

HOW SHOULD YOU MERCHANDISE ANNUALS AND PERENNIALS?

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1. What is merchandising and how does it fit into the whole process? Merchandising might be thought of as the bundle of activities, such *advertising and promotion, location, display, pricing, salesmanship, and customer service*, that are employed to sell products and services to consumers, particularly at the retail level.

2. Most of the techniques of merchandising are the same regardless of whether you are selling products or services or both.

- * Plants and garden supplies
- * Lawn and garden maintenance
- * Landscape design and installation
- * Equipment sales and repair
- * Horticultural education
- * Professionalism

3. The nature of products and services may change, although some, particularly greenhouse plants and services, might be considered classic. They never go out of style. Some products (and services) are high in "fad" value. A very careful eye is needed to know when to get into such business, how extensively, and when to get out.

Above all, plant retailers must *know their products* -- how they are made, how they are used, what their benefits are to the people who use them.

4. Consumers often have a great deal of choice about the products and services they buy. Although there are many "slick" advertising campaigns that have been developed to change consumer beliefs and attitudes about products and services, they are generally ineffective unless the products or services address some *basic need(s)* that people have. These needs change with time. Merchandisers must:

- * recognize that the buying public can be segmented into groups with similar needs that can be addressed effectively
- * recognize that the plant retailer can't be everything to everyone
- * recognize the needs they are trying to fill for specific segments of the buying public then try to match customer needs with suitable products
- * be attuned to changes in need (for example seasonal needs for plants and garden supplies)

5. Merchandisers should recognize that consumers usually go through a regular process in choosing products and services *when the need arises*.

* First, consumers must become aware that the need exists and where they can go to satisfy the need, and with what. Often there are many options, sometimes there is only one or just a few that will do. It takes a great deal of effort to change awareness to action on the part of consumers.

* Once action (actually going out in search of a product or service) occurs, an evaluation process takes place. The consumer must consider the available choices and make a decision based on possible risks and potential satisfaction.

* Evaluation leads to trial, and satisfactory trial leads to repeat business and testimonials for the product or service.

* In the sales of the greenhouse products and services, it is necessary to gauge the needs of the customers and try to determine how best to fill them. In this context, consider three terms: *Announcement, Presentation, and Followup*.

6. Consider announcement to be the whole area of informing targeted customers about your products and services and the benefits these provide to them. Announcement includes advertising and promotional activities, and should educate as well as sell.

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* Never underestimate the intelligence of your "audience," but never overestimate their knowledge of the subject area (plants and gardening). It is important to remember that the American public in general does not usually consciously think about plants and flowers in terms of products to buy, even though they are widely exposed to trees and shrubs in the environment. (My personal guess is that no more than one in five homes use flowers in any way in public areas in front of the house.) At the same time, the public generally places a high value on landscapes and the presence of plants. The problem is to convert this vague general awareness into specific action. This requires much more publicity about plants in an active sense as things to buy and use, not just to look at somewhere as people drive or walk by.

* Try to be aware of natural cycles that occur throughout the year regarding gardening activities and community events. This awareness can help you gauge the behavior of your customers and when they are most likely to develop needs related to plants.

7. Presentation includes any interaction between you and your business, and potential customers. It is:

- * advertising layout
- * exterior and interior layout and display for the business
- * personal salesmanship
- * customer service

Education. When it comes to plants and flowers, consumers must be educated. Education will increase the value consumers place on the product, and can make them feel better about the risk they are taking. Consumers really know relatively little about maintaining flowers and are often reluctant to spend much time or take much risk putting in a beautiful garden.

Annuals versus perennials. Consider two outwardly similar products: annual plants and perennial plants. Except in general ways, you really can't sell perennials in the same way you sell annuals.

* Perennials generally need more support information as part of sales. They require more pre-planting preparation and planning than do annuals because they are going to be in position longer.

* Perennials are not really as well-known to the general public as are annuals. Labeling and plant information are important.

* Perennials require more maintenance and people need to realize that more time and labor may be involved in caring for perennials than annuals.


* Only recently are perennials being marketed in showy condition. Before, and even commonly now, perennials are displayed half dormant or immature and not ready to flower. How can this be compared to a dazzling blooming geranium or marigold.

* Display beds may be very helpful to show perennials in use, particularly in combination with annuals.

Selling color and beauty. Greenhouse people are in the business of selling beauty. Any displays must be beautiful and colorful so the customers think you know what you are doing and feel you care about what you do.

8. Followup is what happens after the sale. Are services rendered properly? Do you check in with the customer to see how the plants are doing? Do you remember the customer when something special comes along you think they might be interested in? Do you know them by name when they return? Do you get customers involved in your business in other ways where they might serve as a testimonial to what you do? Many people do not really know how to care for plants in the garden, especially if problems arise. They need information and support from greenhouse people to help.

Consumers need to know they can find you when a problem arises and that the problem can be resolved satisfactorily without a major confrontation.



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In the greenhouse industry, look at the plants as simple a vehicle used by people to interact socially with each other. People seeking personal service and attention should find it in the retail greenhouse or nursery. They should also learn something useful from the exchange. Personal salesmanship becomes very important for instilling confidence in the customer about your business and the friends they might make there. The more the customer is spending ("risking") the more important these good relationships are.

9. The art and science of advertising, layout and display for the greenhouse business is founded on the factors above. Customers are looking for "a good deal" or generally *what's in it for them*. They are also looking for convenience and safety when they shop, and certainly you shouldn't overlook the entertainment value of the shopping experience. Finally there are all kinds of social needs filled through the purchase of products and services. Thus advertisements are designed to inform and entice consumers with a recognition of their needs and suggestions of benefits. The layout of the sales area is developed to provide safety and convenience to the customer as he or she shops, and displays are designed to excite, inform, provide ideas and **SELL**.

At the same time a business person must consider the **return on display space**, and the ease or difficulty of maintaining displays properly. Some compromises are in order.



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10. **Plants are not stereo equipment.** When dealing with plants, we deal with something living. First, plants should be grown for survival in the greenhouse by reducing the temperature, moisture, and fertilizer near the end of the growth period before sales. Then plants must be maintained properly during sales to retain or enhance their value. They cannot be treated as hardgoods with indefinite "shelf life." Adequate space must be supplied with the proper environment and support systems for survival.

Plant use after sale. Many people do not really know what to do with plants, particularly new and unusual ones, and they must be shown through demonstration and creative display. Without creative ideas, they will tend to use the same plants in the same places each year. Thus displays need to be educational, attractive, and creative. Group different plants with pleasing color combinations together. Group them by similar use, height, spread, or some other trait.

Packaging. Consumers are used to having products "packaged" in some way. Plant products and services may need to be packaged to enhance their value. This packaging might be as simple as adding a label or a decorative container. It may be as complex as selling planting and design services with the product itself. Much of what comes from the greenhouse or nursery could be considered "raw" product. It needs to be finished in some way for retail sales.

Combining product with services is known to marketers as the *extended product*.

Display. There are about as many ways to display and package products as there are businesses or even consumers, but for simplicity, certain major techniques are employed that appeal to a wide range of customers. In any case the methods should be *flexible* so that displays can be changed if necessary to enhance interest and sales. It should be remembered that sales space is very expensive. If a product isn't selling well it should be modified in some way or replaced in order to increase sales. It might be a change in appearance, a change in location, a change in information about it, or some new incentive to buy.

Popular and hot selling items should be given plenty of sales space, but they should not be given the *best* selling space. Make customers search a little for popular items, and use the best selling space for items you wish to promote or introduce. The best sales space, by the way, is inside the main entrance, and on benches and shelves that are roughly between 30" and 60" from the floor.

11. In terms of sales, greenhouse and nursery layout, think in terms of transitions, something like a private residence. Visitors park in front and enter the

"house" by the front entrance. The house, of course, is fully climatized and contains valuable furnishings that need full protection from the weather and bright sun. (There could be garden supplies, flower arrangements, containers, etc.) The house may have an atrium or sun room. Its counterpart in the commercial business is the display greenhouse, which is the proper place to display and maintain most green and flowering potted plants.

Next comes the patio which may be partially protected, and holds furniture and container plants and intensive plantings of various types. This is a perfect place to demonstrate all the ways plants may be used in intensive plantings in containers. Again, the commercial greenhouse will have a counterpart in connected lath structures and arbors. These areas provide some protection, but are not considered all-weather areas.

The open patio and garden of a residence can be equated to the outdoor sales area of the retail nursery-garden center, where plants of larger size, more permanence, or requiring little protection are displayed in natural settings, or in a "store" format along aisles, on benches, or in ground beds.

Integration and transition are the keys. You would like to connect as much protected area as possible so that your customers can travel through most of your store, even in inclement weather. Also, all these different places are ideal spots to display plants and gardening ideas.



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12. **Flexibility and expansion.** Be sure to allow room for expansion and plenty of parking for the retail store. At the same time, don't be space foolish. You can achieve high sales in a small space if you carefully select products and display them well. expanded space is not really the solution to low or lagging sales.

For maximum effect, displays must be maintained (cleaned, groomed, filled) regularly and should be changed frequently for continuous appeal to regular customers.

13. When you consider advertising, display, and personal salesmanship techniques, do not overlook, the three aspects of product.

* **The product itself** (advertise appealing physical characteristics). There is nothing more beautiful than blooming flowers expertly grown and designed.

* **The extended product** (includes services such as packaging, delivery, charging, installation, maintenance, guarantees, information). Services decrease risk and increase satisfaction, and bring on those repeat sales.

* **The product benefits** (what the customer get out of it). When it gets down to it people buy things because they get something out of it. Capitalize on the natural attraction of flowers, but also the social status and self-esteem derived from having beautiful flower plantings around the home.

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