

INDUSTRY PROMOTION

...the Good, the Bad and the Ugly



By Stan Pohmer

Those of you who have worked with me before, have heard me speak at industry events or have read my past writings know that I am one of the industry's staunchest supporters of consumer-focused marketing and promotion efforts. We've got a great product that the consumer genuinely likes, but we're continually getting outshined by the marketing/promotional efforts of nonfloriculture products. These other industries are successfully convincing the consumer that their products are better than ours, providing them with compelling reasons that a spending vote for their products is a better value or is better for them.

To this I say... "Hogwash!" We know this isn't true, that we are the better choice, but have any of us really told this to the consumer? We spend a lot of time, effort and money telling each other that we have the preferred choices – the better products and programs – but preaching to ourselves doesn't add a nickel to our industry sales or your bottom line. If, as an industry, we could ever get ourselves together with a unified front, a consistent message, to the consumer, there's not enough production capacity to support the demand that would be created!

WHAT'S IN THE AIR

Well, that scary phrase "industry promotion" is raising its ugly head again!

At least two initiatives were broached at the OFA Short Course in July. The first, America In Bloom, uses the Communities In Bloom strategy: a grass roots, civic landscaping, PR campaign that originated in Canada and was brought to the United States by the now-defunct BPI. It has been presented as a stepping-off point for the development of a national marketing initiative.

The second marketing suggestion was for a campaign to reposition poinsettias as a value-added, home decorating solution with the goal of changing the image from a price-based focus (something we as an industry have promulgated and perpetuated, not a position that was dictated to us by the consumer). Both of these initiatives met with, at best, lukewarm response from the audience.

Some of you may say, "been there, done that," because the industry has attempted to organize marketing and promotional efforts before, without sustained success. Anyone care to remember Floral Board, Promoflor and Plant America?

OUR CHALLENGES

A marketing/promotional campaign for the floriculture industry has to deal with a number of anomalies that other successful commodity campaigns (e.g., Dairy Council, Beef and Pork Councils, Grape and Apple Commissions, etc.) don't have to deal with. And yes, many of our products are commodities because we've positioned them to the consumer that way. Consider some of our challenges:

Our industry is made up of many different and divergent sub-groups: annuals, perennials, foliage, trees, herbs and specialty plants, cut flowers, etc. The dairy industry has one main product: milk. All of their other products, like cheese or ice cream, are milk by-products.

In floriculture, there is no association

or trade organization that represents all aspects of the industry, nor is there any national group that can speak for or coordinate all of the state, local or specialized product group's efforts. The dairy industry, as an example, has a national council that represents the interests of all the individual state or regional dairy groups.

The floriculture industry has to deal with climatic zones that dictate both production and retail timing, as well as actual product availability by geographic area. In the Sunbelt states, gardening is a year-round business, starting in January, while here in the upper Midwest, the season kicks off in late April and only lasts 6-8 weeks. Milk, on the other hand, can be universally promoted at any time; the beef and pork industries can focus on national barbecue promotions from Mother's Day through Labor Day.

Producers in our industry are forced to take sides with retailers: They are either mass-market oriented or independent retailer-focused. Each retail segment's needs are different. And, these retail channels look at each other as archrivals. A cow is only concerned with providing milk, and there is no difference in a gallon of milk at the convenience store or the supercenter; the cow is apolitical.

Because of the multitude of combinations and permutations in our industry – caused by the different product and geographic groups and the varying degrees of participation and representation in these groups – we are forced to deal with tremendous political pressures. For example, a program that meets (or is perceived to meet) the needs of the mass merchandiser will not be supported by the independent retailer and vice versa. In the dairy industry, the cow is still apolitical and has no inter-