Who knows where the stock market, unemployment and gasoline prices will be the day this column appears in print? As I write it, the stock market closed just over 9,000 points for the first time in weeks, unemployment was at an all-time high and gasoline prices were affordably low. The country is in a recession, obvious to nearly everyone but only recently confirmed by economists in their analysis of data over the past year. The news has left all of us more uneasy, more concerned and holding on more tightly to our money than in recent memory.

Your challenge will be to convince your customers to spend enough of their money to sustain your business through the peak spring season, when most sales and profits are generated each year. The bigger challenge this year is making that happen enough in an already tough economy.

Sears has been around as a retailer for over a century, but its glory days are in the past. There was a time when you could buy anything from Sears, including a house. You could also furnish the house, clothe your family and enjoy recreational products from that same store (or catalog). The diversity of specialty retailers and the entry of new low-price leaders into the retail market have displaced this traditional American retailer. Still, in what looks to be our toughest spring in many years, what lesson can you take from the success of Sears that might help entice your customers to spend with you this spring?

Narrow your choices

The Paradox of Choice, an excellent book written by Barry Schwartz (2004, Harper Perennial), talks about how sales decline when consumers have too many choices, but sales increase when consumers only have a small set from which to choose. Ever think about your product mix at the peak of spring sales? It probably looks overwhelming to some (if not many) consumers.

Merchandisers at Sears recognized this long before Schwartz wrote his book. Sears used to put three brands or three product choices in front of consumers: good, better, best. Sears marketers knew that offering too many choices was worse for business than narrowing the field. So the retailer helped consumers by providing them with a short-cut to solving their problems by giving them three choices. There certainly were more choices to be made, but Sears narrowed the field by selecting three it would spotlight.

Good, better, best

Good was the budget-friendly choice. If your budget was stretched thin, this product would work well for you and most likely solve your problems in a basic manner. It was a good choice because it had few options or few “add-ons” and was a relatively simple fix. Good was usually good enough if you didn’t really care about having the latest and greatest. It was, simply, a good solution.

Better was a step up from good. If you had a bit more money to spend, you could buy a better solution to your problem. It likely had a few upgrades or a few more accoutrements which was reflected in the price. Better was the middle-of-the-road solution that wasn’t too conservative or too flashy.

Best was the top-of-the-line. If you opted for the best solution, you were willing to spend the money to have the newest and/or most features. The best solution was for someone who had the budget to afford the best and wanted to spend it on that product. If you purchased the best, it was for something you wanted to show off or was very important to you. It might be something that you used often or it portrayed part of who you are.

Don’t overwhelm

During the spring buying season, many of your customers may feel overwhelmed. This may be caused by the number of choices they are offered or from the stress their budget is taking. You can help them this spring with budget-friendly merchandising and pricing. Reducing the overwhelming number of choices to suggest a manageable few can save them time and (hopefully) money.

Establish some displays with good, better and best alternatives. These displays might integrate colorful annuals with edible herbs and flowers. Show customers a good choice that suits the climate, is visually appealing and budget friendly. Suggest a package or combo and have some ready-made items there for quick purchase.

Offer more DIY options

This year, have even more options for the do-it-yourselfer. Consider having three displays, one of each which shows good, better and best options for
a flowering container, hanging basket or other combination planter (that may include herbs and vegetables). Those three displays should have a few finished combinations as examples, but the displays should also have several individual items so customers can make their own. The better and best tables will have more sophisticated, upscale and higher-priced items.

A good vegetable and herb combination might contain an Early Girl tomato and some parsley. The better combination might consist of a larger container with a patio tomato, parsley and basil plant. The best combination could be even larger, have a grape tomato and a yellow pear tomato with a few herbs. This would also be fun and easy to do with some different lettuces, creating a living salad bowl. Add some nasturtiums to the best combination to sell some edible flowers. Some of the choices might even be organic.

**Provide plenty of displays**

Consider dedicating nine display areas — six for ornamentals and three for edibles. Maybe integrate one with both ornamentals and edibles. Be sure to have the display model elevated in the center in order to draw attention and to highlight its features. An easy way to do this is to turn an empty bulb pan upside down. Label each of the products and maybe even have a recipe card for consumers to follow. The card can also suggest mulch, gloves, fertilizer and tools if they are needed.

The demo, or as marketing consultant Judy Sharpton calls it, the mannequin, is central to the display, but critical to sales this year will be having the component parts there for customers to do at home. You should devote space to 25-33 percent finished product and 66-75 percent components. Provide a handy container into which all the components will fit. Offer to recycle the container to entice customers to come back for another look at what products are being displayed. Make it easy for the customers to “build it” in their imagination before doing it at home. You might even feature a photo contest (on line, in the store or both) for the best combination planters made by one of your customers.

**Make it simple**

Make it practical and easier for your customers to shop this spring. While you may offer 5,000 different products, in a key area of the retail sales floor, set up some displays that reduce the choices to good, better and best. Display finished combinations of both edible and ornamental containers, well labeled and priced, as well as a sufficient quantity of components for consumers who want to save the money and do it themselves. Appeal to your customers’ budget-friendly and creative side this spring.

---

*Bridget Behe is professor, Michigan State University, Department of Horticulture, (517) 355-5191; behe@msu.edu*