

GROWERTALKS

Columns

2/27/2013

Young Voices: Bridging the Gap

Jennifer Hatalski



As a Gen Y consumer, I'm bombarded every day with advertisements. There are sales, daily deals and new spring clothing lines being released. Companies come up with clever tactics to get their targeted buyers' attention. If you examine the companies that have set the bar high, they've made a killing on track suits to fragrances, sneakers to electronics, and last—but certainly not least—you can't forget the coffee.

We live in a world where other industries have made their products, or their brands, somewhat of a status symbol. And me? I would like to live in a world where the best house on the block is the one that has a nicely manicured landscape complemented by awesome plants, inside and out, no matter what month of the year. So how do we do it? How do we get people, including the next generation, into the retail garden center?

Listen to your consumer What are they going to spend money on and how are they shopping? Apple has mastered the art of giving people what they want and predicting what they will use. Steve Jobs once said, "It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them."

People in Gen X and Y are so accustomed to this from other industries that they want to be told what to buy; they want it done for them and they want it to be easy and successful. There will always be that group of exceptions who grew up gardening with their mom or nana, like I did. However, these situations have been diminishing and it's our responsibility to listen to our new consumers and begin to grow our industry in other ways.

Create the experience Starbucks junkies don't stop for their morning cup every day because the store is convenient or because they know they can get in and out and not be late for work. I was a proud Starbucks employee for more than three years while attending college. They engrain the Starbucks "experience" in every employee. It starts from the moment you walk in the door and infuses all of your senses. Upon entry, you hear the sound of the fun music and your friendly barista saying hello. You walk up to the counter, see the pastries and the fresh coffee brewing, and engage in conversation. You're swept over to the bar and pick up the cup that has your name on it personally for you. You're thanked for coming in and, before

you walk out, you get a taste of your favorite beverage.

Most of us have had this experience before and the beauty of it is you can do this all over the world and be confident in the service you'll receive and the product you'll obtain. How many garden centers out there deliver an experience strong enough to have their customers come back every day and bring five other friends?

Take a risk Differentiate yourself! The days are long gone when we can put up benches, fill them with product and expect that people will show up at our store and buy it. Merchandising your store and growing unique and different products are more important than ever. Juicy Couture reinvented the tracksuit to be a luxury status symbol because their company took risks in their presentation and style. They were the first to start a new trend and give people something to talk about. With their target demographic of ages 10 to 26, there are some things that we can learn from by looking at other industries.

Start from the beginning and listen to your consumer. Don't only give them what they want, but show them what to buy. Once you have them lured in, make sure to create the best experience as possible. Most importantly, don't be afraid to differentiate yourself from the competition. As much as we need to continue catering to our current customers, we need to spend more time planning for our prospective ones as well. **GT**

Jennifer Hatalski is Merchandising Coordinator for Hort Couture LLC