

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

by ELLEN C. WELLS



Photo courtesy of MasterTag

The OrchiDÉcor program from Worldwide Orchids includes many elements of a successful branded program.

How to make your creative thoughts a reality (Next Course: Getting the buyer to buy.)

A clearly defined marketing or merchandising program can transform a product line from a bench full of pots into a well-organized product line. Banners, pots, bench signs and tags with the same color scheme, look and style pull together what would otherwise be an assortment of plants and give them a unifying look for the consumer with solutions to their gardening questions.

Of all the tasks associated with merchandising programs—the feasibility studies, market research, number crunching and so forth—creating a theme and seeing to the details of producing a finished product may be the most intimidating.

What is the creative process?

Having the idea to begin a merchandising program is just the first step in creating one. And while having a product line in mind for the program is part of the “creativity” of it all, it’s just the beginning.

Gerry Giorgio, creative director for MasterTag, a firm specializing in creating and producing marketing and merchandising products for the horticulture industry, has worked with many growers and grower-retailers over the years in developing their programs. The “creative” part, Gerry says, is the entire dis-

play system that promotes a product and carries the program’s message. This includes a program name and tagline, tags, color scheme, graphics and logos, display cards, banners and posters.

Gerry and MasterTag help clients at each point in the process, from developing tags or signs alone to creating the whole comprehensive merchandising program. “By and large our experience has been that the growers want to promote their products but aren’t sure exactly what they want,” he says.

He explains that usually growers will come to them with a product they’d like to promote and ask for a merchandising concept to develop around it. “Our process from there is to understand what the grower wants to achieve—to differentiate themselves from a competitor, enter a new market or impress upon a current customer that they are their vendor of choice—and ultimately to sell more product and improve their margins,” Gerry says.

From that point, MasterTag’s creative team asks their client lots of questions about products and, Gerry adds, “We always try to understand it from the perspective of the consumer, because they are ultimately who we have to encourage to buy the product.” From the client’s answers, the creative team distills the product’s important points and develops graphics, colors and text

that will help tell the product’s story, inspire consumers and help them make buying decisions.

To help clients who need a creative kick start, MasterTag has examples of previous programs on its Web site for inspiration. “These sometimes make the client say, ‘Hey, I like this one. Can you do something similar for me?’ That points us in a good direction,” Gerry says. He also likes to approach the creative process from discovering what the client wants to achieve with the product. From there, MasterTag’s team can work backwards to create the display, graphics and messaging.

“We use lots of our own expertise from what we know of the consumer and an understanding of the types of consumers that frequent certain types of retail stores,” Gerry explains. “We talk about it with the grower and establish a message that is specific for that type of shopper.”

Some growers and grower-retailers opt for a do-it-yourself approach for their program’s creative concepts. The producers of merchandising products can be involved as much or as little as clients wish. Professional designers, however, have a broad base of experiences from both within and outside the horticulture field and can apply these proven concepts to a program, giving it a leg up when it hits the market.

Brainstorming together

Worldwide Orchids in Apopka, Florida, needed to “freshen up” its look, and their president, Marty Roth, decided to tie in orchids’ new role as a home décor item into a new marketing and merchandising program. Marty worked with Gerry at MasterTag, who presented him with a series of different ideas, names, color schemes and looks following an in-depth question and answer session. “We brainstormed until we put the concepts together,” Marty says. “Gerry came up with the ‘OrchiDécor’ phrase, and I came up with the ‘effortless elegance anywhere’ tagline. It was all based on give-and-take brainstorming sessions. It was actually lots of fun.”

As he does with all new ideas for Worldwide Orchids, Marty took the OrchiDécor concept to everyone in his office for their opinions. “I try to make everything as much of a collaborative experience as possible, because people look at things from different perspectives,” he explains. “Because we are trying to appeal to a reasonably broad market, everybody’s input is very helpful,” he adds.

Marty also tested the OrchiDécor merchandising program, which includes a gift box, retail display rack, tag and specific color scheme, before it went to market. “We produced some prototypes and went to our biggest customers and said, ‘Here’s the direction we’re going. Are there any thoughts you’d like to add to it before we go forward?’” He wanted to make the program as perfect and complete as possible before final production. “Once you get rolling, it’s not necessarily convenient to make small changes,” Marty notes. “To have any economy in production, you have to produce quite a few. So once it was a go, we got box after box of these supplies. We try to time the little adjustments for the next run of materials.”

Putting together the OrchiDécor program, which took about six months, was not a walk in the park, Marty points out. “But there is something about getting the creative juices flowing and having the opportunity to have a give-and-take relationship with someone who under-

stands what you are trying to achieve that’s very invigorating.”

“Marketing is a key component of any business,” he says. “It’s not enough anymore to simply grow a nice plant and put it in the marketplace. You have to find ways to convey your message and to help educate and entice the consumer.”

Starting with concepts

Laura Martindale, sales manager at Seacliff Farms, Leamington, Ontario, wanted to build upon the signage The Home Depot installed in the stores where her products are sold. Her goal was to take the big-box feel out of Depot’s garden centers by creating a different atmosphere through customized signage. Laura also wanted to create distinctive early-, mid- and late-spring seasons in the garden centers to correspond with the sales periods of different types of bedding plants.

With that general idea in mind, along with a suggested Spring Dazzlers name for the mid-spring sales season, Laura met with MasterTag in July of last year to develop a new program in time for the start of the next spring plant production in January. “We knew we wanted to break up the season and have a distinctive tag shape, and we knew what kind of look and feel we wanted to create,” she says. “MasterTag came up with the shape right off, presented color schemes and so forth. We tweaked them back and forth for a little while, but we worked together to do that.” Through this effort, Cool Beginnings, Spring Dazzlers and Hot Blossoms were created.

After an initial meeting, MasterTag supplied Laura with a summary that outlined the objectives she wanted to achieve through the merchandising program and also supplied a timeline for the creative and production processes. The process was more involved than she expected it to be. She found the timeline to be invaluable, though, because “you know exactly what you need to do and when, and if you don’t make the deadlines, then you can clearly see what those implications are going to be.”

Laura advises anyone considering a merchandising program to sit down with

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everyone involved—from other growers who will use the program to the creative team producing the materials—and clearly describe your purpose and goals. “It’s looking at a lot of details,” she says, “and from MasterTag’s end, you realize a lot of detail that you wouldn’t have thought of. We know what we want, but they help in terms of what they need in order to make it happen.”

Developing over time

Wenke Greenhouses has developed four merchandising programs over the past two years for use at their own retail as well as other independent garden center locations. Working with MasterTag, Lisa Wenke Ambrosio has developed coordinated pots, tags, posters and signage for programs that are meant to sell more product faster over a two- or three-week time period.

“One of the biggest surprises for me was the number of choices you have,” Lisa says. “I had to constantly choose what kind of paper, poster sizes, number of grommets and so forth.” After working on the first program, though, she got a feel for MasterTag’s questions and process. Now the process takes about one-quarter of the time it took for the first program they worked on together.

Because the creative process can be abstract at times, Gerry advises anyone thinking about a merchandising program to understand that this is a give-and-take process. “It’s really an evolution of ideas, one building on the other,” he says. “The process may be conceptual at first before getting to a tangible, implementable stage, and you need to be comfortable with that idea.” ■

Ellen C. Wells is a green industry veteran and freelance writer in Boston.

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