

A person wearing a black coat and blue jeans is walking outdoors. They are carrying a large, green Christmas tree in their left arm and a brown paper shopping bag with a silver tinsel decoration in their right hand. The background is a light-colored wall with shadows of trees and the person. The title 'Adapting Tree Shopping for a Safer Holiday' is overlaid in large, white, bold letters with a drop shadow.

Adapting Tree Shopping for a Safer Holiday

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With the outbreak of COVID-19, many things have changed in our daily lives. Shopping is one of them. Some people feel safe enough wearing a mask and using sanitized carts to go shopping while others have gotten used to ordering online and having their products delivered. With the pandemic continuing its up and down cycles, fresh-cut Christmas tree retailers should prepare their businesses in several ways for the new shopping reality this season. How safe people perceive it is for them to go out and shop is the reality you need to deal with; what they think is the most powerful influence of how they act.

According to a June 2020 study by Podium, Inc., nearly 3 of 5 Americans said a local business' pandemic-friendly services led them to purchase goods or services from them the first time this year while 2 in 5 said the lack of those services drove them away from shopping with that business. Those services included online or telephone ordering, contactless payment, and/or curbside pick-up and delivery. The study reported that the use of curbside services rose from 13% to 49% with the greatest

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increase among persons aged >60 years and also among more women than men. The relative importance of price actually decreased (from 78% to 50%) as the importance of personal safety rose. Making shopping safe and convenient will be key themes for fresh-cut Christmas trees in 2020. Consider how much it will cost to offer some of these changes and include it in the price of services.

One of the first preparations for this Christmas season is to communicate frequently, beginning as early as October. Podium (2020) reported that consumers who appreciate well-communicated safety practices jumped from 14% to 44%. Waldron and Wetherbe (2020) published the HEART framework for businesses to communicate with customers and employees during a crisis. H represents the humanizing of the company. Show the owners and employees pictures (first names only to protect their safety) and convey the many generations that the business has

literally been in the customers' back yards. E means the business needs to educate customers about change – especially the steps you are taking to ensure customer and employee safety. A indicates how the company assures customers it is stable in these unprecedented times, so talk about the importance of continuing Christmas traditions by selecting a tree for home decoration. R says to revolutionize offerings, and that most likely will be through the “new” conveniences and contactless payment. T means to tackle the future, and you should circle back around to reiterate that the business is committed to change for the better through improved shopping practices, keeping customers and employees safe, and being there for future generations.

As you plan those initial messages, be sure they are a mix of the benefits of real Christmas trees and the choose/cut experience as well as the changes you have made to ensure the safety of customers and employees. Two to four posts per week, beginning in October, should get you off to a good start. Schedule the posts across the various social media formats you use, and then you can change them if needed. Want some basic information about good social media posts? Listen to the free Marketing Munchies podcasts: Season 2: Episodes 36 and 37 (www.connect-2-consumer.com). You can get some great information from the National Christmas Tree Association press room (<https://realchristmastrees.org/news-media/press-room/>), which has accurate industry statistics, real tree traditions and myths, folklore and history, as well as tree safety. Many of these messages are ideal for communication to your customer base. Images should include (with permission) families and friends having fun selecting their real trees. Consumers connect best with images of people they relate to, not just the beautiful trees. Incorporate some of these benefits on your telephone message, too!



The other key message to communicate this season is safety. On social media as well as your website, address the changes you have made to keep employees and customers safe. Begin with an overall statement like, “we value the health and wellbeing of our employees and customers.

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Here is how we are keeping you both safe.” Discuss safe practices you are using including increased sanitization of common areas, adding hand-washing stations, requiring masks, keeping



socially distant, constructing transparent barriers at check-out, taking employee temperatures daily, and new hand sanitizing stations at key points in the nursery. Keep messages brief but positive, and repeat these safety messages online so that customers can anticipate a safer shopping experience and want to return to get a tree this year.

Online and in social media, remind customers to shop locally. In much of the research I've done with colleagues on edible and ornamental plants, local

plants were more highly valued and carried a greater willingness to pay compared to organically or sustainably grown products. Local businesses are comprised of our friends and neighbors. In times of crisis, especially in the pandemic, people want to help others they know or have a connection with. A 2010 Michigan State University study (Robinson, 2010) reported that when someone shops locally and spends \$100, \$73 stays in the local economy. That makes a big difference! It's worth your time to remind customers of those facts.

Closer to the time you open for sales, you will want to show your product mix including trees, wreaths, and other related items, as well as hours of operation and how to contact you. It is essential that the geographic location is on each page, as well as a contact telephone number. Feature this information on social media, and think about sharing the new ways customers can shop with you this year. Will you offer online shopping or telephone orders? If customers have shopped with you, these may be convenient and safe options for them this year. Consider dedicating two or three parking places for curbside pick-up. Have a sign made with the telephone number (consider buying another phone for this) to call when the customer is ready for pick-up. Curbside pick-up may also carry an additional fee if you need to devote one or two people to this service, especially on the weekends.

This year is a great time to develop your online store. While many customers may want to still come in person, the time is never better to get this up and going. Consider working with your website provider and have a simple store this year with some trees and related products. Not everything in your inventory needs to go up here, just enough for reluctant shoppers to want to continue to do business with you. Set it up so they can pay online and either pick-up or have it delivered.

Will you take shopping by appointment? Some garden retailers offered a video

concierge service this year where they set an appointment with customers to "shop" for them. You can use an online scheduler and may need yet another dedicated phone for this. You can "Facetime" customers so they can see trees and wreaths they would like to buy. Set a minimum purchase (perhaps \$50) so the employee's time is not wasted if no purchase is made. Then, arrange for delivery (yet another charge or perhaps free if the purchase is over a minimum amount). Set a delivery date and get a phone number so the delivery person can text a picture to show the tree and other items were delivered.

Show hours of operation and consider offering appointments on one day (Tuesday or Wednesday) when families might be one of a few small groups at the business. Consider if you are going to limit the number of people in a group or let them decide. Mask ordinances may still be in operation and are a good idea, but think about how you will handle younger children in the party (who may not be able to keep a mask on). Consider how you will handle transportation (and be sure you tell customers ahead of time if the hay wagon isn't operating this year!) so they can adjust their expectations. If hot cider or hot chocolate was part of the experience you offered in the past, consider a change in how that is done. Maybe offer pre-packaged hot chocolate or cider to go. That cost might be included in a "Family Tree Adventure" package that includes a hayride for just that family, tree selection and purchase, and to-go beverages in mugs or mason jars printed with your business name and logo. It could be another part of a great memory of tree choose-and-cut in a very different time.

Make check-out safer with a transparent, physical barrier between employees and customers. Spray paint circles (or tree shapes or ornaments) on the floor/ground so customers keep the recommended six-foot distance apart from each other. Consider going cashless and offer

touchless payment by credit card, but if you still accept cash and checks do reiterate this online and in the checkout area. Keep employees safe by requiring masks, especially when interacting with customers. Do post signage to remind shoppers to wear masks and keep a safe six feet from others. We see these signs just about everywhere these days but can forget rather quickly.

We have reset so much of our lives for this new normal that it should be expected to influence a strong family tradition like selecting the fresh Christmas tree. Communicate often with potential customers about both the benefits of a fresh tree and your concerns and changes to keep customers and employees safe. Consider developing an online website with a reduced product mix, offering telephone or virtual concierge purchasing, and rethink the

check-out process to keep everyone safe. Giving customers options to keep doing business with you is essential to a profitable season. 🌲

Citations

Podium, Inc. 2020. Consumers want social distancing services from local businesses even after the pandemic. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/report-consumers-want-social-distancing-services-from-local-businesses-even-after-the-pandemic-301083570.html>

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