Wonder why customers come to your store, look around and leave empty handed? The reason may be that they are not influenced to buy. Robert Cialdini, author of the book, “Influence: Science and Practice,” gives six principles of ethically influencing people to buy in retail situations.

Reciprocation is giving back for something given. Grocery store product sampling displays are the best example of this type of influence. They give a food sample to shoppers, show them the product, and customers feel obligated to reciprocate by buying the product. Giving away coupons, mints, popcorn, balloons or tomato plans to children are ways to use reciprocation. Give to customers, and they will give back to you. Cialdini refers to research at a restaurant where the waiter gave each person at the table a mint. The tip rate increased. When the waiter returned with an additional mint because they were so special, the tips skyrocketed.

Consensus is about following the lead. Make a comment like, “Our most popular annual is…” and customers tend to buy the plant because others have had success. Customers will follow the lead of others who have had success with your product or service.

Closely related to consensus is the principle of liking. This is demonstrated by a feeling of connection between people. Find a common interest with customers and help them work toward their goals. It is the salesperson’s attitude of cooperation that influences the customer toward their goal. Complimenting the customer helps establish the connection between people.

Scarcity can be used to encourage customers to buy a product now because of the possibility of getting the best quality and quantity while supplies last. People have a tendency to desire more of what they may not be able to have. People have more interest in what they might lose.

Authoritative sources of information give customers a sense of security. When information is reliable, you establish credibility. Communicate this to customers by knowing about plants and their care. Advertising relays credibility when customers know how long you have been in business, which means you have a history of knowledge and experience. A testimonial from a satisfied customer is a powerful tool that carries more credibility than a proclaiming yourself credible. Many garden centers and especially landscape customers come to us by referral.

We miss an opportunity if we do not ask our customers to recommend us to others.

Being consistent and committed builds stability and clear thinking. Customers know what to expect and will be more committed when asked to buy your product or ideas. We know from our own research that garden center customers value the quality and selection offered by independent garden centers. This is an influential benefit that mass merchants don’t have. When making suggestions, be prepared and have a backup. If the first recommendation is too expensive or not reasonable to customers, offer a substitute. An alternative will help customers find what fits their preference and budget.

Often we hesitate to ask customers to buy. We fail to influence their decisions because we don’t use the principles of influence. Telling the customer that we have good plants that would work in their gardens is different than asking them if they would like to buy this plant. Give them the opportunity to commit to a purchase. Add-on sales fit into the mix of influencing. We know what customers need to be successful gardeners. We owe it to them to inform them and offer products for their success.