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Trendspotting: Unique Experiences

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If you're looking for something new, don't ask ChatGPT. It doesn't know how to sell a plant that glows in the dark. It doesn't know how to get 25 year olds in SoHo to line up to take a plant personality quiz. It doesn't know how to get Hank Green to make bruschetta with your new purple tomato.

It doesn't know any of this because it's a large language model that's created to predict what's most likely to come next based on trillions of data points of what came before.

In order to sell the unusual, you have to think about it in a new way. That requires you to be a person, not a machine, and pay attention not only to what's coming out of a screen, but to what people around you are doing.

Human brains are wired to want novelty. We seek it out. But that impulse is at odds with being a business owner and having a job because the human need for survival seeks safety and the known. Investing in a different product line or a different plant or a unique way of engaging with customers can feel risky. What if it flops?

How, then, do you reconcile those two strong human impulses for novelty and safety?

Get out your Crayons

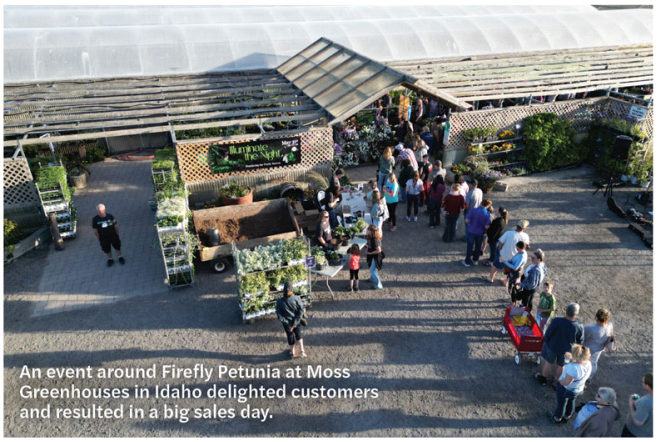
You need to draw your own Venn diagram. On one side, the new thing or new initiative; on the other side, the familiar way of doing it or the way most people would think about it. In the center is where the magic lies. That's what you do to connect the two and get your customers to happily pay. That's how you get Hank Green to make bruschetta out of your purple tomato.

I wrote an article about the Firefly Petunia for *GrowerTalks* last year to give growers strategies to sell to retailers. For you, the independent garden center, to buy these plants from the growers you have to feel confident that you can sell it to consumers. And there's nothing our industry loves less than something that looks like a 4-in. commodity plant that someone is telling us to sell for $25.

In order to sell the unusual, we not only need to think like a child or an artist, we need to think like our customers.

Get your crayons back out. Make a list. What are the things that you like doing? What are the things that light you up? What are your hobbies? Which companies send emails that you always open?

To you, you have a job. To your customers you provide entertainment. Here are two examples of how to entertain.



An event around Firefly Petunia at Moss Greenhouses in Idaho delighted customers and resulted in a big sales day.

Light up the Night

"It's not a petunia. It's a bioluminescent organism," said Tyler Duncan, National Accounts Director and Team Lead for the Firefly program at Raker-Roberta's at a MANTS press presentation in January. He also brought along the purple tomatoes for us to taste. The point he made about saying it's not a petunia (even though it's built on a 10-year-old petunia chassis and it looks like a petunia) is that if you put it on a bench next to regular ol' white petunias with a price tag five to 10 times the regulars, nobody is going to buy it.

But if you make it an EVENT, they will. That's what Jenn Moss at Moss Greenhouses in Idaho did in 2024. Tyler said, "On a random night they sold tens of thousands of dollars of product. In the off-season, no less."

If you look at the pictures of the event you can see people with ARMLOADS of 6-in. Firefly plants and they're holding other plants, too.

Attendees, some of whom were visiting the greenhouse for the first time, wore glow-in-the-dark necklaces and partied with the plants in the dark. Tyler showed me a picture of Firefly plants in a greenhouse at night. It was wall-to-wall glow. "Greenhouses aren't open at night. Consumers don't get to see this spectacle. They only see the few plants they might buy."

I suggested that retailers near a Firefly grower could partner with them for an evening event. If you aren't near a grower, have your own event. Get your Firefly plants in and make the first hour of the event a "glow trail" experience where visitors get to see the mass of plants. THEN let them buy the plants to take home. In addition to the single pots, make up some moon garden planters for higher AOV or curate moon gardens with a mix of annuals, perennials and Firefly plants for pre-order and pickup at the event. You KNOW they'll buy more when they're there.

One of our web maintenance clients in Connecticut, Burnett's Country Gardens, just posted on Facebook about Firefly, asking their customers if they'd buy it for $25 to $30. At the time of writing, they have 281 reactions and 194 comments. That's about 230 more reactions and 190 more comments then they average.

While about 80% of the responders said, "Yes!" with no qualification, a few others had questions about hardiness and what causes the bioluminescence. Which is GREAT! Those questions are easily answered, including telling customers to bring it indoors as a houseplant during the winter. What's key there, to me, is that they didn't just say, "Would you buy it?"—they asked if customers would buy it at that price.

Want a line out the door? Don't just sell something unusual. Make it an event. Let people be swept up in the hype. And provide them support so they're successful with your new offering.

Beauty Branding

Last summer, Bailey Nurseries took over the courtyard garden at Lauderee in SoHo, New York. Each of the Bailey consumer brands had a space that was dedicated to them, from step and repeat photo walls of Easy Elegance Roses and Endless Summer Hydrangeas to “plantsona” (plant persona) quizzes for First Editions. Gretchen McNaughton, Communications & Content Strategist at Bailey, walked me through their strategy.

“Beauty brands do a lot of activations. So do wellness brands and fashion brands,” she said. “They create spaces where customers can come and engage with the brand in a playful way. That’s what we wanted to do with Flora House.”

Over the course of two days, over 1,000 people came through the event space. “They stayed for 45 minutes. Even in a huge downpour. We hear that at another activation nearby, people ran in, grabbed their freebies and ran out.”

She said one of the most popular activities were the pressed flower bookmarks. “We dried all of the flowers ourselves because we wanted to use flowers from our plants. It was a lot of work, but it was worth it.”

She said others were skeptical when they were planning that activity, but added, “I’m the demographic of the people who would be attending the event. What would I want to do?”

The event, as a whole, went viral online. Here’s what Gretchen said made it a success.

People love beautiful things and in New York there are many beautiful things, but not as many beautiful garden spaces. People wanted to get into the space when they were setting up. Think about how you can create spaces in the garden center that people want to stay in for a while.

People are craving that in-person connection post-COVID. We still haven’t healed as a society from everything that happened. And then we have more things in the world that are happening. Providing an experience that people could feel calm in was key. Plants and gardening are tied to mental health for good reason. We feel good about cultivating plants and being IN spaces with plants.

Visitors stayed because of the fun activities. They took the quiz, played checkers, enjoyed a free coffee or tea, and made a bookmark that will help them remember the event and the brands.

The long and short of it is: have fun. If you’re having fun at work, it’s a win for you and for your customers, too. **GP**

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