

Marketing Munchies Podcast Transcript

Episode #28

Water Source, Water Use, and What People Think

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Announcer: Welcome to the Marketing Munchies Podcast series hosted by Dr. Bridget Behe. Each week Bridget and her guests will share information, insights, research-based findings, and her 30 years of experience to help your horticultural business connect better with current and future customers. Now, let's join our host, Dr. Bridget Behe.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Hi, and welcome back to the Marketing Munchies Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Bridget Behe. It's a privilege for me to have, as a returning guest, Melinda Knuth from Texas A&M University. Mel is a doctoral student at Texas A&M in the department of Horticultural Sciences. Welcome back, Mel!

Melinda Knuth: Thanks!

Dr. Bridget Behe: Well, let's talk about the second paper that you were able to publish with Charly Hall, Tom Fernandez, Pat Huddleston, and myself. We'll switch gears (staying on the water topic) a little bit. Tell me the title of the second paper?

Melinda Knuth: This title is called "Consumer Perceptions of Landscape Plant Production Water Sources and Uses in the Landscape during Perceived and Real Drought."

Dr. Bridget Behe: I would say the short title for this is "how did people's perceptions about the water source and the water need in the landscape differ."

Do you want to remind the listeners if they didn't hear the last podcast—you want to tell them a little bit about the methodology and how we did the survey?

Melinda Knuth: Sure. We did an online national survey across the United States, and we surveyed about 1500 participants.

Dr. Bridget Behe: What kind of questions did we ask them?

Melinda Knuth: We gave them a picture of a plant with a description, and this description had both the name of the plant—if it had to be irrigated the first year or if it was irrigated multiple years—the price, and what type of water was used (whether it was recycled water or fresh water). We then asked them to rank this plant by asking them: How likely are you to buy this plant?

Dr. Bridget Behe: It's really fascinating to me as a researcher (maybe I'm the only one on the plant that gets excited about data analysis). It's really interesting to me that we can show consumers a picture and say: How likely are you to buy that plant? And, we can extract all kinds

of information. Like: How important each characteristic was about that plant and then what they valued more and what they valued less.

Let's talk about those plant characteristics. What was the most important contributor to their decision to buy the plant or not buy the plant?

Melinda Knuth: It ended up that the actual plant genus was the most important reason that they would or would not buy the plant.

Dr. Bridget Behe: How did that relate to other studies that you had read—I have done some; Charly has done some—how did that relate to past work?

Melinda Knuth: It was very consistent with past work. Usually plant genus is the most important, and so we weren't surprised in any way that that was the most important reason why they did or did not.

Dr. Bridget Behe: I think it's important for growers and retailers to understand the plant type still is going to be the big deciding factor.

Then let's talk about price, because that was another characteristic. Where did price fall in the importance in the decision?

Melinda Knuth: It actually was the least important out of our factors.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Wow. Did that surprise you?

Melinda Knuth: A little bit. In past literature it has been shown to be the most important factor, up there with plant, but in ours it happened to be the least. Again, we did a national survey. These are random people from across the U.S., so it is a very robust sample. But, it happened to be the least important.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yes, price is important to some people but, across this big sample, what fell out in this particular study was price was at the bottom in terms of importance.

Let's talk about the two really important plant characteristics. The first one was the type of water that the grower used, whether it was fresh water or recycled water. What was the finding there?

Melinda Knuth: Fresh water was most preferred followed by recycled water. This was also interesting to us going back to our previous podcast. We found that those who were in drought and knew they were in drought actually irrigated more than those who didn't know. Even though they knew it was better to irrigate their landscape less and conserve water, they still chose not to.

This follows through with these results. Fresh water, even though they know recycled water is better for the environment, they know that it can potentially save them money, they still chose to use fresh water. This goes a little bit into some of the past literature, and what we found as the "yuck" factor. There is a psychological barrier. You could say: a reason they wouldn't use recycled water. We believe this to be the ultimate reason why fresh water was preferred, even though they know that it's not the better option environmentally.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yes, there's something there that really merits more investigation. We need to do a little more research on that "yuck" factor to try to help sway more people to endorsing or at least accepting psychologically that it's "okay" to use recycled water.

The last characteristic we gave them was how much water that plant needed in the landscape to become established. I think it was "requires water just in the first year or requires water every year." What was the finding there?

Melinda Knuth: The finding with that one was positive. Most people preferred that it was only watered in the first season and not in consecutive seasons following. This is great news, because this shows us that people are interested in irrigating less on that front—not necessarily with the fresh water versus recycled water, but more so they only want to irrigate the first year and not have to worry about it afterwards.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yes, so let's talk about some implications especially for retailers, but you know the growers are impacted by these messages as well. What do you think growers and retailers should be doing—both for the recycled water and the plants that require irrigation hopefully only in the first year to get established?

Melinda Knuth: For the fresh versus recycled, I think it's important to be very clear with one is in the water and where the water is coming from. There is again that "yuck" factor that is holding especially homeowners back from using the water, because they're afraid that there are things in the water that they don't want to be there. By being very explicit and very clear about where the water is coming from and how it is treated, is essential.

The second factor, which is whether it has to be established with irrigation only in the first year versus multiple years, being very clear with that and putting it directly on the signage, communicating with the consumers: this only needs to be irrigated the first year. That would really resonate with those people who prefer that method over the multiple year irrigation.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yes, talking about plants needing water or really requiring water only for that first year to help them get established. That would indicate a drought tolerant plan or a plan that has just generally lower water use. I think that's perfect. And, two, talking about how growers treat their water or that the water is recycled from their property. I think those are both excellent messages that could be communicated on a website or even on a container, on a QR code that leads to a website about the environmental practices of the business.

I think this is great work. Water is becoming the future currency, and the more we understand about consumers and their water perceptions, with regard to horticultural products, with regard to the plants, the better prepared we are going to be when we face more drought situations in more regions of the U.S.

Thanks again for coming on the podcast, Mel! We look forward to having you back.

Melinda Knuth: Definitely, thank you.

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Announcer: Thank you for joining us on this week's Marketing Munchies Podcast. For more information or to download the transcript of this podcast, please visit, connect-2-consumer.org. That's C-O-N-N-E-C-T, dash, the number two, dash, C-O-N-S-U-M-E-R, dot, C-O-M.

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