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Using AI to Shorten the Customer Journey

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Artificial Intelligence is changing how horticulture businesses attract, support and retain customers, both B2B and B2C. When integrated into daily operations, AI doesn't just automate, it aligns. The result? A shorter, smarter and more connected customer journey.

From predicting plant trends through a pre-selling strategy to handling customer questions at scale, AI is becoming a quiet partner in both marketing and customer service. For landscapers, garden centers and brands that sell directly to consumers, these tools offer something precious: time, insight and frictionless customer experiences.

But the real value of AI isn't in algorithms, it's in context. AI will not fix a broken or outdated process or system. Success depends on how AI is embedded in daily operations: the data it draws from, the people who guide it and the correct processes it accelerates. When applied effectively, AI can dramatically shorten the customer journey, the series of steps a person takes from curiosity to conversion to advocacy.

Here we'll look at a multitude of ways garden centers can use—and already are using—AI.

AI-Enhanced Search, Discovery and Data Completeness in Marketing

Imagine a multi-store retail garden center—let's call them EverGreen (a fictitious name). They faced a growing challenge: as more customers shopped online, the traditional customer journey became fragmented. People were discovering plants on social media, typing vague search terms like "colorful shade garden," and leaving sites when results missed the mark. The journey from awareness to purchase had become long and leaky.

EverGreen decided to use AI to simplify that path. They implemented a horticulture-specific search and discovery platform powered by natural language processing and image recognition. The system could interpret intent behind searches such as "low-water pollinator garden" or "shade containers with color," returning curated, localized results instead of generic listings.

This instantly shortened the consideration phase. Customers who once spent 15 minutes filtering results now found what they needed in seconds. AI connected "what they meant" to "what they needed," increasing relevance and

reducing abandonment.

But EverGreen soon realized that AI's intelligence depends on complete data. Fewer than half of its loyalty members had full profiles; they were missing ZIP codes, purchase histories or plant preferences. Without that information, personalization stalled.

So marketing and operations partnered to reach 100% customer profile coverage. Checkout prompts, staff engagement and system integrations ensured that every customer interaction both online or in-store fed into a unified data hub.

Once the system reached full coverage, the impact was immediate:

- Conversion rates doubled among customers with complete profiles
- Average order value rose
- Search-to-purchase time fell

AI insights also revealed new “micro-journeys.” Customers searching “lowest light” or “cat safe” plants were automatically routed to curated collections, creating fresh marketing opportunities.

By embedding AI into both marketing systems and everyday workflows, EverGreen didn't just enhance search—it redesigned the customer journey for speed, relevance and satisfaction.

Customer Service AI That Closes the Loop

While marketing AI shortens the path to purchase, AI customer service representatives (AI CSR) shorten the journey after it, turning questions into confidence and problems into loyalty.

Imagine Flora (another fictitious name), a single store dynasty plant retailer, discovered this as post-purchase inquiries began to overwhelm its small customer service team. Customers wanted answers about plant care, delivery and replacements; all critical “Use & Support” steps that often stretched for days.

Flora launched an AI-powered virtual assistant called Leafy. Trained on the company's product catalog and care library, Leafy could instantly answer hundreds of common questions. Customers could even upload photos, and AI image analysis would identify overwatering, pests or light stress, offering immediate care advice.

This automation collapsed the gap between support and satisfaction. Within weeks, average response time fell and customer satisfaction climbed. So did post-plant purchases of fertilizer, pottery and plant supports.

Leafy wasn't a standalone widget; it was fully embedded in Flora's operational systems. The chatbot connected to CRM, order management and logistics software, enabling it to track shipments or escalate complex issues with all details attached. When an escalation reached a live agent, AI-generated summaries sped up resolution and improved consistency.

Just as importantly, the data Leafy gathered revealed new insights. When AI flagged a surge in questions about cat-safe plants, the marketing team responded within days, launching a “Plants for Cat Lovers” campaign.

By weaving AI into customer service operations, Flora shortened the journey from support to loyalty, transforming reactive service into proactive engagement. The result was increasing the Customer Lifetime Value, the life blood of

any cash-and-carry consumer business.

Here are a few operational lessons from this exercise:

- Context is critical: AI works best when part of existing workflows, not bolted on after.
- Data completeness drives accuracy: Every customer record adds value to personalization.
- Shortened doesn't mean rushed: Speed works when it enhances clarity and confidence.
- Cross-functional loops matter: Marketing and service insights should feed each other continuously.

Closing Thought

In horticulture, AI's greatest promise lies in augmentation through operational context. When marketing, customer service and data systems share information, the traditional five-step customer journey becomes a continuous, connected loop. Discovery flows naturally into purchase, support loops back into loyalty, and every interaction strengthens the next.

The future of horticulture isn't just about smarter plants or smarter businesses. It's about smarter operations that nurture relationships as efficiently as they care for flowers. **GP**

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The Five Steps of the Customer Journey

1. Awareness—Discovering a brand or product
2. Consideration—Researching and comparing options
3. Purchase—Completing the transaction
4. Use & Support—Receiving guidance or solving issues
5. Loyalty—Returning, repurchasing or recommending

AI links these steps through insight, personalization and responsiveness, reducing friction and turning single interactions into lifelong relationships.