



By Stan Pohmer

CLAIRVOYANT OR CLOSE MINDED... A SUBTLE DIFFERENCE

Understanding all the market segments is key to becoming a successful retailer. The first step is always most difficult: Are you willing to admit you don't know how other generations think?

Much of our thinking is based on a fallacious position that we need to offer homogenized programs, a one-size-fits-all attempt to satisfy everyone with the same product or program without the benefit of knowing what will appeal to each of our customer segments.

I just attended the Super Floral Show in Columbus, Ohio, an event that focuses on the mass market (namely super-market) channel but with increasing interest from forward-thinking garden centers and florists who want to see new trends and see opportunities to broaden their appeal to target consumers. And, yes, the major categories being shown were cut flowers, yet there were annual, potted flowering and foliage producers there as well.

It was also a prime opportunity for independent retailers to obtain insights into the suppliers and retailers in what many of them view as "the competition" (yet we all know our primary competition comes from non-floral retailers and other industries all vying for the same shrinking discretionary dollars as we are). It is an informal way to gather information and industrial espionage that could better position independents in relation to mass marketers to help gain a competitive advantage.

The Sad Truth

The product and program offerings were almost overwhelming; the colors, packaging, presentations and displays. If this were what our consumers saw presented at retail, I have no doubt that our per capita consumption would rise meteorically, but sadly, for many reasons, much of what I saw will never reach retail stores, at least not in the form I saw it on the trade show floor.

In some cases it might be because of logistics and distribution reasons, in others because it's a category that the retailer doesn't currently carry. But worst of all, it might be because the person making the decisions is

close minded and/or doesn't understand the core customers' needs or those of customers he or she needs to reach to build the customer base.

A case in point: there was a very progressive grower at the Super Floral Show who has been extremely successful in building a strong core business in what was once a specialty category but is now very mainstream, trendy orchids and bromeliads. To supplement his product offering and provide more of the "one-stop shop" environment that his customers are looking for and to leverage his freight and distribution costs, he's expanded his program to include foliage. But not just basic foliage; his company has been at the cutting edge of understanding the marketplace and consumer purchasing drivers. He has positioned his entire company on not producing just flowers and plants but providing living home decor, so the expanded foliage program needed to complement, not compete against, the market position they've worked hard to build.

His move to this new position was gutsy, to say the least, but it was based on a vision grounded by today's marketplace, consumer buying habits, decorating trends and understanding what consumer segments we are or are not reaching and what it might take to entice them to purchase his products.

One of this grower's new program introductions was a line of foliage plants that were spray painted (using a water-based paint that the plant grows out of over time and doesn't affect transpiration) in golds, silvers, burgundies — it could be any color. While this program won't appeal to all customers, especially the plant traditionalists, it definitely has the potential to attract those customers we as an industry

have had a hard time appealing to in the past — those consumers in their late teens, 20s and early 30s. This customer segment is definitely not into traditional values but is into the "cool" factor and things that support their lifestyles and trends.

Kids Just Don't Understand

But this program won't see the light of day in some retailers because of a lack of clairvoyance and vision and the close mindedness of some decision makers. One buyer with a very traditional trend sense made the comment that his customer would never buy it. When it was pointed out that it wasn't him it was designed to appeal to but rather younger purchasers such as his teenaged daughters, he stated that his daughters wouldn't buy it either.

Now as the father to three 20-something children, I've learned (by virtue of being told by them countless times) that I don't understand them, their tastes or their ways of thinking. I admit I'm something of a traditionalist. And I know that I don't understand their culture or their tastes in music, dress, work habits or social relationships. I don't understand their trends, their need to be in constant and immediate contact with the world (a.k.a. their social group) or what motivates them to do anything they do.

I'm in no way suggesting they are bad kids; on the contrary, I'm proud of them and the fact that they are mature, productive, well-adjusted, well-mannered and overall good kids. But for me to suggest that I understand what they will or won't buy would be a major and flawed supposition on my part. I'm not in any position to make any

decision regarding what might appeal to them.

The good news is that I'm fully aware that my tastes are not those of my kids' tastes, so I know it's necessary to either rely on consumer research that focuses in on this age and demographic segment or include the input and opinions of people who better represent this population group better than me.

Understanding AllThe Segments


It's not just this age group that we as an industry need to gain a better understanding of in order to develop products, programs and services that will appeal to them. Men don't think like women (again, something that's been reinforced to me, this time by my wife). Young people don't or can't understand the needs of the boomers. Urban dwellers have a different set of needs than rural and ex-urbanites. Hispanics have different cultural infusions that influence their purchasing habits, and the list goes on and on.

Much of our thinking is based on a fallacious position that we need to offer homogenized programs, a one-size-fits-all attempt to satisfy everyone with the same product or program without the benefit of knowing what will appeal to each of our customer segments. And in taking this approach, we end up not appealing to key customer groups and limiting our potential.

This is part of the reason we haven't reached the X'ers and Y'ers as effectively as we could have; we've wrongly assumed we could reach them through slightly differed approaches we used on their parents, and they were inspired to purchase for the same reasons that appealed to their parents and grandparents. And as a result of not understanding their motivators, we haven't provided compelling reasons for them to be involved with our industry.

We need to tap into the resources that will enable us to better understand the values and motivations of these various consumer constituencies so we can cater to and satisfy them better than we have in the past if we want to engage them in our industry for our own selfish success as well as give them the opportunity to experience the benefits our products provide. No longer can we predispose our own prejudices on the psychology and values of other purchase groups if we want to compete effectively and grow our businesses.

It's one thing to be clairvoyant, which is really vision tempered by reality and experience, and another to be close minded, an assumption that one understands the thought processes of others based on one's own values and experiences. Sometimes it's a very sub-

tle difference, but one that we need to learn to make if we want our industry to succeed for the future... 

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