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An Exploratory Study of Garden Center Selection For Landscape Plants

Ellen Day
Department of Marketing, Terry College of Business
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602

Abstract

An exploratory study employing qualitative research methods was conducted to identify the criteria customers use in selecting retail outlets for landscape plants. A small convenience sample of subjects residing in Atlanta, Athens, and outlying areas of Georgia were asked where they purchased landscape plants and why they chose particular retail outlets. Findings suggested that choice of retail outlet typically depended on the type of purchase. Many of the participants purchased bedding plants primarily at mass merchandisers, while purchasing larger shrubs, trees, and more unusual plants at garden centers. Customer informational needs appeared to be a major reason for the different retail choices. Based on information obtained through focus group and individual interviews, perceived quality of plants appeared to be of paramount importance for every type of plant purchase, while the importance of price, breadth of assortment, expertise of sales assistants, location, and other factors depended more on particular purchase intentions.

Index words: garden center, retail nursery, marketing, landscape plants.

Significance to the Nursery Industry

In a highly competitive market, owners/operators of garden centers need to know why consumers select particular retail outlets, such as garden centers, mass merchandisers, home improvement stores, or other retailers who sell landscape plants. Results of an exploratory study indicated that retail selection was driven in large part by the type of purchase. Independent garden centers were preferred for major plant purchases and when the consumer wanted gardening tips and information related to growing conditions and type of care required. For familiar, lower-risk purchases, such as bedding plants, consumers often preferred a mass merchandiser because of price and convenience. Because of the qualitative research methods employed and the small sample, managerial implications per se are not presented. However, a few ideas emerged that may be of value to garden center owner/operators. For example, the study suggested the need for competitive pricing for common and popular landscape plants (bedding plants, small shrubs, etc.) and 'user-friendly' information for larger shrubs, trees, and more unusual species of plants. Careful management and monitoring of displays can enhance customer perceptions of plant quality. Suggestion selling may help increase sales of green goods and related products. Also, women often assume a major role in plant purchases and retail selection and therefore comprise an important component of a garden center's customer base.

Introduction

Despite the importance of identifying criteria consumers use in choosing among retailers when shopping for or purchasing landscape plants, there is a paucity of research that provides owners/operators of garden centers with insights into ways to increase their business. The need for additional research addressing marketing issues has been widely acknowledged (2, 7, 10). Therefore, an exploratory study was undertaken to address the critical issue of garden center selection. Because of the use of qualitative research methods employing a small sample, findings should be considered preliminary and tentative. Hence, research propositions, when warranted, rather than conclusions per se are presented.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research approach involving focus group and individual interviews was employed because of the exploratory nature of the study. Focus groups (or 'round-table' discussions), the most popular method used in qualitative research, or one-on-one individual interviews are employed when too little is known about consumer behavior to insure meaningful larger-scale survey, or quantitative, research. Because the latter requires sufficient understanding of the behavior of interest to design structured, relevant, and appropriate questions, survey research is predicated on an existing knowledge base that directs questioning regarding the 'who, what, when, where, and why' of consumer behavior. In the absence of considerable prior research, focus group and individual interviews can provide the starting point for exploring the dynamics of behavior. Because these qualitative methods typically employ small convenience (i.e., non-random) samples, statistical analyses, quantitative results and generalizations are precluded. This limitation notwithstanding, qualitative research often becomes an important first stage in a research process that attempts to better understand aspects of consumer behavior. Important issues can be identified, which in turn helps define research questions to be addressed or hypotheses to be tested in a subsequent stage of the research project, and insights, particularly into the 'whys' of behavior, can be gleaned.

Qualitative research is appropriate when investigating a topic, such as garden center selection, on which prior research is sparse, because qualitative methods permit participants to speak in their own words, to elaborate upon, explain, or qualify responses, and to share personal views and frustrations (3). Data collected in such a manner typically is much more informative than data collected by a highly structured, and usually inflexible, questionnaire. Moreover, because in designing questionnaires the researcher must necessarily presume to know what issues are important as well as the potential range of responses, true under-
Diversity of the sample was critical to insuring that participants in the study would recall recent purchases and garden center choices. Although persons spending less may constitute a significant portion of the market for landscape plants, the requirement seemed justified because (1) most marketers, including retailers, are interested in attracting and keeping ‘heavy users’ in particular and (2) discussions would not be productive if recall of past purchase behavior was low, as may be the case with small, infrequent purchases.

Diversity of the sample was critical to insuring that participants did not represent a narrow market. Hence, both men and women were recruited for the study. However, the final sample comprised more women than men, in part because several men invited to participate stated that they did not assume a major role in most landscaping purchases. Diversity of sample was increased by recruiting persons living in Atlanta, Athens (a mid-sized city), and in outlying, rural areas in Georgia. In addition, participants represented an income range from approximately $25,000 to over $100,000 annual household income and an age range from 20 to over 50; all had at least a high-school education. The sample comprised both novice and serious gardeners, and the majority of volunteers were homeowners. This diversity notwithstanding, the mere fact that a (potentially biased) convenience sample was employed makes generalizations to larger populations tenuous. Also, all participants were employed full-time, meaning that one important market, retired persons, was not represented. Nevertheless, since this study was exploratory, this author felt that the achieved level of diversity within the sample would provide considerable information about reasons consumers choose one retailer over another.

In total, 25 women and 3 men participated in the three focus groups, and 3 women and 6 men were interviewed individually and one married couple was interviewed together. No further interviews were deemed necessary for this initial investigation because ‘redundancy’ had been achieved; that is, very similar, oftentimes identical, responses were obtained across the interviews, suggesting that additional interviews would yield little, if any, new information (8). The same discussion guide was used for all interviews, which were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Data analysis involved identifying patterns across responses, as well as specific comments or observations by participants that provided insights into shopping and purchasing behavior. The findings that follow represent a distillation of approximately 13 hours of recorded discussions.

**Results and Discussion**

When asked “where do you buy outdoor plants?”, participants named virtually the full range of retail options: independent garden centers; mass merchandisers; home centers; retail nurseries; and farmers’ markets. One important, in-
disputable finding was that choice of retail outlet typically depended on the type of purchase. That is, the majority of respondents stated that they would often buy bedding plants from one store type and make major purchases, i.e., trees and shrubs, from another (type of) outlet. Kmart, in particular, was consistently mentioned as a primary source for bedding plants, especially annuals. Garden centers were mentioned more often as the source for trees, shrubs, and more exotic varieties of landscape plants, including annuals and perennials.

Proposition 1. Choice of type of retail outlet for landscape plants will vary by type of purchase.

Most respondents reported that they shop around to some extent, comparing assortments, availability of certain types of landscape plants, and prices. However, comparison shopping normally takes place over time rather than on one buying trip. In lieu of visiting different retail outlets, several participants reported comparison shopping through information supplied in newspaper advertisements.

Reasons consumers selected particular retailers varied, depending on the type of purchase. Because participants felt reasonably competent in judging the quality of most bedding plants and usually did not need advice or assistance in their selection, many participants stated that they patronize those retail outlets offering relatively broad assortments and competitive prices, even if the outlets were mainly self-service. In contrast, for purchases of shrubs and trees, which represented both a greater financial outlay and a longer life span (i.e., higher risk), participants said that they preferred to patronize independent garden centers where they expected knowledgeable salespeople to assist in plant selection and provide information about installation and maintenance.

Proposition 2. Mass merchandisers are preferred for bedding plants and familiar, relatively inexpensive (lower-risk) plant purchases, while independent garden centers are preferred for larger shrubs and trees (higher-risk purchases).

Since the primary goal of this research project was to ascertain why consumers choose certain retailers, considerable probing was done to identify the relative influence of various retailer and product characteristics. The majority of respondents stated that price was an important consideration in their selection of a retail outlet. However, this price sensitivity did not necessarily translate into looking for the lowest prices. Rather, price was considered in the context of type of purchase and perceived quality of plants. Since respondents felt that quality varied less for bedding plants across retailers, many would look for the best price; but low or competitive prices were somewhat less important in the purchase of shrubs and trees, the quality of which, in the respondents’ view, was more difficult to assess. For these larger purchases and for more unusual plants for which respondents desired planting tips and other information, price appeared not to be an overriding concern.

Proposition 3. Competitive prices are relatively more important for lower-risk plant purchases.

Of paramount importance was perceived quality of plants. Respondents tended to equate ‘quality’ with health of plants, although plant appearance (color, roots, shape) played a role in evaluating quality. Most respondents felt competent as-sessing the quality of bedding plants and other familiar landscape plants purchased on prior occasions. In contrast, the quality of trees, especially if there were no flowers or leaves, and most shrubs was perceived to be somewhat harder to judge. One point made by several respondents was that their perceptions were negatively affected by dead or sickly looking plants among the displays or visible in an outlying area. Another important point made by several respondents was that while they might expect higher quality at independent garden centers as compared to mass merchandisers, they perceived few, if any, quality differences.

Proposition 4. Perceived plant quality is a critical consideration for all plant purchases.

For most purchases, assortment appeared to be a key consideration in selecting a retailer. The majority of respondents stated that they did not want to drive to several different locations to buy plants. Few respondents indicated that the availability of related gardening products drove their choice of retail outlet, yet several insights were gleaned from the discussions. Most participants stated that they made special trips to buy plants, regardless of the type of plants to be purchased, and rarely purchased related products when buying plants. However, many stated that noticing related products will often cause them to return later to the same store to buy ancillary items. One participant observed that because plants are often physically separated from gardening supplies, especially during peak purchase periods, the customer is not necessarily ‘reminded’ of the need for other products, unless the salesperson engages in suggestion selling.

To determine whether the drawing power of the mass merchandisers, such as Kmart and Wal-Mart, and home centers, such as Lowe’s and Home Depot, could be attributed in part to the availability of ‘one-stop shopping’, participants were asked how important it is that a store carry unrelated merchandise. Virtually all respondents agreed that this was not a determinant of store choice for plants. The primary reason was that they made special trips to buy plants because they were ‘project-oriented’. That is, they set aside time for planting and usually had a single purpose in mind when patronizing stores to purchase plants. One participant noted that plants can be very bulky and one can get dirty handling plants, so purchasing many different types of goods on one shopping trip may be impractical. These reasons notwithstanding, because consumers shop at mass merchandisers and home centers for other types of products, they often become aware of the garden center at the store, which, in turn, can translate into some impulse purchasing and return trips specifically for plants.

Proposition 5. Availability of other products (merchandise) does not greatly influence retail choice for purchases of plants.

The relative importance of knowledgeable sales assistance appears to depend on the type of purchase. As might be expected, participants indicated that assistance was usually unimportant in the purchase of common varieties of bedding and other relatively inexpensive plants but usually very important in more major purchases such as trees and shrubs. Several comments were of particular interest. Some participants expressed distrust of information provided by some sales assistants; they stated that if they asked questions they normally would get information, but they did not always
view the sales assistants as trustworthy ("oh, they will give you an answer..."). This observation seemed to hold in particular for mass merchandisers. Most participants indicated that they sought assistance primarily for tips on planting and caring for plants. Not surprisingly, novice gardeners indicated that they relied more heavily on sales assistants than more experienced gardeners did. Perceptions in general were that personnel at independent garden centers were much more likely to be knowledgeable and helpful than sales assistants at the mass merchandisers and home centers. Considerable discussion ensued about participants’ need or desire for information. Because the information provided on the tags or stakes was generally viewed as inadequate, participants stated that they often relied on store personnel for more complete information about appropriate planting conditions, care and maintenance of installed plants, and characteristics (e.g., height) of mature plants. However, participants agreed that how plant information was conveyed, e.g., through additional store signage or "environmental displays" (1), was not so important as the availability of information.

**Proposition 6: Plant-related information is relatively more important for higher-risk plant purchases.**

The importance of location in choosing among retail garden centers was somewhat difficult to ascertain, in part because 'convenience' is relative. For the majority of plant purchases, participants indicated that they patronized stores "in their area", yet occasionally they drove several miles to a retail garden center. Participants living in Atlanta seemed to emphasize the importance of convenience more than participants from Athens or rural areas. Whether a customer is willing to 'go out of his/her way' to a more distant location appeared to depend upon: 1) type of purchase, 2) whether the individual viewed gardening as a hobby or more as a necessity, and 3) size of purchase. That is, participants did not see the need to drive great distances for common bedding plants yet were sometimes willing to invest the time to visit a more distant garden center for more unusual plants, for trees and shrubs, for large quantities, and for a 'recreational outing'.

Responses among participants were mixed as to the influence of retailer advertising on retail selection. Most were aware of advertising, primarily in newspapers, for landscape plants, which served as a source of price information. Not surprisingly, respondents pointed out that advertisements were not likely to stimulate a shopping trip and purchase if the person was not 'ready and willing' to plant. Some respondents noted that advertising served to remind them that it was time to plant particular types of landscape plants.

Considerable discussion about gardening in general and sources for plant materials in particular apparently takes place among work cohorts, friends, and neighbors who share an interest in gardening. Several respondents mentioned sharing experiences both with respect to success with certain types of plants and level of satisfaction with specific retailers, suggesting that word-of-mouth can influence store choice.

Since virtually all participants were married, they were asked who was chiefly responsible for making the decisions as to what types of plants were purchased. About half stated that they more-or-less made such decisions jointly with their spouse. However, only two males (from upper-income households) indicated that they were the primary decision-maker, whereas roughly half of the women stated that they had primary or complete decision-making responsibility, especially for flowering plants. The responsibility for deciding where to purchase plants corresponded to the responsibility for deciding what to purchase.

**Proposition 7. Women tend to play a major role in deciding on type of plant purchase and selecting a retail garden center.**

Most participants stated that their choice of particular plant species was dictated primarily by 'the spot for which the plants are intended'; hence, their purchases were largely what might be called 'planned impulse'. That is, virtually all participants said that they had a good idea of what they wanted to buy before they went to a store but that they usually made decisions as to specific choices once in the store, being influenced in part by the available assortment, by plant appearance (health, color), and often by a salesperson's suggestions. Those who enjoyed gardening, as opposed to those who viewed it more as a necessity, stated that they usually bought more than they originally intended once they were in a store.

Despite some criticisms relating to limited assortments, uninformed salespeople, and limited availability of plant-related information, Kmart specifically was mentioned most often as a source for plants, especially bedding plants. Price was the primary reason given for Kmart patronage, although convenience was also a determinant factor. Kmart's tent sale, in particular, was mentioned by several respondents. Based on the discussions, Kmart's competitive advantage therefore appeared to be based on: 1) customer familiarity with the store, 2) store visibility through location and advertising, 3) perceived convenience, 4) competitive pricing, and 5) the tent sale 'event'.

**Proposition 8. Price is the primary reason consumers make plant purchases at mass merchandisers.**

These research findings are consistent with the observations of nursery industry experts (4, 6, 9) and corroborate results of the few related studies (5, 7), although this qualitative study provided more insights into certain aspects of consumer behavior because of the flexibility of the methods employed. For example, prior studies have not revealed that store choice may be a function of the type of purchase. However, because this particular study involved a small sample of consumers from one area of the country, drawing definitive conclusions and generalizing the findings would be inappropriate. Rather, the primary goal of most exploratory research is to identify some of the key issues that can guide future research relating to complex behaviors. Therefore, the research propositions, or working hypotheses, emanating from this investigation need to be confirmed through additional research employing different and larger samples.

**Literature Cited**


