

WHAT COLOR ARE YOUR SALES?

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On a flight from Chicago enroute to Columbus for the Short Course, I was thinking about giving my presentation on color, and happened to overhear a remark at the airport. It was a totally normal remark, but it reinforced the importance of color in our lives. There were two young women standing in the concourse near one of the boarding gates, and one of the women said to the other, "Oh, I'm just green with envy that you get to go and I can't."

For the rest of my trip I decided to write down common phrases I overheard that had color in them. Someone said he was feeling **blue**. Someone else said that something had to be true because he had seen it in **black and white**. One rugged looking fellow told a companion that someone else was just plain **yellow**. A couple of businessmen discussed getting out of the **red** and into the **black**. In contrast to the person who was feeling blue, another person said they were in the **pink** of health.

The point in all this is color is extremely important in our lives - almost unconsciously to some degree - and if you can understand this importance and the meanings color convey to us, you, as a retail florist, can capitalize on it to increase sales.

How important is color in selling? Experts tell us that 60 percent of a purchase decision is based on color. That means that if you have the general product someone is looking for in the color they

are looking for, they are already half sold on buying it. In fact, if you have the right color, but not quite the right product, you have a good chance of persuading the customer to buy a different product just because the color is right. For example, if someone comes in looking for a flowering pot of pink tulips and you don't have them, it may be easier to sell them a pink azalea or a pink cyclamen than it is to sell them a different color of tulips. Price and some other factors will enter into the sale, but if the customer has pink on her/his mind, the choice will probably be based on color rather than the type of flowers.

Now, if you don't have anything in pink to offer as a substitute, chances are you may lose that sale.

Why is color so important? A lot of it has to do with fashion - what's in at the moment - and a lot of it has to do with the psychological meanings colors convey to us. More often than not, it is a combination of these two - people have certain feelings about certain color groups, and then fashion trends influence what particular shades, tints or tones of colors are more popular at any given time.

It is these hidden meanings of color that I'd like to share with you, because what color means to people, and how color is used are really the keys to enhancing your sales.

Following I will give some everyday examples of how people use color to express their feelings. These comments are not just flippant remarks that happen to include color - they are steeped in some very real perceptions we have about color

Red

We start with red. And there's a good reason for starting with this color. Not only is red a color that often crops up when you ask somebody what their favorite color is (who doesn't like a red sports car) but red is the first true color humans can distinguish when they are infants. We all start off seeing everything in shades of black and white, and then we begin to distinguish color. And red is the first color

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we can discriminate. Child development experts will tell you a toddler will pick out red objects over other colors repeatedly, and will stare at something red for a long time. It's also interesting to note that a study of over 300 primitive languages found that all languages had words for black and white, and when there was a third word added it was always red. That's how important red is to us. And it is almost universal. Although our tastes change over time, our innate predisposition to red never completely leaves us. It does, however, change over time.

According to one color expert, men tend to retain a preference for yellow-based reds, while women develop a preference for blue-based reds. What's interesting here is if you are a man, or your seed or plant buyer is a man, that will influence the shades of red you produce or sell. But, if your customer base is primarily women, you may be slightly off the mark. Here is an excellent reason for getting the opinion of someone who is the same sex as your primary customers.

Another interesting point about red is that it is a color that actually affects us physically - our blood pressure goes up, our hearts beat faster, we produce more adrenalin when there is a lot of red in our field of vision. All our senses are stimulated. We literally get excited about red. Think about how that sudden glare of red in the car in front of you makes you react.

Psychologically, red has a lot of meanings, but all with strong emotions - love, blood, sex, revolution, warning. Consequently, red is used in everyday life to convey these meanings to us. Here are some standard ways we use red:

In retailing, if you want to stimulate customers, or your employees, a big display of red will do it. That's why, despite efforts to sell other colors at Valentine's Day, only red will do for some people. Pink may be romantic, but only red says love and lust.

Now when I say red, I don't want you to think in terms of only the primary red that is found so often in children's toys. The red family encompasses those colors from deepest burgundy to palest pink and corals and salmons. You have to think of the whole family when you think of red, and the pink range is very important, too. Even though it is in the red family, the meanings of pink are different.

Pink is sweet. In fact, studies have shown that pastries and candies iced with pink or served on pink plates or on tables having pink tablecloths, seem to taste sweeter than on those served on other colors. Sugar often comes packaged in pink bags, for example. Cotton candy is pink. And people think pink smells better. People expect pink to smell nice - if it doesn't, they may be disappointed.

If you are choosing one pink variety over another, I'd recommend the one that has a scent over one that doesn't, or, if those pink azaleas don't have a lot of scent, put any scented flowers near them and people will assume it's the pink ones that smell so nice and they'll buy them.

One very current color combination that you are going to be seeing more of is pink and green. We've seen it before and we're seeing it again, and I think you'll see it in clothing and interiors for casual rooms, kitchens, baths, etc. One plant that really capitalizes on this combination - Wizard Coleus, bred by PanAmerican Seed. This excellent potted plant is the epitome of this fashionable color combination.

Washed out reds and pastel pinks are currently very fashionable. If you have seen a decline in sales of red flowers, let's say geraniums, you have probably seen an increase in pink and white geranium sales. It's not the geraniums that aren't selling, it's the color.

One last interesting story about red and how it influences us happened in hospitals. It used to be that in emergency rooms they would throw a red blanket over patients needing immediate attention. That way doctors would see the red and respond quickly. But the trouble was that the patient would see all that red and get excited - blood pressure would go up, adrenalin would be produced - everything doctors didn't want to happen. Today, most emergency rooms use blue blankets instead of red, because patients seeing blue are calmed rather than stimulated.

Blue

So, let's talk about blue. As I just indicated, blue is a calming color. When there is a lot of blue in our field of vision, our systems slow down. The expression about "feeling blue" is very accurate. When you feel blue you feel depressed rather than stimulated. Now this doesn't mean blue is a depressing color, but it does indicate why blue says certain things to us.

In fashion and every day use, blue is a color of great authority. Policemen wear blue and ride in blue cars (although black and white are still popular and also convey authority), and a blue suit is considered right for bankers and businessmen. We place great confidence in blue. If you want people to trust and believe you, deep blue is an excellent color to wear, or a good color for stationery. A blue ribbon is always first prize.

We don't have a lot of blues in flowers, certainly not as many choices as we have in other color ranges, but a lot of perennials are blue, and I think the increased popularity of blue in fashion may explain in part the increased popularity of perennials. Because blue is a recessive color - it is the first color we lose sight of at dusk - it can be overlooked in the garden center and the garden. You can highlight blues by combining them with yellows or other bright colors that will call attention to the fact that they are there. An advantage to blue's recessive nature is it can lengthen or widen an area. A long narrow garden - or display area - can be made to look wider by using blue flowers or blue paint on the long walls, and an advancing color such as red or yellow on the short walls. Blue is also a cool color. Tests have shown that just changing the color of paint in a room from a warm color to blue will lower the perceived temperature in that room. You can do this in your store with flowers, or to create a cool feeling in a garden by using lots of blue.

Currently, lilac, periwinkle, hyacinth and other pastel blues are very popular in fashion and furnishings. Note how the names of the colors are names of plants. This may be a good indication of plants that have good sales potential. Pots of flowering bulb plants in these colors are good choices for interior accessories for spring and fall sales. And one color expert told me he felt that orchids, especially the blue tones and blue pinks, come in the perfect colors for today's interiors. Not surprisingly, we are seeing more and more availability and popularity of orchids as potted plants.

Yellow

Now, yellow is an exciting color, but not in the same sense that red is exciting. Our physical reaction to yellow is mainly it gets our attention quickly. Yellow is the only color that doesn't darken as it gets more saturated and intense. And yellow is said to be the "fastest" color we see, although it vies with red for this position. Yellow



looks fast and we see it fast. This is probably why yellow is so important in use as a warning color for signage and equipment. Yellow also says "cheap" in some ways - not always meaning lesser quality, but fast and cheap go together in a certain way.

You can use yellow to get customers' attention, either right at the front of your store, or further back to draw them through the display areas. Personally, I'd put yellow in the back, because some customers may never get past the yellow if it's up front.

If you want to look like you have the fastest delivery in town, paint your vans yellow. Not only will they have high visibility, but people will think of them as fast.

Yellow is predicted to be gaining popularity for coming color fashions. The Color Marketing Group's forecast for consumer colors for 1990 include many that are strongly influenced by yellow. Fortunately, yellow is available in a wide variety of plants - although I think we still need a really good yellow petunia. I know breeders are at work on yellow impatiens and yellow violets, and there's a new yellow poinsettia from Paul Ecke Poinsettias. As more yellow varieties come about in the next five years or so, be sure to have them to sell. Yellow is gaining importance.

Because yellow is bright and cheery, it combines well with other colors to say "fresh" and "vital." Yellow and blue combine to a very springtime combination, but it's a cheerful duo anytime. Yellow is exciting and upbeat. One color consultant has said planting yellow flowers in front of a house will help it sell faster, and from that we can understand that putting sale items on a yellow table or yellow tablecloth will tell people these are a bargain, and consequently they should sell faster.

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Because yellow is one of the last colors to fade from sight in the evening, it stands out in the garden. Yellow can call attention to garden features such as a fountain or other attraction, as well as hazards such as steps. It can also be used to divert attention from one area to another. If you are remodeling and have a real mess in one area, put a display of yellow flowers directly across from it, and people will notice the flowers more and the mess less.

Green

Green is a funny sort of color. Most people like mid-tone greens, but once you make it lighter or darker, or add more yellow to it, it becomes attractive to fewer and fewer people. Although green is the most restful color to the eyes, it generally does not command the authority or respect in fashion that other colors do, at least according to one source.

In respect to green being the most restful color, it is interesting to note that hospital operating room personnel generally wear green coveralls. The reason for this is that green is a direct complement to the color of exposed flesh, and the eyes of a surgeon or doctor who looks up and sees green will recover from any eye strain much more quickly. Historically, engravers - the old fashioned type who very finely etched steel plates - would keep a green gemstone, usually a beryl, on their benches to stare at when their eyes got tired.

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While green is in fact a restful color, it has other connotations to it. Green is the color of hate, poison and decay. We turn green with envy or turn green when we are seasick. Slime is green and imaginary monsters are green. Yet it is also the color of life, as in horticulture, where green means new and growing. A greenhorn is someone new and inexperienced, and we say someone is green when they are just starting out.

Greens run from dark emerald to palest mist to almost yellow and almost blue. Pale yellow-greens have less popular appeal than pale whitened-greens. Very dark greens appeal to fewer people than pure mid-tone greens.

Dark greens, often popular for logos and signage for greenhouses and florists, are elitist, but can be made to appeal to a wider audience by combining them with democratic yellow or orange.

Blued greens seem to say security and stability to us. Many countries, including the United States, use green in their currencies. It is the color of resources, the earth, and it says "secure."

How can you use green? Even though green is so closely associated with florists, growers and interiorscapers, it may not be the best color to use in promoting your business. Studies have shown we do not take green seriously in business. Green is not a good color for a business suit, even if it flatters your red hair. One study showed people who solicited donations while wearing green were less successful than those wearing other colors. If you aren't closing sales or getting paid what you asked, could it be the green?

Dark blue-greens are often associated with prestige and can be used successfully by banks and upscale consumer products. Security and stability may come into play here. But the bluer greens such as aqua and turquoise have limited appeal - they are more trendy and fashionable than they are lasting colors.

Green is the color of nature. Robin Hood wore green to camouflage himself and his merry men in Sherwood Forest. And green has historical associations with love. Don't abandon green, just use it carefully.

What do you sell your potted plants in? Green utility pots? That's fine, but because green is such a natural in your business, green pots are basically ignored. Using colored pots, in complementary colors for the flower colors, will attract more attention and be more appealing to customers. Or, using pot covers - and this has been proven in marketing studies - will allow you to command a higher price not only on the basis of cost, but on the basis of eye appeal.

A last word about green. With the exception of dark, elitist greens, green is common and ordinary and people just don't react to it that strongly. If you really like or want to use green, you can broaden its appeal to customers by combining it with yellow or orange, two colors more democratic in appeal.

Orange

The word orange is a distinctive color that didn't enter European languages until around the 16th Century, and that was after the introduction of the fruit. This late entry into the language explains

why we describe orange hair as being red, or say something glows red hot when in reality glowing orange hot would be more accurate.

We have a wide range of flowers that fall into the category of orange, but orange is not currently an "in" fashion color. Remember the '60s with burnt orange, avocado green and coppertone brown? Orange hasn't recycled yet to any large extent. But orange does have some very interesting appeals.

Orange, like yellow, is a generally accepted color. When combined with more elitist colors such as dark green or violet, it broadens the appeal to more people. Generally speaking, orange makes things look affordable, and this is one reason why it too is often used in fast food restaurants.

Combined with blue, orange gives us the message of great strength. Look at all the cleaning supplies that use some combination of orange and blue.

Orange is usually associated with fall. Leaves turn orange, and orange chrysanthemums and other flowers are then in demand. Just as fall is a transition from the heat of summer to the cool of winter, orange is a transitional color. It says "affordable" and "middle of the road."

In merchandising, orange can be a faddish color for sports clothes and other merchandise, but it is seldom used in formal situations. Like yellow, orange is also frequently used as a warning color on large equipment or in signage.

If you use dark green a lot in your signage, you may be appealing to only five percent or less of the population. By combining green with orange you can appeal to a much greater number. Aside from its association with fall, orange is a good color to say "affordable." Paint your store walls orange to create a warm, you-can-afford-our-prices atmosphere.

Black and White

I group these together because, even though they are thought of as opposites, in many ways, they also convey similar meanings and are often used together. As I pointed out at the beginning, all known languages have terms for black and white even if they have no other color terms - in reality the meaning is often just light and dark, but these are our primary distinctions.

Black is often associated with evil and death, but can also be used for extreme formality and high authority. Fashion authorities tell us a black suit is the most authoritative color a business person can wear.

And what do we wear to very formal functions? A black tuxedo or a black gown. Limousines are black, and glossy black surfaces, such as a marble entry way, are considered very sophisticated and very authoritative. Combine black and white or black and gold and you have a very formal, elitist combination.

Judges and ministers wear black, and I do know of at least one interiorscaping firm that dresses its employees in black. Ordinarily you wouldn't think of doing this, but this firm's clients are large hotels and businesses, and dressing in black gives the employees a more authoritative and important look than ordinary work clothes would.

You probably don't use black much. With the exception of some novelties such as black tulips, there aren't many black flowers. But you can use black to convey authority or formality in your stores. Black and white stationery is very acceptable and authoritative, as is signage in these colors. A black and white decorated area for wedding consultations would be very appropriate. And if you are daring enough, try black uniforms.

White, as we all know, symbolizes purity, refinement, precision, and cleanliness, at least in Western society. It too can be a very formal color, but its light reflecting properties make it popular in informal situations as well. If you have an area where you want a high degree of accuracy accomplished by workers, paint the area white. White encourages precision. This might be your bookkeeping area or a planting area. The one thing to watch out for is white is hard on the eyes, so you may want to use an off-white or white with accents of other colors such as restful green.

Studies show people tend to hurry in a white atmosphere. It could help to keep sales moving along and increase traffic in your stores. However, if cashiers are slow and you don't want your customers feeling hurried, use a color less "hurried" such as pastel pink or beige.

Gray

The last color I'm going to mention is gray. Gray is the new neutral that is gradually replacing beige.

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We even have a new color called "greige" being used on exteriors and interiors. With the exception of Dusty Miller and a few others, there really aren't many flowers or plants we would describe as gray, but gray is still an important color for you because people want colors that go with gray.

As customers switch their color palettes from browns and earth-tones to grays and blues, they are going to be looking for plant and flower colors that are compatible with these. This means exterior plantings and interior potted plants and fresh cut-flowers are going to have to go with these newer, more popular colors. The head of color merchandising at Benjamin Moore Paint Company told me he can't think of any interior designer who would use bronze chrysanthemums in a room today. But, he said, lavenders and purples are perfect for the gray-tone rooms.

We have probably all played the little game where you stare at a square of color and then shift our eyes to a blank sheet of white paper and then see an after image of that color's complement. Well, true gray is the only color that does not produce an after image when stared at for any amount of time. This makes it an ideal color for work areas where you want to encourage creativity. It is restful, it is neutral, it is nonintrusive.

In clothing, gray conveys a "friendly authority" image, and therefore is excellent in business, provided the style is right.

Now, how long will this current trend to gray last? Probably well into the mid-90s and beyond. Fashion colors for clothing change rapidly - they may last only some season or six months; however, color trends for interiors and exteriors last longer because of the consumer investment.

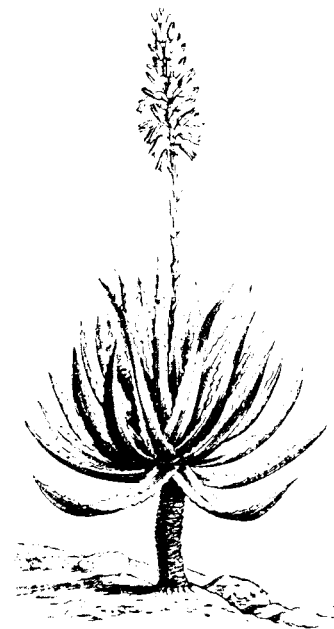
Those are the major color groupings and how people react to them. Now, what can you expect to get from this?

First, color is important to your customers - it is 60 percent of a person's reason to buy. You need to be aware of current long-term color trends for interiors and exteriors - those are the ones that affect you the most. You can find out about color trends simply by asking your local paint stores what is selling best and what trends they see. You can also ask at more fashionable dress shops, and at car dealerships. Auto colors are usually planned four years or more ahead.

How can you best display color in your stores? Display colors in a rainbow order, grouping like colors together and going from red to fuchsia. Remember the name Roy G. Bivf (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, fuchsia) to know how the colors go in order on a color wheel. Americans read from left to right, so you should arrange your merchandise from left to right. Go from dark to light in one color grouping and then dark to light in the next.

If you can bring yourself to do it, group plants by color rather than by type. Put all your reds and pinks and salmons and corals in one area and all your yellows in another, etc. Remember that some people are generally more interested in color than they are in specific varieties or classes. If you don't have the right plant, you have a better chance of making a sale if you at least have the right color, and by displaying plants by color, things won't get overlooked.

If you pay attention to using color as a sales tool, you can enhance your retail sales, get out of the red, into the black, and turn your competition green with envy.



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