greenPROFIT

Features

1/31/2017

Customer Service: Speak Your Customers' Language

Teresa Odle

Using plain language in gardening communication is a necessity to build and keep your customer base.

Let's say you're at your doctor's office and discover your cholesterol has spiked, placing you at risk for several diseases if you don't get the problem under control. Do you want your doctor to speak only in terms like LDL, HDL and atherosclerosis? And do you want to learn more about heart disease from a scholarly article in a medical journal or a credible source for lay readers?

The health care industry finally is attempting to make medical information clearer for the people who need it most—those of us trying to stay out of the medical system by taking care of ourselves and preventing disease. In fact, an entire initiative and $70 million per year center on health literacy.

The reason for the health literacy boom isn't just because 36 million adults have low literacy. It's also because not everyone goes to medical school. And in the green industry, it's important to recognize that most customers don't have a horticultural degree or 20 years of gardening or farming experience.

According to the 2016 National Gardening Report, there were 6 million new gardeners in 2015. Efforts to engage new gardeners are paying off. Continuing that trend and keeping these new gardeners interested requires that those of us in the green industry stop using the horticultural equivalent of "LDL" or "atherosclerosis."

Rick Hobson, owner of Jericho Nursery in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has been in the business his entire life, hanging out at the nursery his father managed for 30 years, and then working there himself for another 25. He also hosts a local radio show on gardening and thinks customers are therefore more comfortable asking him questions. "I think every person is at a different level and you've got to connect on that level," says Rick.

For example, Rick well knows the difference between soil and dirt, but doesn't believe he has to use all of the "proper" words when talking to inexperienced gardeners. Helping staff realize that it's okay to say "dirt" even if "soil" is more accurate can improve the experience for customers. By speaking or writing to the customer level, "I'm not being haughty or acting as if I know more than you," says Rick. A little humility is even called for

from time to time.

That same humility can improve your written words. Knowledge level of customers—or potential customers—becomes even more critical in written, one-way communication. Angela Treadwell-Palmer, co-owner of Plants Nouveau, LLC, in Mobile, Alabama, points out that catalogs and plant descriptions traditionally have been written for pros in the industry—people who know a lot about plants. With the explosion of Internet-based communication and social media shares, it's entirely possible that a new gardener finds these materials in search engines. "Only 20% of Americans know a lot about plants," says Angela. That leaves another 80% with little or no knowledge.

Even when writing for customers, there's nothing wrong with using plain language to appeal to and engage a wider audience. As Angela says, "We need to talk to everyone, not just the 20% who understand." And as long as the information is accurate, you shouldn't have push-back from your more knowledgeable audience. Even breeders introducing new plant varieties might not realize that information intended for wholesalers and retailers makes its way to customers.

For new gardeners, 5 million of whom are age 18 to 34, an online search is the best solution for planting and landscaping questions. Sadly, the onslaught of hits includes many with technical language and others with inaccurate information or constant reminders of "10 mistakes you're making in your garden." Rick says, "I think it becomes intimidating and daunting," and that's why he tries to help new growers succeed.

Rick goes so far as giving away plants that otherwise would be thrown out. "I call them my 'making customers happy plants,'" he says.

You can give away easily understood information to help your customers succeed. It should pay off in developing new gardeners today and in future generations.

Teresa Odle's blog www.gardeninginadrought.com, received the Association for Garden Communicators 2016 Gold Award for Best Electronic Media Writing. She can be reached at teresa@odlecreative.com.

> **Translate Terms to Plain Language**
>
> Here are a few sample terms and how you might use them, along with sample rewrites of a few actual plant descriptions:
>
> **Deciduous**—The tree's leaves fall off by winter
>
> **Backfill**—Refill with the same dirt
>
> **Foliage**—Leaves

> **Specimen plant**—Feature in your landscape; focal plant; draws attention in your garden
>
> **Mass planting**—Looks great in a group of three or more; good in groups for hedges and filler
>
> **Drought-tolerant or drought-resistant**—Like dry conditions; get by with less water than other plants after the first year
>
> **Blooms**—Flowers

> > **Take a look at these examples of how to change verbiage:**
> >
> > *Actual plant description online:*
> >
> > "… this evergreen has unique matte blue-green foliage and a wonderful cascading layered habit … perfect for foundation and landscape plantings."
> >
> > *Clearer version:*
> >
> > Enjoy the blue-green leaves of ____ all winter. The stems and leaves spill over in layers, making them perfect for a grouping of several plants against your home's front walls. _____ also is a stunning plant anywhere in your yard, especially where you can see the leaves from a window in winter.
> >
> > *Actual plant description:*
> >
> > "Our customers have enjoyed this tender lavender hybrid indoors during the long winter months. ¬¬¬¬¬¬_____ is well-suited to the dry conditions of our houses and throws spikes of deep blue flowers above a lush mound of silver foliage."
> >
> > *Clearer:*
> >
> > Our customers love this lavender specially designed for growing indoors all winter. _____ can handle the dry conditions of our homes in winter. Deep blue flowers top spikes that rise above a mass of small, silver-tinted leaves.

Writing Plainly is Easy

To get started, understand your audience through formal or informal research (talking with staff or reviewing online comments and questions, for example). Writing to the least experienced customer isn't shameful; it's a smart marketing tactic.

• Diagrams with water needs might seem simple, but as a communicator about gardening in drought, I can tell you that many new gardeners fail to understand a plant's water needs until in extreme conditions or until a

purchased plant is established. Tell customers how to plant and water their new purchases (“Water it every few days for the first month, then cut back to once a week all summer, depending on rain. After that, water only in hot, dry periods and watch it grow!”)

• Involve someone with less knowledge than your company experts, but enough to translate technical information into plain language. At the least, have a person closer to your audience level review your materials. Even better, have them help write or translate information. If you have no one internally who can do that, hire a writer or editor. Returning to the health example, doctors, educators and researchers write scholarly articles for peers, but consumer information often is written by marketers and writers, then reviewed by subject matter experts.

• Or take a page from the National Cancer Institute: When you look up cancer information at NCI, you can select patient or professional versions. The patient versions are written in plain language with just enough detail on topics like risks and treatment. The professional version uses more clinical terms, details and statistics. It might cost a little more time or money initially, but will require only updates or new plant additions as needed. And you can use this option for online communication, which is easy to update and involves no printing costs. **GP**