Evergreen Growth

Crafting a Marketing Blueprint for Michigan's Christmas Tree Farms

Dr. Kevin Chastagner & Dr. Lauren Berkshire Hearit | Hope College

Funded by the Michigan Christmas Tree Association

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Why We Did This

The problem you already know

- Six weeks to sell. Fifty-two weeks of decisions.
- One shot per year to find out whether a marketing dollar worked
- Hard to keep customer data when the season is that compressed
- Most marketing advice assumes you sell year-round. You don’t.

What we set out to fix

- Give growers real data on Michigan consumers — who they are, what moves them, and where the marketing effort actually pays.

What the Grant Set Out to Do

1	**Talk to Michigan consumers directly** Eight focus groups · 32 participants	DONE
2	**Field a statewide survey built from what they said** 316 Michigan consumers	DONE
3	**Turn it into a marketing blueprint growers can use** Full grant report + Practitioner report + Presentation + Website	DONE

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Objective 1: What We Heard in the Room

Eight focus groups · 32 Michigan consumers · Southwest & Northern Michigan

Ages 19 to 83 · Real-tree buyers and non-buyers in the same room

NOSTALGIA

Looking back

Childhood memory drives today's preference — often without realizing it

TRADITION

Looking forward

Parents deliberately building a memory for kids and grandkids

PAIN POINTS

As one ages

The physical work of a real tree pushes some families to artificial

EXPERIENCE

What makes it worth it

Species, freshness, atmosphere, and the trip itself — price is only one part

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What They Actually Said

NOSTALGIA

"I don't really remember where we would go, but all I really remember is being surrounded by trees and the Christmas lights overhead."

TRADITION

"He was cutting the tree … and he fell backwards. The tree fell on top of him. The kids thought he did it on purpose. They were hysterical … That wouldn't have happened in a tree lot."

PAIN POINTS

"You don't have grandkids that are willing to go with us anymore … there's a possibility we might have to just give up on this tradition."

EXPERIENCE

"I would want to see a sign saying where they were cut and when they were cut. I don't think I'd buy them unless it said when they were cut."

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Objective 2: The Statewide Survey

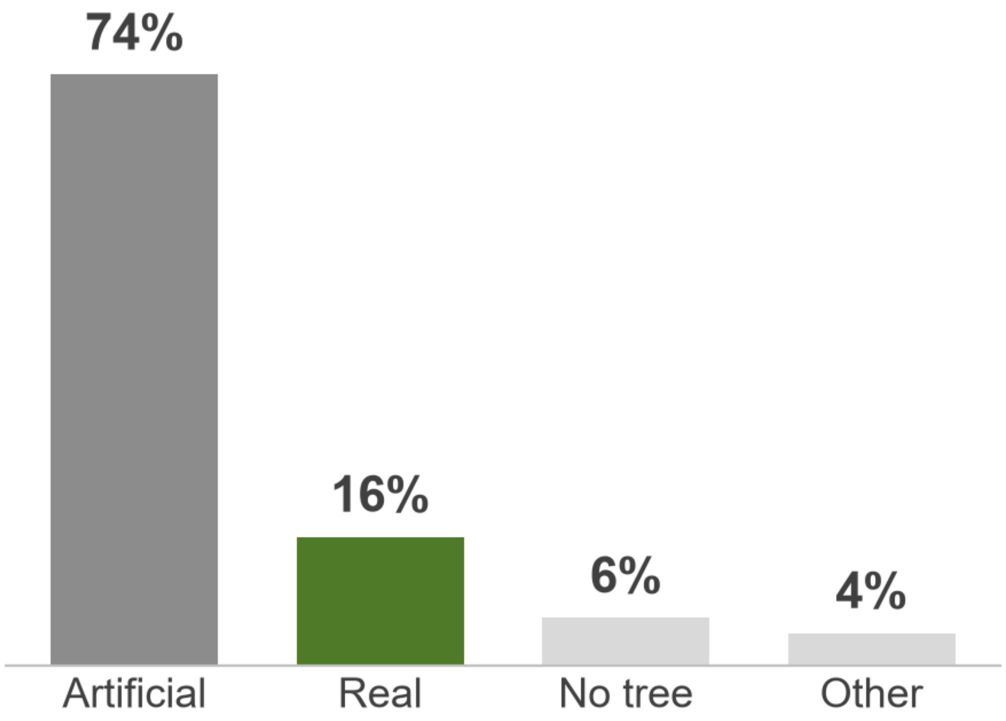
How we did it

- 316 Michigan adults who celebrate Christmas (349 collected; 33 removed for quality)
- Fielded the week of Thanksgiving, when people are actually deciding

Who answered

- Skews female (64%), suburban (46%), white (81%), college-educated (50%)
- **Only 13% are over 60 y.o., we under-represent older Michigan**
- About half have children at home

Three out of four Michigan households put up an artificial tree



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This Market Barely Moves

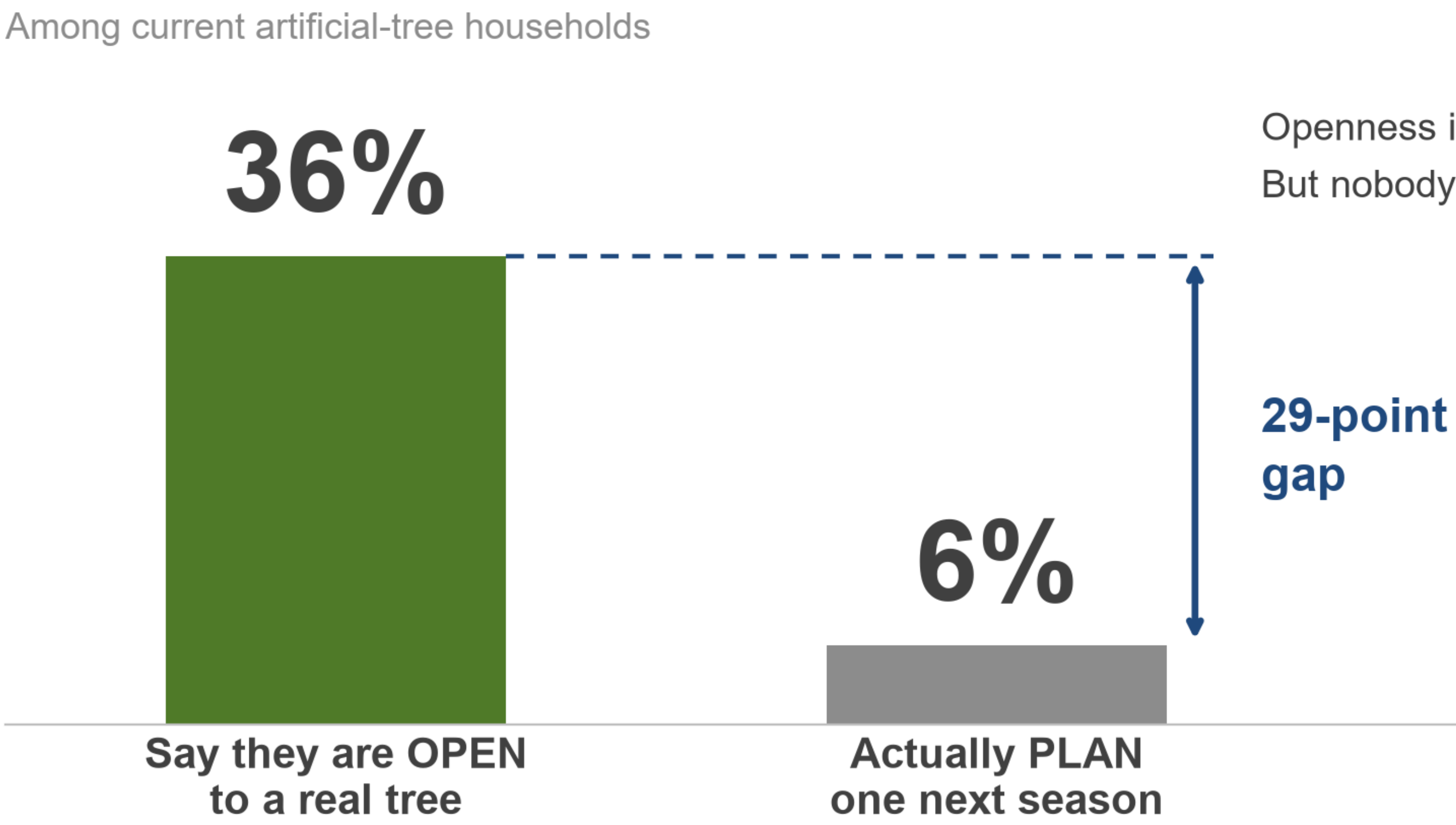
Habit runs deep

- 78% have displayed the same type of tree for five years or more
- Last year’s choice predicts next year’s almost perfectly
- **Only 2.5% of our sample plans to switch, in either direction**

Two-way switching

- Of everyone who has ever switched in our sample: 96 went to artificial, but 31 went to real
- Top reason for switching, in both directions: convenience (46%)

There is a 29 point gap between those who say they are open to a real tree, and those who actually *plan* to purchase a real tree next season



Openness is real.

But nobody converts by accident.

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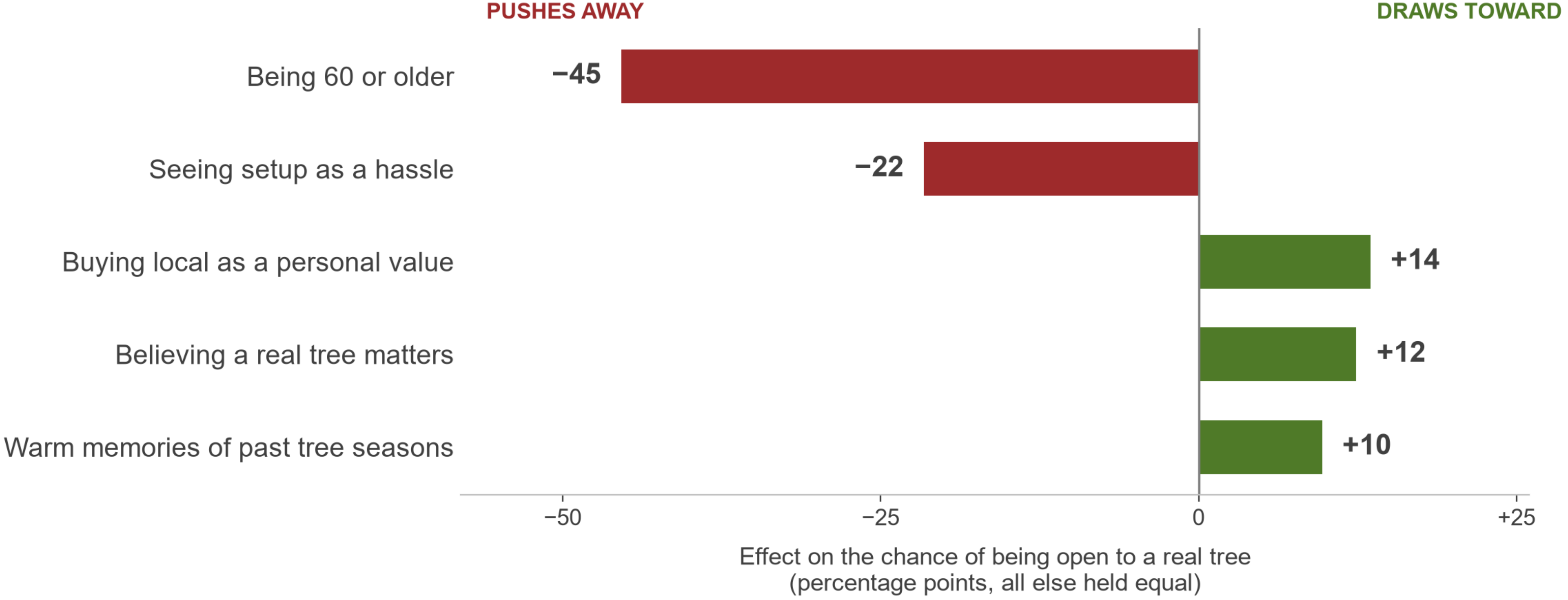
Five Things Separate the "Open to a Real Tree" Group

Among current artificial-tree households — what moves someone toward, or away from, being open to a real tree



Cost is not on this list. Neither is income, where they live, or what they paid for their artificial tree.

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Lead With Authenticity — Not Aroma

Authenticity: Placing a high importance on it being 'real'

- Biggest gap between real (mean = 4.3) and artificial buyers (mean = 2.5) of anything we measured (5-point scale)
- Strongest predictor of openness among artificial buyers. Held up in survey, and in focus groups

The surprise: aroma doesn't stand on its own.

Scent looks powerful on its own — but once you account for "it's a real tree," aroma stops adding anything.

"Nothing compares to the real thing."

Fold scent, tradition, and atmosphere inside that message, rather than using scent, tradition, or atmosphere as the basis of your marketing campaigns.

Setup Is the Barrier Worth Attacking

Barriers are everywhere

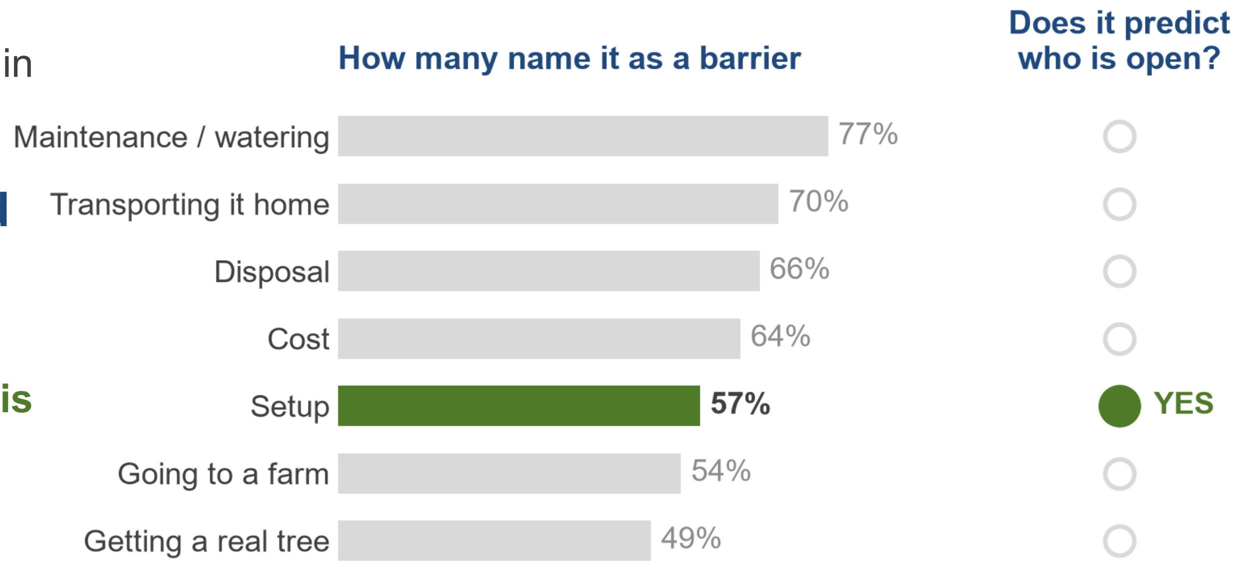
- The average artificial buyer named 4 of 7 barriers. One in five named all seven.

Only one separates the open from the closed

- Not open to a real tree: 66% call setup a barrier
- Open to a real tree: 41%
- **The only barrier that holds up once everything else is accounted for**

What that means

› Consider delivery-and-setup service
› Pre-fitted stands/stand-fit help
› Fresh-cut and pre-drilled trunks
› “We’ll set it up” as a paid add-on



Cost is named by nearly two-thirds — and tells you nothing about who might convert.

The 60+ Age Cliff

- **Under 60 y.o.: about 4 in 10 are open to a real tree.**
- **60+ y.o.: drops to about 1 in 10 respondents are open to a real tree. Not one respondent over 60 strongly agreed.**

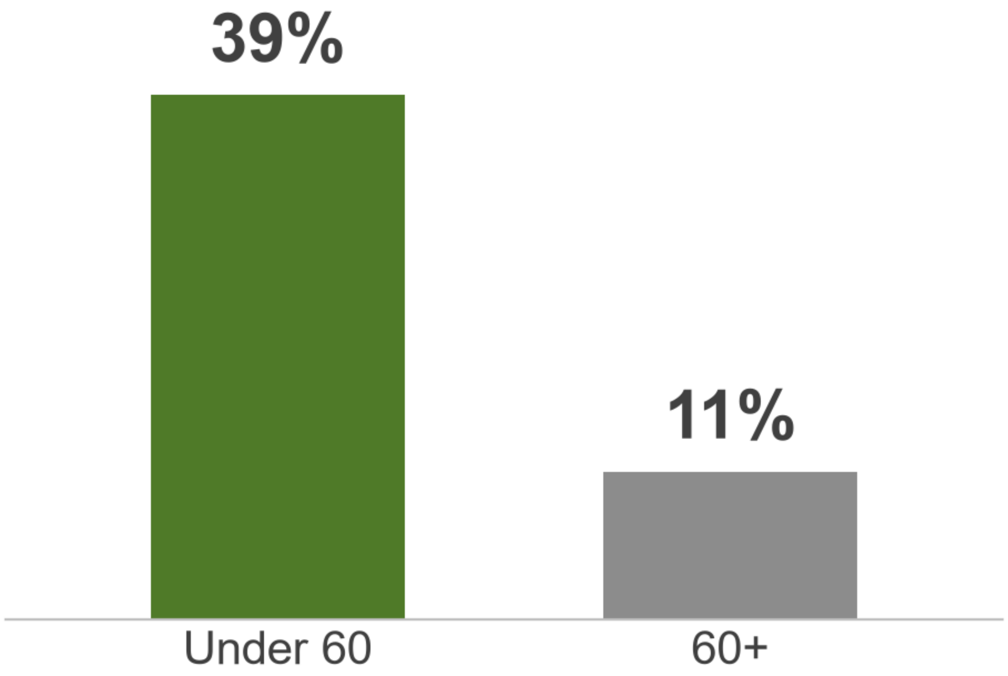
We tested every explanation we could

- Not barriers (older buyers report the same ones)
- Not nostalgia (the two age groups score the same)

Three takeaways:

1. 60+ is not where new customers come from.
2. A 60+ heavy base signals you need to replace demand.
3. Delivery + setup could <u>retain</u> the older buyers you have.

Share of artificial-tree buyers open to a real tree



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Buy-Local Is a Targeting Tool, Not a Message

People who value "buying local" are the most likely to have ever switched tree types.

This holds across every way we measured it.

The catch: it predicts switching in BOTH directions.

Buy-local people move toward real trees — and away from them.

So use it to find your audience, not to convince them

- Co-market with farmers markets and local business campaigns
- “Shop local” weekends and cross-promotions
- **Then bring the authenticity and setup messages once you have their attention**

Four Things Worth Reconsidering

Each sounds sensible — and each came back empty in the data.

Lapsed buyers	People who once bought real and now buy artificial are **no more likely** to plan a real tree than people who never bought one.
“It’s easier than you think”	Artificial buyers rate every real-tree hassle **higher** than actual real-tree owners do — but **prior experience doesn’t shift it**. The message would need more.
Families as a screener	Families are **more** tradition-driven and buy more add-ons — but **no more likely to value authenticity or to own a real tree**.
Social media for discovery	**No** respondent found their tree source through Instagram, TikTok, newspaper, or radio. (Doesn’t mean drop social, though…)

Where They Buy and How They Find You

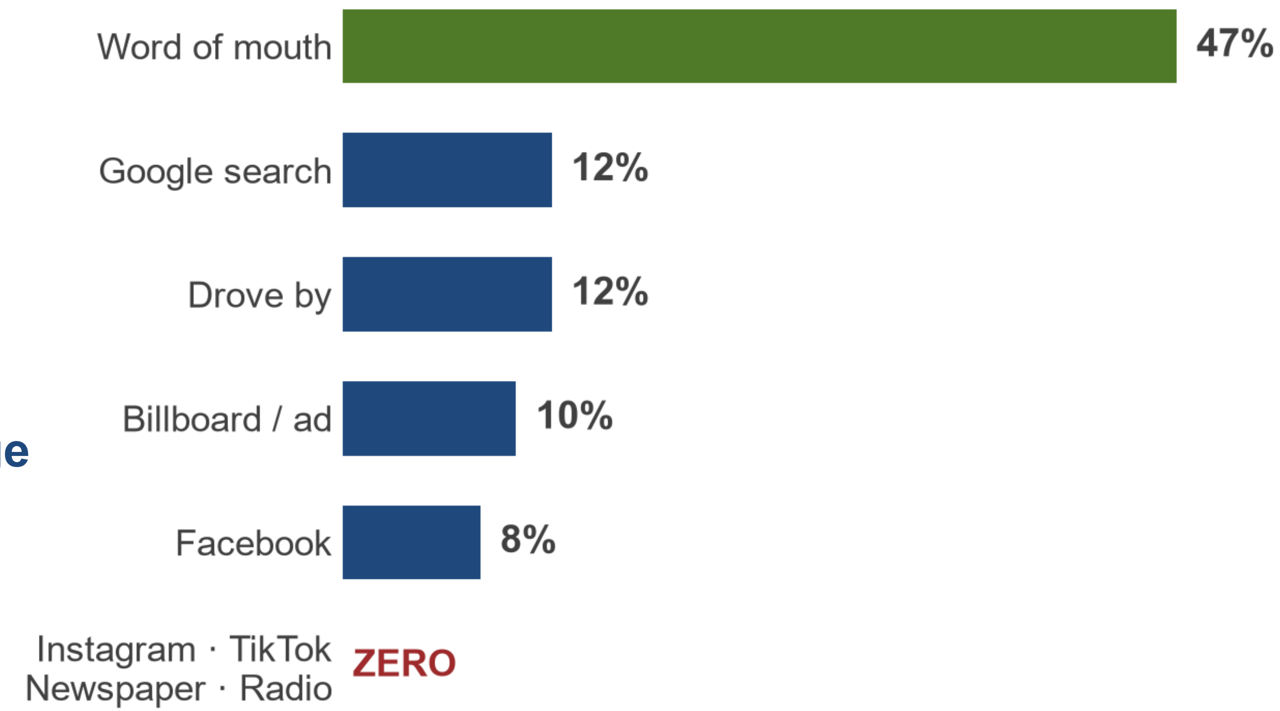
Where real-tree buyers bought

- **Choose-and-cut farm 39%**
- Corner lot (Scouts, church, roadside) 20%
- Nursery 16%
- Big-box store 14%
- Farmers market 10%

51 real-tree buyers — treat these as directional

**The read: referrals, Google presence, signage
In that order.**

How real-tree buyers found the place they bought from



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What the Visit Looks Like

71% travel 30 minutes or less	**90%** spend 11+ minutes on site	**59%** shop with a partner	**39%** shop with children

- Add-ons: ornaments 43% · wreaths 33% · garland 24% — about a third buy nothing extra
- Families buy roughly twice the add-ons (1.4 vs 0.7 items)

There may be some potential in unmet early-season demand

18% wanted to buy EARLIER than they did. Only 8% wanted later.
Peak preferred window: Thanksgiving weekend through the first week of December.

What They Pay

Real trees

- Average $76 · median $88 · 78% pay $100 or less

Artificial trees

- Average $145 · median $150 · one-time purchase

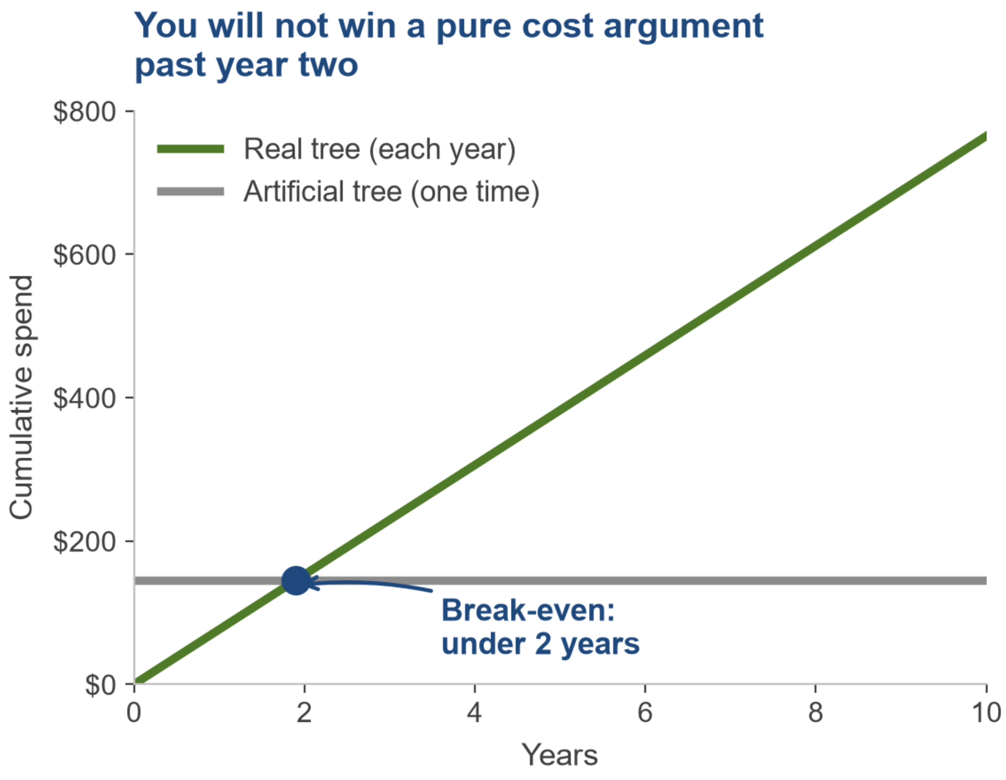
Break-even is under two years.

An artificial tree kept 10 years costs about $15 a year.

The honest read

You will not win a pure cost argument past year two.

Which is fine — cost doesn't predict who's open anyway. Compete on the thing artificial can't replicate.



Four Kinds of Michigan Consumer

Grouped by their whole pattern of attitudes, not one answer at a time

Authenticity-Driven

about 1 in 4

Believe in real trees. Low hassle concern.

Two-thirds of all current real-tree buyers.

YOUR PRIMARY TARGET.

Nostalgic, Committed to Artificial

about 3 in 10

Sentimental, but don’t value realness and worry about hassle.

Unlikely to convert. Don’t spend here.

Practical, Settled Artificial

about 1 in 4

Moderate on everything.

Use with caution

Low Engagement

about 1 in 5

Low on every attitude we measured. Least receptive.

Use with caution

The Target, Split in Two

The authenticity audience isn't one group — it's two, sharing the same beliefs but facing different obstacles.

THE LOW-FRICTION CORE

Already convinced. Openness as high as 8 in 10.

They don't need persuading.

They need an occasion and an offer.

- "Come get your tree Thanksgiving weekend"
- First-time buyer discount
- Reserved time slot

THE BARRIER-CONSTRAINED

Same beliefs — more obstacles in the way.

They don't need persuading either.

They need the friction removed.

- Delivery
- Setup service · pre-fitted stands
- "We'll handle it"

Neither group needs to be convinced real trees are good. Both need it to be easy to act.

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What To Do This Season

1. **Lead with authenticity.** "Nothing compares to the real thing." Fold scent and tradition inside it.
2. **Attack setup and mess.** Delivery + setup service, pre-fitted stands, shake-and-wrap, haul-away disposal.
3. **Build referral mechanics.** Word of mouth is 47% of discovery and almost nobody engineers it.
4. Fix your **Google presence** and your **signage**. That's the next 24% after referrals.
5. **Post harvest-date tags and "grown here" signage.** Cheap, and it signals authenticity and local at once.
6. **How old is your customer base?** If it skews toward 60+, plan for building towards replacing it over the next few seasons.

-Full detailed report available through MCTA or us
-Practitioner report available on the website along with this slide deck

Website here:

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Think in Life Stages, Not Just Seasons

The same customer needs different things at different points in life. Marketing to the stage — not just the season — is how you win them early and keep them longer.

Young family	Peak family years	Empty nest	60+
A first real tree can start a decades-long tradition. “Start your family’s tradition.” Win them early.	Lead with experience, tradition, and add-ons. The on-site visit pays off here.	Motivators fade as kids leave home. Retention gets harder.	The physical work wins — this is the cliff. Full-service delivery can hold the ones who still love it.

Match the message to the stage — and watch which way your own customer base is drifting.

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Thank You

Kevin Chastagner, PhD
Associate Professor of Management
Hope College
chastagner@hope.edu

Lauren Berkshire Hearit, PhD
Associate Professor of Management
Hope College
hearit@hope.edu

Website:
evergreengrowthmi.org

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