# Evergreen Growth:
# Crafting a Marketing Blueprint for Michigan's Christmas Tree Farms

***Practitioner Report***

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**Final Report Prepared For:**

Michigan Christmas Tree Association (MCTA)

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**Human Subjects Approval**

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### Introduction

Christmas tree growers and retailers face challenges in understanding their current consumers, potential consumers, and the marketing work involved. Due to the short selling cycle and the seasonal nature of the industry, there are limited opportunities to connect with consumers which can reduce the information that a grower or retailer has access to about their consumers. Additionally, the seasonal nature means that the development cycle of marketing initiatives is functionally limited to one chance a year to see a return. The combination of these two pieces increases the value of more systematic data on consumers to try and help better target marketing in hopes of increasing the likelihood of success.

Early consumer research in this space focused on baseline consumer and tree characteristics (Florkowski, Lindstrom, & Florkowska, 1992; Florkowski & Lindstrom, 1995; Larson, 2004), leaving room for a more current picture of a market that has changed considerably amid growing tension between real and artificial trees (Hamlett, Herrmann, Warland, & Zhao, 1989). Recent work has re-opened the space from new angles, for example, the restorative-environment findings of Pierskalla, Deng, McGill, and Jiang (2024) on Christmas tree shopping environments, but a statewide behavioral and attitudinal profile of Michigan consumers does not exist.

This project was funded by a grant from the Michigan Christmas Tree Association with three practical objectives: (1) describe who Michigan's real- and artificial-tree consumers are and how they buy; (2) identify what distinguishes artificial-tree buyers who are open to trying a real tree, so growers can size and prioritize the conversion opportunity; and (3) generate the evidence base for a grower-facing marketing toolbox (messaging themes, channel guidance, and service recommendations).

For those interested in the full details of the analysis there is a full report that is available from the MCTA or the authors. There is also a slide deck from the 2026 MCTA Summer Meeting and a website with more tools and practical advice that is linked to the findings from the survey at: [evergreengrowthmi.org.](evergreengrowthmi.org)

## Survey Creation and Constructs

Focus groups conducted with Michigan consumers in 2025 supplied the constructs the survey was built to quantify, nostalgia, family tradition-building, barriers to getting a real tree and the experience of getting a real tree. In brief, the survey measured how people currently buy (channels, price, timing, and who they shop with), their attitudes toward real versus artificial trees, the barriers they see to a real tree, two established nostalgia scales, the importance they place on the tree itself and on the on-site, post-purchase, and experience sides of buying, and standard demographics.

### Sample

Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online research panel that is commonly used in survey research, and completed the survey on Qualtrics between November 18$^{th}$ and November 27$^{th}$, 2025. As a majority of buyers start their purchase of real trees just after Thanksgiving, this timing was chosen to coincide with the start of the tree-buying season when consumers are likely to be solidifying their plans.

Participants were recruited on Prolific based on informed consent, current Michigan residency, being 21 or older, and that they celebrate Christmas annually. Participants were compensated through the Prolific platform and the study was approved by Hope College's Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB #25-015).

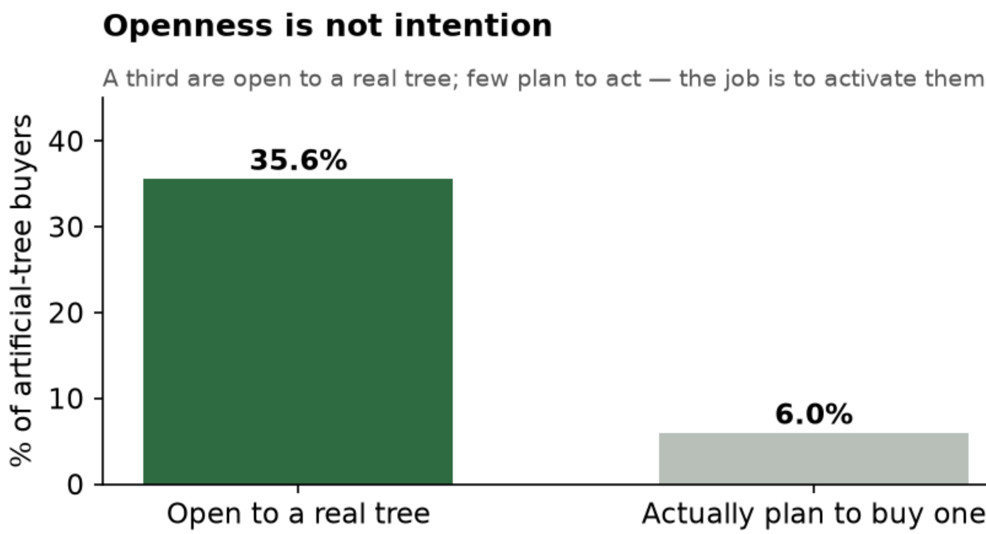
A total of 349 responses were collected during the time the survey was available. Five screening criteria were used to improve the quality of the sample and any one of the five would trigger removal from the sample resulting in a final sample of 316 usable responses. The final sample skews toward female participants (about two-thirds) and is slightly whiter than the Michigan population.

## Action Checklist

1. **Lead with authenticity**. Make the realness of the tree the headline of your messaging; use aroma, tradition, and atmosphere as support; make it visible with harvest-date tags and "grown here" signage. Give a "ready-to-buy" core a reason to act (an occasion plus a first-time offer), and make it easy for what we call the "barrier-constrained" group.
2. **Setup**. Setup is one of the highest barriers for prospective real Christmas tree consumers. Consider offering delivery, set-up, and removal, or simpler options like pre-fitted stands, stand-fit help, pre-drilled trunks, and "we'll set it up."
3. **Normalize the hassles**. Shake, bale, and wrap trees; make disposal easy; use "easier than you think" language with already-open prospective first-time real Christmas tree consumers.
4. **Lapsed buyers**. Do not build a campaign around them; spend that effort on the levers above.
5. **Age**. Do not make 60+ a primary target; watch your own customer-age mix; consider using full-service delivery to retain aging real-tree buyers.
6. **Buy-local messaging**. Lead with "local," and use "grown and cut here" signage; meet these buyers at farmers markets and shop-local events; turn a first local sale into loyalty.
7. **Word-of-mouth**. Fuel referrals (bring-a-friend offers, ask for reviews) and be findable (a full Google Business Profile and clear signage).
8. **The on-site visit**. Stock ornaments and wreaths at the point of sale; make the visit an unhurried family experience; keep it feeling like an authentic farm.
9. **Families**. Serve them well (activities, add-ons, family framing) but do not screen on "has children" when deciding who to target with your marketing efforts; instead, consider language like, "start your family's tradition" for new families.

## Findings for Growers and Retailers

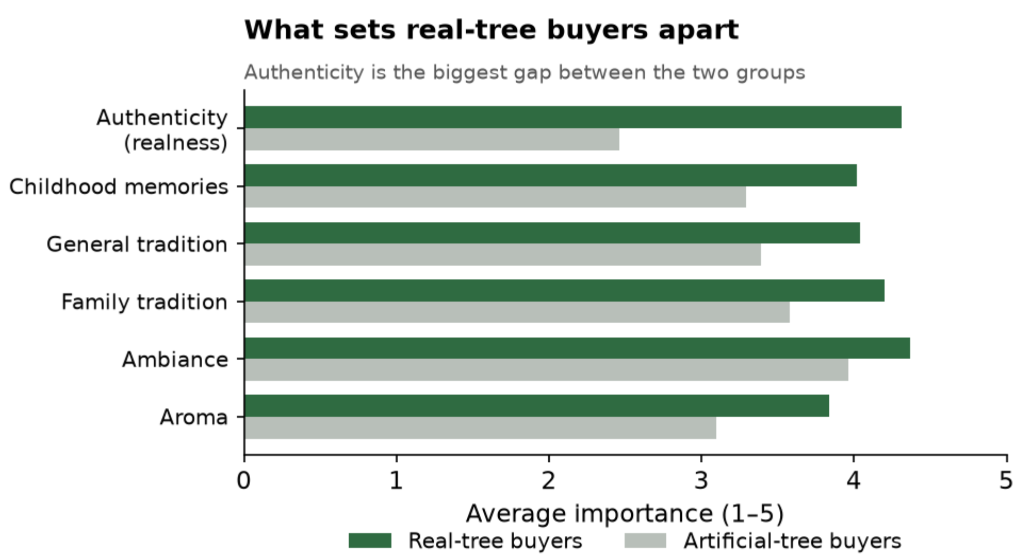
Our analysis found, amongst other things, a set of practical implications for growers and retailers to consider when marketing real Christmas trees within the State of Michigan. A third of Michigan artificial buyers are already open to the idea of a real tree (35.6%), but few plan to act on that. While considering what it takes to convert consumers to real Christmas tree purchases, growers and retailers should consider building marketing initiatives that target consumers who are open, and provide them with a way to make a concrete plan to actually purchase a real Christmas tree.




*Openness to a real tree vs. plans to buy one, among artificial-tree buyers.*

Each finding below states what we found and, under "What to do," the concrete steps a grower or retailer can take. A one-page action checklist is on the previous page.

### *1. Lead with authenticity*



*Average importance of key attributes (1–5): real vs. artificial buyers.*

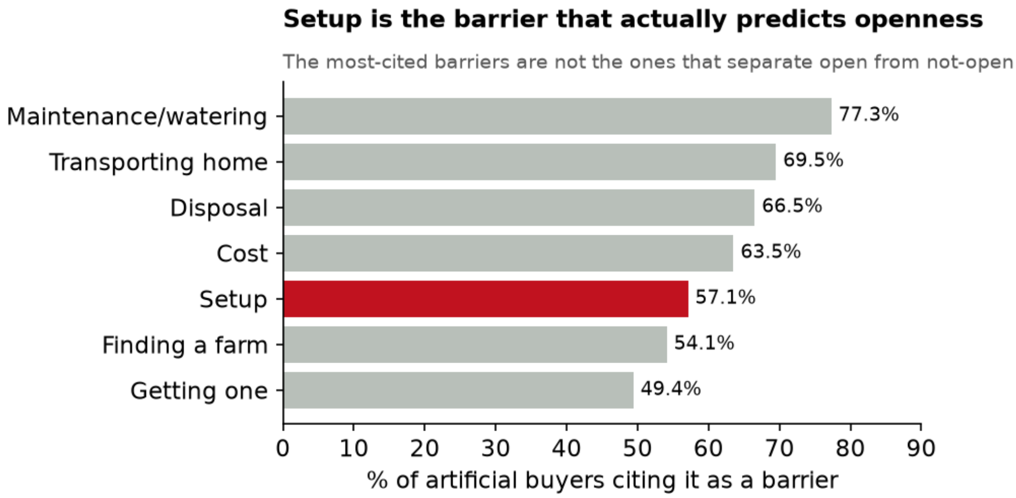
There is a strong relationship between realness, or authenticity, and openness to purchasing a real Christmas tree. In our sample, valuing authenticity is the single largest gap between real and artificial consumers: people who buy real trees rate authenticity higher than people who own an artificial tree. Aroma, tradition, and the atmosphere a real tree creates in the home are all genuine motivators, but our analysis suggests they are expressions of that same underlying authenticity rather than separate levers. Experiential nostalgia fits the same way. It is a real driver of openness, it is broadly distributed rather than confined to one demographic group, and it works best as the emotional frame around an authenticity message rather than as a campaign of its own. Our focus groups reinforced this, with one participant calling a real tree “a textural, like sensory experience” compared with an artificial tree that felt “like tinsel, it’s, like, plasticky.”

**What to do:**

- Lead your messaging with the realness of the tree. Simple versions include “nothing compares to a real tree” or “a real, fresh-cut Michigan tree.”
- Use aroma, tradition, and atmosphere as support for that realness message, not as separate campaigns.
- Make authenticity visible on the tree and the lot with harvest-date tags, named varieties (participants volunteered “Fraser Fir” and “softer needles”), and “grown here” signage. This matters most at retail lots and big-box settings, where the grower is not visibly present.
- For the low-barrier, highly receptive core (open, with few frictions), give a reason to act now, such as “come get your tree Thanksgiving weekend” along with a first-time discount or a scheduled time slot.
- For the barrier-constrained group (open, but seeing more friction), the task is not persuasion but reducing the logistics of getting a real tree for the first time (see the setup finding).

*Valuing authenticity is not the same as being ready to switch. Many artificial buyers who say realness matters are still not planning a real tree, so use authenticity as the message you lead with, not as a way to pick who to target.*

## *2. Setup: the barrier and the fix*




*Barriers to a real tree, ranked; setup is the one that separates the open from the rest.*

Within the artificial-buyer sample, setup is the only barrier that differs between consumers who are open to a real tree and consumers who are not. It is not the most commonly cited barrier, but it is the one that separates the open from the rest.

**What to do:**

- Offer a delivery, set-up, and removal service. In our focus groups, one couple over 60 years old paid a premium for exactly this.
- Stock and promote simpler options too, such as easy or pre-fitted stands, stand-fit help, fresh-cut or pre-drilled trunks, and "we'll set it up" options.
- Treat the tree stand as part of the sale and the experience, not an afterthought.

*Cost is not the lever here. Cost is widely felt, but does not differ between the open and the not-open, and what a buyer paid for their artificial tree is unrelated to openness, so the idea that people stay with artificial because they already paid for it does not hold up.*

## *3. Normalize the 'hassles'*

When comparing artificial owners with real-tree owners, artificial owners rate the hassles of a real tree (disposal, transport, ongoing care, watering, setup, needle loss, and fire safety) higher than real owners do. Concerns around disposal shows the largest gap between real and artificial Christmas tree consumers, and fire safety the smallest. However, our analysis found these concerns act more like a stable background feeling, so marketing messaging is unlikely to move higher-concern buyers. But for buyers who are already more open to real Christmas trees, it can help the switch from artificial to real feel easier.

**What to do:**

- Reduce the mess on the grower side: shake out dead needles and bale or wrap the tree before it leaves the lot. One participant credited this with being able to “get it in the stand and get it straight.”
- Make disposal easy with clear recycling or drop-off information, or a haul-away option. You could potentially provide details about tree recycling for the county or city in which you operate when consumers purchase a tree from your choose-and-cut or retail location. Disposal is the concern with the single largest gap between artificial and real buyers.
- Use “easier than you think” messaging around the maintenance of real Christmas trees for buyers who are already open to a real tree. This is not an effective way to convince high-concern buyers to try a real Christmas tree for the first time.

*These moves help buyers who are already close to switching more than they change the minds of high-concern buyers.*

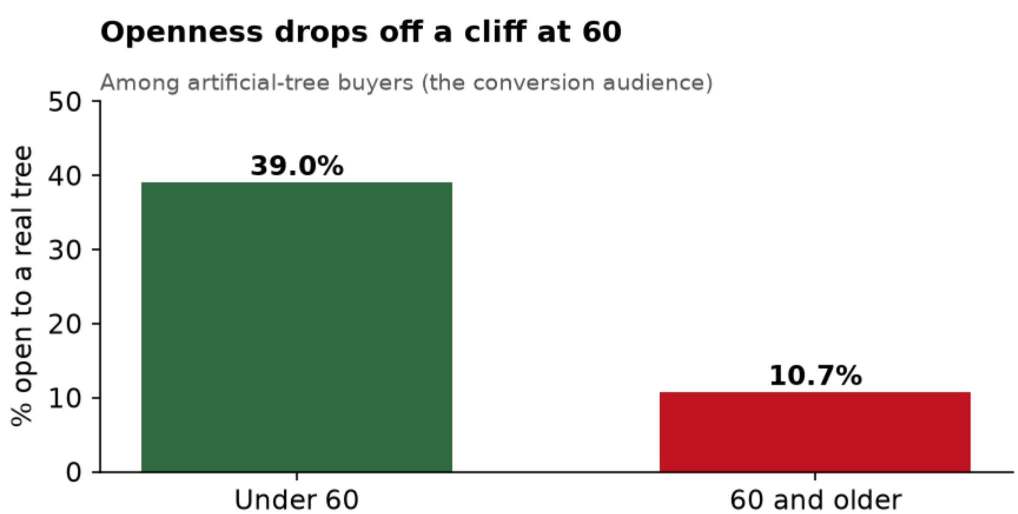
## 4. Lapsed buyers are not the target

It can seem appealing to target lapsed real-tree buyers who now own an artificial tree, since they have prior experience and maybe some nostalgia. In our analysis this does not bear out. Lapsed buyers were no more likely to actually plan a real-tree purchase next year than those who never had a real tree (8.8% versus 6.5%), and only slightly more likely to express general openness (44% versus 34%), a difference too small to rely on.

**What to do:**

- Do not build a marketing initiative around lapsed buyers. The likely return is weaker than the other options in this report.
- Put that effort into the levers that do separate the open from the rest: authenticity, an easy-set-up offer, buy-local messaging, and a younger audience.

## 5. Age: who to target and who to retain




*Share of artificial-tree buyers open to a real tree, by age.*

Age 60 and older is the largest constraint in the analysis. Not one respondent aged 60+ strongly agreed they were willing to purchase a real tree this coming season, and this is not explained by barriers or nostalgia. Among artificial buyers, 39% under 60 years old are open to a real tree, versus about 11% at 60 years and older.

**What to do:**

- Do not make the 60+ group a primary target for conversion messaging.
- Watch your own customer-age mix over time. If your current customers skew toward the 60+ cut point, treat it as a signal that you will need to replace those customers with younger ones over the next few seasons.
- Use full-service delivery and setup to retain older real-tree buyers who love the tree but are aging out of the physical work. In our focus groups, that arrangement let one aging couple keep buying real trees longer than they otherwise would have.

*This is a hard-to-convert age group, so treat delivery for older customers as <u>retention</u>, not conversion.*

## 6. Buy-local as a targeting signal

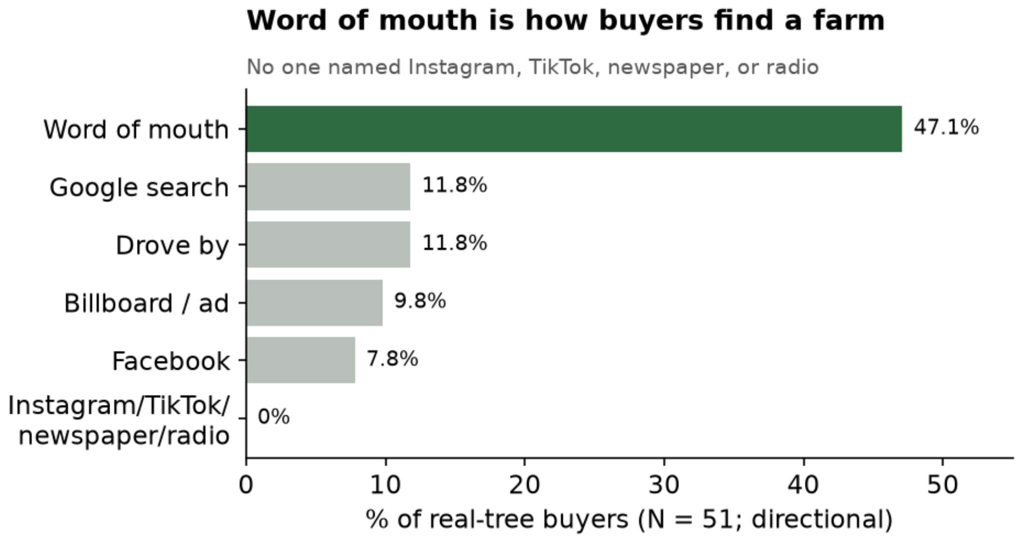
A "buy-local" orientation both predicts openness to a real tree, and tracks who has actually switched tree types before. Lead with local in your message and meet these buyers in the local channels they already use.

**What to do:**

- Lead with "local" and make it visible. "Locally grown," "cut this week on our farm," or "support a Michigan family farm" taps a value that predicts openness and doubles as proof of authenticity. Particularly important for most retail lots and big-box settings, clear "grown and cut here" signage on site matters to consumers.
- Meet local-minded buyers in the channels they already use: farmers markets, "shop local" events, Michigan-grown and agritourism networks, and marketing materials in neighboring local businesses. One participant said, "[if a sign said] this is from a local farm, we just cut these down... that would probably influence me to at least consider going there."
- Use the first local sale to build loyalty. Buyers described sticking with a preferred local grower once they find one. One focus group participant said, "once you find a place that you like, atmosphere, people, trees, you tend to go back." Many participants agreed with that sentiment.

*Buy-local flags people who are values-driven and switch-prone in either direction, not people guaranteed to move toward real. It widens the audience you can reach; authenticity and a setup-solved offer are what actually convert them.*

## *7. Word-of-mouth is the top channel*




*How real-tree buyers found where to buy (N = 51; directional).*

Word of mouth is how real-tree buyers most often find where to buy (47%), ahead of online search and driving by. No respondent named Instagram, TikTok, newspaper, or radio as the way they found where to buy. This does not mean social media or a website are unimportant for information, but discovery runs on word of mouth and on being easy to find.

**What to do:**

- Fuel referrals on purpose: a "bring a friend" or refer-a-neighbor discount, a photo-worthy moment on the lot, and an active ask for online reviews, which are word of mouth at scale.
- Be findable when someone searches or drives by. Claim and fully fill out a Google Business Profile (hours, varieties, price range, photos, directions) and use clear road signage. Participants noted it "can be really hard to find some of these places."
- Use social media and your website to inform people who already know you, such as hours and what is in stock, rather than as the main way to get found. Consider ensuring your website is updated with that season's hours, pricing, and contains language that will put your website at the top of a search engine when a consumer searches, "local Christmas tree farm," "Christmas tree lot," "real Christmas tree farm" or other permutations of a non-expert searching for a real Christmas tree.

## *8. What the on-site visit looks like*

Real-tree purchase trips are unhurried and family-centered. 90% of buyers spend 11 or more minutes on site, most shop with a spouse or partner (59%) and children (39%), and 43% add ornaments, 33% wreaths, and 23% garland while on site (about a third buy nothing extra).

**What to do:**

- Stock ornaments, wreaths, and garland at the point of sale. Because roughly four in ten buyers add ornaments and about a third add wreaths. This is a low-effort way to raise the average sale.
- Build the visit as an unhurried family experience: walking the rows to find the right tree, hot chocolate, and treating the outing as an adventure, which focus-group participants described directly.
- Keep it feeling like an authentic farm rather than polished or touristy. Several participants preferred that genuine feel, so on-site additions should read as real rather than produced.

*This finding is based on descriptive data, so treat it as a picture of who already buys real rather than a tested conversion lever.*

### 9. Families: serve them, be careful targeting them

Families with children at home are a distinctive segment: more tradition- and togetherness-motivated, more nostalgic, more interested in the on-site experience, and more likely to buy add-ons. But family identification is not a conversion lever. Parents are no more likely than non-parents to value authenticity, to see fewer barriers to purchasing a real tree, or to actually own a real tree. Children-at-home is only a borderline predictor of openness. Ultimately, the family audience splits across a group that is convertible to purchasing a real tree, and a non-convertible group.

**What to do:**

- Do not use "has children" as a target market screener for conversion. Lead with the actual levers instead: authenticity, a setup-solved offer, buy-local, and a younger audience.
- Serve families well when they do buy: on-site children's activities, family-tradition and togetherness framing, and add-on merchandising.
- As a longer-term bet, consider a "start your family's tradition" message aimed at new families forming their own rituals. The survey cannot confirm this, but the focus groups and the life-cycle view point to family formation as a natural entry point.

*The family audience mixes people who will convert with people who will not, so treat family stage as a way to serve customers well, not as a way to find converts.*

## Contact Us

If you have any questions or have found this helpful, reach out and let us know:

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