

Promoting Woody Plants Through Print and the Web[®]

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INTRODUCTION

As growers, we are a lot more comfortable growing plants than marketing plants. But selling plants and making a decent profit is more complex and sophisticated than it used to be. The days of typing up and mailing out a price list are long gone. Placing a classified advertisement in the back of *American Nurseryman* is not sufficient. Our marketing skills need to be as well developed as our growing skills.

Every business needs to a strategic business and marketing plan that defines the business and its products, and which can be easily conveyed to the customer. If Spring Meadow's marketing has been effective, then you all know that we are a propagation nursery that specializes in new flowering shrubs. If our new plant promotions have been effective, then you know that our Proven Winner ColorChoice introductions are bold, colorful, and every bit as showy as a perennial. At least those are my intentions.

What defines your business and your products? What message are you conveying to your customers? For example, what is the first thing you think of when you see these logos: Wal-mart and Michelin — low prices and top of the line, safe tires. Personally I prefer Michelin's message and Walmart's message and margins, but either way, you know the message. Do you have a clear message?

The goal of marketing is to let others know what makes your nursery and or your products special or unique. Today I will use examples of print and web marketing to help you to better convey your message.

TELL PEOPLE, OR SHOW PEOPLE, SOMETHING USEFUL

Give them a good reason why they should buy your plants. Perhaps you've seen an ad that proclaims "Quality Plants." If this is the best you can do, then you're in trouble. Today, quality is a starting point. Your products must say quality, not your ad headline. There's nothing wrong with a quality strategy. It works for Toyota, but their cars and ads convey it. Their ads don't proclaim "Quality Cars for Sale". So move on. No one cares when your nursery was founded. No one cares about your Great Grand Daddy. No one cares how big your fields are. No one cares if there's a mountain behind your nursery. They're interested in your unique products, your value-added services, and how you're going to help them make money, or how you are going to make life better or easier. We all want to buy things that make our lives or business better and more rewarding. You need to tell them why they are better off buying your plants as opposed to someone else's.

BE UNIQUE IN YOUR APPROACH, DON'T FOLLOW THE CROWD

You need to stand out from the crowd, so be creative and have some fun. The first goal of advertising is to be noticed. If you're not noticed, no one will get the message. Here are a few examples; Plant Delight's Nursery cartoon catalog covers are so cool. They're unique, fun, and memorable. People can't wait to receive their catalog each year.

Are your ads noticed? After you've read a magazine, do you remember any of the ads? Flip through again and analyze the ads. Learn from the best of the best on Madison Avenue. Borrow best ideas but never steal specifics.

IDEAS FOR PROMOTION

Color Sells, So Use Color. We all say it and believe it, so why don't we apply it to our marketing. This is especially important if you are selling new plants. Make them say wow! Does it pay to advertise using two color ads? Research indicates that two color ads are less effective than black and white ads.

Plant Purchases Are Emotional, So Sell Emotion. At an earlier stage in our marketing we needed to show people what our liners looked like, so we showed liner images in our catalog. Now that Spring Meadow is more established, we show mature plants and flower close ups. We concentrate on what makes the plant special and show the potential of our plants. Tags, fliers, and ads should focus on what makes the plants so special. Women are the main end consumer, so we need to appeal to women, and convey positive feelings and emotions about our plants. Even our plant names are intended to appeal to women, i.e., Chardonnay Pearls™ deutzia. Pearls and chardonnay are both items that appeal to positive female emotions.

Keep Your Message Simple. People don't have time to read. While I may read and analyze your advertisements, most people don't. Keep your ads simple and be to the point. Ask yourself what is the main take-home message? At best you are only going to convey one to three messages so concentrate on them and use other venue to communicate the rest of story. Make the pictures work for you. The right image can convey several key messages allowing you to use less text to convey your main message. Simple, clean, and quick-reading ads are more likely to be read and remembered by your audience.

Be Consistent and Patient. Your audience is just starting to notice you only when you are totally sick of your advertising or marketing message. Tweak and vary the look but stick with the message(s). The old rule of thumb was that three ad impressions were needed to bring a consumer to a purchase decision — "curiosity" is created with the first, "recognition" with the second and finally "decision". New research indicates that as many as 10 to 15 exposures are necessary over a concentrated period to reach just half the target consumers and regular impressions are needed to build brand awareness and loyalty.

Promotion and Marketing Is More than Just Advertising. Another useful marketing tool is "P.R.". Write articles about plants. Send in a Field Notes to American Nurseryman. Be creative. Send out press releases to newspapers in your market area. We send our press releases on a monthly basis and you would not believe how many newspapers pick up our little stories. Many newspapers don't have staff writers. They're very happy to get a helpful article from you so long as it's not overtly commercial.

If You Don't Have a Website — Get One. It need not be anything expensive or fancy but publishing on the web is too cheap to ignore. Use the web to finish the story you started in your ad. Here you can provide the in-depth information and additional color photos to supplement your ads. Are you fearful of paying big bucks to a webmaster? Then do it yourself, or better yet have your teenager do it. It's not as hard as you think.

Also understand that google has replaced the Rolodex. When I need a phone number or fax number for a business, I just Google it. Within seconds I have phone numbers and addresses. I don't have to type them into my contact book and it's always up to date. How rude it is when there's no website to provide me with this basic information. If I Google your nursery, will I find it? Learn how to optimize your site for search engines and submit your site to search engines. For example, if you google Spring Meadow Nursery our link comes up first. That link takes you to our home page where you can easily find our contact information. If you click on the "articles" button, you'll find an article I wrote called "how to create a nursery website." Read it. See that's the beauty of the web.

Reinforce Your Print Promotion with Your Web Site, and Vice Versa. Put your web address on your advertisements, your letterhead, and everything you are publishing. A website is useless if people can't get there. Once they get to your website, it should reinforce the message(s) of your print advertisements.

Feature Your Best, Most Profitable Plants on Your Home Page. Most of your visitor will only see your home page and go no further, so make it count. Skip the fancy introduction. Get your message across and do it quickly.

Provide Something Useful. Give people a reason to come and return to your site. Give them a reason to stay a while. For example, we post useful articles, links, and information that are helpful to our visitors. Think about how you use other people's websites. What do you like and dislike about them? E-business is, most likely, not the reason for your website. It's a promotional tool and it's a way to make dealing with you business easier. It's an opportunity to expand on the message you presented in your print ad.

Use Web Statistics to Know If You're Effective and If and How People Use Your Site. This is the beauty of web promotion compared to print. You can actually tell if people look at your promotion and how long they look. You need a statistical program to do this. You can get a free program off the web. You need to understand how people are using your site to improve it and to reinforce your marketing message(s).

Start Small and Evolve over Time. Build on the foundation one step at a time; be creative, stand out from the crowd. Define your message. Let others know what you stand for and how your products will benefit them.