

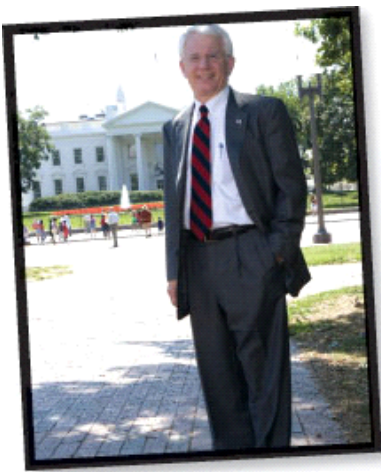
# GROWERTALKS

## Columns

9/26/2012

### Parsimony or Pragmatism?

*Bob Dolibois*



**BOB DOLIBOIS**

In thinking about a subject for this October column, fellow ANLA staffer Jonathan Bardzik forwarded me a posting from the mobile version of Atlantic magazine. Being a decades-long reader of the printed version, I read the blog with interest and voila! I had my column topic.

The posting explored the possibility that much of the effort to reach the emerging Millennial/Gen-Y consumer is going to fail. Why? Because, the blogger observes, the underlying world view of consumer goods and services is fundamentally different for this burgeoning generation. He refers to them as “the Cheapest Generation.”

His justification for that moniker is the extended current economic trauma that has significantly depressed the early-year earning power and career-building of these younger people. He also refers to mobile technology that has introduced the feasibility of a “rent-it-when-you-need-it” approach to consumer goods. He cites products like ZipCar, the urban-based, short-term rental system that allows enrollees to have a car only when they need one and only for the time they need it. To heck with owning a car.

Of more interest to our industry is his observation that homeownership is delayed (no news there) and when these folks buy a home, it will most certainly be smaller and in tighter quarters than the Faux Chateaux owned by their drowning older siblings and/or parents.

Agreed. But only to a point. After all, how much of this miser-mindedness is circumstantial? In the turmoil of the 60s, I well-remember the prophecies for a far-different America based on the anti-establishment views espoused by the Baby Boomers (facing the Very Establishment specter called “the Draft”). It will be interesting to see whether the current urban condo-dwellers will still be using that spiffy ZipCar when their kids have to get to lacrosse practice with those gigantic sticks in tow.

Want proof? Following the birth of his third child, my own Saturn-loving son had a conversion and is now the captain of a conventional minivan. He and my daughter-in-law are also talking about plans to landscape their house. At last! Funny that.

I am NOT suggesting that our industry just “sit tight,” doin’ what we’ve been doin’ for years, and the next generation will eventually beat a path to our door. Quite the contrary. Any more than I believed that ANLA should just have just have kept doing what worked for decades and not pursued our partnership with OFA.

But I do believe that some of the prophecies about our demise as an industry are premature. The notions that we’re doomed by a bunch of Gen-Y’s who will always prefer tweeting over weeding are unduly pessimistic ... or opportunistic. I think our reactions to them should be tempered accordingly.

For sure, we have to determine how to make gardening and landscaping less time-consuming and more project-based. The Gen-Y’s interactions with our products and services have to be more nimble. The plants that sell will be the ones that “perform” in multiple seasons, are right-sized for smaller spaces and don’t require heavy maintenance or inputs.

They need to be displayed in tandem with companion plants (think about outfits on store mannequins), not just the way they came off the truck. Better yet—sell them off of a truck! If it works for Cuban sandwiches and mystery-meat-in-a-pouch, could it work for houseplants and garden gloves? Just don’t abandon the store ... yet.

Could the Millennials prove to be the cheapest generation, at least since the generation that weathered the Great Depression? Maybe. But I think “cheapest” is an inaccurate descriptor. An Apple iPhone is not cheap. That special herbal-infused vinegar is not cheap. Tapas, pound-for-pound, are anything but cheap. Each of these products delivers a high-value experience, whether that’s a retina display at lightening speed or a delightful taste that doesn’t coat the tongue.

Buck up, folks. Quality gardening and landscaping can provide a high value experience; even better than most other activities. The Millennials like to play and they like to see as much result from that play as us older folks like to see from our work.

Let’s not confuse cheep-cheep with cheap-cheap. **GT**

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