



By Stan Pohmer

Creating Relevance & Consumption

What do growers and retailers need to do to help consumers understand the value and benefits of their products — and ultimately buy more of them?

It used to be that growers grew and retailers sold. It was the retailers' job and responsibility to create the market for our products. And for many years, this formula worked well.

But something's happened over the past 10 years or so. The growth rate in our industry has slowed significantly. And although we can blame some of this on the lousy economy of the past two years that's rained on our collective parade, our problem started long before that. Some may say the challenging weather patterns are the cause of

our lack of sales impetus; further study will show that the climatological impacts were more regional than national, and we have a national industry problem.

So to what can we attribute this concerning trend and, more importantly in my humble (or not so humble) opinion, what can we do to get back on track and start growing again?

Yes, we've been facing some demographic changes that are impacting our businesses, with the Boomers, our core consumers, aging and reducing their involvement in our products. And, yes, the X-ers, Y-ers and Millennials aren't as inured with our products as their parents have been. And, yes, there's been a lack of new home construction that traditionally fueled some of our sales, and homeowners are downsizing. These are definite contributors to the state our industry is experiencing, but I believe that these are more symptoms of our problem and not the primal cause.

As an industry, we haven't done a great job of providing or educating consumers of all demographic strata with the reasons that plants and flowers are important to their lives and lifestyles. We haven't communicated the real value our products provide. We haven't promoted the real personal benefits — emotional, psychological or physiological — that floriculture can and does provide. We haven't effectively shown the financial contribution that landscapes add to home values. Bottom line, we haven't demonstrated the relevance of our products to the consumer, and this, more than any of these external challenges that are really beyond our direct control, is the single most significant factor that has contributed to our slowing consumption.

It's a Different Consumer Out There

Today's consumer is far different than they were 10 and 20 years or even five years ago. The way we communicate with them (or don't communicate with them) is different. The recent growth of social and digital media

as a means of connecting with people, declining newspaper and magazine readership, the rapid rise of "affinity" broadcasting, or the growth of specialty TV and cable channels, are all factors that are changing the way consumers think about products and shop. Consumers today research potential purchases via the Internet long before they walk through the front doors of a store.

We constantly hear that today's consumer is more value conscious than ever before, and I believe this is true, especially in today's economy. But as an industry, we tend to equate "value" only with "low price." Recent studies have shown that the way consumers view value is in the personal benefits a product provides versus other products that they can purchase. Sure, price plays a factor in their decision matrix, but if one can demonstrate real personal value, price becomes a secondary consideration.

From my perspective, this all boils down to creating and communicating the relevance of the products our industry offers, and there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that plants and flowers can be relevant in all consumers' lives and lifestyles, to all demographic segments, young or old, even if they are more value conscious. Our products align with the value and values consumers are looking for better than almost any other category I can think of; our opportunity to start increasing consumption is identifying and communicating the real value we offer. The relevance we need is beyond "pretty" and low priced.

So what can we as an industry do to help create this needed relevance? Some may say that an industry-supported marketing campaign, a "Got Milk?" for plants and flowers is the answer. I won't go into all of the reasons why this isn't practical here, but this simply ain't gonna happen. We don't have the necessary funding, industry infrastructure or stick-to-itiveness (i.e. we don't have the patience to wait for a PR campaign like this to gain traction) to make this a reality.

Creating Relevance

Creating and communicating relevance isn't just the job of the retailer, even though they are closer to the consumer than most growers are. The lessons learned over the past few years, whether it's because of the economic downturn or programs like vendor managed inventory (VMI) or pay by scan (PBS), taught us (or should have taught us) that collectively we're all in business to satisfy the needs of one customer, the end consumer; we're no longer a supply chain, we're a *demand* chain driven by the consumer. So what can the grower do to help create and communicate the value needed to demonstrate relevance?

Four things come immediately to mind, and none of them requires huge capital outlays.

1 There's been discussion over the past few years about creating a grassroots initiative based on the "quality of life" attributes or benefits plants and flowers provide. Once we as an industry agree on what these benefits are, we can then begin using them in consumer messaging, be that on the tags and labels growers use in/on their pots, the graphics that are put on rolling billboards (aka delivery trucks), or on POP signage and displays growers provide to their retailers. Retailers would include these same quality of life value messages in their marketing communications to their customers. One important note is that none of these value messages would in any way subvert the brand message of the individual grower or retailer; what we're talking about are industry taglines that can be communicated on materials you're already using/providing and promoting.

2 America in Bloom (www.americainbloom.org): AIB is a voluntary national industry effort already in place that is helping to develop relevancy for our products on a local level. The goal of America in Bloom is to encourage and help municipalities, towns, villages and cities to beautify and create community spirit through the use of plants and flowers. By getting civic leaders, the business community and the local citizens (including garden clubs, Boy/Girl Scouts, schools and homeowners), everyone gets to better understand the relevance and contributions plants and flowers play on both a community and personal level.

America in Bloom (and the website) is a resource for communities that want to get involved in this movement. America in Bloom also offers a friendly competition among communities of similar population size; in addition to getting bragging

rights, the expert judges of the competition provide a detailed report on how to improve, providing best practices that will help keep everyone in the community involved with our products in the future.


I encourage growers to become the captains of the AIB movement within their own communities and to communicate this program to all of their customers (as well as local governments) to help get them involved.

3 Children are our future customers! Consider sponsoring tours of your facilities to schools, youth organizations (i.e. Boy/Girl Scouts, 4-H, etc.), and sponsoring projects related to our products through school science fairs. The earlier they are exposed to the benefits of plants and flowers, the easier it is to get them involved when they get older.

4 Offer seminars and educational sessions to consumers in your marketplace, either in your own greenhouse facilities or at your retail customers' operations.

Start Now

Creating relevancy for our products equates to building consumption by our consumers. And everyone needs to be part of this effort no matter where you are in the demand chain; you can't sit on the sidelines waiting for someone else to do this for you.

We've got great products and it's not just about low prices. We need to communicate the real value, benefits and relevancy to our consumers to get our industry moving in a positive direction again... 

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