



The Petunia Project

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The Volusia County horticulture agent organized a series of activities for the Future Farmers of America (FFA) Chapter at the New Smyrna Beach High School called “The Petunia Project.” The extension agent provided pots, soil, plants and other supplies, and conducted 3 workshops that simulated commercial nursery industry issues. The students generated funds from a competitive entrepreneurial flower competition for their FFA chapter collected as donation proceeds. Red, violet and pink petunias were used to solicit donations during a farmer’s market event. Tables were assigned to student ‘companies’ identified as Red Teams, Violet Teams and Pink Teams, corresponding to the petunia color each promoted; two companies per table, totaling three tables. This encouraged competitive marketing. Table décor and pot embellishment enhanced marketability of petunia plants. One hundred and fifty-three students participated in the classroom portion of the program and 22 FFA members attended the farmer’s market event, greeting shoppers and competing against fellow classmates in solicitation of donations. Twenty-five percent of the FFA members attending the event developed new work skills as measured by a post project survey and by class participation. Students collected a total of \$774.18 to support FFA programs. The project provided an increased awareness of commercial horticulture, money marketing and business skills as evidenced by attendance in the classroom and during the event. Confidence, job satisfaction, undefined sales outlook of the Violet Teams played a huge role in their success. Pessimism, job dissatisfaction, and defined sales outlook hurt the Pink Teams. The results of this study were shared with the students on the importance of these traits for commercial and employee success in today’s business environment.

Many young people lack occupational job skills in marketing, sales and leadership. Their age, inexperience, and dependence upon their parents hinder their chances in obtaining business skills outside the home. Hence, they are not challenged to generate entrepreneurial ideas and further pursue monetary gains as success in the business world.

To help young people develop entrepreneurial skills, the Volusia County Extension Office developed a program, called “The Petunia Project.” The long-term goal of The Petunia Project was to help students develop usable skills that would benefit them in the workforce by simulating an entrepreneurial horticultural business. The students would learn basic plant transplanting techniques, gain confidence in soliciting donations, competitive marketing, and relate to how job satisfaction impacts profit. In the short term, the students would experience the impact of a natural disaster like a major hurricane on inventory and how the nursery industry counterbalances with pricing strategies. Also, the students would experience the reward of generating funds to support their local FFA chapter.

Materials and Methods

In 2017, the extension agent met three times with 153 Future Farmers of America (FFA) students and their instructor in two separate classes at New Smyrna Beach High School. The objective was to create an activity for students to participate in an

entrepreneurial project that would generate funds for their FFA Chapter at the local Farmer’s Market. Additionally, it would provide the agent with a starting point for marketing efforts and money management skills needed to train Generation Z clientele. The agent donated 699 petunia plant plugs 288/280 (Knox Nursery Inc., Winter Garden, FL), 100 lbs. of Fafard® Professional Potting Mix (BWI Companies Inc., Apopka, FL) and 1350 4” pots (Standard size 20) to the New Smyrna Beach High School FFA Chapter. This was the start of the Petunia Project. As an added incentive, the most profitable petunia company would receive a celebratory pizza party from a portion of the proceeds.

In the first week, each of the two classes was divided into three groups, called “companies” (3 companies per class, for a total of 6 companies). Each company was assigned a different petunia color (‘Carpet Pink’ — “Pink”; ‘Dreams Red’ — “Red”; or ‘Mambo Violet’ — “Violet”). These became the Pink Teams, Red Teams, and Violet Teams, respectively. The companies from Class 1 each received 144 plugs and pots. Class 2 companies received half the amount with 72 plants and pots. This simulated commercial nursery situations where companies compete for market share.

Students developed company names, marketing strategies, assigned leadership, and maintained inventory. They also acquired basic horticulture skills by transplanting petunia plugs into 4” pots. During the fourth week, the agent surveyed the students. Survey questions queried:

- Did they feel their flower color would impact donations (help, hurt, no difference)?
- What was their confidence level in their company’s ability to generate solicitations (least/mid/highest amount)?

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- Did they gain new job skills that could be applied in the future?
- Did they think they would have been better suited to a different job assignment?
- If they were to repeat this project what would they do differently?

The results from this survey gave the agent insight on the student's assurance level *prior* to the farmer's market event. Armed with this information, the agent was able to compare actual monetary gains with that of initial estimates.

On 27 Sept. 2017, 22 of the FFA students participated in a four-hour field activity called "Think Pink! Celebrating Life & Loved Ones," focused on cut-foilage and breast cancer awareness event at the Deland Farmer's Market. The agent assigned tables for companies to display their petunias with similar colors located together. Each color was placed alongside its competitor from the other class, sharing an 8-foot table (Fig. 1) to encourage competitive marketing. The students used table décor, plant



Fig.1. New Smyrna Beach High School Future Farmers of America members at the Think Pink! Celebrating Life & Loved Ones Farmer's Market in Sept. 2017.



Fig. 2. New Smyrna Beach High School Future Farmers of America members competed with marketing tactics including signs, colored T-shirts and pot décor at the Think Pink! Celebrating Life & Loved Ones Farmer's Market in Sept. 2017.

pot embellishments and decorative pot tags to enhance petunia marketability and donations (Fig. 2). The potted petunias were distributed free of charge, but the members of the different teams greeted market goers and vied against classmates in soliciting donations for their petunias.

Results

Due to Hurricane Irma striking Volusia County during the petunia production period (mid-September), New Smyrna Beach High School was closed for an extended period of time, which made it difficult for students to water their plants. Some of the plants died due to lack of water, resulting in fewer plants being available for the farmers' market event.

It was quite warm on the day of the event, but that did not stop the students from enthusiastically promoting their petunias. They even promoted solidarity by having each "employee" wear their company's color. Some greeted the public by educating them on the benefits of the FFA organization. Others focused on breast cancer to draw in the client by offering compassion and/or celebration of survivor experiences. In some cases, attendees donated money to the FFA organization and bypassed the free petunias. At the close of the event, the agent tabulated the donations. The Pink Teams from both classes decided to combine their efforts by splitting their donations equally, with \$50.25 to each team. The Violet Team from Class 1 had the most plants and received the most donations (\$265.93). In contrast, the Violet Team from Class 2 only collected \$89. More notably however, the Red Team from Class 2 collected \$180 in donations and had the highest average per plant donation (\$2.73). This team's donations exceeded the per plant donations of all the other "companies," including the Red Team from Class 1. As a result of the Petunia Project, the New Smyrna Beach High School FFA received a total of \$774.18 in donations. The overview of each company's revenue is detailed in the Table 1.

Survey Results

Fifty-three students participated in a written survey. When asked what their confidence level was in their company's ability to generate solicitations:

- 60% of responses felt their flower color would help donations, 15% felt their color would hurt donations and 25% (all Violet companies) indicated that it would make no difference.
- 15% of all students felt they would surpass the other teams in donations.

Table 1. Donations collected, total number of petunias and average donation per plant received by 6 student Future Farmers of America teams, at the Petunia Project event entitled Think Pink! Celebrating Life & Loved Ones, at the Deland Farmer's Market in Sept. 2017.

Company	Total donations	No. of plants	Donation amount per plant distributed
Pink Team, Class 1	\$50.25	136	\$0.37
Pink Team, Class 2	\$50.25	26	\$1.93
Violet Team, Class 1	\$265.93	140	\$1.90
Violet Team, Class 2	\$89.00	69	\$1.29
Red Team, Class 1	\$138.75	139	\$1.00
Red Team, Class 2	\$180.00	66	\$ 2.73

With the exception of one Red Team member, all of these responses came from Violet Teams.

Together, both Pink Teams and Red Teams indicated little to no confidence in securing donations.

- 59% of all students reported learning new skills that they could use in the future.

When asked if they would have been better at a different job assignment within their company, Violet Team members reported that

1. 60% were happy with their job assignment.

For Red and Violet teams:

2. 11% thought they were better suited for an alternative job and
3. 28% were open to another position within their company.

Surprisingly, the highest confidence levels (except for one Red Team student) came exclusively from Violet teams and their ability to solicit the most cash donations from market goers. Both Violet Teams believed their flower color would have no effect on obtaining solicitations in an event called 'Think Pink.' Violet Teams profited the most (\$1.29–\$1.89 per plant = \$354.93 combined) and were deemed the winners eligible to receive a pizza party.

The members of the Pink Teams believed that their flower color was more advantageous. Yet, they were the least success-

ful in obtaining plant donations (\$0.37–\$1.93 per plant for total sales of \$100.50). In contrast, the members of the Red Teams felt their flower color was a detriment at the onset. Yet they were second in total donations (\$1.00–\$2.72 per plant for total sales of \$318.75).

Conclusion

Many factors played a role in the outcome of the fundraiser. The success of the winning Violet companies, as evidenced by the survey and donations collected, reveal that a high level of engagement, a positive outlook, and effective teamwork leading to job satisfaction made a huge impact on the students' aptitude for amassing the most donations for the FFA organization and a pizza party reward. In contrast, doubt, job dissatisfaction, and a pessimistic outlook hindered both the Pink and Red companies. The results from this study were shared with the students and commercial horticulture industry leaders to highlight the importance of these occupational traits for employee retention and future success in the work force.

As a result of the extension agent's teaching and hands-on direction in a real life commerce exercise, FFA youth generated \$100 in solicited donations to benefit their local FFA chapter. Additionally, 25% of the youth attending developed new work skills as measured by a post classroom survey and by class participation.