



Market-Hardy Branding

Successful branding is more than just a name and a logo — it's having quality control and commitment to support that image. That's how a little boy with overalls and a cap earned Welby Gardens the title of runner-up for this year's marketing innovation award.

By Brandi D. Thomas



When you think of carnations, you probably think South America. But before we started importing cut flowers from our neighbors, Colorado was the leader in carnation production in the United States.

With such a carnation proliferation in the 1960s, many growers strove to differentiate. Their reaction: branding their products as better, unique and different. But you can only have so many one-of-a-kind products — and this market went from being flooded with an unnamed to a variously named commodity. Branding without quality control only served to prolong the inevitable demise of Colorado carnation production; oversupply caused low margins, marketing became too expensive and over time, growers became saddled with an unprofitable product.

At this point, you are probably wondering what this history has to do with Welby Gardens, the runner-up for the 2002 GPN/MasterTag Marketing Innovation Award, especially if you know that this Colorado-based grower does not grow cut flowers. The most important thing about this digression is not how carnations were once strong but why they became weak — and why branding is the reason. According to MasterTag consumer research, Welby Gardens' brand is recognized by 51 percent of consumers in the Denver area — more than Blooms of Bressingham, Wave Petunia and Martha Stewart.



Blue pots and large tags bearing the Hardy Boy logo draw attention to these Exotic Old World herbs.

HARDY HISTORY

Welby Gardens developed their Hardy Boy logo in 1976. They'd been in business for nearly 30 years and had witnessed the carnation catastrophe. The Gerace family wanted the logo to be easily identifiable and distinguish plants as easy for consumers to grow.

According to Alex Gerace, "We saw that if there wasn't some way to establish quality and recognition of your plants, you were forced to take what

the market could bear. We felt that by branding our product — standing behind it and guaranteeing it — we would establish ourselves in the market. We saw the demise of the carnation industry and what happened when things became commodities; we see today what happens to garden mums, which are offered by everybody at the lowest prices — that you can't establish both quality and price."

Welby realized from the very beginning that they could not just unleash a brand with a cute logo and expect it to work. They knew it had to be nurtured and controlled at every step, from the greenhouse to retail. "You have to have some kind of control over the product," explained Alex, "because logos in dead plants are not good advertising." How did they secure that control? By being choosy about their customers, exclusively independents. "We knew that we had a good form of marketing through independents," he said. "They're going to make sure that someone takes care to water the plants because their profits are at risk. A good portion of our success is who we choose to market to." In short, having committed retailers is directly related to your performance. "If you're not able to influence retailers, then all your work can be destroyed," Alex added.

Later, Welby tightened their control by funding newspaper ad campaigns that helped customers increase profits. The campaigns began in local papers and expanded to other critical markets where 4-6 retailers carried the brand. "We placed ads for them, using their logos and identifying the retailers and the locations where consumers could find Hardy Boy plants. It was very similar to co-op; we basically paid the cost of the ads and they were required to buy a minimum of the product in the ad," said Alex. Individual retailers kept track of their responses, and when they got 150-180 ad coupons in one weekend, they had tangible evidence that the ads were working.

HARDY HERBS

Welby's Hardy Boy can be seen on annuals, perennials, ornamental grasses and vegetable starter plants in Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, Mississippi and Iowa — but it's to their line of Herbs that they are given special recognition. ♦

The company’s goal with this line was to eliminate confusion about whether herbs were hardy or tender. Herbs are designated as “Exotic Alpine,” “Exotic Old World” or “Exotic Tropical” based on their hardiness zones.

“Exotic Alpine” herbs will withstand frost and are primarily perennial in Zones 4, 5 and 6. Picture an herb on the peaks of snow-capped mountains; Alpine plant tags depict just such an image, which helps consumers feel they can purchase ginkgo, oregano, thyme, Echinacea, mint, sage, valerian, ChasteBerry Tree, Beton and blueberry without worrying about frost.

“Exotic Old World” indicates climates of the Mediterranean and England. These plants — bay, citrosa, chamomile, rosemary, licorice, stevia, society garlic, lavender, tarragon, fennel and curry — are semi-hardy in Zones 7 and 8 and can withstand cold but not frost. The blue sea and old-world architecture is what consumers see on these tags, providing the visual cue that these plants thrive in temperate climates.

Tender herbs make up “Exotic Tropicals,” which includes black pepper, vanilla, sarsaparilla, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, lemon grass, sugar cane, gotu kola, allspice and basil.

The Welby program has been awarded runner-up status, according to MasterTag’s Joe Fox, based on the creative way it represents the plant segments. “It draws on emotional appeal to the consumer and goes beyond a traditional representation of specific plant characteristics,” he explained.

Welby crafted an entire program around these herbs and themes that includes information about the herbs — from mythological to practical uses. Visuals and P.O.P. materials include plant tags, a double-sized, 14- x 16-inch placard, banners and literature. When the program was first launched, Welby placed newspaper advertisements listing all the retailers involved and the various promotional activi-


ties that would be taking place, including in-store contests for the best herbal recipes. Individual retailers were able to give winners a full day at an herbal spa. One week featured herb container planting, where customers came to the stores and either bought or brought in their own containers for planting. The most impressive of the contest prizes was a trip to one of the Caribbean spice islands. Employees could even get involved. At some locations, there were as many as 13 staff entries for herb recipes; the winners received Hardy Boy bedding plants or cash.

HARDY HANDLING

Alex Gerace believes there is a definite benefit to grower-branded product: quality control. “If you have a nationally branded product,” he said, “it could be a good item but grown poorly. The good-looking plant will always perform the best.” Welby also has control over the types of plants they brand — they aren’t just new and unique, but proven to perform. Welby chooses items that perform well in the area they are shipping, running a 1-year trial on each plant to make sure they are actually able to withstand the end-market climate.

“If you’re going to brand, you have to be critical of your product, critical all along the way, not just until you get it out the door,” Alex advised. “If you see yourself as just one of everybody else, that you can’t do anything to your product to make it any better, then you’re not going to be successful.” This is the moral of the Colorado carnation — one that you, like Welby, can benefit from. GPN

Brandi D. Thomas is associate editor of GPN.



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