

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

12/1/2021

## Hort's Renaissance Man

Jennifer Zurko



If you ask Marshall Dirks why the founding members of Proven Winners hired him, he'll say he honestly has no idea. When he signed on as the second employee in a new start-up brand in the early 2000s, he had no marketing experience, didn't know what an advertising agency was and really didn't know what he was doing. And he freely admits it. Looking back, Marshall says those founders were the ones who really had the greatest vision.

But one thing Marshall does have is the will to get it done. Call it determination. Call it gumption. Or passion. Or whatever adjective comes to mind. What's kept Marshall going for more than 20 years with the same brand is the desire to truly listen to the end consumer, be open to ideas and inspiration from any industry or product category, and never be afraid to ask for help.

### The will to find a way

In high school, Marshall had three jobs: he was a sous chef at a local steakhouse, he had a daily paper route, and he helped Dr. Jerald "Snook" Pataky, a plant pathologist at the University of Illinois, inoculate and remove rust spores off of corn plants. Every penny he made he saved, which allowed him to pay for his entire education at Northern Illinois University except \$1,500, which his parents gave him when he graduated.

He applied to the College of Business at NIU, but his concentration was not in the marketing field, like you would assume.

"I wasn't smart enough to be in IT," explained Marshall. "Wasn't smart enough to be in finance or accounting ... there's all those categories within the College of Business and I wasn't smart enough to be in any of them. So I went into the general bucket of management. And even within that, I was in the HR bucket."

The one marketing class Marshall did take included a teacher's assistant, Dawn Ford, who told him about an internship opportunity at a plant breeding and distribution company in West Chicago. Ball Horticultural Company was looking for college students to come in over Christmas break to call customers and check in on them. Marshall signed up to participate, sent in his résumé and ... the internship was canceled.

That same month, December of 1992, Marshall graduated from NIU and started the arduous task of looking for a full-time job. He drove around to warehouses in the town where his parents lived, knocking on doors asking if they had any management positions available. A pretty cheeky move for a kid just out of college, but it showed just how green Marshall was about the professional world.

"Of course, they all laughed at me," said Marshall. "Management is something that you earn and work through, and almost always starts with a sales position. I knew I didn't want to do sales, so I was down on my luck. I was painting boiler rooms at my mom's school district. I loved it, but [my parents] were like, 'Come on, you have a college education. You have to do something with it.'"

## **Early lessons learned**

Marshall will tell you that the paths he's taken during his 50 years on this planet weren't just because of hard work or luck, but because of his strong faith, saying that "the Lord has always provided me with a job." And while he was still attending college and figuring out what he was going to do with his life, this was certainly the case.

While attending services at his parents' church, Marshall ran into Mike and Nancy Richardson, the last instructors at the DuPage Hort School, who told him they were the owners of a young greenhouse business in Elburn called Fox Valley Growers. They only had a few employees at the time and were trying to get poinsettias delivered to their customers, so they offered him a job.

"That was my introduction to the greenhouse business," said Marshall. "I worked for them for four winters, and every spring and summer break."

Interestingly, even though Marshall was working at a greenhouse, he didn't switch his major to Horticulture, despite the fact he wasn't that keen about Human Resources. But Ball kept his résumé from the internship that never came to fruition, saw he had a degree in HR Management and contacted him.

The first year he worked at Ball he reported to the VP of Human Resources and was part of the team who helped the Customer Service Department, among other things, figure out how to serve customers better and reduce hang-up rates and call times. He was in charge of running a statistical analysis of why this was happening.

Marshall said he found that they: 1) didn't have enough people answering the phones at the right time; and 2) often couldn't address the specific needs of the customers. One of the solutions to this was pairing the personality of the customer service rep with certain regions to better suit those customers (i.e., New York customers wanted to get down to business, which was a seven-minute call, whereas customers from the South enjoyed longer conversations, which was a 20-minute call). And also gaining a better understanding of the Supplier Relations team, who often had the needed answer.

This taught Marshall a very important lesson: "How much we need to learn from the customer, and if we model our business after their preferences, how that will serve us and hope that they will tell others about us."

In 1995, Ball went through a complete reorganization, which required over 100 people to lose their positions. Thankfully, Marshall was spared, but he didn't really have an official "job" to speak of. And all of this happened the day before he and his wife Jodi got married. So when he came back from his honeymoon, he stopped in HR to ask where he was supposed to be.

He told them he would “take the worst job at Ball and I think I got it.” It was in Quality Notifications (QN, formerly called TAFs—Take Action Forms) of the Plant Department, which is fancy for “complaint department.” The lone employee who handled QNs was overwhelmed and needed help, so Marshall was placed there to address everything from shipping issues to missing plugs.

“Every day you had this report of hundreds of claims—you hated when shipments went out!” he laughs. “But I looked at it from a different perspective of how can we turn the complaint department into a revenue-generating place for our company?”

At the time, Ball had just started differentiating its suppliers, which turned into what is now its Gold Supplier Network. A majority of the plug and liner producers had good relationships with Ball, so Marshall was part of the team that developed new protocols for suppliers that wanted to be considered top-tier, which included keeping shipping damages down to a minimum. They worked on coming up with better boxes and packaging, including a type of mesh cover that went over the tray and was held down with clamps so the plugs wouldn’t fall out in transit. Marshall said he got the idea by watching how a local Christmas tree grower kept the needles from falling off and the branches from breaking by wrapping them in plastic netting.

“It wasn’t that Ball had a supply issue and didn’t grow good plants; there was a disconnect of how we get them to our customers in an efficient manner and reduce our quality complaints,” Marshall explained. “It all came from listening to the customer and seeing the problem.

“No one wants to check the complaints box, but, to me, the complaint area is where your gold nuggets are. Hearing the complaints is where I spend my time: ‘Okay, is this something that’s a valid complaint or is this something that we should ignore?’ It’s a barrier to the next innovation because I know if I choose not to do anything, and my competition chooses not to do anything, who suffers? Our customer.”

## **Second at the start-up**

While Marshall worked in the Plant Department at Ball, he was introduced to a lot of different people and businesses that ended up really forming his professional outlook. He credits Steve Blacksmith, who was one of Ball’s long-time Supplier Relations managers, with showing him “what a business trip looked like. It wasn’t a trip for fun; it really was focused on the customer. It was your time to go there and listen.”

Steve was one of Marshall’s first mentors in the industry.

“Good sales reps go to listen to their customers and Steve Blacksmith was an incredible listener,” said Marshall. “He listened to his suppliers and he cared about them. It was a shift for me because I came from the complaint world and the mentality that the suppliers were the problem. But Steve was like, ‘These guys butter the bread for us. We can help them—how do we become their advocate?’ He fought for the suppliers and fought for improvements—whether it was technology or cutting quality.”

In the late 1990s, three of the operations he worked with formed a partnership to grow annuals under one brand. Tom and Sharon Smith of Four Star Greenhouse in Michigan, John Rader and Jerry Church of EuroAmerican Propagators in California, and Henry and Jeff Huntington of Pleasant View Gardens in New Hampshire came up with the name “Proven Winners” and started selling unusual and unique plants under this brand.

In a roundabout way that didn’t have the Proven Winners founders actively poaching Marshall from Ball, he was asked if he was interested in handling marketing for them. The timing was fortuitous because Marshall and Jodi’s family was expanding, and his 45- to 60-minute commute to and from work was starting to wear on him. What Marshall really wanted was to raise a family and not put the entire burden on his wife. Back then, hardly anyone worked from home. If he accepted the position at Proven Winners, he could work from his basement while spending

more time with his family for the same amount of compensation.

There was one little problem, though—Marshall knew zero about marketing.

## **Inspiration from the strangest places**

“When I started with Proven Winners, I got hired for a marketing position and I didn’t even know what a marketing agency was,” said Marshall.

Marshall said he was basically stuffing and sending folders that included a Proven Winners catalog and a business card to leads he got from trade publications “and that was ‘marketing.’” They had a plant tag and a website, and most of the marketing outreach was to the trade. Marshall knew something had to change.

“When I came on board, we came to the decision that we needed to be spending more of our time talking and listening to gardeners,” he explained. “Most of the marketers in the industry spent their time convincing growers to buy their plants.”

The first thing he did was change the original tagline of “Dedicated to the Art of Gardening”—which he thought sounded “frou-frou and purist”—to “A Better Garden Starts With a Better Plant.”

“It talked about this concept that the majority of gardeners feel that they have a black thumb. And the mindset is, do they even know that there is a better plant?” said Marshall. “So planting that seed to the consumer that a plant is not a plant—these two petunias sitting next to each other may not be the best. Growers see that, retailers see that, but the consumer ...? When that product fails, they blame themselves. There is no other industry where the customer blames themselves for a product failure.”

From the beginning, Marshall felt the end consumer should always be top-of-mind. And in those days, the supply chain of horticulture was still siloed; very few growers were aware of how the end consumers were faring with the plants they grew. To Marshall, this was a missed opportunity.

After doing a bit of research, he learned that about 83% of garden center customers are women, so he started to amass a collection of women’s magazines every time he went to the grocery store. He rarely bought gardening publications, instead focusing on fashion and health.

“I wanted to be a part of that conversation of what are they struggling with and how are they communicating that,” he said. “There weren’t women in our organization at the time where we could hear their voice, so I had to buy it and bring those examples in of here are the colors that they’re using, here are the things that they’re doing, here are how products are being displayed and shown.”

This is when he started noticing how cosmetics companies were naming their products and that they were pretty clever. So he would take trips to the mall and ask the woman working the makeup counter for all their lipstick, nail polish and eye shadow swatches. You may think that’s strange (and I’m sure the women behind the counter did, too), but Marshall had a method to the madness.

“So it’s another red petunia. Well, L’Oréal doesn’t think of it as another red lipstick—they create a special name for it,” said Marshall. “So we got all these names and none of them were trademarked.”

Marshall would also go over to Sherwin-Williams, getting plant name inspiration from all of their paint swatches.

“It’s not original—it’s applying what people are already doing,” Marshall says matter-of-factly. “Who are the primary buyers of paint? Women. It’s finding a product that women are passionate about and trying to use the vernacular that they’re used to seeing.”

Marshall would get inspiration from other companies and products, like Porsche, TimberTech and the McDonald’s

Happy Meal. He said he would go and sit in a bunch of different McDonald's restaurants that had a play area and noticed that the customers were mostly women with children.

"I would ask them, 'Why are you here?' And they would say, 'Well, there's no other safe place for my kids to play. I want to talk to my girlfriend and I don't want to have to worry about where my kids are at.'"

Marshall said at the time there weren't many restaurants that were kid-friendly. A lot of places may have a kid's menu, but they didn't have specific products for kids because that's not who they were catering to. Little did people know that McDonald's was becoming the No. 1 toy distributor in America.

"McDonald's was screaming it," said Marshall. "I wanted Proven Winners to be 'the lifestyle.' We knew Proven Winners plants were going to be more expensive and that people were going to have to choose—how do you incorporate that into a lifestyle? McDonald's was committed to the kid's market and that's what I learned. We've got to be committed to that end consumer."

## **Still thriving, evolving and developing**

Curious about who came up with the idea of the Happy Meal, Marshall found out it was an advertising agency in Kansas City called Bernstein Rein. Although he couldn't afford to hire their services (this was an agency used to multi-million-dollar marketing budgets), the CEO himself pointed Marshall in the direction of a little startup agency created by four former Bernstein Rein employees called CHRW. They helped him put together Proven Winners' first TV commercial and the rest is history—20 years later, the C of CHRW has transformed the agency into a digital group that still develops some of their marketing campaigns and all of the company's websites.

And it's taken 20 years for Proven Winners to really make its mark on the gardening segment. Marshall said that when people see the Proven Winners logo on his shirt they often stop him and say how much they like the plants.

"I think the fact that this has all sort of evolved and it's worked—I think that is what surprises me every day," said Marshall. "That growers had to make the decision to grow Proven Winners, broker reps had to make the decision to stand behind Proven Winners, retailers had to take the risk of buying a more expensive product. And it works because there's a level of trust there."

Going from a co-op idea from three growing operations to a well-known plant brand itself that now has a multi-million -  
dollar marketing budget is no small feat. Marshall and his team have done it all when it comes to promoting Proven Winners, from billboards to radio spots to Nintendo games (Pikmin Bacopa). The hard part isn't coming up with ideas—it's trying to keep up with the ever-changing way consumers learn about products.

"The biggest change now in terms of goals is we're no longer telling the message. The marketers were once responsible for what your brand looks like, but now someone else is telling people. And that's a huge change," said Marshall. "The marketers are no longer fully in control."

Now, people—especially younger consumers—are finding out about products through social media as they follow their favorite influencers. Besides establishing strong brand social media accounts, partnering with folks like Garden Answer and Gardening with Creekside, one of the best things a brand can do is provide the resources and tools directly to influencers in the hope that your product will be incorporated into their lifestyle.

"Because the customer keeps changing, the way we have to market changes," he said. "That's led to all the digital stuff, the online stuff, it's led to streaming services. That's what's exciting for me because the customer is never staying still. We're not driving that change; we're just responding to it."

Marshall said that if he envisions a picture of himself, he also sees a thousand names because he's the product of a

number of great people who've been instrumental in helping him make the Proven Winners brand successful. Although he plans on sticking around for another 20 years, he's cognizant that eventually Proven Winners will have to start looking for the next Marshall Dirks. But, to Marshall, that doesn't mean someone would have to fill his shoes; rather, they would walk their own path in their own shoes.

"First, it's the realization that other people can do your job better and when do you get to the point of admitting that? Of when is it time?" he said. "And we're getting to that time because Proven Winners has evolved—it's no longer a marketing company to support the genetics of three annual producers. My job has evolved from marketing to almost running a small and local business.

"I think the biggest thing about working for a company for so long is you have to ask yourself, do you still love what you do? Is there anybody that is more passionate about this than you? And when that day comes, then I need to be replaced. But right now, I feel like I am one of the most passionate people for Proven Winners and I love the job and I love the people I work with and I love the environment that we've been able to create."

So his wife Jodi and three kids (Connor, Austin and Taylor) will have to continue to endure Marshall wearing nothing but Proven Winners apparel and interrupting their family camping trips to check his emails. He says Jodi doesn't always mind because she knows how much happiness he gets from his career. He adds, however, he couldn't have done this without her blessing. She trusted him to leave an amazing company like Ball in the midst of family growth, to take a risk and join a small company with just one employee and no office. He said she's been a tremendous supporter of all he does—she listens to crazy ideas and provides sound advice during difficult times. It's funny how working for a start-up plant brand when he didn't know what he was doing has been interwoven into all aspects of his life.

"I don't view myself as 'arrived;' I view myself as always 'under development,'" stated Marshall. "I don't want to be a stick-in-the-mud. Three things I value are my faith, my family and my role at Proven Winners. The fact that I get to integrate those people I love and work with is the biggest reward. I absolutely love the people I work with and for. I value the trust and empowerment they've given me and I'm passionate about the success of Proven Winners."

---

## Marketing Lessons From Marshall

Marshall Dirks is what we journalists consider a "quotable person," so I couldn't just leave these "Marshallisms" on the cutting-room floor:

- "Management and companies often know what the problem is, but they're slow to implement the change and take the risk. We're starting to practice something called 'IDS'—Identify the problem, Discuss it briefly and then spend the majority of the time Solving it."
- "Don't hold back information. If you've got something that might help, don't wait until it's too late."
- "The thing I take the most pride in is, on the marketing side, we've really maintained long-term relationships with vendors and suppliers who have helped us along the way."
- "We can quickly become obsolete if we're not willing to change."
- "For me, ideas excite me. It's how to push the envelope. I have little concern about failure—not because I don't think that we'll fail, but because we have such awesome people who don't want the idea to fail, either."
- "What I try to find out is, where is the fringe? What are people talking about and doing that might become the norm? And also trying to figure out what will be the norm. Check out livestream shopping—could this be the next retail frontier?"

- “Our motto at the office is ‘Surprise, Delight & Serve.’ We want to surprise them with our quality product, delight them with a beautiful plant and serve them well. If we did those three things well, we won the hearts of people. It’s less about profits and more about how you make people feel.” **GT**