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Getting a Read on Consumers

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Most of us learned to read books at a young age and reading shaped our world, so you might not be too surprised to learn that consumers read displays much like they read words in a book.

What do you see when you look at a display of plants? Often, retailers are so focused on selling plants that few stop to think about how consumers get the information they need to make a purchase decision. Two studies, both funded by the Horticultural Research Institute (conducted pre-pandemic), lend some insight into how consumers read plant displays.

We've conducted several studies in the Horticultural Marketing Lab at Michigan State University (MSU) using high-tech eye-tracking glasses. Our lab was one of the first in the country to use this new technology, which continues to develop in its precision and flexibility. Essentially, the glasses have two cameras over each eye and triangulate where the wearer is looking using infrared LED beams. The precision is about the size of a dime viewed at a 3-ft. distance. We're able to record

how people view the displays and then analyze them for common patterns.

Both studies were conducted at MSU in the lab with real people (recruited locally) using real plants. We have our study protocols and survey instruments approved prior to the data collection by the university committee on research involving human subjects so that we comply with their ethical requirements. We pay our participants because they're sharing their time and responses.

Study 1:

Flat or Horizontal Displays

We wanted to understand how consumers visually look at flat displays. These displays are quite common in the

retail setting because the fixtures can be constructed from many types of material (e.g., wood, plastic, expanded metal), are quite flexible on the sales floor to use in many ways, and facilitate the care of plants (that is, they're easier to water plants on them).

Our displays had six, 12, or 24 4-in. impatiens plants arranged on black tables surrounded by black cloth to prevent our study participants from seeing other displays when they were viewing one. Displays were constructed in a randomized order. The sign was located at the back of the plants and read "Spring Annuals \$3.99" or "Sale Annuals \$1.99" to create a price variation.

Each participant started at a different display and moved sequentially throughout the study of six displays. Participants were recruited online from a panel maintained by the Communications Arts & Science College for their studies, so we recruited from a mix of plant purchasers and non-purchasers.

After the study participant was given the informed consent form, they were fitted with the Tobii 2 Eye-tracking glasses, had the glasses calibrated to their eyes and proceeded to view the displays. After that, they completed some questions in an online survey. We had 90 complete and useful responses.

Increasing the number of plants in the display from six to 12 to 24 increases average time to choice by 20% to 30%. In other words, more plants require more thought and more time to arrive at a decision. That may not seem like much, but our brains are already pretty stressed, so increasing the time to arrive at a decision may not be our best option. It taxes the consumer's brain more when more plants are in the display.

Yet, more people find a plant they like when more plants are present; not everyone likes the same plant even if it's the same genus, species and cultivar. Even more challenging is the finding that 20% of the plants were ignored (literally not seen by any consumer) as the number of plants in the display increased to 24 (and 24 isn't that large of a display!). Growers work hard to produce high-quality plants and retailers work hard to merchandise them to maximize appeal to consumers. Yet our research shows that in these mass displays, many of the plants go unseen, which also means they go unsold. A consumer can't buy what they don't see. Those "blind spots" are in the corners of the display. We saw this result at both the high- and low-priced displays.

Study 2:

Tiered or Vertical Displays

In this study, we sought to understand how consumers viewed a step or tiered display, which presents products in a more vertical manner. This type of display arrangement is less common in horticulture. We also were curious how incorporating different genera into a display changed visual viewing. There were 97 complete and useful responses.

Much like Study 1, we constructed six displays: three with perennials and three with flowering shrubs. Each display had one, two or three genera without any price change. The displays were arranged in the lab in a random order and participants moved through the study in a progressive order, starting at the next subsequent display from the previous participant. In this study, participants also completed an online survey to provide supplemental information (e.g., demographic characteristics, plant purchase history, etc.) to be used along with their visual data.

For the single-genus displays, less than 20% of the plants were ignored or not seen, which was less than what we found in the horizontal mass displays. So more plants were viewed in these tiered displays. Much like the horizontal displays, the corners were more often ignored than the center of the display. We also discovered that the time spent on each shelf was similar, so no shelf was better or worse than the other two. Participants tended to fixate on their selected alternative rather quickly, averaging their first fixation on the selected alternative within the first 25% of their gaze sequence, or in this study, in approximately 4.6 seconds.

We also observed that study participants appeared to “read” the display in which plants were horizontally merchandised faster compared to displays that were vertically striped.

Results in Action

More than 70% of purchase choices are made at the point of purchase, so retailers both online and in-store have tremendous capacity to influence product choice. Most customers have so much on their mind that they operate on “autopilot” and don’t see everything you’ve merchandised. How can you get them to slow down or pause for just a few more seconds? Be more strategic in your merchandising.

First, plant price didn’t appear to influence the visual reading of the display; people seem to visually process the display in a systematic manner regardless of price. However, that system of visually moving through the display is influenced by how the plants are merchandised.

Second, in both horizontal and vertical (tiered) displays, the corners are often ignored, so don’t put the great products there; they’ll simply be missed by many potential buyers. More plants are ignored in the flat displays, so save this type of merchandising for lower-margin plants for which you’ve got a lot of inventory. Mass displays can lead to decision overload, which may force a busy potential customer to ignore all the plants because they don’t have time to decide which one to buy.

Want to get more eyeball time on a plant or product? The vertical (tiered) fixture is better because you can interrupt the “reading” of each shelf by striping the merchandise vertically. That is, put stripes of plants or product rather than entire shelves of the same item. The stripes disrupt the visual flow across shelves and that few seconds more of eyeball time might just lead to a purchase. That which gets seen more and viewed longer is often more likely to be purchased.

We’ve also found in a separate study that customers need space to “look away to decide.” Spacing higher-margin products apart more can give customers the space to disengage and think, even if for only a few seconds, about this product as something they want to buy.

There certainly is an art to creating attractive, appealing displays. How you merchandise product does influence the visual attention customers have for the products there. This is a great area for experimentation by practitioners and academics alike! **GP**

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For More Research

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