their parents in a solely owned nonfarm business, the law states. Youths ages 16-17 can work unlimited hours at any non-hazardous job. O'Connor said the labor department deems driving to be a hazardous job.

UNDERAGE DRIVERS

A LOT OF OUR MEMBERS use under-18 delivery drivers," O'Connor said. "There are certain cases where minors can drive, like if it's an unplanned thing or one trip, but if it's a regular part of their job, or they're hired for the purpose of being a delivery driver, it's illegal. That law is more than 20 years old, but people don't know about it until the Department of Labor comes in and cites them. One woman called me and said she has two

sons who drive for her and that's it; there's nobody else in the business. That kind of puts our people between a rock and a hard place. If you're paying minimum wage for a delivery driver, how often can you find someone over 18 who's going to take minimum wage?"

O'Connor said several FTD members in Kansas have been cited for child labor law violations because they employed drivers under 18 years old. "What happened was one person got cited and the ambitious inspector said 'Aha, retail florists! I'm going to go out there and see if there are more doing it.' And he cited several."

ACTIVE INSPECTORS

A PPARENTLY, IT'S NOT UNcommon for one complaint or violation to focus attention on similar businesses in a region, O'Connor said. Some labor department inspectors are more active and aggressive in seeking out FLSA violators once they find an industry's vulnerable aspects, and

avidly pursue such businesses in their regions.

"It's not just that they investigate for one employee," O'Connor said. "Once they come into your business, they look at your records on everybody. If an employee calls and complains, the Department of Labor goes through your payroll records for the past two years and they look at everybody."

HELP AVAILABLE

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION about the FLSA can be obtained from the FTD Government Affairs Office in Washington, D.C. As Catanese found, O'Connor and Acevedo are accessible and helpful.

"We need Elaine in Washington," Catanese said. "She's worth her weight in gold. Anytime you want to call her, she'll listen to you and help you out. If she's not there, she'll call you back."

Contact the Government Affairs Office at 216 Seventh St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003, (202) 546-1090

FLORIST

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the FTD Government Affairs Office in Washington, D.C. at (202) 546-1090, or write to 216 Seventh St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003