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## Dollars and Sensory

*Amanda Thomsen*



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Close your eyes and think of your garden center as a sensory playground. How do your feet feel as they step on the ground? What are the smells? What can you hear? What's begging to be touched? It's a twist on a daily walk-through, for sure, and it may sound a bit silly, but there's value there. If any store is going to be a playground for your senses, why not a garden center?

Let's talk about the Lush stores. In 2017, with declining mall traffic that frequently makes the evening news, they made \$530 million dollars. That's a lot of bath bombs, mon ami.

I hate the mall. I'm dragged by my family three times a year and I acquiesce only if I can stop at Lush to shop and then get some Auntie Anne's pretzel bites. Stepping inside a Lush store is like a vibrant wake-up call after lumbering around the mall like a zombie. The walls and signage are black. The display tables and crates are rough wood. This allows candy-colored products to blow your hair back with intense, glittered, technicolor brilliance.

If I use my imagination, I can see this setup working well for the indoor portion of a garden center, with indoor plants perched atop wood crates and chalkboard signage that can be changed on a whim. It's practical and stylish. The products do the talking, but not all the talking. There are signs everywhere touting their aggressive recycling policy (bring in five empty containers for recycling and you get a free face mask) and stance against animal testing. They have shampoo and conditioners that come in bar form so there are no bottles or other packaging to recycle. It's all a feel-good.

I will say that an \$8 to \$12 bath bomb absolutely freaks me out. I could buy a 1-gal. perennial for that! But the longer I stay in the shop, the more I am just ... feelin' it. I buckle and I'm going home with an expensive bag of what's essentially smelly baking soda.

The staff at Lush is my favorite in all of retaildom. They're friendly, excited, passionate about the products (they clearly get to take stuff home to play with and it shows) and just a tad bit theatrical. In the stores that I've visited, there are sinks in the middle of the store for customers to see how products work before they buy. Each sink is a stage with a different production happening. Some customers are receiving one-on-one attention at one sink; another may have a group all gawking at some bubbling, gurgling bath confection. It's a tactic PERFECT for younger shoppers. You're showing them exactly what they're going to get while also giving them an experience while

shopping.

How can we bring that home to where we work? How about having mini planting stations throughout your store to be able to show how to plant something or how other products play along with selections already in their baskets?

We ALL know that planting containers is theater. Why not use that to draw attention? To be playful? To create an experience?

When Lush customers get home with their purchase, they then share that bath bomb fizzing away in their bathtub on social media. THAT is your customer excitement goal. Get them so excited that they share their purchase with the planet (then you reGram that like it's hot.)

Ultimately, what we sell is ALREADY more than a product; each plant comes with its own interesting story, fragrance, texture, taste or feeling. What it fizzles down to: Are you choosing to make that story an experience for your customers? **GP**

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