

Successes and Failures of Marketing—The Blooms Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing, as defined by the UK Institute of Marketing, is “the management function which organises and directs all those business activities involved in assessing and converting consumer purchasing power into effective demand for a specific product or service to the final consumer or user so as to achieve the profit, target, or other objectives set by the company.”

Until recently, selling, not marketing, is what most of the nursery stock industry has done to maintain its income. However, times are rapidly changing and this paper gives some ideas about marketing based on the experience that Blooms of Bressingham has had in marketing new plants and groups of plants, then turns to the present and future.

BLOOMS EXPERIENCE

In the 1960s, although Blooms was known for the breeding and introduction of hardy perennials, very little attempt was made to promote or market new varieties. The garden centre market was only just developing but my father, Alan Bloom, had begun promoting and marketing hardy perennials and their use in “island beds.”

When I returned to the family business in 1962, I began to develop the collection of dwarf conifers and heathers—and over the years promoting this group of plants to what seemed an eager public.

Although we promoted new plants, it was a little ironic that the major promotion we were to do was a shrub not even raised by us. This was the first colour break in shrubby potentillas called, it would seem appropriately, ‘Red Ace’. It was the first shrub to have the protection of Plant Breeders Rights and our successful negotiation to obtain world rights was to put us in the firing line, so to speak, in promoting new plants. This was in 1975 and after an enormously successful launch at Chelsea and pre-booked sales of over 200,000 plants it went on the UK market in September—only to turn yellow in the hottest summer Britain had experienced in 50 years.

We all know the problems of controlling plants and their environment and our next major promotion on *Phormiums*, the New Zealand flax, in 1979 coincided with one of the coldest winters for some years, leading to major losses of plants. But the path was set for Blooms to seek new plants and promote them through mail order and garden centres.

We had been instrumental in setting up a marketing cooperative of five independent nurseries, the Anglia Group, in 1969. However, in 1979 we left so that we could promote our own company brand name, Blooms of Bressingham, direct to the public.

Using newly designed promotional material we continued to promote new plants such as *Potentilla fruticosa* Princess™, *Spiraea japonica* Golden Princess™, *Choisya*

ternata Sundance™, *Juniperus × media* Gold Sovereign™, *Hebe* Margret®, and *Fragaria × ananassa* ‘Frel’ Pink Panda™, as well as many hardy perennials.

WHAT TO PROMOTE, HOW TO PROMOTE IT

Things have moved on, and we are now only one of many in the UK whose marketing is becoming increasingly professional with larger and larger sums being committed to it. But is it profitable to promote and market new plants? I believe it is, or at least it can be, but these days the markets are changing so rapidly that one needs to be aware of not only the potential but the pitfalls. Here is a brief guide as to what to look out for in deciding how to introduce, promote, and market a new plant.

The Plant. Avoid the instinctive reaction to select it because it is “a nice little plant.” You will need to think of it as a product and assess it for the market it seems most suited for, i.e. garden centres, mail order, amenity, etc. Perhaps it is adaptable for several markets.

Culture. You need to think about what is the best way to propagate and grow your chosen plant — seed, cutting, micropropagation, grafting? Is it generally free from pests and disease—if not, what are they and how can they be controlled. You need to develop a production blueprint as soon as possible, and add to it as your experience grows. Whilst growing trials are necessary, increasing competition may mean pushing new plants forward without the benefit of a long trial period.

Plant Protection. If you have a new plant of potential importance, do not part with it to anyone without asking for a test certificate to be signed by the recipient—otherwise difficulties of ownership may arise, creating possible problems in obtaining plant breeders rights (PBR). PBR and plant patents are an insurance against the costs of promotion and marketing of a highly desirable and commercial new plant. They give longer term benefits to the company and, of course, royalty returns to the breeder. PBR should be applied for before the launch of a new plant—not only in the country of first introduction but ideally in the other major markets too. This takes some organisation and initial cost.

Marketing and Distribution. This stage is almost the most vital, assuming you have a marketable plant. A breeder or small nurseryman is unlikely to have the resources or knowledge to make full use of the potential of a new plant. The market is not just the UK any more but, potentially, the whole world. For that you need an organisation that can cover the UK and foreign markets either by themselves or, as is most likely, in association with other companies. Plants will need testing and assessing in different climatic and market conditions. Sales and distribution will need to be controlled and royalties collected.

Planning further and further ahead is becoming more necessary so agents have the opportunity to trial under a test certificate before introduction into any country. It has taken us a long time to get to that point at Blooms but at last we are beginning to get a more efficient distribution system with agents in most major world markets.

Launching New Products. So finally, after maybe several years of costly preparation, plans are prepared for a product launch. Remember, marketing is about creating a demand and to create a demand you must create publicity for the

plant. This should involve a launch date and as much media coverage as possible. The gardening press in Britain and in many other countries is generally hungry for good copy about new plants. The Chelsea Flower Show and other exhibitions are excellent platforms for a launch, particularly if accompanied by a celebrity. The markets need to be provided with all the pre-publicity material and distribution dates, and of course plants need to be at their best in appearance and quality when finally released to the public to buy.

The Financial Returns. Costs can be enormous—£30,000, £50,000, £100,000—even before a plant is sold. There are big risks to the marketing company and potentially big rewards if it goes well. In fact the marketing company, unless they are one and the same, has a potentially bigger risk than the breeder though both will usually get paid, or not, on results. Breeders need to be patient, knowing that it often takes time to test the plants and build the markets. With PBR and plant patents lasting longer than 20 years rewards should come if the foundation, the structure for production and marketing, is firmly built.

CONCLUSION

At Blooms we have had successes and failures. The failures almost always have come from not doing our homework sufficiently on the requirements of the plant under market conditions, being rushed into marketing too soon, or a combination of both. So we have now become much more methodical in our appraisal system for new plants, with the result that plants such as *Fragaria* × *ananassa* 'Frel' Pink Panda™ and *Hebe* Margret™ are working very well, despite occasional pirating attempts.

But new plants at Blooms are not only those with major across-the-markets potential. We select many plants which are just good garden plants but may not always look or grow well in containers. We do not always want to be orientated towards just a few major introductions. Our policy is to offer a wide range of new and unusual plants—perhaps some rediscovered—and to promote not only plants but ideas on how the gardener can use them. To broaden the market in such a way may be an even greater challenge for the present and the future.