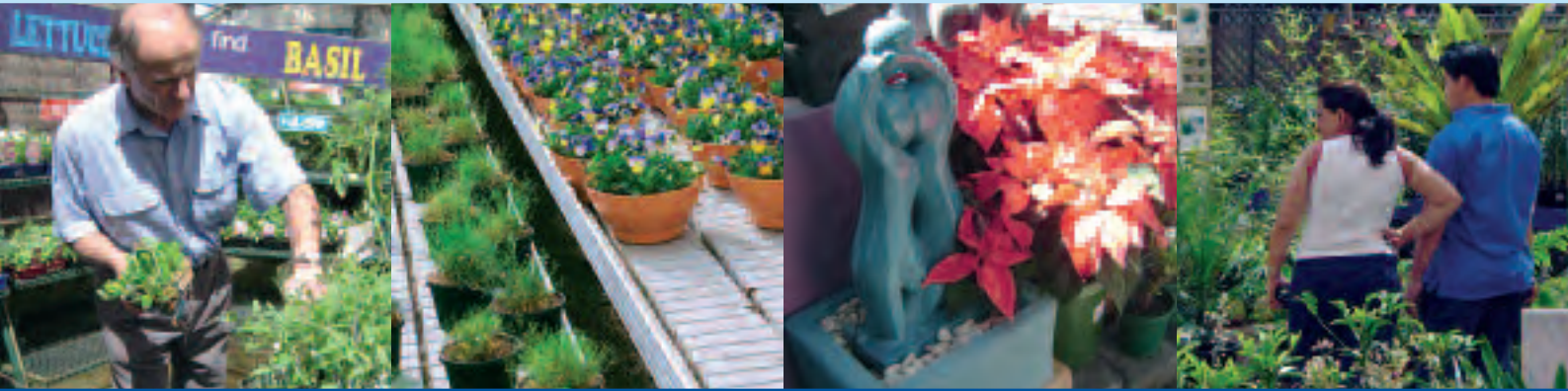


Nursery Papers

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The retail experience

Founded by noted social researcher and author, Hugh Mackay, the *Ipsos Mackay Report* helps marketers and retailers understand the mind and the mood of the Australian consumer.

In this month's issue of *NGIA Nursery Papers*, the principal author of the *Ipsos Mackay Report*, Randall Pearce, casts the retail experience in a new light. He outlines how the retail experience is more than a commercial activity; it is a defining ritual of our consumerist times. In addition, he sketches some innovative ways for businesses in the nursery and garden industry to become part of this broader cultural experience.

• Your Levy at Work •

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Nursery & Garden Industry
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The cultural experience of retail

The retail experience is a cultural experience and, as we all know, the cultural has far deeper roots than the commercial. Based on the *Ipsos Mackay Report*, *The Retail Experience*, this month's issue of *NGIA Nursery Papers* explores the retail experience as a defining ritual of our times. It illustrates how and why shopping is far more than a commercial activity and why buying and selling has become one of the few activities that bind us together as a community.

This paper also offers tips and advice to producers and retailers in the industry seeking to tap into the cultural experience and transform their business into a destination – not just a 'store' – for shoppers, gardeners and consumers alike.

'Borrowing' trust – the Ipsos Mackay method

The Ipsos Mackay Report is based on the **listening method**. Ipsos researchers fan out

across Australia to listen to Australians chatting with friends, neighbours and workmates in the relaxed environment of their natural habitat (homes, clubs, and workplaces). This method of research through discussion with trusted peers in a comfortable setting encourages participants to focus upon and explore the issues within the topic that are of interest and concern to them. This approach harnesses the dynamics of spontaneous interactions between people who already know and trust one another. The research 'borrows' that trust.

The fieldwork for *The Retail Experience* was composed of seventeen such group discussions with Australian men and women ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-60s in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra, Ballarat Blue Mountains and the NSW Central Coast.



Shopping is one of the few defining rituals of our times still binding us together as a community.

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The retail experience is a cultural experience

The retail experience is laden with opportunities for producers and retailers in the nursery and garden industry because it offers the potential to tap into something that is deeper than the commercial – something that is cultural. If you are unconvinced, just watch the next young family with children that come tramping through your lot. Much like the initiation rites of yore, the younger members of the clan can be seen being introduced to one of the few defining rituals of our times – shopping.

In our increasingly diverse society, we have a shortage of common rituals. Today, it is just as likely that your customers have visited a mosque as a church and to prefer Thai food to pies and mash. Shopping is a stand out in the field of modern Australian culture because it is one of the few threads that bind us together as a community. To illustrate the point; shopping experiences now mark important stages of development for young Australians. One of our participants put it this way.

Kids love it when they go shopping on their own – it's a real sign of independence. I was thinking only the other day, how many little rituals do kids have that are signs of growing up? For some people, it used to be the first communion, or confirmation, or something. Now, I think it is going shopping on their own.

Production nurseries and garden centres can provide particularly rich environments for culture to flourish – not just a shopping culture (although that is the backdrop) but also a 'gardening culture'. For example, how can you tap into a child's early understanding of the annual cycle to demystify why we plant certain species in spring and others in autumn? If you can establish a link between the rhythms of the customer's daily existence and the cycles of the garden, you will have made a cultural connection. And cultural connections will endure much longer than any loyalty program.



Build as many meeting places as possible into your retail space, especially eating and drinking opportunities. 'Chatting space' is as important in a nursery back lot as in a coffee shop.

Whatever happened to the village green?

The shops are where we congregate habitually and ritualistically. The consumer marketplace has taken the place of the ancient 'market square', the 'village green' and even the parish church. The shops are where many of our village-style interactions occur: incidental social contact, informal meetings over coffee, extended

chats in the aisles. The chance to meet up with fellow gardeners cannot be undervalued in this regard. Shoppers appreciate the opportunity to do things in retail centres, apart from shopping. As many overseas and Australian retailers have already discovered, eating and drinking opportunities are particularly welcome. Shoppers are also keen to learn about new products they might not have encountered elsewhere.

Key Point

Retail centres act like a modern 'village green' as well as a 'market square'. Casual meetings and incidental social contacts are more likely to occur in shops than on the footpath. Even routine rounds of the traps fuel our sense of belonging to the community.

Tips

- Build as many meeting places as possible into your retail space – 'chatting space' is as important in a nursery back lot as in a coffee shop
- Eating and drinking opportunities are an excellent way to attract new and existing customers into your business
- Transform customers into a captive audience by providing spaces where they can relax with friends whilst visiting your business – then take the opportunity to expose them to your new product range.

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Key Point

'Retail Therapy' is about the thrill of acquisition, getting good value, being well-treated and being given permission to indulge myself. The heart of retail therapy is that I feel better about 'me'.

Tips

- The outside world seems unfriendly; consumers crave a retail environment where they are taken seriously and where the entire system is geared to meeting their needs
- Everything your business and you, as a retailer, do and say should enhance the consumer's sense of well-being... a perfect little bubble of gratification.

'Retail therapy' is about the thrill of getting good value and being well-treated. Your customers come to you to feel better about themselves.

Finding 'your place' in the retail jungle

Increasingly, Australians define themselves and the style of their households by the way they shop, the shops they visit, and the gratification they obtain. Retailing, especially garden retailing, is not (and never has been) about buying and selling. It is about colour and movement, pleasure

and pain, satisfaction and frustration. Above all, it's about finding ways to feel better about ourselves.

As shopping has become more like a cultural ritual and less like a purely commercial transaction, shoppers have warmed to the emerging style of the retail environment. They like its brightness, its colour, its buzz, its stimulation and

excitement. They often describe retail outlets as being 'nicer' than they used to be. Clearly, a new benchmark has been set for the retail experience – and for producers and retailers – in Australia. However, while glamour is always attractive, authenticity is what sustains a long-term relationship. Glitz needs to be balanced by warmth, humanity, sincerity and reassuring signs that this is 'my kind of place'.



Service is whatever you do to make the customer feel in control of the transaction. Warm and responsive personal contact is an excellent way to achieve this.

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An easy-to-understand store layout, easy movement through the outlet and clear signage help put the consumer in the driver's seat and give them a sense of control.

Customer service is a social need

If we define culture as 'the way we do things around here', then it's easy to understand how customers can become nostalgic about 'the way we used to do things'. Customer service is something that Australians look back upon wistfully, wishing that we could recapture that feature of a bygone shopping era.

Today, service is more likely to connote 'being in control of the transaction' than it is about 'being served'. Customers acknowledge that in an increasingly self-service environment they are likely to have less personal service available, but they still yearn for service that is friendly, sincere and respectful. They still want sales staff who are prepared to 'put themselves out' and 'know their stuff'. Product knowledge is the key factor in all this, and customers complain that it is too often missing from their encounters with sales staff. A familiar complaint runs like this:

The bigger the store, the less likely you are to find people who know anything about the merchandise, because they have to go self-service and hi-tech stuff because they are really running it as a warehouse.

The underlying theme here is **control** – one of our deepest social needs. This is a powerful theme in consumers' discussion of the retail experience because, even when personal service is in decline, it is still possible for the customer to feel in control. An efficient self-service operation, combined with a comprehensible store layout and sensible use of technology can still put the consumer in the driver's seat. Product knowledge is vital but it can come from a variety of sources: a sales assistant, a website, a brochure or an in-store demonstration. Transparent pricing and easy movement through the outlet are also welcome indicators that the customer is the reason the retail operation exists.

At the end of the day, it is the quality of the retail experience that you offer that will translate into value for the consumer. Whether you facilitate newcomers to the 'gardening culture'; provide opportunities for enthusiasts to congregate and form a 'café society of gardeners' or if you simply observe and respect the deep-seated social need we all have for control, you have an opportunity to lift your business out of the retail muck and join the broader cultural movement that we call shopping. At a time when glitz and glamour are on offer everywhere, returning to our cultural roots may be one of the few ways you can tap into the mind and mood of the Australian consumer.

Key point

Service is whatever you do to make the customer feel in control of the transaction. This can be achieved through superb efficiency, easily-comprehended self-service arrangements, or warm and responsive personal contact. The combination of all three is most powerful.

Tips

- Staff training is even more important in a self-service environment than across a traditional counter. When shoppers need help/advice, they really need it!
- Stock knowledge is vital. As products become more complicated and/or more homogenous, customers are looking for simple direction and guidance.