

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

12/1/2019

A Man with Star-Studded Ideas

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Why does someone who's rubbed elbows with Ariana Grande, mingled with Nicki Minaj and texted with Mariah Carey want to work in our boring, old industry?

Because to Ryan McEnaney, our industry is anything but boring. At least, he's made it that way while he's been on the marketing team at Bailey.

In case you hadn't heard, Bailey's promotion of their products—most notably for their Endless Summer Hydrangeas—has gone far beyond the typical consumer promotion that our industry dabbles in. And I say “dabbles” because not many companies that sell horticultural products can say they've been a part of a major consumer public relations event that's typically reserved for products like popular beverages and fast-food chains.

So far Endless Summer Hydrangeas have been: the official plant of Super Bowl LII in 2018 when it was in Minnesota (where Bailey's main headquarters are located); the primary plant Bobby Berk placed in the landscapes of hapless men during Seasons 3 and 4 of “Queer Eye;” and filled up the entire lawn of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. in honor of Earth Day.

You may think to yourself, “How the heck did Bailey come up with that? And how did they pull it off?” The answer is: it's good to know people.

Looking California, but feeling Minnesota

Ryan's contacts in Hollywood and entertainment have helped Bailey book consumer PR events that most of us could only wish for. But first, let's back up a bit ...

Bailey is a multi-generation business that breeds, grows and sells ornamental shrubs, trees and perennials. And as with every family-owned plant company, the children of the next generation cut their teeth working in the greenhouses and bareroot fields.

And, being Baileys, it was the same story with Ryan and his siblings. During high school and college, Ryan worked in the marketing department at Bailey, helping out during their annual expo and producing their promotional materials.

The current generation that runs Bailey is the fourth, with Ryan's mom Terri McEnaney, his uncle Dan Bailey and various cousins at the helm. And they have an agreed-upon rule that their children—the incoming fifth generation—work outside of the company for at least three years before coming on board full time. Actually, Terri worked at 3M

before going back to Bailey and she felt it was an important exercise for her kids, too. (Two of Terri's kids work outside of the business, while Ryan and his brother Dan have jobs at Bailey.)



Pictured: For Super Bowl LII, the Bailey team was able to get Endless Summer Hydrangeas named as the official flower. Photo courtesy of Bailey.

With the real-world experience the elder Baileys expected, Ryan started college as a pre-med student. It didn't take long to for him to discover that he didn't have a strong enough constitution for blood and needles, so when the opportunity to move to Los Angeles come up, he jumped at the chance.

Ryan went to live with his Uncle Dan's sister-in-law, who's a Hollywood producer, so she was able to get him a job at local PR firm. He instantly loved it and his resourcefulness was immediately tested—Ryan's very first client was Flavor Flav, one half of the duo Public Enemy, and known for his high-maintenance antics.

"I think I got him because I was the only one in the office he remembered by name," laughs Ryan.

He worked in LA that summer and fall, and went back to Minnesota, transferring schools and then interning over the summers for PMK, the largest entertainment PR firm in the U.S. at the time. Once he graduated, he got a full-time position, going from being an entertainment publicist at PMK and Slate to a beauty publicist, eventually branching off on his own as a freelance publicist. He was in charge of establishing relationships with brands like OPI and Redken, and getting to work with celebrities like Mariah Carey, Ariana Grande and Nicki Minaj.



Pictured: Bobby Berk plants an Endless Summer Hydrangea during the Netflix show "Queer Eye." Photo: Ryan McEnaney.

For five years, he worked in LA, but in 2012, when he went home for Terri's birthday, he thought he could move back and still do his beauty publicist job from home. When Bailey decided to move PR back in-house, Ryan interviewed for the job at Bailey and has been working on their marketing team full-time for the past six years.

But just because he's a Bailey doesn't mean that he was given the position; Ryan makes it very clear that if you're family, you have to earn your role and you can't report directly to relatives. This alleviates the risk of nepotism and maintains the proper optics for other employees. This is very important to Ryan and he wants the rest of the company to know he takes his role in the business very seriously.

"There's not a lot of pressure from family, but at least for me—and I think I can speak for Danny, too—we put a lot of pressure on ourselves because we know that people are watching," he explained. "And for me, that was even more exciting because I'm like, I'm going to come in and I'm going to prove that I'm not here because my family owns the company. It's because I really think that I can make a difference and I want to learn about the industry."

There's added pressure for Ryan and his brother Dan to prove themselves, but it also provides an amazing opportunity to work alongside their family members, who can mentor them.

"Having experience elsewhere, I think I have a better appreciation for what we have here and it's a unique challenge," said Ryan. "And, for me, I think that it's exciting. I get to sit next to and learn from my mom every day and my grandpa and my cousins and that's really cool."

So crazy it just might work

And just because he's a Bailey doesn't mean they say yes to all of his ideas. This is where the team dynamic of the marketing department comes into play. Alec Charais is Bailey's Marketing & Communications Manager and it's his job to make sure that the company is spending its marketing budget wisely, while also being open to innovative ways to promote their plants to growers, retailers and consumers. That means every member of the team contributes ideas and new ways of getting their brands' names out into the marketplace.

"We're very much a collaborative team—and that's both the internal team here, as well as the relationship we have with our agency," explained Alec. "It's not just one person. We all bring our skills to the table."

"We don't ever want anybody to not have an idea or not bring an idea to the table that they've thought through and they think it's an opportunity for exploration. Ryan's an idea guy and we appreciate that and need that out of Ryan."



Pictured: To celebrate Earth Day in 2019, Bailey built a replica of a tree with 850 individual bareroot trees and 500 Endless Summer Hydrangeas. Photo: Ryan McEnaney.

I asked Ryan if his co-workers tell him his ideas are crazy and he laughs and says, "Almost every meeting!" He admits that not all of his ideas have panned out, but the ones that have worked have paid dividends in priceless PR for Bailey. Take the Super Bowl, for instance—most people thought he'd never be able to pull it off. But one of the things that he said he learned working with Simon Halls, who was then president of PMK (and cool side note: husband of actor Matt Bomer), was how to be resourceful and creative.

"When I came up with the idea of the Super Bowl, I was like, 'Well, we could do it. Why wouldn't we?' So I just dug, dug, dug and found the right person. We worked on it for two years, but we got it."

Ryan is quick to give props to the Bailey production staff. "They worked their butts off—they got thousands of hydrangeas in perfect color in December/January in Minnesota. We did trials on it for two years and we just pushed. That had never been done for the Super Bowl—they never had an official flower, so we sort of created that."

For the gig on "Queer Eye," Ryan said he was just watching the show as they were re-designing someone's landscape and thought, "Well, if they're going to talk about plants, why couldn't they be our plants?"

It took some digging, but he got the creator and executive producer's email. And after not hearing for months, the producer's assistant finally called and Bailey negotiated two seasons. It's also opened the door to provide plants for other Netflix shows, too.

"You just have to go and do it. Don't be scared by the idea of something so big because you never know," Ryan said. "Not every idea that I bring to the table gets approved, and when I reach out not all of them work out, either. But that's okay. They shouldn't all work. The thing that's so great about our management team and Alec is that they sort of just let me play. Even if they're like, 'Mmm, that's probably not the best idea,' they tell me to research it, figure it out and come back."

"I'm very much a 'what's next' type of person and we need somebody like Ryan who's got those ideas and wants to bridge the gap to build awareness outside of those traditional avenues. We rely on that," said Alec. "He'll bring an idea forward and I think, 'I never in a million years would have thought of that,' and I've told him that constantly. But then I tell him, 'I need to know more. Let's dive into it. How do you think it really could work?' He's exceptionally talented and he's a big reason why we are who we are."



A balancing act

Ask any breeder, distributor or wholesaler and they'll tell you that having to market to both their customers and their customers' customers is a tough order. They're two different types of buyers who care about different things. And it's a challenge that Ryan has had to overcome after five years promoting products directly to consumers with an endless budget.

"One of the best things about working for [the entertainment] industry and how it relates to Bailey is it gave me a really big-picture perspective," he said. "Budgets were never a concern—you could do anything and everything in that industry. So I try to bring some of that into our industry where we don't have huge budgets, but we have something really beautiful and interesting, and finding ways to do really big things."

The nature of the product has also lent itself to some challenges. On the surface, it may seem easier to promote "color" like flowering annuals than shrubs that you plant and don't touch again for five to 10 years. But Ryan said you just take a different approach to talking about them.

"It's about creating a living space, this idea of experiencing life in full bloom, where you're creating a backdrop to your everyday life," he said. "Using trees and shrubs, it's something that's going to sustain."

Bailey has been promoting other ways for consumers to enjoy woodies besides planting them in the ground, like using them as a main component in a mixed container. (The tropicals guys are getting in on that action now, too.)

"It's sort of shifting people's thought processes a little bit," said Ryan. "We have total zone envy in Minnesota being in Zone 4, but we can put an Illicium in a pot in the shade here and throw it away at the end of the year."

Ryan's background of constantly having his eyes and ears on consumer trends in beauty and fashion helps him and the Bailey team try to figure out what consumers will want in their gardens. But gardening trends are harder to predict and take longer to formulate.

"We have to be five years ahead of what the consumer wants," said Ryan. "We pay attention, we do a lot of research into what consumers are looking at now and what they'll look at in the future. But we have to nudge them, too, because it takes so long for us to either breed or find a plant and do all of the trialing. It can be five to eight years that we have to anticipate what the trend is going to be."

But luckily for our industry, most people are open to change, albeit a bit slower than Ryan is used to.

"I was right out of high school in 2004 when Endless Summer launched and before that the idea of a brand was fairly limited. From then, it's a completely transformed business," he said. "I think that our industry is good at trying new things because we sort of have to—like influencer marketing and paid search have become so important."

In Ryan's opinion, technology and big data are the future of marketing plants, but still while maintaining that personal connection. Millennials and Generation Z may have been raised with a smartphone glued to their hands, but the research that the Bailey team has collected says that younger consumers are looking for a more direct relationship with nature.

"The importance of data, the importance of the relationship and the connection to people, personality and brand

building—whether that’s an actual plant brand or the brand of a person or a company—I think is so incredibly important.”

One foot (still) on the red carpet

So does Ryan ever miss the LA scene?

“I get that question a lot. I don’t really,” he admits. “There are pieces of it, of course, that I miss. I got to go to the Oscars and fun premieres and all that stuff, but through the nail salons, I still get to keep those relationships because we get to do a lot of celebrity nails for award shows.”



What he’s referring to is his side business—two Frenchie’s Modern Nail Care franchises that he’s opened during the last three years. A national chain with close family ties (Uncle Dan’s other sister-in-law opened the first Frenchie’s six years ago) has allowed Ryan to still maintain a foothold in the Hollywood scene. For the last Emmy Awards ceremony in September, Ryan’s own nail technicians did actress Regina King’s nails. Frenchie’s now has 120 franchises around the country, working with nominees and winners at all major award shows—including the Oscars, Golden Globes and Tony Awards—and with clients that include Rachel Brosnahan, Laura Linney and Kacey Musgraves.

Pictured: Ryan’s side hustle—two nail salon franchises called Frenchie’s—has celebrity clients, which includes actor Regina King, shown here with her lovely nails right before the 2019 Emmys. Photo: Ryan McEnaney.

“It’s a cool challenge. It’s very different, even just looking at the marketing and the local, grassroots marketing that we do for that company versus what we do [at Bailey],” said Ryan. “It’s helped on the media side; it keeps those relationships, especially in New York. It has helped open doors for the nursery as well. It forces me to wear different hats, but also to figure out how they can work together.

“Being resourceful and working your butt off and just finding a creative way to get attention. That’s why I love what I do because my job is to get people excited about things. For me, it’s easy to go in and talk about our stuff. And that’s infectious. If you build a really strong connection, all of the other things fall into place.”

Like when Beyoncé happened to pose in front of an Endless Summer Hydrangea to promote her own clothing line. That just comes with the territory.

A Publicist’s Marketing Tips

You may not have the resources to have your plants at the Super Bowl or on a Netflix show, but Ryan says there are lots of ways to promote your business—whether it’s through an actual brand, a personal story or through unique products.

- One thing you can do is to create “a persona of you,” said Ryan. For example, if you’re a family-owned company and only family works there, that can become your “brand,” and the reason people visit your business is because you’re knowledgeable, friendly and have great quality.
- The second is to partner with someone. Work with the vendors or other brands you sell. “We all have assets that we can provide—like social content, videos, signage—because most of the smaller garden centers, even the bigger ones during spring, they don’t have time and most don’t have a dedicated person to

work on social or PR. But fall back on the people that you work with because a lot of us do have the resources and are happy to provide it. Don't try and do it all yourself."

- Third, don't expect to just send out a regular 'ol press release and assume it'll get picked up by local consumer media or the trade. You have to do something different in order to stand out from everyone else pitching their events and products.

- Do you even need a brand? Ryan says you don't necessarily need a formal brand with packaging and POP—just focus on what your main messages are.

"You have to go in with a really specific target of your talking points and your expectations of what you want to get out of it. The more focused you can be, the easier you'll be able to convey your points to your audience and get them engaged and react back to you." **GT**