

Learning from the Consumer

Since we launched **GrowIt!** in the spring of 2014, one of our main directives has been to find a way to provide consumer insight back to the industry. The entire app first started as a way to see what people were growing around you, and then rate it. We could see what types of plants were being uploaded across the country and how people were responding to them. You

probably remember our bright yellow “Leave it. Like it. GrowIt!” shirts from various tradeshows. Clearly we wanted to get people to provide an opinion on the plants surrounding them.

Since then, a lot of things have changed. We’ve learned a lot about the consumer landscape, and how they view plants in their lives. We’ve also gained a better understanding of how the majority of the industry views the consumer. As **GrowIt!** has changed, our perspectives have changed. We’ve evolved, because one of the things we’ve learned is that while it’s important to understand what the consumer knows, it’s just as important to understand what the consumer doesn’t know.



Seth Reed is co-founder of **GrowIt!** and a member of GPN’s 40 Under 40 Class of 2017. He can be reached at sreed@growitmobile.com.

AN INFORMATION GAP

From the beginning it was clear there was an information gap. At first we tried to require people to label their plants before uploading them to the app. That lasted about five minutes. Inspiration comes before information. So many people would become interested in a plant, and want to upload it to the app, but not have the first clue about what the plant was (let alone know anything about actually growing it). The same thing went for our search process.

People know that they like yellow flowers, and they want them for a container on their front steps. They might even know that the spot they have in mind is going to be in all-day sun (maybe). They do not care whether it’s called a verbena, a verbascum or a viola. That is a foreign language to them.

We noticed a similar occurrence last spring when we launched our “Question and Answer” feature. We gave community members the opportunity to ask specific questions related to growing/gardening problems. We found that people had questions that didn’t pertain to a specific plant and wanted a proper space to ask away.

We decided to let members categorize their questions so that other members could offer better solutions. Some example categories were: fertilizer, soil, pests and — at the beginning — diseases. However, we overlooked one critical detail ... when something goes wrong with a plant at the consumer level, the average consumer has no idea what the problem is.

We were expecting people to ask about plant diseases and pests and know the difference! Meanwhile in the real world, unless things are blatantly being eaten (slugs, caterpillars, deer), people

really don’t know what’s going on. That’s why the “diseases” category quickly became “What’s wrong with my plant?”

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

If you gathered the top minds in horticulture in a room, you could probably get them to agree the modern plant buyer doesn’t know a lot. However, when it comes to practice, we really haven’t changed the way we do business in recent memory. Over the years I have walked into retailer after retailer to find plants displayed alphabetically. Some by scientific name, some by common name, but the point is ... people don’t start their plant search with a name!

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As an industry we greatly underestimate this. We like to add more names onto plants. Not only does a plant now have a Latin name and a common name, but it also has a series name, a variety name, and sometimes even another name for the color! From an industry marketing standpoint that makes sense. It’s how we decide between one red geranium and the next. However, at the consumer level it’s confusing and overcomplicated.

We have to start looking at this and start providing more information about what plants do. We launch thousands of new varieties every year, and maybe a handful of them actually have any consumer messaging behind them. The industry relies on the consumer to know they need this salvia because it’s taller, but we don’t ever say, “Hey if you’re looking for the tallest red plant you can find, here it is.”

The same can be said of the way we sell plants. Again, the general consumer’s knowledge is limited. They know plants start from seeds, but they don’t understand that maybe it’s not the best idea (or use of time/money) to grow cacti from seeds. Yet, we aren’t out there telling them why.

We need to start taking a look at the information we provide as an industry, and analyze it from a consumer’s perspective. Does it fill the knowledge gaps? Is this a consumer message? Is it a grower/industry message? How do we make sure those are differentiated? [gpn](#)