

A Bold Approach To Marketing

With an eye-catching catalog that varies from the industry standard, Takao Nursery is on a mission to reach past the current Baby Boomer customers and attract younger shoppers.

By Val Cunningham

You do not need a crystal ball to find a road to continued profitability in the nursery business: Just page through the most recent catalog from a California propagator working to create energy and enthusiasm — and a whole new marketing approach — among its broker, sales reps and grower customers.

When Takao Nursery's most recent publication arrived in customers' mailboxes, it practically screamed for attention, announcing a new wind blowing through a mature industry. (Based in Fresno, Calif., Takao is a family-owned business that is mid sized by industry standards.)

Avoiding the traditional nursery catalog parade of page after page of small photos showing everything in stock, Takao Nursery took an entirely different approach. Its eye-catching catalog features far fewer plants — only about 50 are shown — strikingly presented to get readers thinking in new ways. Called *Fleur, the Magazine about Plants and Fashion*, the catalog looks very much like a high-end fashion magazine. From front to back, it is a major departure from industry norms.

"Flowers gone glam!" trumpets the cover, and the inside pages live up to that billing, linking flowers to fashion accessories. Bold layouts drape

roses in jewelry and pair shrubs with trendy handbags and cosmetics with coreopsis and roses. There's a flowery send-up of a well-known vodka maker and a photo feature on hosting a garden party, complete with recipes. Interspersed with all the glamour are "think" pieces about marketing to a younger generation. The catalog even includes a case history of a young couple with little time for gardening who still want plants to enhance their lifestyle, both strong trends for their age group.

What in the world is Takao Nursery trying to accomplish?

Seeking A New Segment

"Our entire industry is flattening out," said Danny Takao, who manages the growing side of the business. "We've reached a maturity peak; there is a lot of competition out there and our customer base is aging, so we need to go after a new segment."

As a passionate gardener and businessperson who is not afraid of change, Takao drew a parallel to the wine industry: "They've made wine more of a lifestyle product, and that's what growers and retailers need to do to attract a new generation of gardeners," he argued.

The dramatic catalog is just one aspect of this nursery's approach to the market's changing demographics, albeit an important one. A behind-the-scenes look into how the book was created turns up one of Takao Nursery's secret weapons: Lisa Takao, oldest daughter and a member of the company. Lisa creates the concepts, does all the photography, draws on her graphic



Top: With a fashion-magazine design that pairs varieties with jewelry, handbags and cosmetics, this year's catalog shows Takao's customers the kind of things that appeal to young adults hungry for tips, style ideas and trends. **Bottom:** The catalog includes a case history of a young couple with little time for gardening who still want plants to enhance their lifestyle, both strong trends for their age group. (Photos: Takao Nursery)

About Takao Nursery

Location:	Fresno, Calif.
Family business:	Danny, Renu, their daughter Lisa and Danny's brother, Kogi
Industry role:	Propagator, selling through brokers
Size of business:	Mid sized, ships about 8 million liners each year
Philosophy:	It's all about building relationships

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design training for layout and design, writes the text and manages the production process.

"Each year I try to create a completely new catalog for the company, something unique to the industry and to Takao Nursery, so our customers always look forward to receiving it and want to see what we're doing," Lisa said. (Previous year's offerings included a catalog with a dessert theme and another focused on classic artists like Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh.)

Pushing The Envelope

Lisa wanted this year's catalog to show Takao's customers the kind of things that appeal to young adults hungry for tips, style ideas and trends.

"I think it is so important that the industry begins to place more focus on the next generation, because they will become the new consumers," Lisa noted, explaining why the Takao catalog evokes trendy fashion magazines. "If we don't show them the value of plants now, how can we expect them to value plants in the future?"

Reaction To The "Glam" Catalog:

"If gardening was less hassle, then maybe it would be more attractive to young adults, because we are so busy and hardly have any time."

— A 20-something respondent to a Takao survey

Even though she's only in her mid 20s, Lisa handles her marketing responsibilities with aplomb: "I'm not afraid to push the envelope by coming up with a concept that initially may seem very different or too 'out there,'" she said, laughing that she is "silently stubborn."

After devising the fashion concept, Lisa chose from blooming stock on hand to illustrate it, setting up her own photo shoots, sometimes on a conference table or floor area. The snazzy cover photo featuring greenery peeking out of a fashionable straw purse required only a visit to her closet, since Lisa owns the purse. The cosmetics were acquired at a discount store, and the stylish purses paired with flowering plants were purchased from a stock photo library.

With a Jill-of-all-trades like Lisa in the shop, Takao Nursery is able to create an impressive catalog without a major financial outlay.

Post Baby Boom

Underneath the glitz and glam, the Takao's have a serious mission: They would like to convince growers to be farsighted, to look past the current Baby Boomer customer. There is a need to recognize that young people lead busy lives with little time for garden maintenance. They are often renters with limited space who are looking for bargains and ideas for using plants to enhance their living spaces and their lifestyles — and they will shop at big box stores unless efforts are made to draw them to garden centers.

Special events could pull them in, says Renu Takao, the nursery's financial officer. And once inside, they are more likely to make purchases if a center offers clear labeling as well as tips on plant selection and placement, she added.

"For many young people, the idea of gardening reminds them of their mothers spending



The catalog's Garden Party feature is complete with decorating tips and recipes that are designed to make it simple to throw a party.



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a whole day weeding," Renu pointed out. "They don't have the time or inclination for that kind of gardening."

Plan A Special Event

The catalog's Garden Party feature, complete with decorating tips and recipes, could be a blueprint for growers and retailers looking to stage events to lure a hip, younger crowd into the garden center.

"Retailers need ways to bring young people into their stores," Renu said, "and once they're there, the stores need to gear things to the consumer and their needs, not the conservative, grower-oriented system we have now."

As a strong advocate for new ways of doing business, Takao Nursery and its staff do "walk the talk." Some might question printing a catalog showing only a fraction of the plants in the nursery, but the entire Takao product line is on the company's Web site. The Internet is another

important element of marketing to a younger audience, something the industry has been slow to grasp.

The nursery has been in the Takao family since Danny's mother opened it in 1960. In the business for some 25 years, Takao now travels the world to extend the company's product lines, including Blooms of Bressingham North America, Greenex New Zealand and Suntory Japan.

As a fascinated observer of his industry, Danny offered a final perspective: "We all have to be open to change because our industry is evolving. At Takao, we've always embraced change and feel there's an exciting frontier out there full of great opportunities, and we want to be a part of it." **GPN**

Val Cunningham is a freelance writer and editor based in St. Paul, Minn. She can be reached at valwrites@comcast.net.

Lisa used blooming stock on hand and set up her own photo shoots, sometimes on a conference table or floor area. The cosmetics were acquired at a discount store.

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