

Production & Marketing Reports

Communication Could Increase Florists' Commercial Account Purchases

Lori J. Anderson¹,
Bridget K. Behe², and
Kenneth C. Sanderson³

Additional index words. survey

Summary. Two surveys (one of 101 florists and one of 122 businesses) determined that florists spend little time or money recruiting commercial accounts. Poor communication among businesses and florists was a problem. Of the responding businesses, 91% were never contacted by their florists for any reason, and the methods florists did use for recruiting commercial accounts were incompatible with the means that businesses used to choose florists. Because 79% of businesses made some type of pur-

chase from a florist during the year, florists could pursue commercial accounts as a way of increasing sales. When recruiting new accounts, florists should consider businesses' product preferences, peak gift-giving times, and purchasing preferences.

Many consumers buy fresh flowers to enjoy in their homes. According to the 1994-95 National Gardening Survey, 25% of American households bought flowers (Gallup, 1995). Businesses also purchase flowers for their clients and employees. Research has been conducted to identify the kinds of consumers that purchase flowers (Behe, 1993; Behe and Wolnick, 1991; Behe et al., 1991); however, little is known about the types and reasons that businesses buy flowers. Business accounts could be an important market segment for florists. By communicating with existing commercial accounts, florists may be able to revitalize during slow periods by increasing commercial account purchases.

Retail florists now compete with supermarkets, garden centers, mail-order catalogs, and street vendors. While there has been considerable growth (228% increase) in retail sales for traditional retail florists in the past 10 years, there has been more for nontraditional outlets (261%) (The Floral Index, 1989).

Brewer (1993) found that businesses planned to increase gift spending by 6.3% in 1993. The two top recipients of gifts purchased by businesses were major customers (75%) and employees (51%). Christmas (75%) and convention-trade shows (43%) were the top two occasions for business gift giving, and September (24%),

October (30%), November (24%), and December (25%) were the top months for business gift orders. Flowers and plants were not listed among popular business gifts in the 1993 *Incentive* survey. *Incentive's* 1992 FACT survey listed flowers and plants as a major business gift purchase, comprising 2% of business gift sales for the year. Brewer also found that many business gifts were purchased directly from a merchandiser (59%), incentive representatives (36%), advertising specialty counselors (36%), and retail stores (25%). An average of 103 business gifts were given by businesses, and an average of seven business gifts were received by each business in 1992.

Our objectives were to investigate 1) florists' marketing efforts toward commercial accounts and 2) commercial uses of floral products and services.

Materials and methods

The Auburn Univ. Horticulture Dept., Alabama Agricultural Expt. Station, and the American Floral Endowment collaborated in a study to determine how businesses purchase flowers from florists. The study consisted of two parts: a survey of florists and a survey of businesses.

Florist-directed survey. In developing the florist-directed survey, a preliminary questionnaire was constructed and mailed to five florists for their suggestions. Their suggestions for revisions were considered in forming the final questionnaire. A modified version of Dillman's total design method was used for this study (Dillman, 1978).

The revised florist-directed survey was mailed to 1066 florists randomly selected from 10 cities. The 10 cities were chosen at random from the top 100 metropolitan areas ranked by population (Sales and Marketing Management, 1991): Columbus, Ohio; Charlotte, N.C.; Richmond, Va.; Fresno, Calif.; Worcester, Mass.; Ventura, Calif.; Harrisburg, Pa.; Baton Rouge, La.; Vallejo, Calif.; and Miami. Florists were chosen at random from listings in the cities' *Yellow Pages* under "florists." Two forms were mailed twice to each florist. A long version was mailed on 16 and 29 July, and a short version was mailed on 2 and 23 Sept. 1992. Both forms explained the purpose of the survey and defined "commercial account." We

Alabama Agricultural Expt. Station journal no. 11-955117. This research was generously funded by the American Floral Endowment.

¹Former Graduate Research Associate, at Department of Horticulture, Auburn University, Alabama. Current address: Environmental Care International, 6161 North Washington Boulevard., Sarasota, FL 34232.

²Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture, Auburn University, Ala.

³Professor Emeritus, Department of Horticulture, Auburn University, Ala.

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requested that the surveys be completed by the owner or active manager.

The long form consisted of two parts. The first part was related to the florists' general characteristics, and the second part was concerned with the florists' commercial accounts. The long version had a 7% response rate (69 of 1001 mailed). By most reported results, this rate was low (Dillman, 1978), so a random telephone survey was conducted on 18 Aug. 1992 to determine reasons for this low response rate.

Results of the telephone survey showed that florists lacked concern for the survey or were too busy to complete the survey. Typical comments from respondents were "it was hard to determine percentages for some of the questions," "we are not interested in the survey," and "florists have an aversion for paper work." Based on these responses, a condensed version of the first survey was constructed and mailed to the nonresponding florists.

Miami was removed from the condensed survey due to the disruption by hurricane Andrew. We also removed the businesses with incorrect postal addresses and addresses of all florists who completed the longer survey. We mailed 606 condensed surveys and received 52 surveys answered for a 9% response rate.

The shorter version contained many of the questions from the longer version and included a postcard to help document the low response rate. On the postcard, the florists were given several choices for reasons they did not complete the survey form. We received 97 postcards for a response rate of 9%.

Of these responses, 30% felt that their time was too limited to complete the questionnaire form, 14% felt that commercial accounts were not important enough to their florist businesses at that time, and 14% didn't complete questionnaires for any survey or study. Forty-one percent gave other reasons for not answering the survey, including 1) it would take hours of research to complete survey, 2) they were closed in July, 3) business is private information, 4) they were no longer in business, 5) the florist shop is now a gift shop and bookstore, and 6) there was illness or a death in family.

The responses from the long and short versions of the survey were combined and compared on three variables: 1) the dollar amount of fresh flowers purchased the preceding week, 2) the percentage of total retail florists' sales in 1991 accounted for by consumer accounts, and 3) the total retail sales for 1991. A one-way analysis of variance showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of respondents for all three variables. Thus, responses to identical questions on the two versions were determined to be similar and combined to yield 101 responses.

Business-directed survey. The business survey was conducted in Columbus, a well-recognized test market, where 1571 businesses were selected at random from the *Columbus Yellow Pages*. Of the 1571 businesses, 485 businesses were chosen from five specific categories of firms based on the information from the florist-directed survey: restaurants, real estate companies, insurance companies, doc-

tors' offices, and churches. Surveys were mailed on 13 and 23 Oct. 1992. Of the 1571 surveys mailed, 167 were returned due to addressing errors, and 122 were returned completed (response rate was 9%).

Results and discussion

Florist-directed survey. Florists sell more than just flowers to all their customers. Total product sales for >90% of the responding florists included fresh flowers (56% of retail sales), blooming plants (9% of sales), foliage plants (12% of sales), silk or dried products (9% of sales), and balloons.

Most responding florist businesses were small firms with mean total retail sales of \$359,338 (about \$6,910 weekly) in 1991. The mode was \$250,000. The total distribution of 1991 retail sales ranged from \$1,100 to \$3,000,000, with 50% of the distribution of the total retail sales falling below \$250,000.

The number of store locations and employment were other indicators that the responding florists were small firms. The surveyed florists had a mean of 1.2 locations. Of respondents, 83% owned one location, and only 14% owned two locations. The Small Business Administration (1995) generally uses employment data as a basis for size comparisons, with firms having <100 employees (or <500 for some industries) defined as small businesses. The responding florists' businesses employed an average of three part-time employees and five full-time employees.

Responding florists were open an average of 50 h on a typical, nonholiday week, with an average of 251 payroll hours. If a full-time employee worked 40 h per week, this would yield six full-time employee equivalents per store. The distribution for the number of payroll hours for a typical week ranged from 30 to 1900 h. During the week preceding Mother's Day in 1992, the surveyed florists were open a mean of 60 h, and a total average of 437 h was worked by all employees. If a full-time employee worked a 40-h week, this would yield 11 full-time employee equivalents working during the week before Mother's Day. The total distribution of payroll hours during the week before Mother's Day ranged from 8 to 2800 h, with 50% of the distribution of payroll hours falling below 275. The Mother's Day data repre-

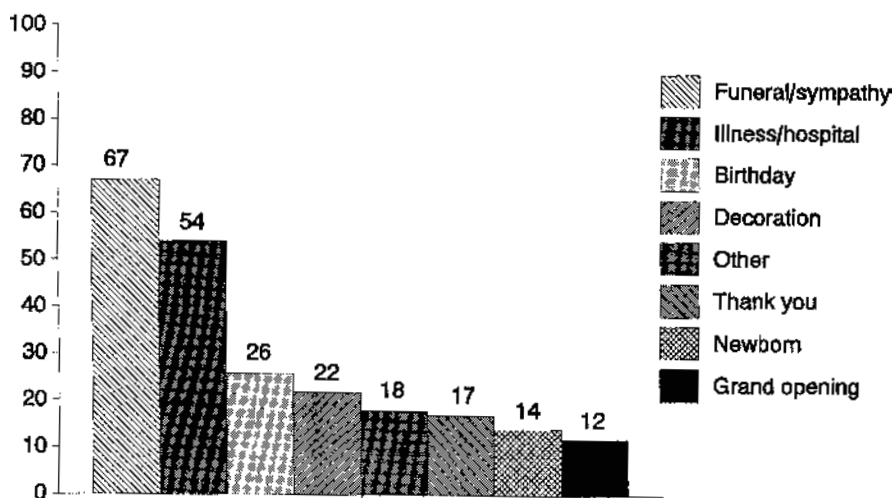


Fig. 1. Percentage of purchases by occasion for commercial accounts. Business survey results.

sents the extreme of holiday demand on labor.

The mean fresh-flower inventory for a typical nonholiday week was \$1672 (retail value). The total distribution ranged from \$0 to \$15,000. Fifty percent of the distribution of the fresh flower retail value inventory was less than \$500.

The telephone was the most common method by which responding florists received orders. Of all orders, 56% were taken by telephone, 23% were walk-ins, 18% were received by order, and 3% were received by other methods.

Discounts were offered by only 25% of the responding florists. Of florists that offered discounts, 92% offered school discounts. Seventy-eight percent offered senior citizen discounts, 45% quantity discounts, and 67% other discounts.

Interest in trade organizations was moderate for responding florists. Of the responding florists, 62% were members of their state florist associations. Fifty percent were members of the Society of American Florists.

The florist owners' or active managers' involvement in civic or community organizations was high, especially involvement in Chambers of Commerce, where 44% of the respondents indicated membership. Of responding florists, 12% were members of Rotary International, and 10% were members of Kiwanis. Twenty-seven percent indicated they belonged to civic or community organizations.

In 1991, the florists surveyed spent a mean of \$8622 on advertising and promotion. The distribution ranged from \$0 to \$73,000, with 50% of the distribution falling below \$3500. A mean \$1031 was spent on donated products and services. The distribution of dollars spent on donated products and services ranged from \$0 to \$10,000, with 50% of that distribution falling below \$500.

Florists indicated that yellow- and white-page advertising was the most common form of advertising, comprising 33% of overall advertising budget. Wire services and newspapers were the second and third largest advertising expenses, accounting for 16% and 14% of advertising expenditures, respectively.

Most florists relied on only a few forms of media for advertising and promotion. Of the florists surveyed,

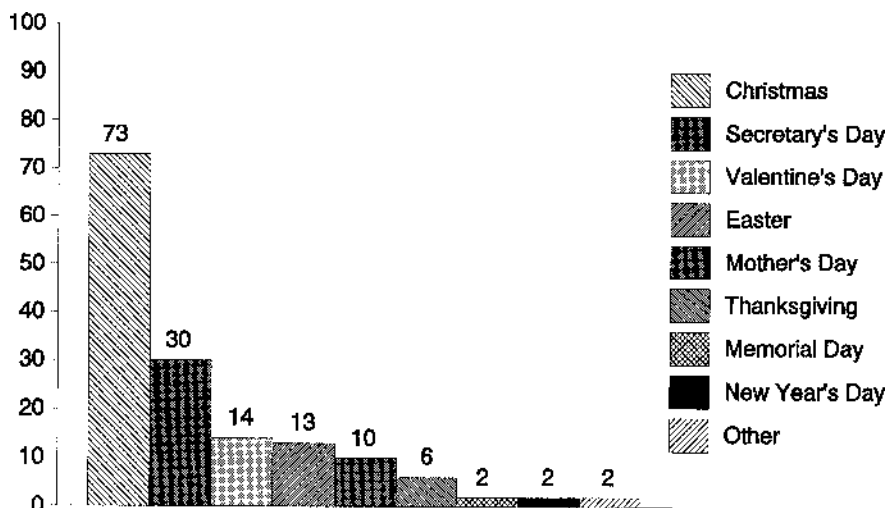


Fig. 2. Percentage of holiday purchases by commercial accounts. Business survey results.

91.5% spent \$0 on television advertising, 70% spent \$0 on radio, and 39% spent \$0 on billboard advertising. Eighty percent spent \$0 on newsletters, 13.5% spent \$0 on the yellow and white pages, and 32.2% spent \$0 on wire services. Fifty-eight percent spent \$0 on direct mail (other than newsletter), 30.5% spent \$0 on products or services donated, and 67.2% did not have an open house as promotion. According to the responding florists, the three most effective forms of advertising and promotion were direct-mail advertising, personal visits, and products or service donated.

Commercial accounts. Offices and clinics of medical doctors (14%), manufacturing industries (12%), and restaurants (8%) were reported as the three largest commercial accounts of the florists surveyed. Florist businesses had a mean of 206 commercial accounts with a total distribution that ranged from 1 to 5000 commercial accounts. Of the distribution, 50% had <50 commercial accounts. Commercial accounts placed a mean of 185 orders in 1991, with a distribution between 2 and 999 commercial account orders. Of the total distribution of orders placed, 50% were <50 commercial accounts.

In the year preceding the survey, 61% of the responding florists increased the number of their commercial accounts by 1% to 10%. Twenty-eight percent reported small changes ($\pm 1\%$) in the number of commercial accounts over the same 1-year period. From 1989 to 1992, 66% of the responding florists increased the number of commercial accounts by 1% to 10%. Of the

responding florists, 17% reported small changes ($\pm 1\%$) in the number of commercial accounts during this period.

Responding florists spent little time on or had a program for recruiting commercial accounts. Florists spent a mean of 3 h per week actively recruiting commercial accounts, ranging from 0 to 48 h per week. Of surveyed florists, 61% spent 0 h per week recruiting commercial accounts. Only 17% of the florists' commercial accounts were recruited actively by employees. Recruiting commercial accounts was conducted primarily by the donation of products or services (50%), direct-mail advertising (44%), and personal visits (31%).

Communication with existing commercial accounts was poor. Of the florists surveyed, 55% did not communicate with their largest accounts. Fourteen percent communicated with their largest accounts weekly, 13% monthly, 10% quarterly, and 8% annually.

Retail sales volume of commercial accounts has increased since 1989. From 1991 to 1992, 66% of the florists surveyed reported an increase in commercial-account retail sales of 1% to 10%. Fourteen percent reported a decrease in commercial-account retail sales of 1% to 10%, while only 20% reported small changes ($\pm 1\%$). From July 1989 to July 1992, 75% of the florists surveyed reported an increase in commercial-account retail sales of 1% to 10%. Of the retail florists, 13% reported a decrease in commercial-account retail sales by 1% to 10%, whereas only 15% reported small changes ($\pm 1\%$).

Fresh flowers accounted for more

than half the products sold to all accounts and commercial accounts. Of products sold to commercial accounts, 57% were fresh flowers, 14% foliage plants, and 11% blooming plants. These product categories constituted >75% of commercial account purchases. A Wilcoxon rank sum test showed that total retail sales and commercial account sales of blooming plants, foliage plants, silk or dried products, and balloons did not differ significantly.

Funeral or sympathy, illness or hospital, and birthdays were the occasions for which the three largest commercial accounts placed the most orders in 1991. Of the responding florists, 83% indicated funeral or sympathy, 80% illness or hospital, and 60% birthdays as the most popular occasion. Of florists surveyed, 36% indicated that funeral or sympathy generated the greatest dollar amount for commercial purchases.

Christmas, Secretary's Day, and Valentine's Day were holidays for which most commercial accounts placed orders in 1991. Of the respondents, 64% indicated Secretary's Day, 33% Valentine's Day, and 27% Mother's Day. In dollar sales, 56% of florists surveyed felt that Christmas generated the greatest amount, whereas 20% indicated Secretary's Day and 12% indicated Valentine's Day.

Business-directed survey. Decoration was not the primary reason for businesses buying flowers. Of businesses, 56% said they never purchased flowers for decorating the office. Of the remaining businesses, 5% bought weekly, 1% every 2 weeks, 3% monthly,

and 6% yearly from a florist for decoration. Of the respondents, 24% said they bought floral office decoration for special occasions, and 5% said they made floral purchases for office decoration for other reasons.

Many businesses bought flowers for special occasions. When we asked businesses how often they bought flowers from a florist, excluding flowers for decoration, 21% said they never made floral purchases; 1% bought weekly, 2% every 2 weeks, 18% monthly, and 1% yearly. Forty-two percent bought for special occasions, and 15% bought for other reasons.

Businesses spent a mean of \$1131 on all gifts purchased from florists and other retailers in 1991. The median was \$500, and the modes were \$300 and \$500. The mean that businesses planned to spend on nonflorist and florist gifts in 1992 was \$1072, the median was \$400 and the mode \$300.

Respondents that sent gifts estimated that their businesses had spent a mean of \$488 on all their 1992 florist purchases so far for that year. The median was \$250, and the mode was \$200.

Businesses listed funeral or sympathy (67%), illness or hospital (54%), and birthday (26%) as the top three occasions for them to make purchases (Fig. 1). The top three holidays on which businesses placed orders were Christmas (73%), Secretary's Day (30%), and Valentine's Day (14%) (Fig. 2). Floral purchases were made more often as gifts on holidays and occasions than for office decoration.

Of business managers, 44% said

they sent Christmas gifts in 1991. The mean of businesses' floral purchases for Christmas was \$347; the median \$250; and the modes \$100, \$250, and \$500. Businesses were planning to spend an average of \$440 on Christmas gifts through a florist in 1992. The median was \$200, and the mode was \$200. Overall, businesses were planning to send 30% of their 1992 Christmas gift purchases through a florist.

Businesses purchased many fresh flowers (80%), potted blooming plants (45%), and foliage plants (35%) from their florists in 1992 (Fig. 3). Of the remaining businesses, 7% purchased bedding plants, 2% hard goods, and 14% silk or dried products. Other nonfloral items purchased were balloons (17%), food and beverage items (5%), and other items (4%).

Businesses estimated that they used a mean of 1.7 florists to order products and services. The median was two, and the mode was one. Most businesses had an account with a florist. The mean time for which businesses had used their current florists was 6 years. The median was 4 years, and the mode was 2 years.

Most businesses (88%) placed their orders by telephone and 10% by walk-in orders. Two percent did not respond to the question. When asked who made the floral selection, 43% of businesses said they told the florists the products they wanted, and 17% allowed the florists to make the selection. Forty percent of the businesses got suggestions from florists and then selected their own products. Most businesses (68%) paid for their floral purchases using a charge account. Fourteen percent paid for business purchases with a credit card, 11% paid with cash, and 4% made purchases with a personal credit card or account. Three percent made purchases in some other way.

Most businesses (59%) selected their current florists because the business managers had used the florist in the past for personal orders. Ten percent saw the florist's products at another business or home. Eight percent selected the florist from the telephone book. Seven percent received advertisements from the florist by mail. Four percent were sent a complimentary arrangement or plant by the florist. One percent saw an advertisement for the florist in a newspaper, and 32%

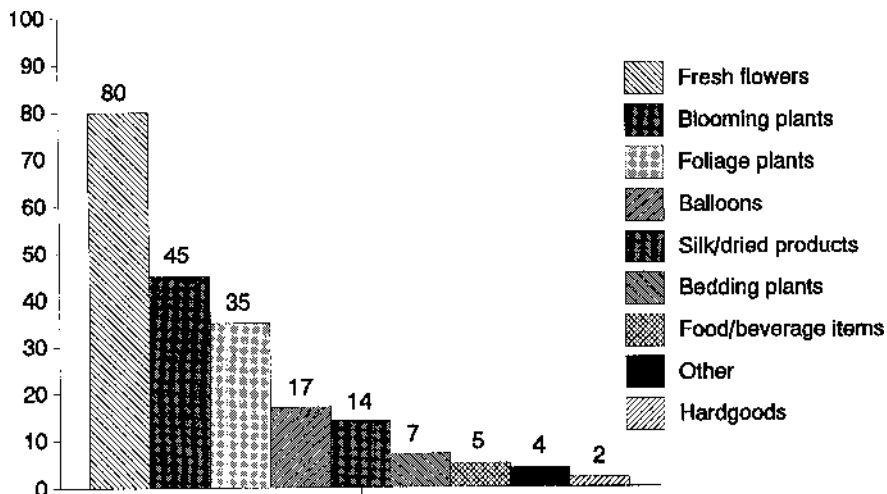


Fig. 3. Percentage of purchases by product category for commercial accounts. Business survey results

used some other technique to select their florists, including the following: 1) advertisement on back of church bulletin, 2) location, 3) florist is a client, 4) other people recommended florist, 5) recommended by out-of-town florist, 6) florist attends church, and 7) florist is fellow club member. Many had seen their florist's work or knew of his or her reputation before they placed an order. Personal contact with the florist was crucial in florist selection.

We asked business managers to discuss the communication and service from their florists. Ninety-one percent were never contacted by their florists for any reason. One percent were contacted monthly, 7% were contacted yearly, and 1% were contacted during special occasions.

Of the reasons for florists to call on the businesses, 1% of responding managers said their florists called to see if new orders needed to be placed. Three percent were called to see if standing orders need to be changed. Eight percent were called to be notified of specials that their florists were offering. Four percent were notified of new items and services, and 3% were notified for other reasons. Not enough florists were communicating well with their commercial customers.

Conclusions

From this research, we found a pervasive lack of interest by florists in developing marketing strategies for acquiring more or stimulating current commercial accounts. The florist-directed survey was received by 1001 florists, yet only 11% responded. A low response rate also occurred in the business-directed survey; however, purchasing flowers is not involved directly in their livelihood as it is for florists. Businesses buy flowers for many of the same reasons individuals buy flowers. Florists should consider pursuing commercial accounts as a way to increase their sales, but these sales will likely come at peak-sales occasions when time and labor are at a premium. Slightly less than half of the responding businesses purchased decorations for their businesses, which could offer some additional sales at nonpeak periods. Poor communication between the businesses and florists was an obvious problem. Of the responding businesses, 91% were never contacted by their florists for any reason. There are vari-

ous ways in which florists could contact businesses, including telephone, direct mail, and complimentary sample arrangements. These methods were used effectively by some of the florists surveyed.

Most businesses placed their orders by telephone. Florists could use this information to acquaint businesses better with their products. Florists could develop a pamphlet or booklet with pictures and descriptions of products to which businesses could refer when placing an order by phone. Special holiday and other pamphlets mailed periodically also would serve as a reminder of the florist for convenient gift purchases.

Product preferences of commercial accounts should be incorporated into advertising and promotions and when tailoring products and services to fit businesses' needs. Fresh flowers, potted blooming plants, and foliage plants were the top three products purchased by commercial accounts.

Top holidays for purchases by commercial accounts also could play an important part in developing sales for this market segment. Christmas, Secretary's Day, and Valentine's Day were the top three holidays for commercial account purchases. Since these are the times when commercial customers purchase gifts, contacting businesses before these holidays might be highly effective in gaining new commercial accounts and sales. In particular, there is an opportunity for the florist to increase Christmas commercial sales. Of the businesses that responded, 44% sent Christmas gifts in 1991. Florist Christmas sales comprised 7% of responding businesses' total Christmas sales, and their intentions for florist spending for Christmas 1992 comprised 33% of the total to be spent on Christmas gifts that year. Florists may have a great opportunity to increase sales by contacting businesses just before the Christmas holiday.

Previous research has shown that businesses purchase more gifts than decorative items. Florists could develop sales to commercial clients by promoting gifts during peak holiday periods and perhaps recruit some decoration business. Commercial accounts may not smooth out sales peaks and valleys in yearly sales, but they may add substantially to sales and profits. Commercial clients appear to be loyal to

their florists, reporting use of an average of 1.7 florists and remaining with them for 6 years. This stability shows that, once florists gain satisfied commercial customers, they may have established a long-term, profitable relationship, especially since many businesses reported having accounts with their florists.

Florists had little interest in advertising and promoting for commercial accounts. The survey listed 10 ways in which florists could advertise and promote their business. Florists spent no resources on five of the 10 listed advertising and promotional methods.

Lack of communication with potential and existing commercial accounts also was a problem. Florists put forth little effort to recruit new commercial accounts or visit with existing accounts. Of the few florists who did, an average of 3 h per week was spent recruiting commercial accounts. Of the responding florists, 55% did not contact existing accounts at all.

From the business survey, we found that the top reason for selecting a florist was using a florist for past personal orders. To recruit a new commercial account, the florist could determine who places the order in the business. Satisfying the people who place the orders could be an important factor in obtaining business accounts. Becoming active in the community also could increase florists' visibility, drawing those business people who select florists because they have met them socially. The top holiday for business accounts was similar for florists and businesses. Florists and businesses indicated Christmas as the top holiday, followed by Secretary's Day and Valentine's Day. A similar pattern was seen with occasions. Birthday, funeral or sympathy, and illness or hospitalization ranked in the top three occasions by florists and business respondents.

The results indicated that florists are doing little for commercial accounts. We don't know why so little is being done since commercial accounts offer the florist many advantages over individual accounts. Flowers also provide an advantage to businesses. Flowers are an ethical gift and can be purchased within the IRS's \$25.00 limit on business gift deductions (Foster, 1990).

Recruiting new commercial accounts, communicating with existing accounts, capitalizing on peak holidays and occasions, promoting the most frequently purchased products, and implementing forms of promotion and advertising are important in developing marketing strategies for commercial customers. Based on the florists' and businesses' responses, better marketing strategies could be created for florists to stimulate commercial sales. From our research, we concluded that commercial accounts are a virtually untouched market for the retail florist. However, we did find that commercial account sales are on the increase. This increase is occurring with little communication between florists and businesses. Better communication with potential and established commercial accounts could stimulate florist sales even further.

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Using Focus Groups to Determine Market Potential for Wildflower Sod

Susan S. Barton, Jo Mercer, and Charles J. Molnar

Additional index words. marketing, consumer preference, product evaluation

Summary. Two focus-group sessions were conducted to determine the market potential of a new horticultural product—wildflower sod. One session included homeowners with suburban lots and an interest in wildflowers. Another session included landscape professionals, property managers, and garden center operators. Participants viewed a slide presentation about the uses of wildflowers and wildflower sod, a videotape illustrating wildflower sod installation, and a demonstration plot planted with wildflower sod. The discussion was conducted by an unbiased facilitator. Participants cited the instant effect of wildflower sod as a major advantage. The price was viewed as acceptable for small areas, especially if sod was broken apart and spaced as plugs. Comments from the participants were used to develop an ideal product description and yielded merchandising recommendations.

The need for improved marketing strategies is widely recognized by the nursery and landscape industry (Gineo, 1988). Techniques such as telemarketing, written

surveys, personal interviews, and focus-group studies have been used to collect consumer preference and market characteristic information. On-site personal interviews with garden center customers revealed a need for plant culture and descriptive information (Niemiera et al., 1993) and the importance of plant quality, availability of professional help, and plant selection for purchasing nursery stock (Khatamian and Stevens, 1994). A mail-in survey of 140 landscape firms was used to discover types of services provided by different types of firms (Florkowski et al., 1994). A random telephone survey supported the premise that different retail outlet types have different target markets (Turner and Dorfman, 1990). Day (1994) used in-depth personal interviews and focus-group discussions to discover consumers' reasons for choosing a retail outlet.

Qualitative research, such as focus-group interviewing, is appropriate when investigating a topic about which little is known. It permits participants to speak in their own words; to elaborate on, explain, or qualify responses; and to share personal views and frustrations (Greenbaum, 1993). Focus groups provide the opportunity to discover new issues and insights unbiased by a researcher's beliefs and expectations that usually are programmed into questionnaires (Seymour, 1988). Focus groups can give the marketer early clues about the marketability of a new product and are used to confirm anticipated customer needs as well as to reveal unsuspected customer desires (Hauser and Clausing, 1988). Focus groups offer an open format for exploring and probing the key characteristics of a new product or service (Worden, 1987). This method will not reveal how many people will buy the product, but it will give insights as to how and why products and services are appealing, if people like the idea or concept, or areas of potential concern (Kreuger, 1988). Although focus-group interviewing is used widely in market research in many other fields, to our knowledge, this technique has been used in only one other published study concerning horticultural products or services (Day, 1994).

There are often a discrepancies among characteristics valued by particular market segments. Florists rated the performance of suppliers' physical distribution services higher than mar-

¹Extension Specialist, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19717-1303.

²Horticulture Agent, New Castle County Cooperative Extension, 910 South Chapel Street, Newark, DE 19717-1303.

³Owner, EastCoast Ecoscapes, 12 Melvern Court, Willington, DE 19810.

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