

Marketing, Branding and Proprietary Varieties, Oh, My!



Where do growers fit into the new system
of pitching programs directly to the big boxes?

By Roger C. Styer

I was reading through a trade journal last month and came across a one-page announcement for Easy Wave petunias from Pan American Seed. According to the article, Easy Wave petunias are selected for growing in “premium packs.” The article went on to say that Easy Waves are earlier to flower, more compact and easier to control with chemical growth regulators, but still fill out just like regular Waves in the landscape. Having worked a great deal with many of my clients on growing Wave petunias, I thought this new series was a great idea. But then I read further.

The “Easy” name would not be promoted beyond the grower level, so stores and consumers would just see the Wave petunia series in a newly designed handle flat with colored packs, only this new series would be minus a few critical colors available in the regular Wave series.

Now, I thought this program was a little like putting the cart before the horse, so I decided to talk with some of my larger clients about Easy Waves. Some of them had received some seed for trialing this past spring, but no one was able to follow the trials to see if the Easy Waves would benefit them. I

asked key personnel whether they had been consulted about launching the Easy Wave program with their key stores. Most had not even heard of the Easy Wave program unless they were out at this year’s California Pack Trials.

However, the thing that really disturbed

me was a comment from one of my clients who sells to Lowes. He said that Lowes was specifically asking for the Easy Wave program. So, how did Lowes get hooked on Easy Waves? Let’s see, maybe they were out at the Pack Trials and Pan American talked with them. Good chance!

OUR MARKETING HISTORY

I don’t mean to pick on Pan American Seed about the Easy Waves. I think it will be good for growers. I just don’t think programs such as this should be introduced without more grower involvement and trialing — and definitely not pushed to the retailers — which leaves me wondering about marketing, branding and proprietary varieties, particularly with big box stores.

Competition is intense between Lowes, Home Depot, Wal-Mart and, to a lesser extent, K-Mart, Meijer’s and Frank’s. Typically, big box stores focus on price and much less on marketing programs and even proprietary varieties. If Lowes can have something different from Home Depot, they will readily sell it.

As margins erode, seed and plant suppliers have to sell more of their products to maintain profits, and we are seeing more of the suppliers going directly to big box stores with brands, marketing programs and, to some extent, proprietary varieties. Brands such as Proven Winners, Simply Beautiful and The Flower Fields are fighting it out for shelf space. Some suppliers work more closely with one chain or another, and may work out a limited-time proprietary variety agreement to be sold exclusively through that chain.

Growers want to sell more plants at better margins. To do this, they concentrate on store-specific marketing and branding, hoping that they can perform better than their competition and remain the number one supplier for that chain in that area. How many different programs can the grower keep coming up


with every year? Once a program becomes successful, it gets copied, reducing its exclusivity and profitability.

BECOMING PARTNERS

It’s hard to say how well all of this is working. One of the best successes in developing and marketing a brand is certainly Wave petunias. Even in big box stores, people will ask for them by name. Time will tell if Proven Winners works for the big box stores, but it certainly works for independent garden centers. Price points may determine the success or failure of this program in the boxes. A great failure has to be My Favorite Mum. This program and brand was pushed to certain growers as a high-margin product but was never priced or displayed properly in the box stores.

For store-specific programs, branding and promotions to work well in our industry, growers need to become more involved from the start. Communication with key chains should focus on what is available, when to sell it, what package it should be sold in (pot, label, etc.), how it will be displayed in stores and price points.

I am really afraid that box stores focus so much on price that many premium products will not make it because of their higher production and shipping costs. Trialing of the new products or programs should be done in test markets first, then rolled out nationally if that is what the supplier and chain want.

The key is for growers to become involved. If you want a say in it, then you better get involved now! Work with your key suppliers, develop new programs, get out to Pack Trials and start testing new introductions. 

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