

DETERMINING THE DESIRES OF SUPERMARKET CUT FLOWER CUSTOMERS: A SIX YEAR EVALUATION PART 1: ESTABLISHING A CUT FLOWER PROGRAM

K.L. Goldsberry, Nancy Baker, and Megan Michaels¹

A three part, multiple year marketing study begins with this article. Supermarkets, as with any market, should have high quality with additional information on care and handling for long cut flower life. Consumer education is required.

Obtaining a "true picture" of the U.S. cut flower consumers, their purchasing habits, desired flower colors, types of products and how they use them is a difficult task. Hutchison and Robertson (1) coordinated a research project which had pre-determined categories of hired consumers divided into groups by sex, age, and income. The plant materials used in the evaluation were divided into groups by flower types, price level, and form of product (fancy arrangement to loose bunches).

The study was conducted in a large room and the products to be evaluated displayed. The results of the Hutchison-Robertson evaluation provided some insight to the desires of the particular groups, but not what "John Q. Public" might want. One major conclusion obtained from their project was the desire to have roses mixed with carnations or pompon chrysanthemums rather than the "traditional" all-rose package.

Joe Howland's advertising class (2) interviewed consumers and florists in Reno, Nevada. Some of the information to be presented in this series will substantiate their findings, and also provide some additional information.

In 1978, a program in cooperation with two local supermarkets was undertaken to determine if their customers were receptive to having fresh cut flowers available as a commodity in their stores. A second objective was to educate the consumer regarding plant material names, flower use

¹Professor, Department of Horticulture, Colorado State University, and former student marketing managers who conducted the surveys as part of their senior problems.

and product knowledge. One supermarket was located in the older part of the city where many senior citizens and office workers shopped. The other store was in the newer portion of the city.

A series of consumer/mass market surveys were planned to determine if cut flowers were a viable commodity in Fort Collins supermarkets. The first survey was conducted in the spring of 1980, and the results based on the flowers purchased at the two stores.

Fort Collins, Colorado, with Colorado State University, a division of Hewlett-Packard, the Woodward Governor Company and a nearby Kodak, has been considered the "melting pot" of America, regarding residents of the community. More than two-thirds of the approximately 100,000 residents are composed of people who moved into the area during the last 15 years. In fact, Fort Collins was considered the fifth fastest growing city in the United States prior to the recent recession.

A second survey in 1982, included a third small supermarket located in an older portion of the city which contained mostly single family houses. The questions used on the 1982 survey forms were similar to those asked in 1980. Additional information was used to try and determine the consumers' attitude toward the purchase of cut flowers in a supermarket versus obtaining them from a florist shop. The size and value of the bunches was also evaluated.

The third survey form contained a combination of questions from survey one and two. Five supermarkets were involved which represented the grocery shopping "homes" of approximately 50 percent of the Fort Collins area population.

1978-1980 Program

The management of the two family owned supermarkets were approached regarding the possibility of providing an assortment of cut flower bunches each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning to determine how receptive their customers would be to the availability of fresh flowers. The flowers were sleeved in clear plastic, displayed in the produce department in plastic buckets containing preservative and sold to the stores on consignment.

The flowers used in the program were produced as a result of research and teaching programs in floriculture at Colorado State University. Because of changes in programs, there was not a continuous supply of the same plant materials throughout the year, and one type of flower was more readily available one year than the next.

The price of the bunches to the stores were based on the November wholesale prices of individual flowers on the October Denver market. Once the price was established, it was not varied throughout the year. Six roses in a bunch were priced at \$1.50 wholesale (\$1.95 retail); 6 standard or 4 spray carnations or combinations of each, \$1.30 wholesale (\$1.69 retail); mixed bunches consisted of all combinations of carnations, roses, snapdragons, iris, spray chrysanthemums, stock or any other cut flower grown in class projects, \$1.50 wholesale (\$1.95 retail). These were 1978 prices, developed in cooperation with the store management and used as a base for the consumer surveys.

Two years of data (Table 1) showed that December and January were months when the supermarket customer used fewer flowers.

Table 1: Number of flower bunches sold by two supermarkets during two 2-year evaluation periods, 1978-1980.

	1978-79	1979-80
October	—	341 (18)
November	368 (27)*	568 (61)
December	307 (3)	460 (20)
January	250 (30)	122 (49)
February	442 (8)	204 (2)
March	460 (5)	—
April	455 (11)	—
May	650 (11)	—
June	351 (9)	—
July	169 (9)	—

() * number of bunches returned.

The 1978-79 data, Table 1, also showed the supermarket sale of flower bunches decreased rapidly in early summer.

A total of 1367 bunches were sold from November through February 1978-79 and 68 returned (4.97 percent), while in 1979-80, 1354 bunches were sold and 132 returned (9.74 percent).

1980 Survey Results

Postage prepaid questionnaires were stapled to 300 bunches of flowers distributed to the two supermarkets during the first week of April 1980. Seventy three cards (24.3%) were returned and analyzed using an SPSS statistical package.

Simple bunches of 6 roses or standard carnations, 3 roses and 3 standard carnations, 3 standard carnations and two stems of spray (miniature) carnations, 3 roses and two stems spray carnations, 4 stems of spray carnations or 5 stems of snapdragons were used. No package of preservatives, greens or instructions were provided in the bunches. Fresh flowers, less than 24 hrs old were used and never allowed to stay past the second delivery date.

Flower condition at the time of sale?

Most people (99%) felt the flowers were in good condition when they were purchased. However, two customers were not happy with their roses. Within two days the heads drooped and one bunch of snapdragons was reported to have dropped some of the florets when it was placed in a vase.

It became apparent, in the first year of the cooperative program with supermarkets, that quality control at the time of bunching was very important. Quality material had to be used or the products would deteriorate rapidly in the marketplace. Secondly, since flowers are plant products, the produce people are automatically put in charge. They had to be educated as to where to store the flowers over night, plus how to answer questions from the consumer. No written directions were at the display or in the packages. Since the program was developed on a consignment basis, we had the opportunity to evaluate the condition and type of bunches returned.

Where did you display the flowers?

The 1980 survey revealed that most people used the flowers in the home. Some indicated they split the bunch and also took a portion to their office. Others were purchased for meetings, etc.

Home	Office	Other
83%	12%	6%

Of those who purchased flowers to be used in the home, the tendency was to place them in the living and dining rooms. Many people (27%) indicated they split the bunch and displayed it in more than one area. Flowers were specifically purchased for use in the dining (22%), living (19%) and kitchen (12%) areas of the home. An indication as to which rooms in the home would receive flowers when the bunch was split was determined from the answers to the following question: *In which room were the flowers displayed?*

Living Room	Kitchen	Bedroom
47%	27%	15%
Family Room	Dining Room	Other
17%	46%	5%

The responses to other questions were:

How often do you receive or purchase "Sunshine Fresh" flowers?

The majority of people apparently buy Sunshine Flowers either biweekly or monthly. The question was incorporated to help determine trends in future surveys.

Weekly	Biweekly	Monthly	Rarely
17%	29%	32%	22%

Did you use a flower preservative and recut the stems?

The "Care" instructions attached to the questionnaire suggested the use of a preservative and to recut the stems. The survey revealed:

Do you use floral preservatives regularly?

Yes - 29% No - 71%

Did you use a floral preservative for your "Sunshine Fresh" flowers?

Yes - 35% No - 65%

Did you recut the stems on these flowers?

Yes - 96% No - 4%

Apparently more people are aware of the need to use preservatives for roses than carnations.

Did you use a preservative this time?

Roses	Yes - 43%	No - 57%
Carnations	Yes - 24%	No - 76%
Snapdragons	Yes - 35%	No - 59%

What was the vase life of your "Sunshine Fresh" flowers?

Data revealed that 92% of those who displayed roses recut the stems. The vase life for all roses, with or without preservative, was apparently satisfactory.

Days	
4-7	8-11
42%	25%

Standard carnations stems were recut by 93% of those surveyed and the average vase life for all flowers with and without preservative was:

Days			
0-3	4-7	8-11	12-15
10%	55%	20%	15%

All of the people who received spray carnations indicated they recut the stems. The vase life for all flowers with and without preservative was:

Days			
4-7	8-11	12-15	Longer than 15
16%	50%	25%	9%

Snapdragon stems were recut by all of those using that plant material. The vase life of the flowers treated with and without preservative was:

Days			
3-4	7-8	8-11	12-15
12%	24%	41%	18%

The supermarket consumers were very receptive to having fresh flowers available on a specific schedule. An indication of their purchasing habits throughout the year allows a supplier to develop production schedule with the proper peaks and valleys.

In past marketing studies, importance of record keeping, and monitoring the feelings of consumers, supermarket managers, bunching employees and delivery people was apparent. Everyone received some education, and the project was a starting point has become evident for learning more about supermarket cut flower sales.

Consumer comments were valuable and many of the ideas were incorporated in the following years: "I would rather buy Sunshine Fresh flowers than purchase flowers at a florist. They last longer and look better for a nice price."; "Very nice, but greenery like leather leaf etc. makes a bouquet complete when (enclosed with flowers) arranging for your home or business."; "Now I treat myself (and family) to beautiful cut flowers instead of the candy and junk foods I used to buy. A trimmer me and lovely table arrangement. Thank you."; "The flowers are always lovely and last longer than flowers I have bought at other stores or even at florist shops. I truly hope you will continue to have the flowers. Thank you for the quality."

Next Month Part II: Flower Prices and Convenience, Greatest Benefit of Supermarket Purchases.

References

1. Hutchison, N.R. and J.L. Robertson. 1979. Consumer Demand Analysis for roses. J. Amer. Soc. Hort. Sci. 104 (3):303-308.
2. Howland, Joseph. 1984. Lessons Learned From Market Research. So. Flor. and Nurseryman. Sept., 1984.