



By John Johnston

BRAND

Many businesses are developing a new strategy to market their story. There is no one component to make it work, but a combination of many parts or building blocks that make up the whole. Vendor discretionary funds for advertising and marketing projects are rare in the garden center realm. Your business might require some budgeted costs to increase awareness and the brand that is you. Start now before the beginning of spring selling.

First impressions begin from the company sign out front and continue to include the entrance door. What is the name of your store? Review how often it is repeated before store entry. Visibility of your business name and logo includes parking signs, sale signs, shopping carts, banners, event signs, and personnel clothing and name tags, to name a few. Consistent logo, legible font, well-proportioned and consistent signage, and bright seasonal color displays all contribute to the overall impressions.

Curbside or street sign plantings in contrasting colors attract attention for everyone looking for the first signs of

spring. If your store frontage is narrow, it takes even more effort (and vertical color) to catch drivers' eye.

From Unknown to Well Known

Your company strengths must lead you down a path to create more store excitement. Start by examining what you do best — and do it even better. A grower might tout their unusual basket assortments or sizes available, but how is this communicated to the home gardener? We know that the box stores have a somewhat limited amount of plant varieties that are brought into their departments, how are you communicating that you have a nursery with hundreds more? Signage? Display? Shear size of department?

Some stores can benefit from their vast display zones from the road, but not everyone has this available view. You may be the most dominant retailer of plants within your region, but shoppers may not be aware of it. Do you have a tag line or message that is repeated consistently in your advertising, your website, your signage? Do you



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Now, more than ever, our world as we see it is judged by impressions. Garden centers must not only create consumer experiences, but build awareness that lasts.

magnify this message by creating an event annually? Independent retailers amazingly don't tell the real story to the public that no one does it better in selling fresh, high-quality plants.

Anticipation and the Brand

As garden centers, we sell perishables — and hope that they sell in a timely manner. There is a price to pay for quality and freshness. Nothing hurts your brand worse than unhealthy or dead plants.

If you are the grower, there is no substitute for awesome color ... always. Reviewing the end caps, main aisle islands, and store front table displays for continued excellence in quality, availability, and in some instances contrasting plant ideas takes a bit of practice and courageous culture for any department manager or owner.

It pays dividends in creating a lasting impression and meeting expectations for higher retails. A recent study about the decline of traditional brick-and-mortar shopping

malls found that successful malls are thriving because they specialize in higher-quality brands and product. Their customer base continues to expand because they have something to offer that's different. Competition is fierce out there — and be encouraged that everyone is not a Walmart shopper. Think of ways to raise your margins instead of finding ways to lower them in order to compete. The task at hand is to continue to differentiate as best as possible.

Instant Messaging

Sending your store's name and brand home with your customer with their purchases is becoming more mainstream across the country. Unique containers, packages, perishables, and even garden center products might take some planning to execute. Every impression that is repeated helps your store become more of the brand in your customer's eyes.

Good-to-great experiences are just a glance away as a reminder when looking at their purchases. Our industry

More garden centers are introducing regional flavors and specialized herbs through food tastings.

has seen two marketing giants in Monrovia and Proven Winners as they evolved through the years into two of the most recognizable names to consumers. Even with the lack of available funding committed toward advertising, you should look at ways to bring more awareness to potential or new customers. There has never been a time more important than now to start, as many of our constituents are retiring or closing their doors. Who will pick up the mantel and continue as a regional specialist for gardeners?

Healthy Choices

Can you go through an entire day without hearing, reading or seeing some repetitive words in our daily lives: safe, healthy, natural, organic, fresh, pet-friendly? These words resonate with everyone, every day. It's no coincidence that our industry is feeling the push of consumers that are concerned about these topics and how they interact with our lives each day.

The next batch of words are becoming a bit trickier to identify, but trending upward with consumers: bee-friendly, chemical-free, made in the U.S., no fillers, all natural, no preservatives. Your business (and your brand) is challenged to bring more awareness in creating selling opportunities in the retail store. Are you identifying these products and bringing your team up to speed? Merchandising displays to educate and sell takes some practice.

Food and beverage are common denominators in everyone's lives. More garden centers are introducing regional flavors and specialized herbs through food tastings. The nationwide popularity of Stonewall Kitchens and McCutcheon lends the opportunity to introduce new food products to consumers. You can also tie in herbs and vegetables for at home gardens during the spring season. Create space to display a featured product on weekends that you can offer samples and monitor with personnel. Use the calendar to promote special dates for consumer fun.

The Educated Consumer

Today's consumer is well-educated and plans to buy products outside the home for a reason. Our lifestyles (and technology) have made everything instantaneous. Research can be done by the sound of your voice or a few clicks on the smartphone or tablet. Where do you see your brand/store in this process? Are you shown in website store locators of the manufacturers you represent? You might be missing out on free advertising in your immediate region.



Are you connecting to consumers through social media channels? Besides the time you allocate toward your home page, it doesn't cost you advertising dollars. You also connect to every conceivable age group with over 300 million cell phones currently in use across our country according to a recent Google inquiry.

Another new development has been free Wi-Fi availability in many stores. Coupled with your web domain, you can bring your calendar of events to the forefront and keep your brand awareness in their plans. Make display space. Differentiate. Have fun, and most of all, build your brand one welcoming smile at a time. 🌸

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