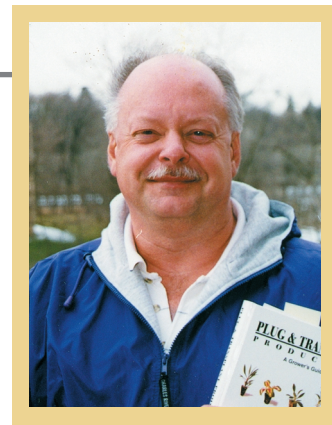


Education for All



By Roger C. Styer

Growers, buyers and end consumers, too.

This is the time of year when I am finishing up a lot of training seminars for my grower clients. I conduct in-house seminars and training sessions on a number of growing topics about which the growers want more information. We get a chance to work with plants they are growing in the greenhouse and discuss some of the newest information and how it relates to the basic concepts of growing.

Having someone conduct a personal seminar for your operation that is based on your needs, questions and uses for your facility, and that targets your mission statement, is the best way to get education, but it's not the only way. Growers are able to attend regional meetings

and conferences where they pick up good cultural and other information. I find that growing operations that allow their growers to continually upgrade their skills with seminars, conferences, trade shows or just visits to other greenhouses keep their growers longer and improve their product quality.

Growers and owners have a number of very good regional conferences and trade shows, and one big one in the Ohio Short Course. How often do you have your growers attend a conference where they can improve their growing knowledge? For my clients, I challenge the growers attending a conference or trade show to come back with 3-5 key ideas, suggestions or new products that can be incorporated into the growing

operation and will improve their product or methods. Each attendee has different assignments, so there is no need for overlap. Soon after the conference, before everyone gets too busy again and forgets, they make sure to review what was seen or heard and what written information was picked up.

We have a lot of opportunities to pick up good information, but I see a lack of interest from managers and owners to improve their business and management skills, even though talks are offered at the conferences. The same challenge I give to growers should be for managers and owners. What 3-5 new ideas or suggestions can you bring back to improve your business and management skills?

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

But what about the rest of the floriculture industry? Who is educating the store buyers or independent garden center operators? And what about the end consumer? We can continually improve our growing skills, but if the rest of the market chain does not improve, what good will this do us?

I think the biggest gap we have in the educational process is between growing operations, store buyers and end consumers. The better we can put together programs and services with stores and garden centers, the more product we can sell for higher margins. Often, I hear about growing operations that deal with the "big boxes." You get an appointment for a certain date and time to meet with the Walmart buyer in Bentonville, Ark., to present new programs and what you have to offer for the next year. They say yes or no, and push you for a lower price. But how well do those buyers really understand the plant products we are promoting? Do any of them attend the same conferences, trade shows or trials we do? Without a better understanding of our products and how to promote them to the end consumer, it is impossible to increase value with

better prices, sizes and quality.

On top of all this, I see continued problems when the main office drives box store programs and regional differences are ignored. The battle that Home Depot and Lowe's are engaged in with guaranteeing they have the lowest prices is not helping our cause either. When marketing decisions are driven by egos and not common sense, we all suffer. How can you, as a producer for box stores, get the buyers back to offering their customers good value without losing your shirt?

Finally, let's not forget about educating the end consumer. We are trying to do this with POP, fancy labels, pots, tags and even booklets in the stores. Do the chain stores you deal with maintain good displays and POP to help sales? And how many different POP displays can a store handle without confusing the consumer and themselves?

Good independent garden centers will offer in-house seminars to educate their consumers on different products and trends, along with having open houses to show off their products. Some even offer landscape design and installation services. But how many will make house calls to help plan the consumer's installation or help with a problem? The personal touch is what many upscale consumers are looking for, and they are willing to pay an extra charge for that service.

Education for the end consumer is more than just articles in magazines or the local newspaper. When you consider your buyer as a consumer, you will find there are ample opportunities to educate them about the value of the products you sell. Remember, education is a never-ending process for the different segments of our market. Why should growers have all the fun? **GPN**

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