

Customer Perspectives and Outplanting Performance

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Proctor, S.K. 1996. Customer Perspectives and Outplanting Performance. In: Landis, T.D.; South, D.B., tech. coords. National Proceedings, Forest and Conservation Nursery Associations. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-389. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station: 202-206. Available at: <http://www.fcnet.org/proceedings/1996/proctor.pdf>

Abstract-One measurement of success in the nursery business is repeat customers. They return because the product (seedlings) has the qualities desired by the foresters. It is my perspective that this success will come from 1) seedling survival in the forest, 2) excellent seedling growth after outplanting 3) increased communications initiated from the nurserymen with regard to what's happening at the nursery and 4) increased awareness of what the foresters' situations and constraints are in the woods.

From 1979 to 1993, average first-year seedling survival has risen from 79% to 91 % on Willamette Industries, Inc.'s land. Average third-year survival has remained approximately 2-5% below first year survival. Our biggest gain in the last 15 years has been in first-year survival. The trick now is to tackle that 9% that is lost to mortality in year one. My belief is that part of that 9% is nursery-related, and a portion is field related. With a handle on survival, the next item is growth in the field. In order for that tree to perform in the woods, it needs to come to the forester with all the qualities of a strong, healthy seedling.

Communication is another key to success. The forester/nurserymen link is very important and should not be overlooked. This area is constantly improving; however, there needs to be closer communication, especially when something negative happens at a nursery. It can be critical for the forester to know what has happened to his/her seedlings as soon as possible so decisions can be made.

The final ingredient of success that I will cover is awareness of what the foresters' needs are in the woods. I urge nurseryman to come to the forest to observe the environment, the constraints and the special situations in which the seedlings must grow.

With increased seedling survival and growth as well as better communication and an awareness of both the nurseryman's and the forester's constraints, success in terms of healthy forests and return customers is closer at hand.

THEME

"Success" in terms of repeat customers will come from

- 1) increased communication initiated from the nurseryman with regard to what is happening at the nursery and
- 2) increased awareness of what the foresters' situations and constraints are in the woods.

INTRODUCTION

As a non-nurseryman, I feel honored to have been from asked to speak to you today. I have been coming to the these meetings since 1986 to gain a better perspective nurserymen with regard to what is happening at the of the nursery arena in that what you do sure has nursery and everlasting effects on my world. And I keep hoping 1 will see more of "my kind" here, because we both have situations and constraints are in the woods. so much to glean from each other.

That will be the focus of my talk here today: gleaning from each other. I will address outplanting performance to some degree, however my main focus will be my perspectives concerning "Success", namely your success as nurserymen and my success as a forester as these relate to the seedlings' success at survival and growth. My belief is that all these "Successes" will come from:

- 1) an increased level of communication between foresters and nurserymen and,
- 2) a heightened awareness of what the foresters' situations and constraints are in the woods.

I would like to compare the nursery business to say manufacturing widgets. You can manufacture something to your heart's content. However if no one wants your product, you are not going to sell it. I am not telling you anything new, am I? The key point of course is that you need to know how your product is going to be used, and then develop a product that is the most successful in that use.

So, how do you measure "Success"? I would say that one measurement for the nurseryman might be that you have return customers whose perspective is that you grow the best seedlings in the Northwest, which in turn, will keep you in business. How do I, the forester, measure success with regard to seedlings? I measure it in terms of survival and growth. I would also include communication and awareness. The four points that I will discuss today are:

- 1) Seedling survival
- 2) Seedling growth
- 3) Communication
- 4) Awareness

SEEDLING SURVIVAL

I reviewed Willamette Industries' tree planting survival since 1979 to focus on change in survival during the past 17 years that I have been intimately involved with nurseries. Field checks are taken in the spring and fall after planting in the first-year, and then every fall for three years or until trees reach a free-to-grow status.

The following information is the result from fall checks:

Planting years 1979-1983 (5-year avg. & avg. all stock types)

*Average first year survival	79%
*Average third year survival	74%

Planting years 1989-1993 (5-year avg. & avg. all stock types)

*Average first year survival	91%
*Average third year survival	89%

What we see here is that from 1979 to 1993 seedling survival has risen from 79% to 91 % on

Willamette's land. However, the ensuing mortality during the next three years has not changed considerably. In other words, if you are going to lose seedlings, the majority are going to be lost in that first critical year. Our biggest gain in the last 15 years has been in first-year survival. We know that on the average we have a good 89% survival after three years on all our stock. On most of our land, survival is actually higher. Several tough units can bring that average down and I did not compute a weighted average for this report.

That 91% is a combination of your hard work and my hard work during the last 15 to 20 years. Technological and silvicultural advancements in both the nurseries and in the field have allowed you to produce a bigger and healthier seedling, and for me to provide that seedling the proper environment in which to grow in the forest. Gone are the days of little wimpy seedlings planted on unprepared soils, a definite recipe for failure! And of course, a worst case scenario ... however we have all seen planting sites we wished we did not have to plant (as is) and seedlings we wished we could throw away.

What about that 9% that you are sowing and growing and I am planting that still does not make it through year-one, let alone year 3 or 50? How much of that 9% is because of something you did or did not do in the nursery, and how much is because of something I did or did not do in the field, and how much of it is uncontrollable weather related versus controllable weather related? I am smart enough to know that I do NOT want to stand up here and BLAME you, the nurserymen for that field fall-down, so my answer is that we both share this responsibility equally, and in doing so, continue to search for that perfect tree!

The figures I have given you are fairly rough. I gathered input from at least seven of our tree farms that cover all our Oregon lands eastside and westside. What I was looking for was a trend, a trend that actually you all probably already know. Some years our survival is up to 99% and others it's down to 84%. As part of my functions for Willamette Industries, I assess the various seedling stock types that are on the market, and choose which type or types will work best for our lands. I am not going to give you survival data by stock type today, because I discovered that, quite frankly, the stock types we use all do very well. Survival of all three transplant types (2-1's, P-1's, and 1-1's) falls within a few percentage points of each other, and fluctuate by year.

Obviously, as well as stock type, I also assess the nurseries themselves to determine where we will do business. Willamette is a firm believer in spreading ourselves out. We historically have grown seedlings with at least five to seven nurseries concurrently, and usually purchase additional stock from three to seven others. While we consider ourselves loyal, we are always looking at new opportunities. Again, it would not be difficult to present seedling survival by nursery. Since percentages between nurseries are so close, and vary by year, I feel that kind of data is unnecessary for this discussion.

Some of you know that Willamette has a "Golden Tree Award." This award is internal in recognition. Each year when I do my fall nursery visits, I write a report to the foresters about the condition of our seedlings in each nursery. In the report I "give" the nursery with the best overall seedlings this award. The Golden Tree Award is constantly moving as each year one of you does something a little different or weather affects the outcome of stock in a particular

year.

GROWTH

My first concern is that the seedlings you produce for Willamette will survive. As I stated earlier, this part of the equation has been almost solved. We are getting excellent survival with most stock on the majority of our planting sites.

So the next level is growth. I am not a research scientist so I do not know the in's and out's of plant physiology and morphology. I just know what 19 years of "seat of the pants" forestry (including about 15 years of tree planting) has taught me. In order for these seedlings to really hit the ground growing, they need to come to me with a few things already in place. They need to be storing all kinds of nutrients and good stuff for that first year in the woods. I want my trees to have a really good fibrous, mopy root system with lots of fines, ideally with mycorrhizae, large caliper, preferably a minimum of 7 mm (Remember, we're talking ideally here!), average of 9 mm, ideal height of 18", with the range being 16 - 20", many, many large, firm buds, defined terminal with one large terminal bud, lateral branches to the ground with many long, dark green needles and a well-hardened off-seedling in order to withstand the shock of going from nursery bed to forest. Have I forgotten anything? Can you produce that for me? Every time? That is what I am really asking for!

If my trees have that going for them when they are planted, they have a much, much better chance of not only surviving, but growing like gangbusters that first critical year. They need each of the above qualities to do the job ahead of them. And I need to do my part, which involves preparing the ground, handling and storing the seedlings with care, planting the seedlings during appropriate weather conditions, vegetation and animal control, and caring for these seedlings long after they are planted. With this kind of commitment on both of our parts, we can get our forests up and running in no time.

COMMUNICATION

In order to have that kind of "Success", we also need the Ingredient called "Communication". I went to a wedding in July of this year. It was a Catholic affair, full Mass, lots of bridesmaids and groomsmen, flower girl and ring bearer, vocalist and guitarist, etc. etc. And of course, a Priest to preside over the whole affair. Now, I'm not Catholic and I haven't been to a traditional wedding in quite some time. So this was pretty exciting to me. Well, we did the singing part and the praying part and the vows part and then it came time for the Priest to share with all of us some marital words of wisdom. He was amusing because he prefaced all that he said by telling us that he definitely was not an expert on marriage (we all laughed knowingly)! I would now like to paraphrase two thoughts that he shared.

He addressed the bride and groom . . ."Today, you think this is the happiest day of your lives and that there will be none happier. I do not want you to think in those terms. I want tomorrow and the next day and the day after that to be your happiest days. And then years after that, there should be again even happier days. You must learn together and grow together, each utilizing your individuality, and sharing that part of you, so you each can benefit and find even greater happiness together than you would have apart. Remember today is a very happy day but it should not be the happiest day of your life."

The second thing the Priest said was, "You come to me today as a couple so much in love, full of joy and happiness. You are sharing this love publicly by coming before God and your guests to take each other's hands in Holy Matrimony. There will come a day when you are not happy, with yourself or with each other. It is in these times especially when you must speak openly and lovingly with each other. Just as you need each other in the good times, so too do you need each other in the not so good times. So, when you most do not want to talk to each other, TALK. And when you do not want to listen, LISTEN anyway. Take the time necessary to discuss what is going on in each of your minds and hearts. Never assume you know the other totally for we are each of us individuals. Communication is ever so important to the success of your marriage."

Well, I was impressed ... and moved. And I believe that this Priest I heard on a very hot day in July had some really good words of wisdom, not only for this young couple, but for all of us as well. And not only in marriage and friendship but also in the business world.

Let's look at these two points: Happiness and Communication. Let's view them, not from the standpoint of the young couple but from the standpoint of you, the Nurseryman and me or others like me, the Forester. We have entered into a relationship by virtue that I am contracting with you to grow my seed into seedlings. It is a happy moment. You are pleased to have my business and I am looking forward to the delivery of quality seedlings. Just as the Priest warned the young couple that their wedding day should not be their happiest day, so too the beginning of our business relationship should not be our happiest moment. And just as the Priest spoke of nurturing their marriage via communication, we also need to keep our lines of communication open. I believe I have a very good rapport with the nurserymen with whom our company deals. And those of you who know me, know that I am open, honest and pull no punches. I also believe I am fair.

I feel the communication I have had with all the nurseries which Willamette deals with has been excellent on the most part. However, there is one area that I feel needs improvement. This goes under the heading, "When Something Unexpected Happens." When something occurs at a nursery that may affect or has affected my seedlings, I want to know about it immediately, not next week, not next month. It is not just for the sake of knowing; it is because if I need to make choices about those seedlings, the more lead time the better. It is important to me. It is important to my foresters. And it is important to my company. Those of us who deal directly with you realize that growing trees is not like making widgets, and then there is Mother Nature to contend with, which is all the more reason that I need to be informed. Sometimes that two weeks may mean the difference between whether we can "save" the lot, or purchase some replacement. My foresters think I'm God or at least the Good Fairy when it comes to seedlings and their needs. They have absolutely no doubt that Foxie will come through with the goods. They think and feel that way because I have never let them down. So, the more information you can give me, favorable or unfavorable, the better I can do my job.

NURSERY/FIELD VISITS

Another aspect of Success comes from designing a product your customer cannot resist. In our case, this would be the perfect seedling, each and every time. Now I realize I need to leave the

Land of Oz and return to the real world. However, there is always room for improvement in all that we do. In the mid 1980's I started seriously looking at a different Douglas-fir stock type for our company, namely I - Vs. At that time, our sowing was around 70% 2-1 stock. In 1988 we planted our first contract grown 1-1's. By 1996 our sowing consisted of 70% 1-1 stock. One of the major reasons for this transition was because I made a concerted effort to visit the nurseries more often than in the past. I went to not only the ones we contracted with but others as well. My point here is that I wanted to learn as much as I could from you, and see what products you had that could meet my needs.

What we need now is fine tuning and tweaking the product. It is time you all got to the forest more. Observe what our special situations and constraints are. Come out to the woods in the winter when we are planting your seedlings. Look at the terrain, the soils, the brush, the weather, not to mention the fish and wildlife constraints, as well as herbicide issues. Also, look at the way we transport, handle and plant our stock. Gain further understanding about why we may be asking for a 24" 8 mm seedling or a 10" 6 mm one. There are reasons for our requests. Some of you do spend time in the woods and I think that is super! Do more of it, and do not wait to be called. Take the initiative and call us first; tell us you think it is important that you see what we have to deal with in the woods. This would be a wonderful opportunity for constructive discussion.

I realize it is your responsibility to grow seed into seedlings and mine to take the seedlings to full maturity. However, the more we understand about each others' needs and constraints, the better product we will both be able to produce.

CONCLUSION

Success in this arena is measured by the *Customer's Perspectives and the Seedlings' Outplanting Performance*. We have come a long way in the last 20 years. I have been around long enough to hopefully have gained some perspective and some patience. I remember a certain freeze that turned a whole nursery's seedlings bright red and I thought they were all dead. A month or so later I went back and they were green again. A miracle I thought at the time. (I was a wet behind the ears forester.) I remember several years after that, another tragedy of some kind at a different nursery, and a young forester getting up in the middle of a nursery meeting and saying he would never grow seedlings at that nursery again. He obviously had lost a sizable number of seedlings and he obviously was very wet behind the ears. We have all been there and we will all be there again, unfortunately.

But the good news is this. You are really doing an outstanding job. Seedling survival in the field has improved by leaps and bounds. Seedling outplanting performance is also improving. Seedlings are just not what they were 20 years ago-they are bigger, better and have more good stuff packed into them than ever before. My perspective is that you are going to continue this upward swing. Just as my foresters' think I can give them everything they want, I think you can give me what I want, especially with the ever-advancing technology of today.

To help get us from here to there, we need to go that extra mile and fine tune all the good things we are doing now. That includes actively pursuing better communication in both good times and bad. and coming out to the woods and discussing the landowner's needs. Are they

reasonable? Are they doable?

We, the foresters, need seedlings that will give us the survival and performance we desire. You, the nurserymen, are charged with producing those quality seedlings. I believe with increased communication between us, and an awareness of both the nurseryman's and the forester's constraints, and the reasons for those constraints, that this Success that I speak of is within our reach.

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