

## Merchandise Concepts/Anne M. Obarski

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### “What Women Want in a Garden Center?”

As a speaker in the green industry since 2007, I have been intrigued with the independent garden centers and their operations. In 2009 I developed a membership program in which I interviewed the presidents and owners of multi-million dollar garden centers with the hopes of sharing their insights on what helped them reach that level. At the beginning of every interview, I always asked about their customer profile. Time and time again the answer was the same, “Women represent 80% + of our business.

That statistic made me ask the following question. If women represent such a large portion of an independent garden center’s sales, then what are garden centers doing to attract, satisfy and multiply more of their women customers?

In the fall of 2011 I developed a survey to ask the question, “What Women Want in a Garden Center”. The following are the findings:

1. *Why do you choose an independent garden center over the big box stores like Lowe’s, Home Depot, etc.?*
  - a. The top 2 responses were **plant selection** and **knowledgeable employees** followed by plant quality and gift items.

**My interpretation:** Garden centers would be wise to focus on the appearance of their inventory from the overall selection to providing the best quality possible in all classifications, especially plant material. In conjunction with selection, the garden centers could develop a strategically focused education based training program for current employees and new hires.

2. *Do you believe that your independent garden center has better quality and longer lasting plants than other stores that sell similar plants for less?*

a. **92%** of the respondents reported that they felt this question was true!

**My interpretation:** Garden centers should embrace this finding. The female custom has admitted that if the quality of plants is excellent she will spend more for the quality and life expectancy of those plants vs. those from the competition that sells similar plants for less. Independent garden centers should not shy away from improving their gross margin by increasing their prices on superior quality plants

3. *Do you find our independent garden center employees friendly and easily accessible and willing to answer your questions?*

• *The following are some of the responses:*

a. I find IGC employees to be much more knowledgeable and interested in gardening. More often than not, they have the experience and enthusiasm to tell me much more about a plant than 'big box' employees.

b. Yes, I often find big box employees not very knowledgeable or very helpful. Not sure if this is because they are not required to sell or what.

c. When they are available they are friendly and knowledgeable. However, with tough economic times comes staffing cutbacks, and it seems there are fewer employees available.

d. Absolutely, they look at it as more than a job

e. Depends on where I go. Independents tend to have a slower pace so are more able to take the time with the customer.- depends on the management and what they expect of their employees.

f. I've occasionally come across people hired strictly to water, but they were still polite and direct me to people who can answer the question. Of course people in independent garden centers are going to be more

knowledgeable and helpful they're jobs literally depend on it. I've shopped at both types of stores depending on what my budget could handle.

**My Interpretation:** The response to this question validates how important it is to have well trained employees who are visible and helpful to the customer. Investing time and money in training employees should be a priority for the garden center owner.

4. *Does merchandising in a garden center affect your product selection?*

- a. The answers to this question were as follows: **39.5 % said yes and 47.4 % said sometimes.**

**My interpretation:** The respondents revealed that merchandising can affect how women purchase within a garden center.

5. *Does informative signing affect your product selection if an employee is not in the area?*

- a. **89.5 %** of respondents said "yes".

**My interpretation:** Garden centers should consider informational signing an important part of their merchandising program. Signing can be considered part of the garden center branding program. The coordination of color, font, logo etc. within the signing can cement brand identity in the customer's mind. Informational signing should be easy to read and understand. For boomer customer's the font should be large enough to read and the body of the message no more than 2-3 bullet points or short sentences.

6. *When buying garden “chemicals”, are you ever frustrated with information on packaging and wish that simplifying the outcome of using the product would be helpful?*

a. *63.9% of our female respondents said yes and 36.1% said no.*

**My interpretation:** The issue of product labeling is in the hands of the manufacturer. If the manufacturers are open to suggestions, garden centers may do them a favor and share this information. In the meantime, it may benefit independent garden centers to do additional training to teach employees a concise benefit description of the top 20% of the chemicals they carry. The knowledgeable employee can offer easy to understand information for the customer.

7. *If you were buying an item at your garden center, what would help you make the decision to buy it there and not for less at a big box store down the street?*

a. *The answers to this question were the following:*

1. *64.9% Product looks worth the price.*
2. *54.1% Knowledgeable employee*
3. *54.1% Loyalty to the garden center*
4. *18.9% informational signing*

**My Interpretation:** Garden centers should post the following comment throughout their stores: “Our plant material is so superior it screams “buy me”! “ People recognize quality whether it’s in plants or pants and the smart buyers are willing to spend a little more to get that quality. That is also where the knowledgeable employee comes into the picture. Garden centers will benefit by putting an emphasis “educating the customer” in their training programs.

I believe that once a garden center is perceived as carrying a superior products the price objection may be less of an issue. I find it interesting that the response to signing came in last. It may be a direct reflection on the fact that the customer would rather have a personal relationship with the garden center employees than spend the time reading the signing.

8. *How does your garden center make you feel special when shopping in your favorite garden center?*

- *The following are a sample of the responses.*
  - a. Employee enthusiasm for my goals plans and interests. Plus, they likely have the knowledge to share their experiences about a certain plant with me.
  - b. Know me by name. Know that I am always looking for something special.
  - c. Carry out large items. I worked at a store that we carried out almost all plants. After work shoppers could get plants and not get dirty.
  - d. Great product selection that fits me.
  - e. They have special sales for members. Remember me when I come in. They get excited about new plants like I do.
  - f. Making you as the buyer feel you are part of their business as well....you are providing the cycle of the small business Not just the in and out of product in the big box.
  - g. Creative displays, ease of navigation around products, assistance with loading
  - h. My favorite one has a rewards system and early notification of sales.
  - i. They ask how my garden is doing. They also talk about the plants and flowers they have at home.

**My interpretation:** I chose to add as many comments as I could for this question. I don't believe that these answers are only typical of female responses. I believe that these comments could be the "guts" of any smart garden centers training program!

9. *How often during the year do you shop in an independent garden center?*

- a. **Over 80% of respondents said that they shop more than 6 times a year and almost half of that number shop over 10 times a year.**

**My interpretation:** What would your garden center sales look like if you could increase that number by even just 10%? If we knew how much the average sale for each of the initial visits were, you could easily calculate how much of an increase you could plan for from these “loyal customers”.

10. *What products or services would you wish your independent garden center would add to their store?*

- *The following are some of the responses*

- Classes
- Fruit trees, cane fruit, a good coffee shop
- I think large "idea" boards - a visual of plant combinations would help up sell items and guide some un-focused customers to guaranteed success
- Better landscaping discounts
- Recycling of plastic pots and trays
- Garden design
- Enough with the new varieties and catchy names! Whatever happened to all the inexpensive good old reliable plants? Some of this new stuff doesn't hold up well at all.
- They offer carry out. There is no need to shop at big box stores for plants.
- QR code information lookup :)
- Fresh produce. More events and seminars.
- DIY craft for gardens
- Compost in Bulk w/ delivery Consulting/Garden Coaching services for those of us that need just a little help.

- m.* I would like them to stay on top of "top garden picks" for our area from either local hort publications or the local newspaper and have as many of those in stock as possible. So frustrating to read about a hot new plant, and not be able to find it anywhere.
- n.* More gift-type plant items. I need to buy birthday and other types of gifts all year, but I often can't find a nice potted plant in a nice pot at my local garden center
- o.* Grocery store style carry out when you are dressed for work.

**My interpretation:** These very honest answers are ones that garden centers should carefully look at. Some of these requests are so simple and inexpensive for a garden center to do.

If your female customer tells you that it's important for her when she shops at your garden center, and she makes up 80% or more of your customer base, wouldn't it make sense to address her needs?

**In conclusion:**

I believe that there are golden business nuggets in this report that are essential for each independent garden center to study and then develop a strategy to add to a training program, inventory mix or merchandising and signing program.

In a time of economic uncertainty, listening to your "actual customer" is the trump card you need to play to insure a healthy business.

## About the author:

Anne M. Obarski, the "EYE" on Performance, has been the Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts for 27 years, now located in Dublin, Ohio. Anne is a professional international speaker and author who works closely with organizations who want to become CONTAGIOUS....on purpose!

Graduate of Kent State University, past sportswear buyer for the May Co. Department Stores, now under the Macy's name, college instructor for 15 years and retail consultant and speaker for 27 years have all helped Anne to bring real life experiences and advice to the thousands of audience members that have heard her passionately speak over the past two decades.

Anne is the author of, "**Applied Retail Mathematics**" and "**Surprising Secrets of Mystery Shoppers**"; contributing author to the books, "**Real World Customer Service Strategies that Really Work**", "**Conversations on Customer Service and Sales** featuring Brian Tracy and "**Confessions of Shameless Self Promoters**" by Debbie Allen. Anne's released, "**Make Your Business CONTAGIOUS**" in 2008, and her newest, "**Make Your Customer Service CONTAGIOUS**" for the garden center industry in 2011 and a second edition for the retail industry will be released in 2012.

Anne has also been a contributing columnist for Garden Center Magazine and a requested speaker at garden center associations in the US and Canada.

She is a member of the National Speakers Association and the Global Speakers Association.

If you are interested in having Anne speak for your group please contact her at [anne@merchandiseconcepts.com](mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com). Visit her website at <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com>.

