

“The Future of Branding in our Industry.”

It was only 7-8 years ago that the topic of “branding” began to appear with frequency in *Greenhouse Grower* and other industry publications. Many began to consider what branding meant, and what their role in it should be.

Proven Winners is proud to be credited with bringing branding to horticulture. We firmly believe in both the concept and its future.

But isn't what we are doing really a lot more than branding? Some have considered branding to be simply developing a name or logo under which to sell plants. But creating a brand that is profitable to growers and retailers, and that provides real value to consumers is not easy. Instead, it is an ongoing and exciting process that, through research, innovation, and better plants, truly never ends.

And here's why. The real job of true plant marketers is much more than just “branding” plants. The real job is the long term process of *creating and building value* for growers, retailers, and consumers.

Let's step back 16 years to when the Proven Winners founders first met to develop the Proven Winners concept. It started with four unique plants – but equally important was the belief that better plants, combined with strong marketing, are good for the industry and the consumer.

Since that first meeting, the industry has changed greatly. Consider how many consumers today know the names Supertunia, Snowstorm, Superbells, and Proven Winners, versus a few years ago. Are growers and retailers selling these plants for higher prices? Do they sell quickly? Do consumers understand the brand promise, and are they getting a more beautiful garden? This is the real test for plant marketers if we are truly building value.

There is no doubt that branding is here to stay and will only get stronger. But only those that do the hard work of providing a strong value message will succeed. Over the past few years, we've already seen brands fall from the national scene, such as Flower Fields and Miracle Gro Plants. After gaining industry traction, the consumer value was not there. But besides Proven Winners, others such as Wave Petunias, Monrovia, and Flower Carpet are succeeding at creating consumer value, although they are doing this in different ways.

For those willing to do the work needed to build brand value, what does the future hold for branding in horticulture? Looking forward, three things will occur. One is grower and retailer interest in creating brands of their own, without a plan for where these brands fit, will decline and a reliance on national programs will increase. Proven Winners will continue to create value through innovative plants, market research, advertising, programs (Certified Garden Center and Roadshows, to name just a few), and ideas about how to enjoy plants in the consumer's own lifestyle setting. However, it is becoming less likely that others can make this same commitment.

The second is an increasing trend for consumer to seek out products they recognize and understand. In a recent consumer research study by Proven Winners at garden centers throughout the U.S., 71% of shoppers age 18-44 said they would seek out a “trusted” brand when buying plants – compared to 36% aged 45+. This means that today's younger consumer – our future consumer – has been trained to rely on brands like no other generation.

The third is the need to make gardening easier. We've heard it before, but consumers increasingly do not have the time and exposure to gardening as did prior generations. Branded products – those conveying an understood promise – will be important to making the consumer's shopping experience easier and more rewarding.

We'd estimate today that 25% or so of product sold in garden centers is "branded". Of this, some is just "tagged", i.e., it has a name attached to it, but the name has no consumer value. With the increased drive towards consumer awareness and value by Proven Winners and others, and with a changing consumer demographic towards value added branded products, the reliance on known national brands will continue to grow.

Proven Winners' biggest challenge, in fact, is in keeping up with demand. Consumers consistently tell us they can't find enough Proven Winners, or the varieties they want. This is an excellent opportunity for growers and retailers to tie into the demand and value being created. Consumers are also asking for the "real" Proven Winners package – meaning those sold in the Proven Winners branded container instead of a generic pot.

The result of this hard work and effort on all our part will be that packaging uniformity will increase, impulse shopping will be made easier, merchandising will continue to improve, and consumers will have a better shopping experience. But most importantly, they will have a more beautiful garden.