



Lisa Oliver

RESUME

Position: Marketing manager, Kalamazoo Valley Plant Growers Cooperative.

Responsibilities: Marketing duties include trade show planning; developing sales presentations and other support material for the sales team; and new product development to expand the co-op's product offerings. The co-op recently joined forces with Michigan State University to develop training programs.

Experience: Formerly assistant vice president/merchant live goods for Franks Nursery

They Say...



David Kuack
GM PRO Editor

Lisa Oliver

on being a grower marketer

Kalamazoo Valley Plant Growers Cooperative marketing manager Lisa Oliver talks about her role reversal from retail buyer to grower marketer.

Q. What have been some of the most enlightening things you have discovered during the transition from retail buyer for Franks to grower marketer for the Kalamazoo Valley Plant Growers Cooperative?

A. This past year has been a whirlwind. The greatest surprise to me as I shifted sides of the table is how much growers in today's business climate must do for their customers. At Franks, to ensure that we differentiated ourselves from our competitors, it was our responsibility to develop the majority of our programs, most importantly plant selection and seasonal adjustments by region. For many other retailers, they must rely on their growers to help them differentiate them from their competitors.

Additionally, at Franks, we handled all allocations and replenishment, day in and day out. It is amazing to me that many other retailers rely on their growers to drive their sales and profitability.

While I realized growers have been taking on some of the merchandising roles at some of the chains over the years, I was surprised that much of the number crunching is done by the growers rather than the retailer.

Q. What could growers do better when it comes to marketing?

A. Marketing plants is something that our industry, overall, does a pretty poor job of. We expect the plants to sell themselves and we think that the cost of good packaging (tags, pots, plants with royalties and more) is a waste of money. However, if we observe any other retail environment, we realize that consumers are being bombarded with frills to help sell products. As an industry we spend a lot of energy selling to the trade. However, the end consumer is the person who needs to be tantalized.

Q. In general, what are some of the things that growers could do to

better serve their retail customers?

A. Listen. What does your customer really need and when do they need it? More than anything, each retailer wants to have its own identity. Find a way to separate them from their competition.

Q. How does having access to product from more than 50 growers in the co-op make your job easier? Harder?

A. Our greatest strength with such a large number of growers to pull from is its diversity. We can service a multitude of customers small to large and are able to segregate the product to the growers that are best at that particular production. Growers have the ability to become specialists at what they do.

The challenge comes in the assembly of the orders when the product is coming from so many greenhouses. That is why we will be investing in a central loading facility in the near future. The co-op is currently looking at a 40-acre parcel for a 80,000-square-foot central loading site. The co-op is leveraging this site in its network of loading facilities to continue to drive the cost out of its business while expanding its product line offerings.

Q. In trying to set up a marketing program with a retailer, what are the biggest and most common obstacles?

A. Every retailer wants its identity to be the brand that it is promoting. Additionally, there are very few of the already branded programs on the market that the retailers feel the consumer recognizes. Retailers are resistant to add to the confusion and do not want to pay more and charge more for something that the customer does not see a perceived value in. Offer a program that has or will have a following and then it is easier to get the buy in.

Q. Has the co-op done many of these types of programs?

A. The co-op has participated in many of the national branded programs such as Wave petunias, Proven Winners, All-America Selections and more. The programs have generally been customer driven in that a particular retailer, many exclusive to that one retailer, requests them. This could be a challenge for many single facility growers. The strength of the co-op is its diversity, making us a great choice for these specialized programs.

In the future, the co-op will continue to embrace programs that have national or retail appeal. Most exciting to me will be some of the programs the co-op will be rolling out that will be exclusive to us. That is what makes it all fun.

Q. Do you think flower brands are important to consumers?

A. While I do believe that brands are very important to retailers and consumers, I do believe that the cost associated with building a brand is much larger than we wish to admit. Therefore many brands have not made it off the ground due to under funding and misdirected targets. The end consumer is the ultimate target.

Look at what Bailey Nursery did with Endless Summer hydrangea. Last year the company created a demand larger than the pipeline could support. It invested much time, money and research as well as a pinpointed marketing campaign and in no time, the company had a winner on its hands.

Ultimately, nothing drives sales better than a well-promoted campaign. Ask any retailer if they had enough Endless Summer plants last year.

Q. Do you think the floral industry needs a national marketing program?

A. The debate on this powerful topic has been going on in our industry for many years. Some industries have been successful while others have not.

I do believe that, since our industry is comprised of predominately regional growers, there is merit in a national marketing program. However, what I have seen of our industry over the past 23 years is that it is difficult and often impossible, to get a consensus on such a direction.

If our industry wants to enjoy more robust growth, it will be necessary for us to engage the occasional gardener. Regardless if it is national or regional, we need to be more active in promoting our industry to the end consumer.

In the meantime, organizations such as America in Bloom were created for the very purpose of promoting community involvement in gardening. This organization reaches out to many other horticultural interest groups in addition to our immediate industry in a quest to raise the level of participation in community gardening, the lifeblood of our existence. It behooves all of us to lend our support to organizations such as AIB and National Garden Bureau.

Q. The co-op funds industry research. What type of research has been funded and has it been predominantly production related?

A. The research that has been conducted up to this point has been exclusively production related. Michigan State University has been a tremendous partner for the grower community. Some of the most recent

research has involved:

- * Strategies and rates for use of plant growth regulators on bedding plant crops.

- * Lighting strategies to accelerate flowering of bedding plants to reduce production time.

- * Better understanding the role of temperature on production time of bedding plants.

- * Selection and development of production protocols for new crops including tropicals, tender perennials and select herbaceous perennials.