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Ornamental Plant Repurchase Intent - Online vs. In-store Sales

Repeat plant purchasing behavior may vary based on where customers purchase their plants (online vs. in-store). Here, we discuss results from a 2023 study investigating US consumers' online plant purchasing behavior.

Customer loyalty is considered the “golden ticket” in retailing. Loyalty results in repeat sales without using additional marketing resources to initially infiltrate the market. Loyalty also increases customer empathy when products do not perform as expected. In the ornamental plant industry, a 2006 in-store buying study addressed loyalty and found that customer delight (i.e., the product exceeds expectations resulting in positive emotions) is a precursor to loyalty (Hicks et al., 2006; Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Independent Garden Center In-store Shopping Environment.

Photo credit: A. Rihn

Here, we discuss a 2023 study addressing customer loyalty for ornamental plants sold in-store versus online. Since the pandemic, online plant purchasing options have been available to customers but buying products “sight unseen” poses potential risks (e.g., quality concerns, damage). The study was HRI funded and a collaboration between Alicia Rihn (UTK), Melinda Knuth (NCSU), Patricia Huddleston (MSU) and Bridget Behe (MSU). An online survey collected data from 1,393 US plant purchasers where 24% made their last plant purchase in-store while 76% made their last plant purchase through online retailers. Online purchasers were oversampled to allow for a deeper investigation into their purchasing behavior and perceptions of online plant sales.

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Generally, participants trusted and relied on reviews when buying plants online (Fig. 2). The review ratings were higher for customers who purchased their last plants through online channels. Product satisfaction measured if the plant form and performance met expectations. Generally, participants were satisfied with their plant purchases (Fig. 3). Online purchasers expressed a higher level of satisfaction than those who bought in-store. Delight was similar in that all participants exhibited levels of delight in their plant purchases with the online purchasers having higher ratings (Fig. 3). Both in-store and online purchasers were likely to recommend the plants and firms to their family and friends (i.e., recommendations; Fig. 4) with higher ratings from online purchasers. When considering repeat purchase intent, both in-store and online purchasers were likely to repurchase the product (Fig. 4). No significant differences were observed between the two groups for repurchase intent.

Participants used a variety of online retailers to purchase plants (Fig. 5). Amazon was used by the largest portion of the sample, followed by farm direct websites. Across the different online retailers, online purchasers used a wider variety of the options than the in-store purchasers indicating a willingness to try different online retailers when buying plants.

Additional analyses were conducted to identify the impact of reviews, performance satisfaction, delight, recommendation likelihood, and online retailer used on repurchase intentions. Participants who purchased plants from farm direct websites were more likely to repeat buy than those who did not. None of the other online retail channels were significant.



Figure 2. US Plant Purchasers Use of Online Reviews (n=1,393).

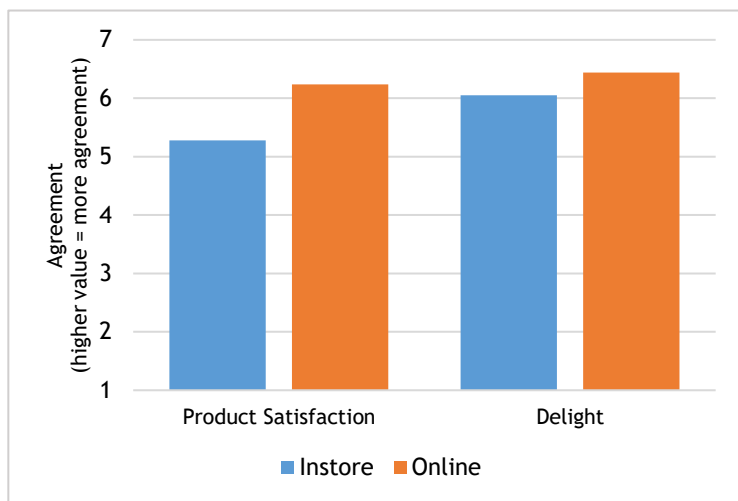


Figure 3. US Plant Purchasers Product Satisfaction and Delight Ratings for Recent Plant Purchases (n=1,393).

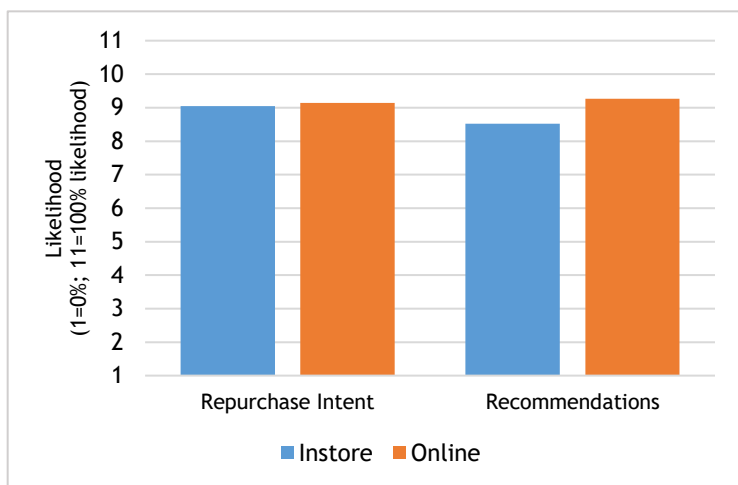


Figure 4. US Plant Purchasers Repurchase Intent and Likelihood of Recommending Plants or Firms from Most Recent Plant Purchase (n=1,393).

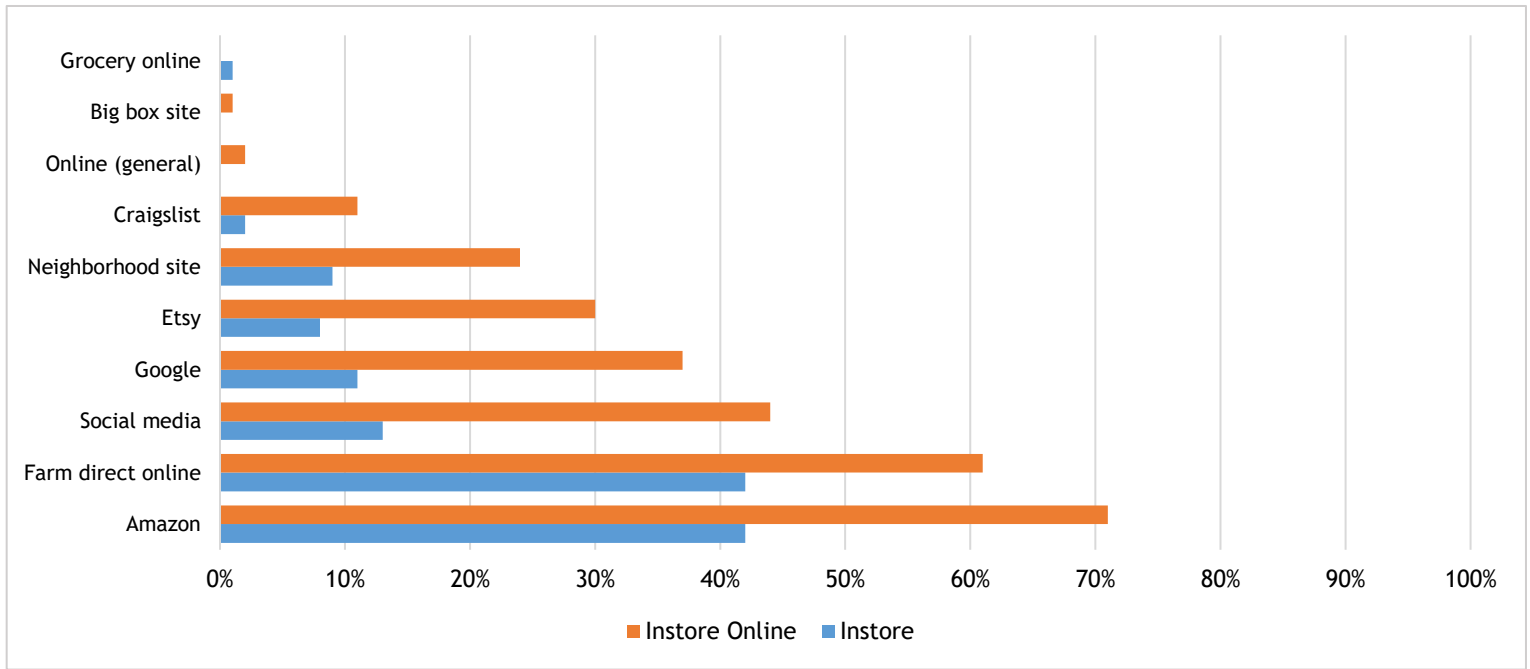


Figure 5. Online Retailers Used by US Consumers to Purchase Plants (n=1,393).

Participants who were delighted with their purchases and those who were likely to recommend the product/firm were more likely to repurchase the products than those without these attributes. As income increased, participants were more likely to be repeat purchasers. Those who purchased their last plants from in-store retailers were more likely to be repeat purchasers than those who bought online. None of the other variables impacted repeat purchase intent.

Based on these findings, key insights include:

1. Delight and recommendations increase repurchase intent.
 - Foster delight by setting realistic expectations among customers (e.g., product form, performance) and add value (e.g., customer service, small gifts, storytelling).
2. Farm direct websites increase repurchase intent.
 - If possible, use a company website to inform and educate customers. Include information related to the product and where it is available for purchase.
3. Online reviews matter to online and in-store plant purchasers.
 - Encourage customers to leave reviews highlighting their experiences. Use photos to demonstrate benefits.
4. Savvy websites are important to plant purchasers, regardless of where they purchase.
 - Online searches may aid in directing customers to more niche items and their availability.

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