

Communicating an Integrated Message ... The Final Chapter

It's starting to look like our time of economic prosperity might be coming to an end. Now more than ever, it becomes important for retailers to use every resource available to them.

By Stan Pohmer

As I write this column, Christmas is over and retailers are singing the blues; the stock market is tanking, and there's a general slowdown in consumer spending and the overall economy. There's even talk about the "R" word (Recession) possibly raising its ugly head. Just the mention of that word causes consumers to think twice about their buying habits, especially on items that are "want," not "need," like most of your products.

In tougher economic periods, the "stack it high and watch it fly" and "if we grow it, they will come" approach to retailing — especially on non-essential, price-marketed categories like horticultural products — won't generate the incremental sales or build the consumption you've become accustomed to over the past few years. Plus, your products will be facing increased competition from other categories of goods, which will be fighting more aggressively for fewer consumer dollars.

Our current market turmoil further emphasizes the need for an increased focus on the integrated market approach — pulling together the different aspects of the shopping experience into one cohesive, irresistible whole. If you can generate compelling reasons for the consumer to buy your products, communicate those reasons in a catchy way and provide the information needed to be successful with purchases, you will ultimately ensure that your customers are having a pleasurable buying experience and that they will return.

INTEGRATING EMOTIONS

A recently published study conducted by SAF (Society of American Florists), shows that people derive tremendous enjoyment and satisfaction from horticultural products and the activities associated with them. Few other retail categories can match the emotional attachment and sense of well being that plants and flowers provide. Yet, when was the last time you saw or heard plants being advertised or merchandised based on the emotional values they can provide?

And the opportunity to "sell the emotion" doesn't just present itself

on the sales floor, you have additional chances to reinforce this message post-purchase, after the consumer brings the product home. Most of the materials and instructions sent home with the consumer only cover the bare essential planting and care aspects of the plants. Why not include some suggested applications and uses that will evoke certain emotions? Why not include histories of the plants? Why not nurture that sense of well-being long after the purchase?

Remember, too, that emotional value is priceless to the consumer, yet it costs very little to provide. What an undeveloped opportunity at your disposal, and it's perfect for a time of leaner budgets! You spend a small amount of money to focus customers on the emotional aspects of buying plants, and in return, your customers become less consumed with commodity price and more in tune with the emotional message of the buying experience you're providing.

INTEGRATING PLEASURE

Shopping should be a pleasurable activity, not a tedious chore. Everything you do with the product — from labels to tags, from signs to displays, from customer service to returns — should reinforce the fact that you sell fun stuff. Sure, there's a lot of information to be conveyed to the purchaser that will allow them to make good

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purchasing decisions and be successful, but the message doesn't have to read like it was taken verbatim from *Hortus Third!*

The consumer is looking to you for ideas, creative solutions and entertainment. Consider setting up garden or patio vignettes that include different

types and varieties of plants and grasses, along with mulches, rock, soils and other hardline products. We have a tendency to think in terms of esoteric themes, like butterfly gardens or perennial gardens, but in many cases, the consumer is looking for simpler suggestions, like

shade gardens or low water plantings or maintenance free xeriscape gardens. These may not be as "high-end" as some of the fancier displays, but they sure can help make the consumer successful with their purchase — and satisfied customers come back to purchase again!

INTEGRATING ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment doesn't have to be a band playing or a clown doing face-painting (although events should play a role in your overall marketing program). Simply appealing to all of the senses through product and display can make the shopping experience entertaining. For instance, water gardens and fountains can appeal to the ears, just as well as piped in music. Herbal teas you make available for customer refreshment can be as fragrant and appealing as some of the flowering plants you offer. Just a simple conscious effort on your part to identify and blend the sensory stimuli that already exist in your garden center can provide entertainment and enjoyment. Don't forget, however, that these stimuli need to be changed frequently to entice your customers in regularly to see what new things you've created for them.

To maintain and grow your sales and market share, especially in tougher economic periods, we need to get beyond just selling plants to selling consumer satisfaction and solutions for the total horticulture experience — from the sales floor to their home and yard and all points in between. Integrating your message through education and information materials, positioning the tangible and intangible benefits of our products, appealing to the emotions and psyche, and providing pleasurable and entertaining shopping experiences all help differentiate your industry from others and provide compelling reasons for the consumer to get more involved in horticulture.

The plants and flowers themselves are only part of the satisfaction and solutions you provide to the consumer; the integrated marketing message you send can have equally as much impact on their purchasing behavior.

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