The Role of the Landscape Architect in Plant Material Purchases: Implications for Marketing Communications

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Summary. As the ornamental nursery industry moves from being production-oriented to being market-driven, growers must rethink the way they do business. No longer can producers target only purchasers of plant materials; now they must also direct marketing activities to those who influence the purchase of plants and choice of producers. Because landscape architects play an influential role in plant specification and selection of production nurseries, growers should consider ways in which effective marketing communications can be developed to influence these influencers. A marketing perspective on the decisionmaking process and the determination of the role of the individual in the decision process is used to develop recommendations on ways for growers to communicate with landscape architects. The implications of these findings for university extension programming also are discussed.

The ornamental nursery industry is in transition, moving from being production-oriented to being market-driven. The long production cycles, especially for woody ornamental plants, present a particular marketing challenge and necessitate a keen understanding on the part of

producers of who determines, and who influences, demand for ornamentals. Atypical approach by ornamental nurseries is to focus marketing and sales activities on the immediate customer who makes the purchase. However, in some cases, the decision on what to purchase and where to purchase is made *or* influenced by someone other than the purchaser (Bingham and Raffield, 1990). A market research program initiated at the Univ. of Georgia focuses on one such potential group in the landscape industry—landscape architects.

The role of the landscape architect in plant material purchases heretofore has not been examined closely despite the fact that the decision on plant material used in many commercial, government, and private developments is made by the landscape architect contracted for the project. In addition to specifying plant varieties for landscape projects, landscape architects can be one of the first to know about future demand because they develop projects months in advance of the time plants are procured (Garber, 1991). And, landscape architects indirectly influence demand at retail garden centers because consumers often request plants they have seen in highly visible commercial projects (Garber, 1992).

The importance of the role played by the landscape architect in determining which plants are used in the landscape and where plants are obtained probably has been greatly underestimated by producers. Only recently have market research data have become available that help provide a better understanding of the value of plants specified by landscape architects (Garber and Bondari, 1992a), how landscape architects influence purchase decisions (Garber and Bondari, 1992b), and, in turn, on what basis they make choices relating to plant material and producers (Garber and Bondari, 1992b, 1992c). These data indicate that landscape architects wield considerable influence in plant material purchases and therefore represent an important target market for producers. Moreover, predictions are that landscape architects will play an increasingly important role in influencing demand for green goods in the future (Cetron and Davies, 1991). Hence, to ignore this segment in strategic market planning could restrict

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severely the ornamental nursery's growth potential.

The long-term implications of the newly recognized role of landscape architects for strategic marketing are numerous and beyond the scope of this discussion. However, to begin to target landscape architects probably is accomplished most effectively and efficiently through marketing communications. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to: 1) examine the role(s) of the landscape architect in plant material purchases based on actual data from a recent study that investigated the level and type of influence of the landscape architect in the purchase of nursery products, 2) provide some suggestions as to how producers might design marketing communications to appeal to this influential group, and 3) discuss implications for extension programming. This paper develops marketing recommendations for nursery operators by integrating the market research results with principles of marketing in the areas of decisionmaking and the role of the individual in the purchasing process.

Roles in the decisionmaking process

Rarely is a single individual solely responsible for a buying or sourcing decision. At the minimum, a single individual is influenced by others. Often, other people are involved in the decision process. The astute marketer must determine both the participants and influencers for a particular decision, be it product specification or sourcing.

One useful perspective in identifying whom growers should target in their marketing programs is that of roles assumed in the purchasing process. Although one individual may be responsible for making the purchasing decision, rarely does that individual truly act alone. Other persons and marketing efforts can directly or indirectly influence individuals as they proceed through the decisionmaking process. Certainly all relevant past experiences, the store of knowledge (expertise), and the opinions of others influence decision outcomes. To examine how others do and can influence the process, it is useful to look at the roles different persons can assume in decisionmaking for the purchase of various goods or services (Bingham

and Raffield, 1990; Webster and Wind, 1982). Among the roles are:

- **Initiator**—the individual who, through recognition of a need or problem, initiates the decision process;
- **Gatekeeper**—the person(s) who control the amount and type of information made available to others involved in the decision process;
- **Influencer**—other persons who, while perhaps not directly involved in the decisionmaking, nevertheless exert influence on the ultimate outcome through providing information, advice, and opinions;
- **Decider**—the person(s) who has the power and authority to make the decision;
- **Buyer**—the individual who actually negotiates and makes the purchase;
- **User**—the person(s) who uses or consumes the products and services; i.e., the end-user.

Clearly, one individual may assume more than one or even most of these roles in decisionmaking. However, it is highly likely that the individual will have been influenced in the process. One interesting departure from more autonomous decision making is the role a landscape architect plays in decisions regarding selection and purchase of plant materials. Results from a recent study (Garber and Bondari, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c) underscore the influential role of the landscape architect, as well as point to his/her varying level of influence. Although landscaping projects are initiated by others, landscape architects initiate the process of plant specification and often supplier specification. Others, such as plant producers and their trade press, assume the role of gatekeepers with respect to the type and amount of information made available to landscape architects. The decider's role rests, in part, with the landscape architect through plant specification. The buyer is typically the landscape contractor, who often acts more as a buying agent in procuring plant material from recommended suppliers. The ultimate user ironically, in this case, plays a relatively minor role in the actual purchase process. Hence, besides marketing to garden centers and landscape contractors, an additional target market is indicated for the producer-landscape architects.

The influential role of the landscape architect

The results of a recent survey of landscape architectural firms conducted in conjunction with the American Soc. of Landscape Architects (Garber and Bondari, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c) clearly indicate that, although landscape architects generally are not the primary customer of producers, these consultants, in fact, both specify plants and select or recommend nurseries. That is, landscape architects, in their role as influencers, have a significant impact both on demand and sources for plants. The study surveyed the 167 firms that were members of the American Soc. of Landscape Architects. The 37% response rate represented large, medium, and small firms.

The specific activities of landscape architects, especially as related to size of architectural firm, provide considerable insights into the manner in which they influence choices of others. Therefore, understanding what decisions the landscape architect makes in turn helps the grower understand the type and level of influence. For example, the results of the study indicated that the majority of landscape architectural firms, irrespective of size, were likely to confirm availability; in fact, according to the survey, about 92% (n = 12) of larger firms (\$1 million wholesale value of plant material purchased or specified), 86% (n = 21) of medium-sized firms (\$200,000-\$999,000), and 79% (n = 24) of small firms (<\$200,000) responded that they confirm availability. Also, the results indicated that >60% of the firms surveyed determine/recommend the production nursery for plants specified. Findings revealed that >90% of the large firms indicated that they do so, compared with ≈57% of medium-sized firms and 50% of small firms.

These results affirm that, although landscape architects generally do not buy directly from producers, they heavily influence actual buyers through confirming availability and recommending suppliers; hence, growers should specifically target landscape architects in their marketing efforts. "Whom" to target is one question, but "how" to target is another. In other words, how can one influence the influencer? Examining the typical decisionmaking process provides some clues as to how this question might be answered.

The decisionmaking process

The classic decisionmaking (sometimes called problem-solving) process model provides a useful perspective on how choices are made and insights as to how choices might be influenced. Typically, the following stages are included (i.e., see Engel et al., 1990):

- *Need or problem recognition.* To initiate the process, the potential buyer must recognize a need or a problem to be solved; this need or problem may not be especially well-defined.
- *"Internal" information search.* Once a need or problem is recognized, the potential buyer searches his/her internal store of information in memory to recall ways in which the particular need has been met or the problem has been solved in the past.
- *"External" information search.* The potential buyer may conclude that the information stored in memory regarding previous solutions is inadequate because the problem is relatively novel or the information is not current; if so, then external sources, such as other professionals, advertising, or trade publications, are consulted.
- *Evaluation of alternatives.* Having identified some potential solutions, the potential buyer evaluates those alternatives based on some set of criteria (evaluation criteria).
Choice. Based on the evaluation of options deemed feasible, the potential buyer selects from among the choices.
- *Post-purchase evaluation.* Having made a choice, the buyer evaluates the appropriateness of the particular selection; customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction results.

While in the marketing literature this model is most often applied to product purchases, the same process is followed in selecting a supplier (Bingham and Raffield, 1990). Both types of choices are represented by decisions made by landscape architects. That is, they not only select specific plant material for a landscape plan but also often recommend or determine the grower from which the material is procured. In order to understand how producers might influence these choices, producers must assess what stages or specific activities within the decisionmaking process they might be able to influence, if not control. For example, need or problem

recognition is largely beyond the control of the producer because landscape projects are initiated by the ultimate customer (homeowners, government agencies, commercial developers). The producer has some indirect influence on "internal information search" insofar as the landscape architect recalls past experience or exposure to information relating to plant varieties and sources. However, the next two stages-external information search and evaluation of alternatives-provide the best opportunities for intervention on the part of the producers. An examination of information sources and evaluation criteria used by land-

scape architects can yield insights into just what opportunities exist to influence the influencer. In addition, the post-purchase evaluation stage suggests an opportunity for producers to assess levels of and reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Various factors influencing the decision process of landscape architects are profiled in Fig. 1, which provides insights into developing effective marketing programs-in particular, marketing communications programs. For a variation of the above decisionmaking stages for business-to-business marketing, see Powers (1991).

Fig. 1. Factors influencing the decision process of landscape architects.

Information sources used by landscape architects

Knowing the information sources used by landscape architects in the "external information search" to specify plants help producers identify effective means of communicating with this influential segment. Data obtained in the survey of landscape firms revealed that, irrespective of the size of the firm, the primary sources used to specify plants were: botanical and public gardens, other landscape architects, producer trade shows, producer-sponsored trade journals, and university personnel (Garber and Bondari, 1992c). Information sources relied on most heavily were botanical and public gardens for the large firms, other landscape architects and botanical and public gardens for the medium-sized firms, and producer trade shows and university personnel for the small firms (see Table 1). Other sources, such as landscape architecture professional journals and producer-sponsored seminars, in general were used less frequently.

The marketing research study (Garber and Bondari, 1992b) also revealed that, for all firms, the primary sources of information used to confirm availability were favorite local grower, nursery catalogs, and the landscape contractor likely to install the plants. In contrast, sources such as university personnel, plant locators, and other landscape architects were used far less often, especially by large- and medium-sized firms.

Criteria used in selecting production nurseries

Knowing the basis on which a particular producer might be recommended or specified by a landscape architect helps the producer understand what type of information needs to be communicated. Research results

Table 2. Primary factors affecting selection of the production nursery by landscape architects.

Factors	Firm size ^a		
	Large	Medium	Small
	<i>Response (%)^b</i>		
Plant quality	100.0	91.7	75.0
Plant varieties	66.7	33.3	58.3
Available in desired size	45.5	91.7	58.3
Price	45.5	33.3	16.7
Nursery will hold material	45.5	16.7	25.0

^aBased on 1990 wholesale value of plant material specified: small (<\$200,000), medium (\$200,000-\$999,999), large (≥ \$1 million).

^bPercentage of firms that cited each factor as "very important" when recommending a production nursery as a source of plants.

indicate that plant quality in general was the most important factor in selecting a production nursery. The relative importance of other criteria varied somewhat by size of firm, as indicated in Table 2. For example, large firms also considered plant varieties, price, availability in desired size, and willingness of nurseries to hold material until job completion; medium-sized firms considered availability in desired sizes, plant varieties, and price; small firms considered plant varieties and availability in desired sizes to be important. One interesting finding was that the importance of price of the plants increases as the size of the firm increases, which suggests that the larger firms that are directly or indirectly involved in larger purchases are more concerned about price.

Implications for marketing communications

The traditional view in marketing is that a firm should direct its marketing efforts to its primary customers; i.e., landscape contractors for commercial projects (Powers, 1991). A more-progressive marketing view is that those individuals who potentially influence the purchase decisions of others should also be targeted. That is, specific and deliberate efforts should

be made to build good relationships with major influencers by designing marketing communications programs to reach and potentially influence beliefs and attitudes of this important segment. "Marketing communications" includes not only advertising, but also useful informational/educational materials, publicity, promotional activities, trade shows, and even "sales calls." The key to developing effective communications, irrespective of form, is providing information perceived as useful by the decisionmaker.

As mentioned earlier, the producer has limited influence in the "internal information search" stage of the decision process. However, building and maintaining top-of-mind awareness of plant availability and services provided by a particular grower can greatly improve the chances of that producer being considered. After all, if a nursery is not known or is not visible through its marketing communications, the landscape architect, in the absence of external information search, will base decisions on the information he/she is able to recall. Direct mailings, presence at trade shows, sales calls, and advertising facilitate achieving the awareness so critical at this stage of decisionmaking.

Influencing the landscape architect at the next two stages-external information search and evaluation of alternatives-depends on meeting the landscape architect's informational needs. Providing regular and timely information on plant availability and providing that information in a form useful to landscape architects certainly are two obvious implications for designing effective communication materials. Relatively low reported usage of plant locators provided by producers, for example, is probably due, in part, to the way in which the informa-

Table 1. Primary information sources used by landscape architects in plant specification.

Sources	Firm size ^a		
	Large	Medium	Small
	<i>Response (%)^b</i>		
Botanical and public gardens	58.3	60.0	24.1
Producer-sponsored trade journals	36.4	15.8	10.7
Producer trade shows	33.3	26.3	37.9
Landscape architects	25.0	63.2	27.6
University personnel	18.2	20.0	35.7

^aBased on 1990 wholesale value of plant material specified: small (<\$200,000), medium (\$200,000-\$999,999), large (≥ \$1 million).

^bPercentage of firms that cited each source as "used a lot" when making decisions on plants to specify.

tion is presented. An alphabetic listing by botanical or common name is perhaps useful for the producer, but not necessarily so for the landscape architect, who likely would find availability lists organized by landscape use to be much more "user-friendly." Therefore, producers can benefit from consulting with landscape architects-i.e., the information users-in designing and developing informational materials such as catalogs and plant locators.

Other suggestions for designing communications programs directed to landscape architects emerge from a study (Garber and Bondari, 1993) in which, among other questions, landscape architects were asked specifically how a plant producer can better serve their needs. On the landscape architects' informational "wish list" were: recommendations of plants for special conditions; photographs or drawings of plants; descriptions of plant size alongwith, or in lieu of, container size; and presentations on plants and their cultural requirements.

The criteria landscape architects use in determining or recommending a production nursery also point to some implications for designing marketing communications. For example, if large landscape architectural firms are targeted through marketing efforts, then demonstration and assurance of product quality are paramount. In fact, providing information relating to plant quality is important to all firms. The majority of large firms also consider availability of plant varieties. Availability in desired size is important particularly to medium-sized and small firms, with small firms also interested in plant varieties. Clearly, if these are determinant criteria in specifying or recommending a grower, it behooves the grower to provide information relevant to these considerations. Moreover, providing information beyond what is typically made available to landscape architects-for example, identifying plants suited to special growing conditions and providing better information in general regarding plant performance under different landscape conditions-can set the producer apart from competitors.

Building good relationships through marketing communications begins with recognizing the influential role of this constituency, followed by direct attempts to better inform landscape architects as to plant avail-

ability, plant quality and, especially, for the large landscape firms, price. Keeping abreast of trends in landscape architecture and preferences of landscape architects better enables producers to plan production so as to stimulate greater demand and produce greater profits in the future. Although producers may not have the time or ability to formally track trends and preferences, university personnel can be key resources for such information-an accessible and free resource to growers. Armed with trend and preference data, the producer is in a position to communicate his or her responsiveness to the needs and desires of the architect.

Implications for university personnel

University extension and research personnel also can perform an important role in marketing communications and development of alliances with landscape architects. For instance, landscape architects need assistance in selecting appropriate plants for different landscape situations (soil types and climatic zones). The results of university plant variety trials could be shared with landscape architects as a way to enhance the appropriate selection of plants for landscape projects. An open-house or field-day forum at the university trial gardens or state botanical gardens, conducted by university and industry personnel, could enhance their understanding of available plants and appropriate use in the landscape. Also, landscape architects should be included as a part of the evaluation team for new plant evaluations and introductions. This brings a design perspective to the decisionmaking process and increases the likelihood that landscape architects will specify the new plants.

Landscape architects should be added to the mailing list for landscape-related extension publications. New publications could be developed to meet the specific needs of landscape architects. For instance, landscape architects identified a trend toward low-maintenance landscapes, in terms of pesticide use and cultural maintenance costs. Educational materials that address the various factors that can lead to a pest-free landscape or less maintenance would be well-received.

At the local level, county agents in metropolitan areas and adjacent rural (production) counties might host regu-

lar meetings of producers and landscape architects to discuss available plant materials and their use in the landscape. In this role, county agents and specialists would facilitate development of an alliance between landscape architects, landscape contractors, and producers. These sessions would educate an important "influencer" of plant material demand.

Although landscape architects influence the demand for nursery crops, they generally are not trained in the taxonomy, culture, and landscape performance of ornamental plants. Also, plants are but one of many items they must specify and use in landscape design. Consequently, producers should accept the responsibility for educating landscape architects on the appropriate use of their product plants. As a technical resource for producers, university personnel can perform an important role in the training of landscape architects on proper use of plant material.

Conclusions

There is substantial empirical evidence indicating that landscape architects play a crucial role not only in specifying plants, but also in determining and recommending production nurseries. Based on a recent survey (Garber and Bondari, 1992d), ≈84% of all firms attempt to confirm availability, while 92% of large firms do so. Landscape architects rely heavily on producers for availability information, mainly obtained through direct contacts with growers and nursery catalogs. Moreover, ≈60% of all firms either determine or recommend the production nursery where landscape contractors obtain plants, with >90% of large firms making such decisions. These statistics clearly suggest that producers potentially could increase demand for their products by targeting part of their marketing efforts to landscape architects, who should be treated as important customers by producers. In Georgia, for example, it is estimated that the value of plant material landscape architects specify is equivalent to 42% of the entire ornamental production in the state, although a substantial amount of plant material specified is sourced outside the state (Garber and Bondari, 1992a).

The implication is that building good relationships with landscape architects can be critical to the long-

term viability of a production nursery because opportunities exist for building demand for plant material not only by planning and managing production to meet the needs and preferences of landscape architects, but also by effectively communicating to this segment. This implies providing relevant information in a form useful to the landscape architect at the time and place he/she prefers that information.

According to the authors of a comprehensive report about gardening and landscaping businesses (Cetron and Davies 1991), the vitality of the industry in the future depends on cooperation, mutual understanding, and communication, as well as the formation of alliances or partnerships among the various businesses and professionals comprising the industry. Improving communications between producers and landscape architects therefore not only has the potential for expanding one's business in the short-term, but also represents an important, and critical, first step toward forming alliances that may be essential to survival in the long-term.

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