

Marketing With Sole



Under A Foot Plant Co. really steps it up when it comes to marketing its plants to consumers across the country.

By Tim Hodson

“You never have any regrets when you do a good job!”

That is what Fran Hopkins has done at Under A Foot Plant Co. — an extremely good job. The founder, president and chief executive of the Salem, Ore.-based company has no regrets for how she has marketed her company’s “great, creepy, crawly, under-a-foot kind of plants.” In fact, her marketing program has been so successful that Under A Foot Plant Co. has been awarded the 2007 GPN/John Henry Co. Creative Marketing Award.

The Creative Marketing Award recognizes an innovative marketing program that truly makes a difference in the marketplace. Some of the characteristics of the winning program include originality,

resourcefulness, and overall impact and effectiveness.

“In my own way, I am a serious control freak,” when it comes to marketing Hopkins said. STEPABLES “is a brand, and for it to continually evolve on a successful and wide scale, I have to have some pretty strategic brand standards for people.”

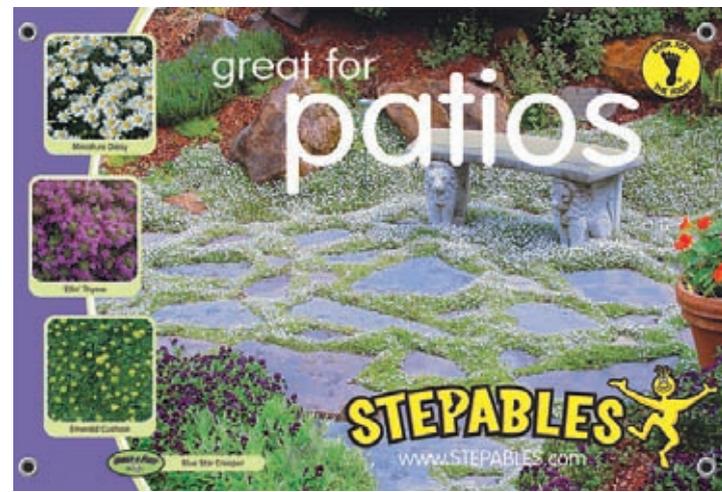
These standards have allowed the product to reach all 50 states and recently Ontario, Canada, and some day, hopefully, around the world.

Hopkins’ approach to marketing is also impressive. For inspiration and to make sure she is in touch with today’s consumers, Hopkins is constantly looking outside the horticulture industry to find new and innovative ideas that help keep the STEPABLES program both fresh and fun for growers and consumers.



Fran Hopkins, president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Co., demonstrates the versatility and durability of STEPABLES, creeping perennial groundcover plantings that tolerate foot traffic and are easy to maintain. They are intended to reduce weeds and give landscapes a special finishing touch. (Photos: Under A Foot Plant Co.)

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Left to right: Garden centers have a many different options for signage and tags when displaying the STEPABLES line; STEPABLES' POP material is aimed at the "typical homeowner, not a savvy gardener." It is intended to help those gardeners be successful, thereby turning them into repeat customers; STEPABLES signage also provides consumers with creative growing suggestions.

A Name And Brand

When asked to define STEPABLES, Hopkins always says, "They are plants you can walk on." The funny looks people give her when she says this are always followed with the question, "Really, you can walk on them?" Her answer is always a demonstrative "Yes," as she shows potential customers how they can jump up and down on the products.

That's even how she came up with the name STEPABLES. One day a landscaper came in specifically looking for plant material to put between steppingstones. She showed him several different varieties that were in bloom, and he said they wouldn't work because people couldn't walk on them. So to prove her point, she began jumping up and down on the plants. That's when he shouted to her, "They're stepables!"

From that point on, she said, the name really stuck. "I got [the name] in my head and I couldn't get rid of it. I went and saw a trademark attorney a week later and trademarked the name, and it just went on from there."

The company's signature foot logo and the distinctive dancing yellow Happy Guy make the 135 different STEPABLES varieties very easy to identify in the garden center. The versatility and diversity of the product offerings provides Hopkins with plenty of opportunities.

Currently, there are 15 growers in the United States growing STEPABLES. The plants can be found in more than 3,500 garden

centers. Hopkins said her products are not available in any of the national big box stores, but they are available in some of the regional grocery chains like Meijer's in the Midwest and Fred Meyers in the Northwest.

The Background

Under A Foot Plant Co. started as a wholesale plant nursery that sold more than 400 different types

of ground covers and perennials. Prior to starting the company, Hopkins was an assistant grower for Armstrong Growers in southern California.

of ground covers and perennials. Prior to starting the company, Hopkins was an assistant grower for Armstrong Growers in southern California. It wasn't long before, "I kind of became the Northwest guru for variegated and unique, ground covering, perennial creeping plants," Hopkins said. But she had bigger plans for her plants — she wanted to take them nationwide. To do that, marketing would have to play a key role.

"It is pretty hard to run a mark-

eting program in this industry and make money at it," Hopkins declared. But she knew she could do it.

"After about nine or 10 years of being in the wholesale nursery business, we came up with the STEPABLES line and that sort of changed everything because we eventually stopped growing wholesale. I couldn't do a national program and concentrate on doing wholesaling at the same time."

the program are definitely tested and definitely worthy of going into the STEPABLES program."

The plants are tested for just about any consumer scenario. Can you drive a car on them? Can you use them around your downspouts? Ride a bike on them? How many kids can jump up and down on them? You name it and Hopkins has probably tested her plants for it.

"The other day I had a question about horse traffic. It is really interesting what STEPABLES means to people. We do all kinds of testing and crazy tests because that is what people need. They want these plants to have numerous uses."

Marketing To Consumers Nationwide And Beyond

Hopkins believes STEPABLES has been successful across the country and now Canada because she focuses on consumer awareness and "the ability to understand what a consumer needs."

"I am not putting anything new out that people haven't seen. I have finally just put creeping perennials into a category where people can understand and use them," she said. "That and the fact that it is a fun product."

"Nobody can complain when the product is priced correctly, it looks gorgeous and it is that way all over the country," she added.

"The coolest thing about STEPABLES is everyone needs them." It doesn't matter if you live in an apartment, if you have a

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Having The Right Products

Not only is Hopkins president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Co., but she also oversees all research and development. She tests every STEPABLES product before it is turned over to the growers so she can be sure the plants will live up to the brand name.

"We don't just throw every plant into the program. I do an insane amount of testing on the plant materials," Hopkins said. "I can't keep my hands out of the dirt. I want to make sure that the plants we put in

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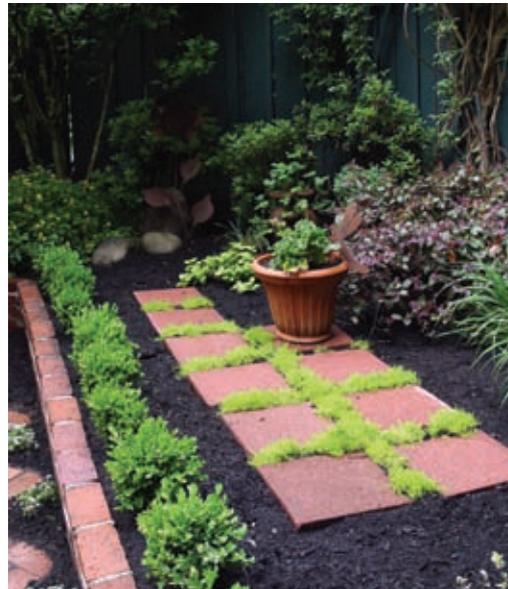


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STEPABLES are very kid friendly, Hopkins explained. She hopes to use STEPABLES children appeal to get younger generations interested in gardening.

huge yard, if you live in a drought area or whatever, there are plants for "enough scenarios that covers anyone that walks up to a display and picks up a plant and they will take it home."

So who is the typical STEPABLES customer? "Everyone," Hopkins declared. "Everybody can use these plants. From the 20-somethings to the 60-somethings."

She said the Gen Xers are really tuned in to STEPABLES because they have the disposable income but they may not have the time to maintain their yards and gardens. Whereas those customers in their 60s like the products because although they may have the time to garden, their bodies may not be as able as they used to be.

She is also making a big push for kids. Since the Happy Guy logo is very kid friendly, children are often drawn to the displays in the garden center. She hopes her products can help "bring young people back into horticulture."

"Kids love to jump up and down on these plants. They get this look [on their faces] and they can't believe they are allowed to do it." Hopkins sees this as an opportunity to open the door to the horticulture industry and "get them dirty — then I think we can get them hooked for life." She wants to at least get them hooked on gardening.

Engaging And Educational Tags And POP

Hopkins said she looks outside the horticulture industry when it comes to developing her point of purchase (POP) materials, tags and

other printed material. "I really scan all kinds of other retail markets to see what consumers are actually looking for. I spend an awful lot of time in grocery stores and department stores looking at consumers and what they are doing."

She said the garden centers benefit from this outside perspective, too, "because they don't normally see the kind of stuff we come out with so they are very happy to put it up and give it a go. And then when they see that it works, they put up more. That is what we are after."

In every other industry, the product is neatly packaged in a box or some other kind of container with descriptive language telling the consumer what the product is and how it should be used. However, in the horticulture business, it is extremely difficult to fit all of the necessary information on a tag. "We have these little, teeny tags and our products are living, breathing creatures that actually need a lot of explanation."

So when Hopkins designs her marketing materials, she takes this into consideration. "Our POP line will always be built to help the consumer not only be successful but keep them coming back."

Her tags and POP are aimed at that individual who has no gardening experience at all. "What we try to do is think from the standpoint of a typical homeowner, not a savvy gardener. How can we help them succeed?"

And it is working. She says because customers see success the first time they use the plants, they keep coming back to solve other

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Consumers and retailers can find information about STEPABLES, uses for the plants and more at www.stepables.com

"problems" in their yards. "It is kind of an addictive thing," she said.

Stepping To The Web

Hopkins' Web site (www.stepables.com) is also a very important part of her success. It is a tool for consumers and retailers. She does offer Internet sales of her products, but that is not the main impetus for the site. The goal is to help consumers be successful with the plants. "Consumers just don't know what to do. They have an idea, but they need to know the whole process." So www.stepables.com provides them with the information they need to succeed.

On the Web site, visitors will find all kinds of information on the plants, an idea center, an online store, a store locator, and an FAQ section and links to help educate consumers about the plants. Last year, she added a plant spacing calculator and a soil calculator to the Web site to provide consumers with even more information. There is also a forum for consumers to interact and discuss their STEPABLES experiences.

As far as Internet sales go, Hopkins said that is mainly for those customers who cannot find a garden center close to them to buy STEPABLES products. She believes she has to provide this service because it would be "the kiss of death for marketing" if she were to post all of the product information on the Web site but then not make them available for purchase.

Retailers also can use the Web site to access STEPABLES clip art, high-resolution photos and plant profiles, newsletters, grower pro-

files and product availability. They can also order additional marketing materials.

The Future

So what's next for STEPABLES and Under A Foot Plant Co.? Besides grooming future horticulture professionals and gardeners, Hopkins would like to see STEPABLES move from a national brand to an international brand. But she knows how challenging that can be. "Building a national brand is not something that happens overnight," so going fully international is even more challenging. But she believes STEPABLES lends itself to being an international brand because of the breadth of the product offerings — and that day may not be too far away.

Hopkins admits her goals are lofty, but "I have never been in this for the short haul. I am young. I've got time." **GPN**

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