



key elements for new plant introduction

by Eva Monheim, Freelance Writer

*Did you ever wonder why
some companies are consistently successful
with new plant introductions?*

The answer lies in four key elements: plant selection - a plant that exhibits great performance or has a specific desirable trait or traits; a good public relations (PR) strategy; a sound advertising scheme; and an ample supply of the product to meet the demand. By missing one of these key elements, your product could fall short of the ultimate goal of becoming a successful new plant introduction and maintaining its market position.

plant selection

Selecting a great plant is the first step to the success of your venture. One needs to look at the overall consistency of plant performance, which can include numerous factors such as: disease and pest resistance; cold, heat and drought tolerance; consistency in bloom size, shape and form; regularity of blooming cycles; overall shape of the plant; year round interest; range of color and fragrance; genetic strength and whether or not the plant is "grower friendly."

The type of plant will determine what characteristics become more important or less important. A good example of this is *Betula nigra* Dura-Heat™ developed by Moon's Tree Farm (www.moonstreefarm.com) in Loganville, Georgia. "This tree was selected for its noticeable differences in character from the native species," says Dan Whitehead, sales manager for Moon's. Unlike the native species, Dura-Heat™ features leathery, shiny, dark green leaves forming a dense canopy - in the autumn, turning to a soft buttery yellow. It's heat and drought tolerant, and a "grower friendly" tree. Whitehead admits, "If growers cannot grow it, then it will not be successful."

According to Whitehead, the success of Moon's products comes from a good plan of action. The plan includes the observation of the strengths and weaknesses of the plant. Evaluations are made over a four to five year period. Full-scale propagation occurs during the time of evaluation to help build the number of trees for

future market supplies and to satisfy the next phase of the development process.

After the in-house evaluations are complete, the tree is then sold and distributed to nurseries throughout the U.S. During the first year of evaluation at other nursery sites, propagation still continues - preparing the product for the anticipated positive performance feedback leading to increased sales.

Moon's success with Dura-Heat™ thus is in part due to the strong product performance and a carefully designed marketing scheme.

Whitehead says that the initial sales to the first test group provides revenue to apply for patent rights. Additional income from further sales and royalties provides revenue for PR and for establishing a future advertising budget.

public relations

Although PR is an integral part of the entire plant development strategy, the strongest PR push occurs after the product has been established as a good consistent performer and when substantial supplies become available. It acts as a strong release into the media market—normally covering the entire targeted market—the positive PR sets the stage for good market saturation, which is later followed by a strong advertising campaign.

PR is the one element out of the four elements of the marketing strategy which is hard to quantify and predict, says Randall Schultz of Schultz Communications (schcomm@aol.com), in Albuquerque, N.M. As a PR specialist, Schultz says that controlling what is written in the press release is the greatest control one has over the PR campaign. Once the press release has been sent out, there is little control over who will see the press release and then who will ultimately use it. If you can interest others in the plant product because it is new or different, then the plant will receive more coverage. It is reasonable to assume that a certain percentage of stories will

come from a press release, but again, a measure is difficult to determine. Schultz encourages his clients to use their databases as the first sources to receive the press releases. This method will guarantee a targeted and attentive audience for the new product.

According to PR guru Susan McCoy, president of the Garden Media Group (susan@gardenmediagroup.com) in Chadds Ford, Pa., a good public relations campaign "helps build the reputation of the new product." Once the reputation is established – the momentum builds.

In a recent conversation with McCoy, she shared one of her client's new product success stories. In 1998, promotions began for a rose called Knock Out™, introduced by Star® Roses (www.starroses.com) – a division of The Conard-Pyle Company of West Grove, Pa. McCoy's PR strategy included sending a limited number of test plants to key garden media members, sending press releases out to the trade, and promoting it at trade shows. In 1999, after receiving high ratings from her 1998 test group, McCoy sent an additional 125 plants to garden writers, rosarians, and extension agents.

From these test groups, there were several things that occurred that

pushed the demand for this rose. The product performed in every region of the country with stellar results. Knock Out™ appealed to a vast audience due to its disease resistant, low maintenance requirement and its ability to withstand drought and subzero temperatures. Knock Out™ won the vote from everyone who watched its strong performance.

Knock Out™ is a good example of how good PR along with a product's superior performance can catapult the product into the limelight. Although McCoy knew Conard-Pyle's Star® Roses had a great product, she did not know how fast the PR would attract other media groups to jump on the proverbial bandwagon. Stories were being written for major magazines right and left – pushing the plant to national stardom.

Because PR is harder to measure than advertising, it becomes difficult to gauge the number of plants a company will need to fulfill orders. This is exactly what happened to Conard-Pyle and Star® Roses. But isn't this an ideal situation? According to Michael Petrie, vice president of J. Franklin Styer Nurseries (www.styers.com) of Concordville, Pa., the PR for Knock Out™ was so good that retail clients were coming and asking for the product by name. Petrie sold out of product. Petrie believed his proximity to Star® Roses and Conard-Pyle would

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guarantee him the ability to purchase additional stock quickly. But in the case of Knock Out™ there was no product to be had. Petrie said that he believed that this product put him to the test as a retailer. He tried to steer his clients to similar performing products to fill the gap in the demand that had been created by Knock Out™.

McCoy followed the PR formula to the letter, said Petrie. Having clients ask for a product by name was proof that McCoy created a great word of mouth PR campaign.

What happened next? By the 2000-2001 season, the demand of the product exceeded the supplies. One might think that running out of supply is an ideal situation, but from a PR perspective it leaves a gap forcing a reassessing of the PR campaign and having the plant producer make major changes in plant production schedules, pushing the envelope to the max.

After several adjustments in the Knock Out™

production schedule, supplies are expected to hit 200,000 for 2003 and up to 500,000 for 2004, and the capability to go to one million by 2005. McCoy predicts that her next PR campaign for Knock Out™ will be another success, boasting that Knock Out™ will be the number one woody ornamental for the year 2004.

advertising

Like a good fertilizing regime, advertising feeds and maintains a stream of strong, steady sales growth. It begins once the product has an established reputation or image. The purpose of advertising is to hold the market space for the product and to keep the sales momentum going.

Maintaining the plant's position in the market happens through targeted advertising. The quickest results come from repeat sales from your own customers, says Schultz. By targeting in house customer databases the new plant introduction's sales are easily maintained.

The vice president of Thompson & Morgan (www.thompson-morgan.com), Claire Burrows, shares several advertising secrets. "Advertising is strongly based on the overall budget that is set for the new plant product." Direct advertising to targeted markets provides strong sales for any new, strong performing plant introduction. Magazine advertising that directs itself to the trade will quickly increase product sales. Web pages, e-mail databases, newsletters and customer lists are all ideal forms for direct advertising. Burrows claims many companies miss valuable advertising and sales opportunities by not utilizing their own tailored customer bases. "This is a key to successful repeat sales." Thompson & Morgan also maintains traditional targeted mailings of catalogues and fliers, which continue to bring in steady sales.

"Deadlines are critical for advertising; many times the advertisements need to be prepared long before the initial PR campaign begins because of advertising deadlines," says Burrows. Selling new plant introductions in seed form limits the window of opportunity because of planting schedules. If her company misses the window of opportunity for advertising for late winter and early spring sales, her product loses market momentum.

ample supplies

Maintaining ample supplies of product provides a continuous flow of product through the market. Preventing gaps in this continuum alleviates loss of sales to other products and competitors all while developing customer loyalty. Many times demand does supercede supply, but in cases like this there should be another plan in place to help offset the shortfall. Communications between

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retailers, growers, PR agents and advertisers need to be an ongoing process to close the gaps that may occur from depleted inventories.

Dan Whitehead from Moon's Tree Farm says there are two marketing strategies in the market place that will determine whether or not there are ample supplies for new product demand. The first strategy is the business that insists on growing everything itself or limits its area of supply; the second strategy is the nursery that distributes its product throughout the country for continued development and sales.

Moon's Tree Farm uses the latter strategy to move its product at the national market level. According to Whitehead, one thing is certain, there has to be a large number of nurseries growing the Moon product to provide ample numbers to meet the demand of a national market and its distribution.

According to Claire Burrows, Thompson & Morgan operates on a similar mindset to Moon's. A strategy should be in place for backup to accommodate the product demand. Although the seed market has a shorter lead time than the tree market or other woody ornamental, perennial or annual markets the demand should be anticipated if the product is a stellar national performer.

By following these four key elements for developing new plant introductions any great performing plant can be a success in the marketplace. ♡

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