

# Marketing Extension Gardening Publications in Boise Nurseries and Garden Centers in 1994 and 1995

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Six Boise, Idaho, garden centers began selling University of Idaho extension gardening publications in spring, 1994, on 20-slot metal racks provided by the Agricultural Communications Center (ACC). During 1994, the stores sold or gave away 1,057 publications. Active servicing by ACC personnel in 1995 led to increased sales during the project's second year: 1,255 publications, and 27 in-season reorders, compared to one reorder in 1994. Across the two years, the stores sold or gave away a combined total of 2,312 publications at a retail value of \$1,598.20, which resulted in earned profits of as little as \$14.14 for the store with the fewest sales (64 publications) and as high as \$167.83 for the store with the most sales (918 publications).

## Introduction

For decades, the Cooperative Extension System has effectively developed a broad constituency among the nation's gardeners. Rare is the gardening book or magazine that does not refer the reader to his or her local Cooperative Extension office, particularly

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for pest identifications and soil fertility recommendations. Unfortunately, like most government offices, the Cooperative Extension office in Boise, Idaho, keeps regular Monday-through-Friday business hours, opening its doors at 8:00 a.m. each weekday and closing them at 5:00 p.m.

In spring, 1994, we approached six Boise nurseries to ascertain their interest in selling extension gardening publications at the retail level. The Agricultural Communications Center (ACC) would provide attractive, compact, 20-slot metal magazine racks, complete with signage, and the nurseries would purchase the publications at the same discount for which they were available to county extension offices: 50 percent for Current Information Series publications and 20 percent for longer bulletins. The retail price of the 54 available titles ranged from \$0.25 to \$2.00.

Some of the nursery managers expressed skepticism or resistance by telephone, maintaining they needed a 40 percent across-the-board discount and our agreement to buy back unsold publications. However, when they saw the sample publications, invitingly displayed in large, loose-leaf binders, all agreed to participate in the pilot project. Their interest was primarily to provide a service to their customers, rather than to make a significant profit on sales. The ACC was willing to absorb the \$134.53 cost per rack (with signage) in order to encourage participation by retailers and to demonstrate to them that they could recover these costs in two years.

### **1994: Observation and Challenges**

It became evident almost immediately that, although the binders were critical to "selling" the project to the nursery managers, the managers were not taking time to leaf through them and complete their initial order forms. Repeated telephone reminders were necessary over a six-week period in March and April 1994, to secure return of the order forms. (In 1995, we began the process in January to avoid the busy spring months.) Likewise, the managers did not use the binders to place orders during the April-through-October sales season; in 1994, only one of the six managers purchased additional publications beyond the initial order—and only after we pointed out that some slots had been emptied. Managers routinely allowed stocks to dwindle to zero without taking action. Clearly, the racks would require more active servicing than we had foreseen, since the managers expected that we would behave much like any other vendor—visiting the stores regularly, taking inventory, and making suggestions for new orders.

Sales were slower than we had expected and depended highly on in-store location. While two of the stores advantageously placed the racks near their checkout counters, two others set them in very low-trafficked areas. The remaining two stores displayed the publications in intermediately-trafficked areas, but the locations—while eye-pleasing—subjected the publications to dust and moisture, compromising their appearance; plastic protective sheets were later slipped in front of each pocket, which markedly reduced—but did not entirely eliminate—publication weathering.

Managers reported that many more customers were browsing the stands than were actually buying publications. Because the 1994 signage did not clearly indicate that the publications were "for sale," some customers assumed the publications were free, creating awkward situations. (While all but a few of the publications bear printed prices, those prices are marked in relatively small lettering at the bottoms of the back pages.) Some of the managers eventually tacked makeshift signs onto the displays, indicating that the publications were available only for a fee.

Finally, rather than selecting only 20 titles for the 20 slots, several of the managers ordered so many different titles that they piled them two or three deep in the slots.

## **1994: Results**

Of the 2,775 copies of publications they ordered in 1994, the six stores sold or gave away 1,057—or 38 percent. Individual stores sold or gave away as low as 23 percent and as high as 84 percent of their inventory. Volume ranged from 41 to 344 copies.

The top five sellers were "Roses: Care After Planting" (120 copies), "Training and Pruning Your Home Orchard" (67), "Roses: Buying and Planting" (66), "Insect Pest Management for Home Vegetable Gardens" (51), and "Insects of Ornamental Shrubs and Trees" (50).

It appeared that a publication's length positively influenced its appeal to buyers, despite its higher price. This may have been because the thicker publications were perceived as having more value, or because they consistently looked better on the stands than the thinner publications which had a tendency to slump and curl.

Regardless of the numbers of publications they sold, all of the store managers were willing to try the project again for a second year. However, all were also reluctant to purchase the racks, citing

concerns that they would not be able to recover the approximate \$135.00 cost through sales.

### **1995: Project Adjustments**

The project was revised in 1995 in the hope of boosting sales. At the suggestion of store managers, new signs were prepared, emphasizing "Gardening for Idaho" and clearly indicating that the publications were "For Sale."

Because five of the six managers believed that 54 titles were too many for them to choose from, we preselected 18 titles for 1995, allowing two extra slots for continuing stock from the previous year. The sixth store continued to carry all of the available titles. The ACC bought back the publications not included in the narrower offering.

To consolidate the 54 selections and to test acceptance of another type of product, we developed five shrink-wrapped packages of three to eight titles each: "Idaho Vegetable 8-Pack," "Idaho Gardening Basics," "Idaho Lawns: From the Ground Up," "Better Idaho Berries," and "Sweet Success with Idaho Fruit Trees." The publications were sold at retail prices from \$1.10 to \$2.75 and were available to the stores at a 40 percent discount.

Beginning in April, we serviced the racks twice monthly. During the slower July-through-October period, we visited the stores every three to four weeks or as needed.

A seventh store—in Ketchum, Idaho—joined the project in 1995 at the request of the county extension educator. Two Master Gardeners who were employed at the store agreed to maintain the inventory and necessary record-keeping. We developed a customized list of 20 publications for this store, which is located at a substantially higher elevation than the Boise garden centers. Since this store was not a part of the original pilot project—and since university funds were not available to buy a seventh rack—ACC paid \$50.00 toward the cost of the new rack and sign, and the store covered the remaining expenses.

### **1995: Results**

The number of publications sold or given away by the six Boise stores improved significantly as compared to 1994: 1,255 versus 1,057. The retail value of those sales nearly doubled: \$1,011.40 compared to \$586.80. Active servicing in 1995 led to 27 reorders—35 percent of the season's sales—compared to only one reorder in 1994.

Together during the two-year period (Table 1), the six original stores sold 2,312 publications, or 60 percent of their inventory, for \$1,598.20. The Ketchum store, which commenced the project on the Memorial Day weekend 1995, sold 46 publications, or 22 percent of its inventory, for a retail total of \$38.40.

**Table 1**

*Overview of Retail Sales of Extension Gardening Publications at Six Boise, Idaho, Garden Centers in 1994-95*

Store	Sales volume	Sales value	Net profit
1	918	\$476.35	\$ 167.83
2	64	\$ 45.60	\$ 14.14
3	116	\$ 98.70	\$ 28.15
4	349	\$236.10	\$ 77.63
5	312	\$269.70	\$ 82.53
6	553	\$471.75	\$ 154.68
Total	2,312	\$1,598.20	\$ 524.96

*Note: Cost of 20-slot metal display rack and sign was \$134.53.*

Top sellers for both years combined (Table 2) were "Roses: Care After Planting" (313 copies), "Roses: Buying and Planting" (166), "Training and Pruning Your Home Orchard" (134), "Insect Pest Management for Home Vegetable Gardens" (92), and "How to Prune Coniferous Evergreen Trees" (91).

None of the newly developed packages performed well. "Sweet Success with Idaho Fruit Trees," a six-in-one package priced at \$2.00, performed best, with 27 sold. Least well-received was "Better Idaho Berries," a three-in-one package priced at \$1.10 that attracted only 14 buyers.

Of particular concern in the second year was the issue of profitability. We had hoped that the stores would earn enough profit in two years—specifically, \$135.00—to pay for the cost of the racks and signs. If they had, we could then graduate beyond the pilot phase of the project. Nurseries signing on after the pilot phase would be asked to pay for the racks and signs as well as for the inventory.

Unfortunately, we were able to demonstrate in only two of the six Boise stores that those publication sales could recover the full display costs over a two-year period. The store with the highest volume, 918 publications sold or given away, earned \$167.83, although that profit figure may be deceptively high because a significant number of the publications were probably given away and other publications were sold by ACC staff for the nursery at its spring "Open House."

**Table 2**

*Best-Selling Extension Gardening Publications at the Retail Level in Boise, Idaho, in 1994-95*

No. Sold	Title of Publication
313	Roses: Care After Planting
166	Roses: Buying and Planting
134	Training and Pruning Your Home Orchard
92	Insect Pest Management for Home Vegetable Gardens
91	How to Prune Coniferous Evergreen Trees
84	Insects of Ornamental Shrubs and Trees
73	Weed Control in the Home Garden
68	Tomatoes for the Home Garden

A second store, the one giving the rack the most favorable checkout-stand location, earned \$154.68. The remaining four Boise stores earned between \$82.53 and \$14.14, while the Ketchum store earned a profit of \$12.08.

### **1996: Changes and Plans**

Discouraged by poor sales, three of the six stores withdrew from the project in 1996. Two of the racks were moved to the store that had enjoyed both the most sales and the most profit; this store spread its doubled-up inventory across the new racks and also ordered new titles.

We plan to continue the project indefinitely with the three remaining stores in Boise and the one store in Ketchum. Should sales increase materially, we will evaluate the potential for adding other stores.

## Conclusions

Retail sales require time, personnel, and expense, but they are a workable means of putting Cooperative Extension System gardening publications into the hands of the clientele. While profits may not be sufficient to recover the costs of displays, retail sales provide a significant opportunity for institutional—if not always products—marketing. If possible, universities should underwrite the cost of the racks and signs to overcome nursery managers' concerns about the relatively high initial expense of the displays.

In order for retail sales of extension gardening publications to be profitable for nursery owners, managers must be willing to place sales racks in high-trafficked locations protected from wind and humidity. University personnel or volunteers must also be willing to actively service the racks, taking inventories and making suggestions for new orders as often as twice monthly during the gardening season.