

SERVICE CONSIDERATIONS IN THE CHOOSE AND CUT BUSINESS

The natural Christmas tree industry has had increasing concern about decreasing market share for Christmas tree sales. Concern exists not necessarily that sales of natural trees are decreasing, but that market expansion has not kept pace with growth increases in population as well as number of households in the country. Accordingly, promotion activities have increased at the national level as well as in several state associations. The recently approved re-affirmation of the mandated Christmas tree marketing/promotion order is a positive step in expanded promotion and publicity.

Within the natural Christmas tree industry, all are aware that trees are marketed to consumers through three primary outlets; these include sales by wholesale growers to retailer groups (eg. big box stores), sales to the public by grower operated retail lots, and sales to the public by cut-your-own lots. Cut-your-own operations appear to have increased more rapidly than other Christmas tree marketing outlets. It is not unusual for many choose-and-cut operations to close the selling season early due to a sharper demand and/or limited tree supply. However, at present the supply of available wholesale trees appears to be limited, which could be interpreted to indicate increased retail demand.

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(This article is an expansion of remarks made by the author at the summer meeting of the Michigan Christmas Tree Association in July, 2019)

A roaring bonfire is a welcome attraction to customers.



A tree cart is especially necessary when moving larger tree that have been selected and cut.

Why Are Choose-and-Cut Operations Increasing in Popularity?

Several factors can be identified as having contributed to increased sales for choose-and-cut operations. These include the following:

1. **Buy local.** When available, many individuals endeavor to purchase goods of all kinds including Christmas trees from local producers or suppliers. This results from a desire to support producers and/or vendors in the local community. Obviously, local producers and ultimately the local community benefits economically when locally produced products are purchased.
2. **Greater assurance of fresh products.** For the choose-and-cut operations that sell pre-cut trees, one of the most frequently asked questions is “when was this tree cut?” There is a common perception that tree freshness is directly related to date of harvest. Obviously, cutting your own tree eliminates any concern about freshness and date of harvest.

3. **Opportunity for family involvement in getting the Christmas tree.**

Cutting your own Christmas tree provides opportunity for family or group involvement in tree selection and harvest. Selecting and cutting your own tree is viewed by many as the beginning of the Christmas celebration and is considered a significant part of maintaining a family tradition and celebration.

4. **Going to a choose and cut farm provides an opportunity for a meaningful outdoor experience.**

Obviously, Christmas tree farms are located “in the country,” even though they may be relatively close to urban communities. Visiting a choose-and-cut farm provides an opportunity for the kids (and adults as well) to be outside, a place for the dog to run (on a leash!), and for longer walks and hikes in a natural environment.

5. **Offering amenities that may not be readily available elsewhere.** Many choose-and-cut farms provide wagon rides, bonfires, a visit with Santa Claus, locally produced food

offerings, excellent Christmas-related photo backgrounds, a Christmas themed gift shop, and an abundance of fresh Christmas greenery including wreaths, garland, fresh boughs, table centerpieces, etc.

In summary, choose-and-cut Christmas tree operations appear to offer significant advantages over other real tree marketing outlets. In our current culture, consumers of all products have come to expect excellent customer service from suppliers and vendors. Cutting your own Christmas tree is no exception to this generalization. Those operations that focus on maximizing customer satisfaction and service can expect their operation to grow and increase in profitability.

Several suggestions related to image and customer satisfaction when visiting and purchasing Christmas trees and related products from a cut-your-own farm can be identified. Operators who provide excellent service have observed that satisfied customers help expand sales and maintain year to year loyalty.



Laurie Koelling is ready to greet customers.

Some Suggestions Related to Customer Service for a Choose-and-Cut Business

1. Make and approach your operation as a business and not as a hobby.

As a choose-and-cut operation you are representing the natural Christmas



Tree carts or limos are very helpful (and popular!) for assisting customers in moving trees from the field to a processing area.

tree industry. Every choose-and-cut farm should present an appearance that represents pride in the products offered for sale and in the professional nature of the Christmas tree business. Neat, well maintained facilities, an organized layout of the farm, excellent directions on how the farm is operated including what trees are available and where they are located, and a visible and well understood pricing schedule are all basic components of a choose-and-cut farm that is operated as a business.

2. Make your operation look professional.

We all have heard the expression: "You only have one opportunity to make a first impression." A professional operation will have neat facilities that are well maintained and painted. Necessary signs will be present indicating where to begin, how the farm operates, where to obtain saws, product prices, and cashier locations.



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Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate	Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate	Age	Size	Per 100 Rate	Per 1,000 Rate
FRASER FIR				WHITE SPRUCE - Lake States				WHITE PINE - Lake States			
(2-2, PL+2)	8-15"	\$135.00	\$900.00	(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$65.00	\$225.00	(2-0, 3-0)	6-12"	\$65.00	\$275.00
(2-2, PL+2)	10-18"	\$145.00	\$980.00	(2-1)	12-18"	\$100.00	\$690.00	(2-1)	6-12"	\$95.00	\$690.00
(P+2, P+3)	12-22"	\$155.00	\$1050.00	(2-1, 2-2)	15-24"	\$125.00	\$790.00	(2-1, 3-1)	10-16"	\$110.00	\$790.00
BALSAM FIR				NORWAY SPRUCE - Lake States				SCOTCH PINE - Scotchhighland + French			
(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$95.00	\$650.00	(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$65.00	\$225.00	(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$75.00	\$325.00
(2-2, P+2)	10-18"	\$125.00	\$850.00	(2-1)	12-18"	\$110.00	\$690.00	WHITE CEDAR			
(P+2, P+3)	12-22"	\$135.00	\$900.00	(2-1, 2-2)	15-24"	\$125.00	\$850.00	(2-0, 3-0)	6-12"	\$65.00	\$275.00
CANAAN FIR				BLACKHILL SPRUCE				(2-1)	8-15"	\$95.00	\$650.00
(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$115.00	\$790.00	(2-0)	5-12"	\$65.00	\$250.00	(2-2)	15-24"	\$145.00	\$990.00
(P+2)	10-18"	\$145.00	\$980.00	(P+1)	8-14"	\$135.00	\$890.00	ARBORVITAE - *EMERALD, *GREEN GIANT, *TECHNY, *DARK GREEN & *PYRAMIDALIS			
(P+2, P+3)	12-22"	\$155.00	\$1100.00	(2-2)	10-18"	\$135.00	\$890.00	√(RC+1)	6-12"	\$140.00	\$890.00
DOUGLAS FIR - Lincoln				(2-2)	15-24"	\$145.00	\$990.00	Started out from a rooted cutting			
(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$65.00	\$295.00	SERBIAN SPRUCE				(P+1)	8-14"	\$165.00	\$1500.00
(2-1)	8-14"	\$100.00	\$650.00	(2-0)	8-14"	\$65.00	\$295.00	Started out from a 72 cell			
CONCOLOR FIR				(2-1)	12-18"	\$135.00	\$890.00	For complete list please write or call us.			
(2-0)	5-12"	\$65.00	\$295.00	AUSTRIAN PINE				Brian Bosch / Owner			
(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$110.00	\$760.00	(2-0)	6-14"	\$75.00	\$325.00				
(2-2, P+2)	10-18"	\$145.00	\$1050.00	RED PINE - Lake States							
COLORADO BLUE SPRUCE - San Juan & Kiabab				(2-0, 3-0)	6-14"	\$65.00	\$275.00				
(2-0, 3-0)	9-15"	\$65.00	\$225.00								
(2-1, P+1)	8-14"	\$100.00	\$650.00								
(2-2, P+2)	12-18"	\$135.00	\$890.00								
(P+2, P+3)	15-24"	\$160.00	\$1500.00								

3. **Have adequate all-weather parking available.** This can be a challenge, but over time should be less difficult. Hard surface paved parking lots are not necessary but well compacted gravel and stone lots are, especially in areas where heavier soils are present. Experienced choose-and-cut operators know that rain and snow can be expected sometime during the typical selling season. Towing stuck vehicles out of the parking lot is both embarrassing and time consuming. Advance planning related to parking will minimize this problem.
4. **Commit yourself to produce products of the highest possible quality.** When possible, grow trees that are the most popular among consumers. Whatever species are grown, engage in cultural practices so quality is the highest possible. This relates to implementing cultural practices such as effective weed control, optimizing soil fertility, trimming to maximize density, and control of harmful pests.

5. **The offering of available species must include true firs.** When possible, these should be grown on the farm. However, in some areas this may be a challenge. For these areas it is recommended that pre-cut true fir species (eg. Fraser, Balsam, Canaan, Concolor, Noble, etc.) be offered as pre-cut trees. Of all conifer species grown for Christmas trees, true firs are the most popular and visitors to any farm will invariably ask for trees of these species. Additionally, over time established choose-and-cut farm operators have observed that many former cut-your-own customers continue to want a natural tree, but do not want to or are unable to cut a tree. Having pre-cut trees available maintains a sale.
6. **Produce (offer) trees in a variety of sizes.** In the past several years the demand for larger sized trees has increased. This is largely the result of changes in home designs to feature higher ceilings, including vaulted or

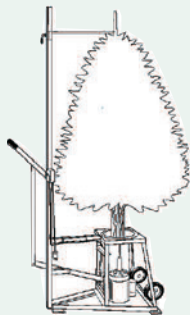


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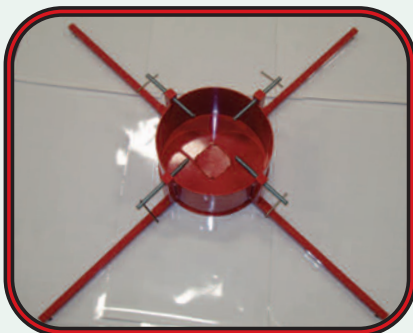


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cathedral ceilings. Accordingly, the demand for and sales of trees from 10 to 15 feet in height have increased. When these taller trees are not present to cut, it is recommended to have pre-cut trees available in these sizes.

7. **Have a good system for handling trees.** Cutting your own tree requires physical work, not only to cut the tree but to handle it after cutting. Depending on the size and layout of the farm it may be necessary to move the tree a considerable distance to a processing area. Carts or other tree carrying wagons should be provided to assist customers in moving trees. Some operations provide wagons to pick up and transport cut trees. An organized system that assists customers in moving cut trees will be helpful in maintaining customer loyalty.
8. **Have one or more full-service processing centers for handling cut trees.** All choose-and-cut farms should have tree processing locations where the base of the tree is re-cut, lower branches are removed to form a handle, the tree is shaken to remove debris, the tree is baled or wrapped and the tree is drilled (if customer desired) to accommodate a drilled tree stand. Additionally, it is suggested these processing activities not be charged for individually; rather the cost of all these activities should be included in the price of the tree.
9. **Sell a good tree stand with adequate water holding capacity.** Not all Christmas tree stands are equal. Many have an insufficient water holding capacity, while others are difficult to use so the tree stands perfectly straight. For many, the drilled, pin-stand is the simplest of all available stands for the customer to use. Additionally, these stands encourage repeat purchases in successive years.
10. **Offer related Christmas greenery products.** In addition to selling quality trees, a full-service farm will

offer other greenery products. These include wreathes, garland, door swags, boughs, live potted trees (some areas), centerpieces, grave blankets, and other “green products” popular in the local area. These products are popular for both real as well as artificial tree users. Not uncommonly, individuals who display an artificial tree will visit a choose-and-cut farm to purchase quality wreaths and other related products.

11. **Consider offering other experiences to complement the visit to a cut-your-own farm.** Several possibilities exist, however some of the more common features include wagon rides, bonfires, a straw pile, a concession stand, and sleigh rides (some areas). Some operations have developed additional attractions including a gift shop, on site reindeer, a petting zoo, pony rides, wagon train rides, etc. When considering any additive attraction, consider the possibility of unfavorable weather during the selling season on the attraction and its operation.
12. **A full-service operation will feature Santa Claus during the selling season.** The presence of a pre-announced and scheduled Santa Claus visit has proven to have significant promotional value for choose-and-cut farms. Children are attracted to Santa Claus and will contribute to increased sales of Christmas items when accompanied by their parents. For farms which feature a gift shop, Santa Claus fits in very well when an attractive space for him is made available in the gift shop.
13. **Full service choose-and-cut farms accept credit cards.** In the current culture credit cards have become the primary tool used by consumers when making purchases. Choose-and-cut farms which accept credit cards typically report that approximately 70 to 75 percent of

all sales are made using a credit card. Additionally, independent marketing studies have found that typical credit card sales are between 10 and 20 percent larger than comparable non-credit card sales.

14. **Be friendly, cheerful, and helpful in all transactions.** Occasionally, this may become somewhat of a challenge. However, remember it is Christmas – the most joyous season of the year. Christmas is about joy, peace, sharing genuine love for each other, family togetherness, memories, etc. It is suggested that in greeting customers the expression “Merry Christmas” be used in contrast to “Happy Holidays.” December 25th happens to be a celebration of Christmas which has been declared a holiday. It is not a celebration of a holiday which happens to be Christmas. Every Christmas tree grower produces Christmas trees, not holiday trees.
15. **Be generous in some part of your operation.** In remembrance of the original meaning of Christmas, do not forget it is about giving. Remember it is more blessed to give than to receive. In some part of each choose-and-cut operation something should be given to customers. These may include candy canes, hot chocolate, cookies, popcorn balls, Christmas candy, and even a Christmas tree as the situation warrants.

Conclusions

Choose-and-cut Christmas tree farms have increased in popularity for many reasons. It is likely their popularity will increase even more in the future. Many factors have and are contributing to their success. These include product quality and value, an opportunity to establish and maintain an on-going tradition, and the privilege of sharing a meaningful family or group experience in an inviting and attractive outdoor environment. To maintain good customer relations and ultimately to retain consumer loyalty, it is suggested

that increased attention and effort be given to improving customer service. Not only is it adequate to offer high quality products consistent with customer expectations and demands, it is essential that customers know what to expect and what services will be provided when they visit the farm. Many successful choose-and-cut operations will provide one or more greeters who will offer a welcome and respond to questions from visitors. Some commonly asked questions include:

1. How does the farm work?
2. Where do I begin?
3. Do you have trees of this species?
4. Do you have pre-cut trees available?
5. Do you have trees of this size?
6. Do you have wagon rides available?
7. How are trees priced?
8. Where do I pay for the tree?
9. Do you take checks?
10. Do you take credit cards?
11. Are dogs allowed?
12. Do you have a concession stand?
13. Where are the bathrooms located?
14. Do you have string for tying the tree on my car?
15. Can I get help loading the tree?

16. Do you have Santa Claus here today?
17. Do you have a bonfire?
18. Can I use my chainsaw?
19. Do you drill trees for pin-stands?
20. Do you have wreaths and/or garland?
21. Do you sell tree stands?
22. Do you have a gift shop?
23. Do you shake all trees?
24. Will you bale my tree?
25. Do you have saws available?

Providing answers to these and other similar questions is the first step in providing full service that is consistent with the expectations of consumers. It is important to distinguish between a common opinion of choose-and-cut operators that this is only a farm and it is not operated like a clothing or grocery store. Consumers certainly are aware of the difference in types and specialization of differing stores; however, their expectation of the service provided is no different. A full service, easy to follow process, and an enjoyable experience should be characteristics of all Christmas tree farms just as it is for all other retail establishments that sell directly to the public. 🌲

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