



The value of influence

Nurseries strategically seek influence and reap the rewards

BY JON BELL

ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO, Costa Farms launched a campaign called “O₂ for You,” which was designed to play up the valuable role that houseplants can play in cleaning pollutants out of indoor air. The Miami, Florida-based horticultural grower — now one of the largest in the world — compiled a list of houseplants that had been shown by research to clean the air. They branded the tags and pots and made a big push to spread the word.

“As the research became more widely published, they had already laid the groundwork as the leader,” said Katie Dubow, creative director for Garden Media Group, a public relations and marketing firm that specializes in the lawn and garden industry.

Similarly, not too long ago, natural fertilizing company Espoma partnered with Laura LeBoutillier, the force behind the Garden Answer channel on YouTube. Though Espoma has been around since 1929 and is known far and wide, teaming up with LeBoutillier — who has more than 452,000 subscribers on her channel, and millions of views on her videos — helped the company gain exposure to a whole new audience it might never have before.

The main theme between the two anecdotes? Influence.

It comes in many forms in the nursery industry, from being

able to guide trends thanks to innovative products or services to sharing expertise and insights that help growers up their ability to thrive. Not everyone in the industry is out to be the most influential. Some keep their heads down and find they do just fine. Others, however, see the big benefits that can be harvested from having influence in the industry.

“The art of influence enables one to effectively carry out tasks and successfully achieve your goals,” Dubow said. “Isn’t that what we are all after? Whether it’s an introduction to a contact from a colleague or an investment in your brand, having influence allows connections to be made more quickly and successfully.”

Gaining influence

Gaining influence in the nursery industry can take many different forms. Some, according to Dubow, can be subtle and simple but still have big impacts.

For example, simply listening to people can go a long way in gaining helpful influence.

“Those who listen well are able to make emotional connections that make them more influential,” she said. “They are ➤

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also able to garner informational benefits by learning new information.”

She also said it can be helpful to become genuinely interested in other people, share praise and honest appreciation and “make others successful.”

“True influence is rarely built upon the backs of others,” Dubow said, “but rather by serving others and helping them achieve their goals.”

Dan Heims, president of Terra Nova Nurseries, a flower and plant breeder and grower in Canby, Oregon, said just by opening gardens to visitors, one can gain influence.

“One of the best ways (to gain influence in the industry) is to open gardens,” he said. “Each visitor is an emissary to the world, offering geometric increases in coverage by posting pictures of your plants to various social media platforms.”

Making donations of plants to auctions or plant-driven auctions can also help boost influence, according to Heims, as can sharing expertise. Heims is himself a published author of “The Garden Clerk’s Dictionary” who has had articles and photographs appear in numerous nursery publications. He also has a lecture repertoire of nearly 30 different topics and has given speeches around the world.

“Writing books and giving lectures to local and national audiences inspires and creates demand for your products, as well as influence, in both local and national tradeshows,” Heims said.

Some of Heims’ speaking engagements have come as a result of numerous awards that Terra Nova has racked up over the years — another way that nurseries can gain influence in the field. One example: the Cultivate tradeshow named Terra Nova

as Nursery of the Year, one of many accolades that have allowed Heims and others at the the nursery to be speakers for both retail and wholesale audiences at flower shows as well as industry tradeshows.

Brent Markus is founder of Rare Tree Nursery and Instant Hedge, two of three nursery businesses he’s started over the years. While he said he has done some speaking engagements for groups like the Southern Nursery Association and the American Conifer Society, his efforts at influence are aimed these days more at landscape architects, garden centers and customers who are looking for the grown hedges that InstantHedge offers.

“InstantHedge is new to the Oregon nursery scene, and as a newcomer we’re focusing on servicing our customers,” Markus said. “That means we’re ever-improving the list of hedge varieties to satisfy our customers, and constantly improving everything from shipping to packaging to remain at the forefront.”

And then, of course, there are the much more straight-forward approaches to trying to gain influence. Those include advertising, marketing, public relations and other such efforts. In this day and age, that has become much more important in the digital and social media spaces.

“By strategically positioning your nursery on the internet and in social media, you can form strong and supportive connections within the industry,” Heims said.

Maintaining a solid online presence, however, can take time and resources away from other important functions of an operation. Heims said his company has found great benefits in hiring a “responsive and collaborative-natured” public relations firm that handles media placements, photography, events and other matters for Terra Nova.

Dubow added that influencer marketing has gotten big over the past few years — and it’s something that nurseries should pay attention to. For those not yet familiar with the term, influencer marketing is essentially marketing that targets not customers, but people who have influence



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over a certain customer segment. Those influencers could be celebrities, but more often these days they are folks who've built up large numbers of followers on social media. Espoma partnering with Laura LeBoutillier is a good example of that in the garden industry.

One caveat to influencers, however, is that as the trend has caught on, it's become clear in some cases that their authenticity isn't always sincere. Often, Dubow said, it becomes too obvious that an influencer is being paid to speak on behalf of brands.

"People will demand more transparency from influencers, watching carefully for signs of sincerity and accuracy," she said.

The potential pitfalls

Gaining influence can be a good thing. It can increase awareness of a busi-

ness and, as a result, boost sales, position folks as thought leaders and help spread recognition among customers.

But there are some potential pitfalls that come along with that influence.

Heims said it's important through the process of gaining influence to be consistent in "doing a good job and remembering to not spread yourself too thin." He's seen some companies who struggle with inaccurate data, poor photography and presentation style, which can poke holes in the influence that a company or individual does possess.

Dubow said a common mistake that influence-seekers make is to use a "one-size-fits-all approach."

"Remember that influencing is highly situational. Learn your personal, genuine tactics and follow those," she said.

"Strategies can range from education to

collaboration. The key is knowing which approach to use when."

She also cautioned that, with influence comes responsibility. Folks look to influential leaders for responses, analysis and other inputs. Because those influencers are often among the first to speak up, they're often the target of the harshest criticisms.

At the end of the day, Dubow said influence, when acquired and yielded wisely, will lead to good things.

"Whether you are a leader or follower," she said, "at some point you will need influence to be successful." ☺

Jon Bell is a freelance journalist who writes about everything from craft beer and real estate to the great outdoors. His website is www.jbellink.com. He can be reached at jontbell@comcast.net.



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