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## Next Level Coverage: Insight from the Experts

*Art Parkerson and Shawna Coronado*

### What Is A Plant Worth?

Not as much as we'd like. My company, a wholesale nursery, sells many shrubs for the same price we did in 1980—when I was in kindergarten!

What could a plant be worth? I ask myself this all the time. I looked it up on Google. Here's what I found: A sort of "garden center" that millions and millions of people go to and buy from regularly, and most of the customers belong to the coveted Gen Y age group. Check out some of the prices—a garden rake: \$200. A potted marigold: \$2,500. A gold-plated watering can: \$10,000. It's called Crazy Dave's Tiddydinkies and he operates it out of the back of his car. He's part of a game called Plants vs. Zombies. Ever heard of it? It's one of the most popular, best-selling video games over the past few years. This spring they'll release the hotly anticipated sequel. In the game you use plants to protect your home from a zombie attack. Crazy Dave sells you supplies.

I'm not suggesting that these gamers are willing to pay \$2,500 for a potted plant in real life. Consider this, though: Before Starbucks, what evidence was there that a cup of coffee was worth more than 50 cents? Before Nike, who thought sneakers were worth \$150?

If you hear nothing else, this is my key insight: All value—and the very definition of value—in our supply chain lies in the relationship with the consumer. We don't know how much a plant might be worth, because we aren't boldly, relentlessly testing the upper limit. I think we're cheapskates, so we think everyone else is, too. In the end, it's the consumer, and only the consumer, that will define the worth of our product.

Our products cost more than money. The consumer has to write three checks, from three separate checkbooks. Only one is money. The others are TIME and ENERGY. Like money, they too are finite resources and consumers have to budget each one. When a consumer stands in front of a retail display of plants, they have to do a calculation: "Can I afford the total cost? Do I have enough cash? Do I have the time to dig a hole and water and weed and care for this thing? Do I have the energy to spend gardening?"

What's wrong with this picture? Do you see a problem? "When a consumer stands in front of a retail display of plants ..."

I think we're all making a poor assumption, when the reality suggests that consumers are NOT in front of the bench, that they're not choosing to spend their time and energy to go to the bench, and therefore, we miss the opportunity to convince them to spend their money.

Our industry substitutes the "retail display" for the "relationship with the consumer," as if the terms were synonymous. Forget the bench. We need to define the "relationship with the consumer" in ways that don't lock us into one season, one opportunity and a shrinking pool of consumers motivated enough to spend their time and energy to come to the retail garden center. The innovators of our industry will find ways to take the plants to where the people are and will offer a very deep, intimate style of service. Innovators will find ways to exploit the relationship with the consumer by making the contact both more frequent and more meaningful. It remains to be seen whether the independent garden center will be the innovators.

What is a plant worth? They'll never be worth more than they are now if we don't want them to be.  
—*Art Parkerson, Lancaster Farms*

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## **B2B Social Media: Stop Ranting & Start Partnering**

Within the garden center industry there's a common rant related to social media and its B2B application. At all the conventions and events the same statement is repeated over and over: "We do not need to build a relationship with the end-consumer because we are a B2B company." It's time to challenge that statement. We DO need to be connected with the end-consumer via social media within all levels of the industry because it's the way all business is evolving.

Consumers are demanding knowledge of both how a product is made and where the product comes from. They want to see and understand a product, but more importantly, they want to connect closely with that product. Social media is the tool with which to personally connect with the end-user in an intimate way, which has previously been impossible. This has caused our industry to evolve; if we're not connected with the consumer, then businesses within the horticultural industry will be left behind.

One of the best ways to become involved in social media is to partner with others on various marketing initiatives within all levels of the industry. Build a relationship with other non-competitive industry leaders to jointly promote a market. For example, a seed grower could partner with a wholesaler to create a series of photographs and videos of their plants that are made accessible via their website. A partner independent garden center might use these promotional items on their website as blog content. That garden center might have a garden writer event at its location, inviting the grower and wholesaler to "meet the press" and get to know them personally. This type of multi-level contact could lead to more conversations on Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and other social media sites for all industry levels, guaranteeing more marketing coverage.

The independent garden center is building the most intimate relationship with the consumer. However, having the B2B producer and wholesaler as friends on social media reassures the end consumer that the product

chain is more personal, like a big family taking care of them. This builds product faith and long-term customers.

Begin by creating your social media presence and connecting with partners online in order to build discussion about your products. There are four easy places to start:

- Non-competitive businesses—both your suppliers and others in the B2B and B2C garden and horticultural industry that could join you on shared media initiatives and events.
- Journalists seeking story content from local media groups, which include newspaper, TV and radio outlets.
- Individual bloggers who are focused on promoting industry product and growth who have strong followings that are online-centric.
- Garden Writers (GWA) who are specific to the garden industry.

Don't send blind press releases to these individuals. Instead, telephone directly to potential media and social media partners, explain your goal, ask permission to send a partnership proposal, share social media posts, and follow up online by connecting and becoming friends. In other words, build a relationship with the partners with the end goal of creating more shared content online and, ultimately, making all our businesses profit. **GP**  
—*Shawna Coronado, garden writer/speaker*