

# MERCHANDISING

BY ELLEN C. WELLS

## MASTER'S DEGREE: SO, YOU WANT TO CREATE A PROGRAM

The first article in a six-part series takes a look at some reasons to enhance your plants with a coordinated merchandising program.

Nike, Big Mac, Kleenex, Kinko's, iPod. All are big and recognizable names for common products—sneakers, burgers, copying services, and MP3 players. For each of these, there are possibly hundreds of other companies of all shapes and sizes making similar products. Somehow, these names and companies come to the forefront of consumers' minds in what could otherwise be considered a gray and massive sea of products. How? With well-planned and coordinated marketing, merchandising, and branding programs. In other words, they said the right words and showed the right images at the right time and hooked millions of consumers into their products. If we could only be so lucky.

It's not luck, not all of it anyway. It takes knowledge, forethought, planning, and lots of ideas from those in and out of the field to develop a direction and put a program into place. In this and the next five articles in the Master's Degree series, we'll give you a crash course in creating, selling, launching, evaluating, and revamping a marketing program for your growing or retail operation.

### Will a marketing program help my business?

In preparing for this article, I picked up my copy of that well-known textbook, *Marketing for Dummies* (you have to start somewhere, right?). One sentence struck me: "If the product is not good, or nothing special in the customer's eyes, then no marketing program can make that product a winner in the long run." Let's assume now that all of the plant products in our industry are always in great condition, but the presentation of the products, which for years have been wrapped in black and hunter-green packaging and laid out on cement-block benches, has kept Joe's petunias and Jane's petunias looking like "nothing special" in the eyes of the consumers. With all else equal—in this case, the health and growing potential of the pansy in that pot—how do you turn something that has become a commodity in consumers' minds into that "something special"?

That's where a marketing program *can* make a product into a winner, or at least help set it apart from the competition. Gary



Photos courtesy of MasterTag

The Living Treasures program from Floral Plant Growers not only draws attention to the plants but also helps organize garden centers around sun and shade categories.

Hudson, of Hudson & Associates, an industry business consulting firm in West Sacramento, California, advises that those growers and grower retailers considering implementing a marketing and branding program should first have a clear understanding of the goals of their program. "The marketing package a company creates is driven by what you want to achieve," Gary says. "Are you a grower who has 20 customers and wants to make sure they keep coming back to you? That's one kind of a product." On the other hand, he says, if you, as a grower or grower retailer, feel you have a product that you can push all the way through to the consumer, that poses a different set of questions and answers, and is quite difficult to accomplish for growers of any size without the express participation of the retailer.

"More astute retailers don't necessarily want the grower's brand," Gary says. For a smaller market area, he notes, if a merchandising and marketing program provides a consistency of image and general name recognition for the product, then growers will be on the right track.

### Taking It Tropical

Mark Elzinga, Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses in Portage, Michigan, worked with MasterTag to create the Tropical Flavors campaign nearly five years ago to help his customers—174 Meijer grocery stores in the Midwest—compete better in the marketplace. "Everyone was marketing product in black flats in the cheapest plastic they could," Mark says. "Our product was a commodity that everybody was driving down each year. You could find the same package whether you went to this big box store or that big box store or a nice grocery store. We wanted to differentiate ourselves so consumers couldn't say, 'all right, flats are \$7.99.'"

When they felt they were losing sales to some of the new, branded vegetatives hitting the market, Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses, with 20 acres producing nearly a million seed flats a year, decided it was time to "do something" with their product. "Our flat sales were kind of flat," Mark recalls. "We decided we had to do something with our seed items to make

them more exciting. We found some nice tricks to shine up the product and make it look new.”

The Tropical Flavors line includes an ocean-blue flat and tropically coordinated pots, packs, tags and other merchandising items in shapes and sizes that were new and different from the traditional black flat. Sales took off right away. Besides flashy tropical colors, Elzinga included plenty of growing information on the product tags, which are key-shaped and include tropical themes and photos. Mark notes that the larger, more colorful tags show the customer these products are a better value, much more valuable than a black flat with generic pixie tags.

“The stores aren’t driving the prices down, because it’s a unique item,” he says. “If no one else has this product, then the consumers don’t have anything else to compare it to.” He adds that Tropical Flavors may not become a nationally recognized brand, but for Meijer’s shoppers, it’s a product they recognize, and the grocery chain has even begun to advertise and promote it themselves in their weekly circulars. They’ve met with so much success with Tropical Flavors that they’ve begun additional campaigns for vegetables (Fresh Flavors) and accent plants (Perfect Accents). So long, commodity.

#### **Educating Consumers**

Gary has found, through years of research and experience, the biggest barriers to a consumer buying more plants are a lack of familiarity and a lack of comfort with the product. After some market research of his own, Dean Chaloupka, president of Floral Plant Growers (FPG), Denmark, Wisconsin, found the same underlying issues with shoppers who frequent the markets he supplies.

“We did some market research with consumers and retailers, not only to see what they identified with in the store, but also what would impact them, what would help them, and what wouldn’t help them,” Dean explains. “We concluded it would be very difficult for us to establish a grower brand or a brand that consumers would readily recognize over a long period of time, without spending millions of dollars. We didn’t feel that was the best use of our money.” FPG wanted instead to address the issues found through their market research: 1) customers found garden centers confusing, 2) they were intimidated, 3) they needed more info, and 4) they couldn’t get help within the garden center.



**MasterTag worked with Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses, Portage, Michigan, to develop Tropical Flavors, a campaign using tropical colors and graphics that really stand out on the retail bench.**

What FPG developed was the Living Pleasures merchandising program. The effort includes color-coordinated pots, pot and basket tagging, bench tape, pricing signs, and banners that are prominently displayed in the ShopKo stores they supply throughout the Midwest. “The first goal was to bring some order to the garden center,” Dean says. “We came up with a color-coordinated program that organized the garden center and our product placement within it around sun and shade categories. We’re also looking down the road to expand that into perennials in terms of early, mid, and late season.”

Has it worked? “Yes,” Dean says, “it’s helped educate consumers about what items will work best for their sun or shade conditions.” He adds that it not only helps the consumer but also the store staff, allowing them to answer very simple questions about sun and shade. In this way, too, FPG has also gotten better feedback on what customers are looking for—a wider variety of sun or shade plants—now that consumers are better educated about plants and interacting more with

the retailers. “The program allows us to differentiate ourselves,” Dean says. “I don’t know if it’s added anything to our bottom line other than continuing to differentiate us as a supplier and solidifying our relationships with our retailer customers.”

#### **Taking Care**

Differentiation. Consumer education. Expertise. These are all key ingredients in marketing. But we’d be short-shrifting you if we didn’t mention one more major factor: service.

“One of the important parts of an integrated marketing program is the in-store service so the plants always look good and fresh, everything’s easy to find,” Gary says. “It’s not just delivering plants; it’s also how they are maintained in the store that helps drive the market.” You can have the catchiest campaign, the smartest tag lines, the flashiest, sleekest colors and packaging. But, if merchandising isn’t followed through to ensure the plants are kept healthy, the pots are kept clean, and order pervades within the garden center, your efforts and expenditures to set your product apart are washed away. Whether that means a grower working with the merchandiser or a grower/retailer training staff to pay attention to details, this last bit of effort may be the most critical on the long marketing road. 🍃

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