

with Miles Rosedale

# branding quality

Monrovia's CEO on strong brands, tasty ketchup and employing artisanos.

By Mitch Whitten

**L**ess than five years ago, Miles Rosedale undertook one of the biggest marketing initiatives in the 76 years since Harry Rosedale started Monrovia. Rosedale and the company's marketing division, led by vice president Pam Wasson, began a major branding campaign. The goal: solidify a consistent, long-lasting image for Monrovia as the premium "craftsmen" of the nursery business.

This was not strange for the times. Branding was the buzzword of the 1990s. With retail chains spreading like bamboo, stores and product makers had to focus their message and their image — their brand — in a way that consumers would easily remember.

BMW is known for engineering, Volvo for safety. Home Depot is the low-priced home improvement store. Unable to compete on price, garden centers embraced quality and service. And Monrovia embraced them.

*Lawn & Garden Retailer* caught Miles Rosedale, at the company's headquarters in Azusa, Calif., to ask him to assess this 5-year-old branding effort and where it will go from here.



Miles Rosedale

What have you learned about branding in the past few years?

We've reconfirmed our thinking that a brand is only as good as the quality of the product. It needs to be authentic and better than its competitors for a brand to sustain itself.

You began advertising to consumers, including expensive, full-page ads in *Martha Stewart Living*, which is unusual for growers who do not sell direct. But you also reached out in new ways to retailers, with image-building, point-of-purchase materials. Which is more important?

Working with our retailers is key for our success in creating a brand for consumers. That's been a pleasant surprise. There was early thinking: How much advertising do we need to do per se and how much can you work with our customers? More and more we've learned that working with our retailers is the better way to build the brand.

It appeared to many of our customers that we were creating a brand for the satisfaction of Monrovia's ego. But enhancing and promoting our brand contributes to their success.

Have you done enough?

There's always a lot to do. We'd do well to get out more information about our plants and the uses consumers have. We never can seem to have enough information. Our POP displays, certainly, give information about our plants. We hold seminars to under-

stand what retailers need to know to sell our plants. We also invite retail customers from our garden centers to come visit us.

Anything you would do differently?

We would work more closely to co-brand our garden centers than when we initially started. More and more, premium garden centers want to have a premium line of plants.

Business leaders have written a lot about branding in the past decade, notably *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, by Laura and Al Ries. Did you look to an established brand as an example when you created your own strategy?

There are examples we use, but not one per se. I like Heinz 57 because it was an early brand in America based on gaining consumers' trust and the quality of food. It recognizes the consumers' need to trust the product.

We want to gain consumers' trust and show them there is a quality difference in their plants. In Heinz's case, that's lasted 100 years. That's not a bad track record. And their ketchup still tastes pretty good. Their pickles aren't bad either.

But creating a long-term branding campaign can be expensive, at the expense of short-term gains.

You want to strike a balance. The way to do it is to see that the money spent on branding is an investment and not look for an immediate jump in consumer awareness. As long as we're satisfying our customers and they're getting value, we can grow it. That's why we put our effort into our customers' success.

Let me guess, you probably won't disclose sales information about your company, which is privately held, right?

Sales are growing steadily. We don't really share growth figures. Sales have improved relative to before the brand. Customer awareness is up, with more avid gardeners, and that's the group we want to influence.

So you're aiming at the experts instead of trying to lure new customers?

Yes, but we weren't as specific early on. If you study Starbucks' example, they began with affluent business travelers on the East Coast because they were served on the United shuttle. The more avid gardeners are getting the Monrovia brand first. Word of mouth will spread from those knowledgeable gardeners.

In 2000, you acquired Wight Nurseries in Georgia and Berryhill Nursery in Ohio. Will the branding campaign help you get a foothold in the East Coast market?

Branding helped. But the opportunity with our companies back East is to look at the plants grown in the East Coast nurseries and grow them to our high-quality standards.

One consultant has criticized nurseries for selling plants in “black plastic trash cans.” But you now use a green plastic pot with your logo on it. Was that an important strategic move to promote Monrovia value?

The pot is not where the magic of our business is. The product is where the importance is. You can’t turn a low-quality plant into a high-quality one with a fancy wrapper.

Give us a sneak peek at something coming this fall.

The authority of our plant product is based so much in our soil science. You’ll be seeing more about why our soils are so much better and why plants thrive because of the soil.

Tell us about “craftsmen,” which you use to describe your employees.

The use of the phrase “horticultural craftsmen” was easy for us to do. We’ve lived that. That’s a natural. Coincidentally, it was a suggestion of some *women* in our company. We struggled a little bit with the tagline “healthiest, hardiest, most beautiful.” For so many years it was “Distinctively Better.” Perhaps that wasn’t a clear enough statement.

Is “craftsmen” important to your employees or just a buzzword for consumers?

We’ve spent a lot of time with our craftsmen explaining our branding effort. They’re proud of what they do and the quality of the plants. We ask our craftsmen to follow the plant and product or service into the marketplace to see where it’s touching our consumer, and make sure that the customer’s experience is a branded experience.

For example, if you’re shipping our plant, make sure it’s shipped great. At Starbucks, there are very few people responsible for roasting the coffee, but everyone is still concerned with the quality of the coffee.

Incidentally, a lot of our craftsmen are Spanish-speaking. The word actually translates better into Spanish — *artisan* — and has an

immediate sense of pride.

The term “craftsmen” goes back more than 150 years referring to a rebellion against mass production.

What does the Monrovia brand look like 10-20 years from now?

It will be what our customers want it to be. We might see more co-branding with garden centers. You might see different plants. But the general theme will be the same: the idea that there are independent garden centers who

will want to be known as carrying premium lines of plants.

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