



MasterTag Marketing Innovation Award

# And the Winner is...

This year's winner solves the number-one consumer problem, while answering some other desired questions.

By Carrie Burns



Photos courtesy of Jack Mellott

I know it's difficult for you to imagine being in consumers' shoes as they wander through the garden center, but just try it — try seeing things through their eyes: "I like the color of that plant ...I wonder what it is...it would look really great on my porch...I'm buying it." What she didn't know was that the plant she selected needed full sun and her porch has an awning that only allows four hours of sun to reach it.

It's the simplest idea for you — you know that sun or lack thereof and proper regions are very important, and you know what plants work best where, but consumers don't. And this seems to be a pretty big problem. But Novalis Inc. has found a way to solve that problem in a clear and understandable way in its Plants That Work (PTW) program, and this is why we are naming them the *GPN/MasterTag* 2003 Marketing Innovation Award winner.

## SOME BACKGROUND

First you should know who Novalis is — a team of four nursery professionals based on or near the East Coast, Carolina Nurseries, Moncks Corner, S.C.; Conard-Pyle Nurseries, West Grove, Pa.; Imperial Nurseries, Granby, Conn.; and Willoway Nurseries, Avon, Ohio, working together to bring exceptional plants to the market. Novalis, derived from the Latin word meaning to cultivate, which is what the company prides itself in.

The PTW program was first introduced in 2001



as a program to enable the consumer to pick up a plant, knowing right away where she can plant it in her garden or around her home. The line of plants is divided into shade or sun plants and is clearly displayed as such with colorful POP. Two retail-ready racks, which together hold 160 “six packs” (80 shade and 80 sun), are supplied to the garden center. Pot sleeves — with bright, clear photos and understandable care information — and handles are able to be customized with the garden center’s name, logo and Web site.

Novalis conducted research to determine its POP components. “In many cases, companies provide signs, and they can’t get the busy workers to put the signs with the product. We were looking at studies from Kip Creel [of NQuery] that said products on fixtures were selling faster than products on the floor; with signs on the fixtures, the turns increased even more,” said J. “That led us to believe that if we could put our POP on our fixtures, they couldn’t lose it. It would be all tied together and our product would fit on there.”

### LET THERE BE LIGHT OR SHADE

Though Linda Guy, director of new product development at Carolina Nurseries and Novalis, and J.’s wife, had this idea in her head for years, it finally took off in 2001 with a lot of planning and hard work. “We spent quite a bit of time with market studies to help us really understand what the consumer does want and need,” she said.

While in the beginning stages, the program was just carried by Carolina Nurseries and included strictly perennials. “It was just a program we were running some perennials in, and now we’re seeing what I call the gray areas,” says J., “where everything is washing together, where what’s in bloom sells, and we’re mixing perennials with annuals.” And now the other three Novalis growers are contributing, which is necessary since the program has grown in customers from 30 independent garden centers to more than 250 in just three years. “This year, we are in over 250, and that’s pretty much in the footprint of the East Coast—Chicago, Tennessee River Valley, Atlanta up through Connecticut. On this side of the Mississippi, we’re touching just over 250 nurseries,” said J.

The colors chosen for the POP only makes sense — green for shade and yellow for sun. “We’re just trying to go back to simple marketing. As growers, we make it too hard for the consumer, and they were saying can’t you just do the simple ABC,” says J. “So, we pretty much said those were the colors. We never thought blue or brown.”

And, the name? None other than horticultural guru Dr. Allen Armitage from University of Georgia, who was helping out with a different perennial project, came up with the name after a long, grueling meeting between Linda, J. and Allen. “I hated it [at first],” said J. “But some of the best ideas don’t start off as good ideas.”



*Each retail-ready rack holds 480 quart-size plants.*

### NOT JUST SUN OR SHADE

While the issue of sun or shade alone might have won Novalis the 2003 Marketing Innovation Award, the program actually answers some other important consumer questions. “What we might call a perennial [in Carolina], Tom Demaline at Willoway Nursery in Ohio might call it an annual,” said Linda. “So, there is a really confusing message going out to the consumer.” As PTW expands to other regions of the United States, zone- and area-specific plant material will be more readily available.

Linda intentionally designed the PTW program broad to include plant materials from Zones 4-9. It is then broken down to what works in different sales regions. “You see plant material, and well-grown plant material, from all over the country, but there hasn’t been a lot of responsibility taken for putting it

in the right areas,” Linda says. “So the end result is success all around. And, you know, that’s the only way we’re going to build great gardeners — providing [gardeners] with the tools to make them successful.”

### GARDEN CENTER REACTIONS

Nervousness is always lurking when introducing a new program to the industry. There are skeptics out there, which can actually make your product even better. PTW was no exception. “Some didn’t like it (the idea); some loved it,” said J. “There are early adapters and the latecomers.” So, if possible, meet them somewhere in the middle. “Some customers said the big rack didn’t fit in their stores, and we came up with a smaller half rack for smaller stores or wall areas.” Pleasing the customer is always a good idea. ♦



Since good ideas don't always sell plants, we asked two garden centers how the program is working for them. "People generally like them [the perennials in the program] a lot. They have some neat varieties, some that were a little out of the norm, and there were some pretty good deals. For example, [PTW's] quart gingers sold for \$4.99, and our gallon gingers were almost \$20 a piece," said Cheryl Aldrich, assistant manager at Habersham Gardens, Atlanta, Ga. "And, we were real impressed with the quality."

"The plants are so good (high quality) that they almost sell themselves," says Heike Franzen, perennial buyer at Hicks Nurseries, Westbury, N.Y. "The program is easy for people who have no knowledge about perennials at all. The program is really good, but I would recommend it more for smaller garden centers, maybe in the \$1 million per year range." In just the perennial market alone, Hick's does more than \$1 million, and smaller garden centers will have a little more time and help to restock the fixtures and/or shelves.

FUTURE

"There are no limitations," says Linda. She is hoping that someday PTW will make it out West, but it will come with a lot of work. "As we move out that way, I'm going to have to work closer with people from those areas to understand their specific needs, just like we are doing further north."

There are also no limitations in the type of material carried by the program. "We do some what I call 'softies' and we also include flowering shrubs," says J. "I know Tom [Demaline] has some spireas and weigelas for foliage color and tex-

ture. We are also looking for blooms of the season, so we're installing some roses. So Plants That Work is broadening out."

MARKETING ADVICE

While you probably don't want to admit it, you've found yourself looking at your competitors and thinking of ways you could make their programs yours but make them even better. Use some of that strategy. You can take a few good ideas or successful pieces and implement them into your own marketing program or strategy. "Your ♦



Pot sleeves and handles are able to be customized with the garden center's name, logo and Web site.

competition forces you to go out and do something. We all do that as growers — look at what the other guy is doing — and it makes you do what I call ‘play up,’” said J. “We saw some successful programs, and I guess we were envious, and it motivated us to try and do something better.”

You can’t really market a poor product well. Linda’s advice is, “Grow the very best product possible for whatever marketing scheme that might be. Provide as much information as possible — not just what zone the plant is comfortable in or whether it’s sun or shade, but what other companion plants work well with these plants, how to use them, what form they are when they mature, because it’s very hard to look at something in a pot at retail and know.”

Congratulations Novalis from *GPN* and MasterTag on being the 2003 Marketing Innovation Award winner. **GPN**

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*Take a look at the runner-up winner of the 2003 Marketing Innovation Award, found in the May 2003 GPN, and don’t forget to enter your marketing innovation for next year’s award. You can find details, rules and regulations, in the May 2003 GPN, page 37.*



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Left: Novalis President and Director of New Product Development, J. and Linda Guy; Right: Pot sleeves display color photos and care information.