



*Grower Direct Farms' unique consumer plant packaging system took off in the retail market and soared high enough to grab first runner-up in the 2001 GPN/MasterTag Marketing Innovation Award program.*

# The Little (Marketing) Idea That Could

*By Beth Meneghini*

Ideas are born from simple things. Something usual, something you see everyday. Then one day, somebody discovers something in the everyday that you didn't. Something different, something better.

Case in point, Len Van Wingerden. Van Wingerden had probably come across a remote control before, maybe a calculator or two, perhaps even a camera. But it wasn't the electronic

devices that inspired Van Wingerden; it was the small ribbon hiding in the battery compartment. By pulling on the ribbon, the batteries inside simply fell out, no pulling, no rolling and no prying. Easy.

Van Wingerden got to thinking about the ribbon. And being a grower by trade and inventor by choice, he applied the ribbon idea to the design of his bedding flats.

## The Marketing Innovation Panel of Judges

All six judges that took part in last year's Marketing Innovation Award program returned for a second round.

"I think it speaks volumes about the significance of this project that each of our judges returned for a second year," said Joe Fox, sales and marketing manager for MasterTag. "And each of the members of this high profile group have again committed their active participation for next year. We hope to promote the program with enthusiasm and solicit even more entries for next year's award."

A seventh judge was added to this year's panel to help complete representation of the major segments of the floriculture industry.

**Jim Barrett**  
Professor of Horticulture  
University of Florida, Gainesville

**Bill Doeckel**  
Director of Marketing  
Ball Horticultural Co.

**John Gaydos**  
Director of Public Relations, Promotions and  
Product Development  
Proven Winners

**Ed Gillette**  
Publisher  
GPN Magazine

**Mitch McDonald**  
Grower  
Chipsea Greenhouse

**Lisa Oliver**  
Asst. Vice President of Live Goods  
Frank's Nursery

**Stan Pohmer**  
Floricultural Consultant  
Pohmer Consulting Group



*The plastic "ribbon" inserts for the Wing Series make life a lot more simple for home gardeners. Each insert is color-coded, according to its size and price. Consumers can easily remove the Wing Pack inserts to view the plant's root system. The insert also makes for easy removal of the plant material for transplant into containers or the landscape.*



"I first tried the idea with a ribbon. It was a failure," said Van Wingerden. "I tried again and came up with the Wing Series, and now it works beautifully."

This consumer plant packaging system, known as the Wing Series, is the one that earned Len Van Wingerden and his greenhouse operation, Grower Direct Farms, the rank of first runner-up in the GPN/MasterTag

Second Annual Marketing Innovator Award.

### BREAKING THE MOLD

Somers, Conn.-based Grower Direct Farms grows all the usual suspects in annuals and perennials: impatiens, petunias, salvia, marigolds and osteospermum, to name a few. The operation employs about 60 people working on 500,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse space, six

acres of outdoor growing area and 45,000 square feet of support building. In business for 18 years, Grower Direct hummed along in its market niche, selling product mainly to mass merchandisers, until two years ago. Home Depot, Lowe's, Sam's Club, Wal-Mart, and various supermarkets in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, eastern New York and



Len Van Wingerden developed the Wing Series as a consumer package that would market itself. Grower Direct does, however, use some POP materials to promote the Wing Packs and the variety of different plant types they work with. These bench cards attract consumers with both the plant type and the unique packaging of the Wing Series. (POP materials courtesy of Grower Direct.)

## Marketing — Spreading the Word

Marketing is no longer a dirty word in the greenhouse industry. We are still a ways from growers shouting their marketing prowess from the nearest hilltop, but the "M" word is no longer whispered behind closed doors.

It wasn't that long ago, however, when a grower who dared divert even a few pennies toward a marketing initiative was thought to be a fool. After all, in a production-driven industry like commercial growing, you simply didn't spend money on intangibles.

But in today's world of ad budgets, branding, promotional tie-ins and value-added marketing, growers are starting to realize that marketing gets results. And although you may not see them next week or even the week after that, a savvy marketing campaign can be the difference between a good year and a great year.

### LEADING BY EXAMPLE

While grower marketing has gained a higher profile in floriculture, there are still growers out there who have yet to take the plunge. Many are not aware of the wellspring of resources and support available to them. Others simply don't know that growers like them, in other parts of the country or perhaps just down the road, have successfully implemented a marketing program and would love to share their stories.

One company thought it was time to get the word out.

"MasterTag decided to start this awards program as a way to communicate to the entire industry the benefits of growers helping

to sell their products to the gardening consumer," said Joe Fox, sales and marketing manager for MasterTag.

Patterned after a similar program company managers observed in Australia, MasterTag developed the Marketing Innovation Award. The program's objectives are to encourage innovation in marketing green goods at the grower level and to promote successful examples of unique marketing programs in the industry.

"Our primary goal is to get more people to think about marketing and how it can change their business," said Fox. "It will someday be an industry requirement; you'll not only have to promote your product, you'll have to promote gardening as an activity. There are simply too many choices out there for consumers. We as an industry have to start effectively competing for consumer's discretionary dollars."

### TWO YEARS OLD AND GOING STRONG

The program debuted in 1999 and boasted almost a dozen entries. The award winner, Mt. Vernon, Wash.-based Etera, was announced at a reception during the Ohio Short Course in July. The Short Course also served as the kick-off for the Second Annual Marketing Innovation Award (MIA).

"We are extremely happy with the program this year," said Fox. "Things ran a bit smoother this time around because we had a chance to work out all the kinks."

The entry period ran from July 2000 to December 2000. A panel of independent

judges (see boxed item on pg. 26) chose one first place winner and a first and second runner-up. As in its first year, applications for the award were open to all greenhouse and nursery producers of plant products in North America.

Some of this year's applicants included Darvonda Nurseries, Fernlea, Gro N Sell Inc., Grower Direct, Natural Beauty Growers, Riverbend Nursery and Sunny Border Nurseries.

"I've been asked if entrants must be customers of MasterTag. My answer to that is absolutely not," said Fox. "The more growers think about how to merchandise and package their products, the more the industry grows as a whole."

This year's winners will again be announced at the Ohio Short Course in July. First prize is a seven-day vacation to Disney World in Orlando, Fla., including airfare, accommodations, and \$1,500 in spending money. This article is the first in the series of MIA winner profiles to appear in GPN. The first place winner will be featured in a cover story in the June issue. The second-runner up will be featured in July.

And remember, it's never too early to start planning for next year. Submit an application for the 2001 MIA, provided your company's marketing/merchandising program has been introduced to the retail market prior to entering the competition.

For more information on the program or to receive an application, please contact MasterTag by phone (800)253-0439 or by fax (800)528-0003.

# marketing

Pennsylvania all purchased plant material from Grower Direct.

But the once comfortable niche took on a different form in the spring of 1999. That's when Van Wingerden first implemented the Wing Series into his business. He saw in this invention the greatest kind of marketing tool, the one that

creates consumer convenience.

"The Wing Pack enhances the plant product," said Van Wingerden. "It's a sturdy, attractive packaging device that is consumer friendly in several ways. Most importantly, it lets consumers remove plants from the pack without any hassle."

There are four sizes in the Wing Series, although the tray dimensions for each are identical, 8.4 by 9.6 inches. The difference comes in the size of the plant, so packs hold either 4, 6, 12 or 16 plants. Unlike vacuum-formed packs, Wing Packs are two-color injection molded packs. Depending on its size, a



## PLANTS THAT WORK WELL IN THE WING PACK

Van Wingerden grows most bedding plants and many smaller perennials in the Wing Pack, including the following:

Geraniums  
Impatiens  
Marigolds  
New Guinea  
impatiens  
Osteospermum  
Pansies  
Petunias  
Salvia  
Vinca



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THE FLOWER FIELDS

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Wing Pack tray has two or four rows. Into the rows fit what Van Wingerden calls the "plant ribbon," which in this case had to be transformed into a plastic insert.

The plant ribbon is a continuous plastic mold into which plants are placed. The plant ribbon can easily be removed from the pack, allow-

ing customers to see the plant's root ball as well as easily remove the cell for planting without damaging the plant or root system. No pulling, no rolling, no prying. Easy.

"The common 6-12 pack flat is a retailing nightmare," said Van Wingerden. "Displays quickly become disheveled, and half-empty

flats give customers the leftover feeling, an impression that all the best plants have been taken."

The Wing Series is a single-sell unit, so when a customer picks one up, only the display space is left behind. Wing Pack trays have two tag-lock slots and a secure, working handle. Plant ribbons are

color-coded by the number of plants they hold for easy pricing. The Series' uniform size allows for both display efficiency and mechanical transplanting. As it turns out, the Wing Series is grower-friendly as well.

## MARKETING ITSELF

The Wing Series doesn't have an extensive POP program. Van Wingerden did not expend a massive budget promoting his innovation. Instead, he created a series of 30 x 60-inch banners that promote the Wing Pack and the type of plant it holds, but there are no special tags, no placards and no life-size Velcro signs.

None of these extravagant measures are needed because Wing Packs sell themselves. The marketing genius is the consumer packaging. Joe Fox, sales and marketing manager for MasterTag, Montague, Mich., feels that the Marketing Innovation entry by Grower Direct Farms shows growers that there are no rules or boundaries to a marketing program. "Good ideas aren't always elaborate or expensive, just innovative," said Fox.

## LEADING THE PACK

Van Wingerden owns the patent on the Wing Series and for right now, he seems to own the market on this type of consumer packaging.

"Marketing is very important to our business," said Van Wingerden. "This idea has really taken off, and we're consistently moving more of our product into Wing Packs."

Van Wingerden has implemented the Wing Pack system into several Home Depot, Lowes and Wal-Mart stores in the Northeast and expects more will be on the way.

"We've even sold small quantities of the Wing Series to some growers so they can grow, test and market the packaging in their local area and with their customers," said Van Wingerden.

Len Van Wingerden may not be shouting his marketing strategy from every hilltop, but he is certainly paving a way for other growers (and accepting deserved accolades along the way). GPN

Beth Meneghini is West Coast Editor of GPN.

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THE SCOTTS CO./HORT

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