

Something There

Denny Blew

Centerton Nursery, Inc., 345 Woodruff Rd , Bridgeton, New Jersey 08302-9343

INTRODUCTION

Around 1450, long prior to the voyages of Columbus, Portuguese sailors were sent westward by their king to see what lied beyond the Atlantic horizon. According to ship's logs, they sailed out about a hundred miles. Then they returned and pronounced their judgment "nothing there." Of course the king and everyone knew this to be the case anyway, and it would be 40 years before this assumption would again be challenged.

Unfortunately, their tragic mistake didn't die with them. In our search for new marketing territory, we too, make abbreviated voyages of discovery, turn back, and pronounce "nothing there."

Today we live in a world that demands a global perspective. The popular country-western star, Joe Diffe eludes to global perspective when he sings: "Welcome to the earth: third rock from the sun." What we earthlings often fail to do (and I am as guilty as the next earthling) is to venture a bit farther, to try an alternative direction, to believe that if infinity lies ahead, then there must be infinite possibilities.

MARKETING POSSIBILITIES

Centerton Nursery. Our company, Centerton Nursery, has run into a few marketing possibilities. Although I've often been accused of being spaced-out, these were not necessarily discovered via interplanetary journeys lined in the star dust of persistence or intelligence. It was more that we tired of our surroundings, ventured out, got lost, and in searching for a way back, stumbled upon something, looked it over, and suspected that it contained value.

The fact is, we stumble over things all day long, but they don't always jump up and grab hold of us. In James Redfield's study of higher consciousness, *The Celestine Prophecy*, he theorizes that there is a higher-intended, gainful purpose behind every situation we stumble upon in our daily lives—no "chance meetings."

It's as if a higher being sits up there, like Monty Hall and Let's Make A Deal, and creates all sorts of potential situations to see where we go with them. Is it going to be door #1, door #2, or door #3? It's up to us as to whether or not we pick a door and discover what lies behind it.

But usually, we don't see it. Assuming them to be walls, we pass by millions of doors every day. And as the sun sets we plop down and declare "nothing there." On the very rare occasion we recognize a door for what it is, open it, and find that it does indeed contain something of value. Trophytaker™ Daylily was one of these rare occasions for Centerton Nursery.

Trophytaker™ daylily. The first door opened when we purchased our first daylily. We loved the nature of the beast and purchased more cultivars to grow. Then we became frustrated because we felt the product had more potential than sales figures showed. A second door opened. That led us to an investigation of the

species. We discovered that there were over 35,000 registered cultivars of this plant. Hmm. Overwhelming.

If there are that many cultivars, chances are that 99% are average, and 1% are exceptional. I could be wasting my time and money. “Which are the really good ones?” We learned that no one had ever tried to answer that. Hmm. Even more overwhelming. “Ah-ha!!!” (An ah-ha experience occurs here). Consumers weren’t buying for the same reason we didn’t know what to produce: we were overwhelmed!

How are we going to find out which are the good ones? That opened yet another door. I’d heard of the daylily authority, Dr. Darrel Apps of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Dr. Apps was recognized world-wide as a cutting-edge leader in daylily hybridization and evaluation. It was time I paid this fellow a visit.

Almost fatefully, we found our concerns running on a collision course. We came to an agreement and immediately set up tough standards, because if it was going into our system, it had to be exceptional. We evaluated cultivars for vigor, increase, flower durability, foliage durability, bloom season, and general garden performance. From the first 5,000 cultivars evaluated, we gleaned 30.

Next came production—another challenge. Mostly, our “picks” fell under the NWA-HEAH *hemerocallis* classification: if you’re not familiar with it, that’s the “not-widely-available-hence-expensive-as-heck” category. So we had to start with small numbers of very expensive plants and begin the process of growing and dividing, dividing and dividing, dividing, and dividing. After 3 or 4 years of dividing and dividing, our selections multiplied.

Since we knew these exceptional cultivars were deserving of awards, we named the concept “Trophytaker.” How could we protect our investment? Another door. I called my friend Steve Hutton at the Conard-Pyle Company in West Grove, Pennsylvania. Steve gets patents and trademarks on plants just about as often as I get up in the morning. Steve said: call this number and ask for this guy. He’ll fix you right up with one of his specials—so I did, and he did. And after a few months waiting, a few dollars paying, and a whole lot more than a few paper signings, we got our trademark on Trophytaker™.

Dr. Apps and I devised a plan of promotion. The first people we approached were our sales reps (they can’t sell it if they’re not enthusiastic about it). We asked them, “What if we could produce, in volume, a line of daylilies that are so exceptional that only collectors possess them, at a price that would be a fraction of what collectors charge?” They said “when can we get started?”

We dedicated a large portion of the catalog to Trophytaker™ daylilies. We made big labels for the product. We designed large sales-aid placards. We featured Trophytaker™ daylilies in major trade shows. We went to garden center open-houses and talked about Trophytaker™ daylilies. We wrote articles for magazines, explaining the merits of Trophytaker™ daylilies. After 2 years of sales Trophytaker™ daylilies has added a quarter of a million dollars to our business and it’s just getting started.

Well, that’s the story. Let’s examine what happened. Did we create the plants? No, they already existed. Did we create the data? Most of that existed, albeit spread about and largely unused. Did we create the method of propagation or production? We didn’t do that either. The truth is, we created nothing!

However, let’s not overlook one very important point that goes back to my original story. We did open a door that had something there. We did not attempt to make

a mountain out of a molehill. It's more that we found ourselves in molehill valley, removed a bunch of exceptional molehills, and stacked them up to form our own rendition of a mountain.

Hasslefree™ Roses. Now let's talk about Hasslefree™ roses. The door opened for Hasslefree™ roses when Mom found an article on roses in a garden magazine. "Article on roses in this garden magazine, son." "No thanks, Mom. Hate Roses. Too many diseases. Too many insect problems. Too many hassles." She stuck it in my nose and said "read, son."

So I read. Article says these roses do well without lots of care. Hmm. Interesting. Trash can. Two months later, Mom comes through with another article. Article says these roses do well without lots of extra care. Different author—same roses. Hmm. Coincidence. I'm sitting in the doctor's office. Article on easy care roses. Again, different author, same roses. This is a conspiracy! Go to the rest room. Reach for a magazine. Article says "come down off your throne and consider low-care roses". I become a believer!!!!

First thing I do, I try to give the idea away. Great idea but we had too many other projects going on. So I call up my rose-growing buddies. "Hey rose-bud, have I got a product line for you. It's a natural that'll fit right into your system. There's a whole segment of consumers who aren't buying roses because they're too much hassle. They'll jump on this collection of strictly easy care roses." One by one my rose-buddies looked it over and proclaimed "nothing there." Now, I don't have dumb friends. Quite the contrary, but my friends know me and they're smart enough to know most of my ideas look more at home in a straightjacket.

But this, I could not accept. I was handing them my best on a silver platter and they weren't going for it. It was like throwing a party, opening a box of Godiva™ chocolates, and failing to give any away. So there I sit, with the chocolates, in my lap, staring up at me. You see, chocolate and I have this agreement. If it doesn't bother me, I don't bother it. But if it stares at me, I punish it by crushing it between my teeth.

Among my many weaknesses I am also color-blind, and I can't tell the difference between chocolate and ideas. So we sunk our teeth into this idea. Over a 2-year period we tested the product, secured the trademark, and in 1995 we'll be in full swing business on Hasslefree™ roses. It'll do \$100,000 its first year. Not earth-shattering, but not bad for a first year product.

Again, let's examine what happened. Did we create the plants? No. Did we develop the data? No. Did we pioneer the production? No. All we did was look over a system that had something. We did not attempt to make a mountain out of a molehill. We found ourselves in molehill valley, removed the molehills that had a specific, desirable characteristic, and stacked them up to form our own little mountain.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Do you remember the hit TV series, MacGiver? It was the escapades of a guy that constantly found himself in near death situations, trapped in the middle of nowhere, with no likely means of escape, and yet he always manages to create some contraption, weapon, or diversion out of leftover junk, that helps him save the world from nuclear proliferation.

Steven Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* writes that one of the essential ingredients to hit home runs in this life, is the MacGiver factor. With the MacGiver factor we don't aim for home runs: we aim for opportunities, and in the process, we hit some home runs.

Let's Do an Exercise. Imagine yourself in a hallway. We are looking for doors containing mathematical equations totaling up to the number 4. How many doors do you see? If you're like me you see the $2+2$ door, and the $3+1$ door. But how many doors do we see when we employ the MacGiver factor? What about the $4+0$ door and the $5-1$ door? There's the $108 \div 27$ door. There's the $687-683$ door, $431-427$ door. There's the square root of 16 door and the cube root of 64 door. There's the $(39 \times 6)-230$ door. When we employ the MacGiver factor, there are infinite possibilities. When we aim for opportunities, we don't get hung up on shooting only for home runs.

My Grandfather Was a Big Baseball Fan. He loved our Philadelphia Phillies. He never attended a live game, but when he was milking cows, he'd have the radio blasting. When he was sitting in his easy chair, he'd be watching the game, fingernails deeply seated in the arms of the chair. Although I never developed my grandfather's love for baseball, I dearly loved my grandfather. And it hurt me when he began to develop Alzheimer's.

It was the fall of 1980 and the Phils had won the pennant. I thought "wouldn't it be great if I could get World Series tickets? I could take my grandfather to a game and give him the dream of a lifetime." But tickets were sold out. Back in those days I lived hand to mouth because I lived foot in mouth, and the scalpers wanted more money than I could spare.

And then a friend of mine who I hadn't seen in months, happened by. We got to talking about anything and everything, and I mentioned the situation with my grandfather. He opened his wallet and said "My company bought a block of tickets and they gave me two. An unexpected meeting has come up. They're yours."

The tickets, were for game 6, October 18th, 1980, the night the Phillies won the World Series. There was so much partying going on in the streets that it took us 3 h to drive the 1 mile between the stadium and the bridge over to Jersey. That was okay: we had a great time.

I learned a lot of things from that experience. Never underestimate the potential in chance meetings because they provide us with more times at bat. When we keep our minds open we'll get a lot more pitches to swing at, and when we're swinging for opportunities, we'll hit some real home runs.

The Wednesday morning session was moderated by Tom Kimmel.