

Perspectives of Switching to an Online Curbside Pickup Model for a Student-Ran Plant Sale

Introduction

For 29 years, Oklahoma State University students enrolled in Greenhouse Management have been growing and selling poinsettias for the annual sale. The students plant rooted cuttings of about 2,000 poinsettias during the first week of class. Throughout the fall semester, the students are in charge of production, including pinching, spacing, watering, and scouting for insects. On the first Thursday and Friday after Thanksgiving, students help sell the crop so they learn how to market, setup, and run a successful plant sale. Students are in charge of cleaning and dressing plants, working with the public to pick out plants, restocking tables, collecting money, and interacting with the public on postharvest issues or helping carry plants out to cars, while the instructor oversees the process. Starting at 7:30am on Thursday the public is allowed to come to the classroom and choose their own poinsettia. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, this year's sale was moved to an 'online ordering and curb pickup' model two weeks before the sale date.

Online Ordering

The 2020 poinsettia sale used an online order form built with Formsite, a service that allows people with no design experience to create forms specific to their needs. The site has a 15-day free trial, but the \$20 deluxe plan we chose gave us access for a month and allowed for 500 orders per form. Developing the online form took about four hours. Two weeks prior to the sale, the new method of buying poinsettias, as well as a link to the online form, was communicated through our local newspaper, internal email communications, and social media. Students were given the link in order to help market the sale as a class assignment.

Formsite

Using the site's toolbox we configured the 'common/formatting items' options to add instructions for customer use at the top of the form. We used boxes for the customer's name (first and last), phone number, email address, date and time of pickup, and the color and type of the customer's vehicle. The 'order form items' feature allowed us to price each item and generate a 'total' box at the end of an order. That feature also has an inventory section for each item, automatically updating as plants are sold. Many of our customers are in the 50-70 year-old range, but through conversations with them we learned that they found the online form easy to navigate. The form created for the poinsettia sale could be used for any student-led sale.

Payment

A payment feature is an option through Formsite, but was not used for our sale because of university restrictions and not having enough lead time to inform customers of a change in the method of payment. A disadvantage of not using prepaid orders is that customers may change their minds or forget to come even though their order is ready. This artificially decreases the available inventory. Luckily, fewer than five percent of the orders were abandoned. To minimize this issue, we texted customers when they missed their pickup time. There were about five orders that were forgotten, yet picked up with a reminder text. We did not have a cut-off time for orders, so half of the forgotten or canceled plants were still able to be sold. If the orders had been prepaid, we would have been obligated to care

for the plants and arrange new pickup times, or refund money, all of which requires additional time that may not be worth the extra effort.

Pulling Orders

Because we had over 130 pre-sale orders, and 70% of them were for Thursday, we started pulling the Thursday morning orders on Tuesday morning. It took four of us four hours to pull, dress, sack, and move over 600 poinsettias to the staging area in the classroom. We started with the 7:30am orders and grouped the orders based on pickup times. A copy of each order was stapled to one of the paper sleeve bags so that we could find the name and check to see how many plants went with that order upon customer arrival.

Order Timeline

Orders were taken online until the end of the sale, as we never completely sell out of all cultivars. Closing the online orders early would have lost about 70 orders this year, fifteen percent of our sales. Many people were unaware of the online ordering this year, and either ordered late or walked in. On noon the day before the sale, the 7:30-noon timeslots on Thursday were removed as options so that a new order would not be overlooked. On the Formsite software, you can't delete timeslots without losing the information, but you can change the timeslots you are closing to 'administration' which makes them not visible to the public. On Thursday at noon, the Thursday afternoon options for pickup were removed. The Friday sale is traditionally a lot slower than Thursday, so there was time to check hourly and pull any new orders. Taking orders during the sale requires someone to adjust inventory numbers if walk-ins are allowed.

Curbside Pickup

Although we asked for what they were driving, with so many orders it only helped to find orders during slow periods. A student would go to an arriving car and check for a name and timeslot. For the most part orders were loaded within five minutes. Surprisingly, over 75% of people arrived within their 30-minute block and another 15% were within an hour of their time slot. We had a couple of people show up outside of their time block, so we were able to use the Formsite master list to find the name and original time slot to narrow down the location of the order. For pre-pulled orders, two to three people could handle 10 curbside orders in a 30-minute period. This system does require more time upfront, as we spent two days before the sale pulling around 150 orders of plants spread out in three different greenhouses.

Walk-ins

We did have some people that just showed up or wanted extra plants. We had a 'cash and carry' cart setup by the door that made grabbing a couple of extra poinsettias easy. We had about 25 people that did not see the link or just wanted to pick out their own poinsettias, so you should be prepared to handle walk-ins. We also had several people who filled out the online form but did not hit 'submit', so having a few poinsettias ready to go was a time-saver.

Lessons Learned

There were not any restrictions on how many people could sign up for each timeslot. It happened to work out well, as the orders were all spaced out over the two days, but we advise setting a limit on the

number of customers within time slots. A benefit of this online system is that we now have an email list that can be generated to remind people of the dates for the sale each year. This software also tells you where people accessed the link, so we can see which marketing efforts were more successful. . Though we know this is a very popular public event, this year we were able to count up over 200 orders with Formsite alone.

Future Plant Sales

Some people really liked the convenience of the curbside pickup, but we are sure the pandemic influenced some of those comments. We were unsure if people would be as excited to have us pick out their plants, but this sale generated only a little less than average revenue, which can be considered a success when trying a different system for the first time. Others had mixed feelings -- some hope we will offer curbside again, some noted that they missed picking out their own plants, and others indicated they would order online and likely come browse in person too to see what is new. Before the next sale, we will have to decide if the sale should go back to the traditional in-person event or stay online, or if a hybrid model is the way to go. All sale models can be successful with good planning, widespread advertising, good help, and the ability to be flexible.

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