

7/1/2018

Brand Unconsciousness

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Not many years ago in the grand scheme of things, Ball Publishing presented a “Consumer Buzz Live” event at the OFA Short Course, now Cultivate. It featured a panel of real gardeners—homeowners, civilians—captured live at local garden centers, humanely, using tranquilizer darts, then gently revived onstage.

These were serious, seasoned gardeners, people you’d love to have in your GC. The audience, mostly retailers, applauded when panelists disclosed their yearly gardening budgets. MC Chris Beytes quizzed them on their likes and dislikes. When he asked, “What plant brands are you familiar with?” I was on the edge of my seat.

At the time, I was involved with two plant brands striving to crack the consciousness not just of gardeners, but of retailers who scoffed at the very idea that plants could be “branded” like, say, cereal—or everything else people buy.

There was a long silence. Finally, a panelist repeated, puzzled: “Plant brands?” Not what I’d hoped to hear.

After reflection, someone remembered Star Roses. Another, with a little prodding, dimly recalled Proven Winners. Monrovia was mentioned. Full stop.

Not many years before this event, I used to deliver finished plants to retailers. Some would yank pre-printed labels from our pots and baskets, replacing them with hand-written tags. One explained to me, in a tone generally reserved for slow children, “We want people to think WE are the grower.” That was then. Things have changed.

This is now: Last month, I visited several retailers, chains and independents in Pennsylvania and Delaware. Branded plants outnumbered non-branded by a landslide. I pay attention to hort marketing; I do hort marketing. Nonetheless, I’d never heard of numerous TMs.

At Gateway Garden Center in Hockessin, Delaware, every pot on every shelf seemed to be decked out in marketing swag: proprietary pots, oversized dangles, locked-in bilingual labels. The herbs were Chef Jeff’s or Sara’s Superb Herbs. Fruits and vegetables were Homegrown Edibles or Bushel and Berry (formerly BrazelBerries—a wise change). Many natives were ID’d as American Beauties, unsurprisingly: co-owner Steve Castorani, of North Creek

Nurseries, is a founder of that brand.

Esbenshade's Garden Center in Lititz, Pennsylvania, is a larger operation. Also a wholesale grower, they can rely more on in-house production, less on outsourced brands. Their proprietary label, Dutch Country Classics, adorned swaths of annual baskets and pots. But here, too, were unfamiliar labels like chic black-tagged Phalaenopsis, Canada-grown from CosMic Plants, dubbed The Art of Orchids. And then there was the ubiquitous PW. Quality and cleanliness everywhere, chains included, was impressive. Overall, retail product presentation has never been better. Ornamental grasses are still a Cinderella crop, i.e., underappreciated, but the GCs are phenomenal at laying out a smorgasbord of perennials, herbs, edibles and flowering annuals.

That OFA panel will never reconvene, with or without tranquilizers; sadly, their radio tracking collars have gone silent. But if you could ask again, would they know more plant brands? Almost certainly. Would they have chosen favorites, as consumers do with everything else from clothing to automobiles to toilet paper? Possibly. Do brands sway buying decisions? That's all but moot.

Good retail strategy doesn't juxtapose branded vs. generics, side-by-side; bench space is too precious for such redundancy. Comparison shoppers would have to weigh the product in hand against something similar seen elsewhere—or on their phones, but that's another rabbit hole entirely.

The brands I dealt in? Long gone, along with millions of dollars, down the drain of history. It's not a game for the faint of heart.

Brands will come and (mostly) go. But branding? It's here to stay. **GP**

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