

## **Connecting with the Gardening Public<sup>©</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Kernock Park Plants was established in 1976 by Richard Harnett (then a horticultural advisor), along with his wife Jan. Since then, the nursery has expanded to just over 4.5 ha of polythene and glass on three separate sites. There is a workforce of around 80 during spring and summer, falling to around 50, including permanent staff for the remainder of the year. The nursery produces nearly 1,200 taxa including summer bedding, patio plants, alpines, herbs, hardy and herbaceous perennials, grasses, and shrubs. It is primarily a wholesale business, the main product being plug plants — a range of 9-cm liners having been added recently following the take over of some of the lines previously grown at nearby Hewton Nursery. The nursery has been supplying Proven Winners<sup>®</sup> brand plants since 1999.

### **ADVANTAGES OF PARTNERSHIP WITH PROVEN WINNERS**

The Proven Winners initiative began in the early 1990s — the original ideas actually came from some European colleagues, but Proven Winners really began in earnest in North America. The original principle was simple, to market new plants, mostly cutting raised product in a completely new way, as “patio plants” for use in baskets and containers, something not really done by the big seed companies of the day. It wasn't until 1998 that Proven Winners was formally established in Europe. There are seven main members from all over Europe supported by a network of rooting and selling partners.

The benefits of this sort of cooperation include economies of scale, pooling ideas and experience and being an attractive prospect to breeders seeking routes to market for their new plants — nearly 100 breeders from all over the world contribute material to Proven Winners trials. Potential new introductions are rigorously tested in several countries around the world for performance for the grower and the end user. The best plants are taken into the Proven Winner assortment and there are now more than 200 Proven Winner plants on the market in Europe. The vast majority of the stock is elite, virus indexed material.

The industry has tried pushing the product through the system, with little ability to influence the choices made by consumers. Branding means the market pulls the product through. It also helps differentiate products and helps growers to connect directly with consumers.

### **BRANDING AND MARKETING DATA**

In North America, Proven Winners has not only grown and sold its plants, but has also been able to grow an extremely strong consumer brand — in fact it is one of the most recognised brands in USA horticulture. With 2.4 million unique visitors to its website recorded in the past 12 months, Proven Winners North America has an incredible information source from customers and potential customers. It had more than 100,000 responses to a questionnaire distributed earlier this year via the internet and was able to collect some very interesting information on the gardening public.

First, 93% of the respondents were women. Our industry is dependent on women buying our products, so is our decision-making too male-dominated?

More than 60% of respondents were aged 45 or over but 70% of them said they were hooked before the age of 21, which may seem surprising. While 86% said that they shopped at garden centres, but of those only 4% always know what they want when they walk into a garden centre. A massive 96% shop buy on impulse which means we have plenty of scope to influence buying decisions.

Market research carried out by Kernock Park, and data from our colleagues in North America and the U.K. Horticulture Trades Association suggested the target audience for the brand in the U.K. should be females under 45, the gardening proud, those with “alfresco aspirations” who would be interested in container gardening and who are looking for a “modern younger image” from a company which could offer inspiration and planting recipes which are easy to achieve, using innovative plants that they can trust to perform.

### **MARKETING MESSAGES**

Attaching marketing messages to a brand is expensive and time consuming, and initially there is very little reward for the supplier. But brands have been found to simplify the decision-making process for consumers by providing a sense of security and consistency. The marketing mix is designed to create a perception in the customers’ minds, so that when they visit the garden centre they will see the Proven Winner product and know that it can be trusted to perform in their garden, hence differentiating it from the other products. The message is that each Proven Winners introduction has been carefully selected to ensure it meets specific quality criteria. Plants are trialled and tested in sites all over the world to ensure they are bright and colourful, floriferous, flower all season, easy to grow and care for, and disease and pest resistant.

In order to get these messages across the offer must be made as simple as possible. The plant is offered in a branded pot, the logo and information on the plant is offered on the bespoke label and the whole offering is presented in the garden centre with “living labels” and easy to follow instructions.

The simple message on the point of sale material for the garden centre is “Great Plants and Bright Ideas” and includes simple to follow recipe cards. The concept for container planting is that there are three easy steps: choose (pick three 12-cm plants), prepare (by using the planting planner on the card to arrange the three plants in the container) and care (either visit the website for care instructions or follow the instruction on the plant label).

To simplify this further we have split the plant range into three distinct seasonal offerings so that the consumer knows when they should be purchasing which plant. We have “Spring Fling”, “Summer Livin” and “Autumn Magic”. Each is a distinct group of products within the overall brand.

### **USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Before the brand could be presented to the industry and the consumer, facts and feedback were gathered using the website and social media, focus groups, a launch weekend to consumers at a selected garden centre, and a trade launch at the Horticulture Trade Association’s National Plant Show.

Research by both industry bodies and retail experts has shown that there have been big developments in the relationship between retailers and consumers. With the advent of smart phones and the internet, many consumers have an idea of what they want to buy before they go shopping, though this is still tempered by impulse when they arrive at the garden centre. In order to get that interaction with the consumer it is imperative to establish direct channels via social media and the internet and this has been a key factor in the development of the Proven Winners brand. It gives us as growers chance to influence the consumer’s decision before they set out to buy plants. It also enables us to offer support and guidance on the products purchased, building confidence in the fact that the right decision has been made.

We have used all of the common social media formats including Facebook<sup>®</sup>, Twitter<sup>®</sup>, You Tube<sup>®</sup> and Pintrest<sup>®</sup> and have not forgotten traditional ‘hard copy’. In this new electronic age where information is transient there is still a requirement for a tangible piece of material that the consumer can take away with them — so we produce a printed *Ideas Book*. We have found this to be a very useful tool for increasing the consumer

interaction. When they sign up to the website we send them the booklet and we have also run competitions on Twitter where the booklet is given as a prize.

We have invited retailers to add their information to the website as stockist of Proven Winner Plants. So far we have around 40 garden centres and online retailers who have added their details.

### **FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK**

A focus group was held at a retail nursery, made up of nine ladies aged between 25 and 40. The key objectives were: to look at the price perception of plants; establish, what, if any, is the effect of larger/different colour pots; to understand buying motives; and test run the recipes to be promoted. We also wanted to gather some feedback from the retailer following the event and collect sufficient background information to confidently formulate a final plan for the consumer launch weekend, at Plymouth Garden Centre a month later.

From the focus group we heard these consumers would pay £2-3 for a 9-cm summer bedding plant, £3 for a 9 pack of bedding and £3-4 for a 12-cm bedding plant in a Proven Winners pot. They said pricing offers — such as buy 2 get 1 free — made a difference. Their attitudes to seasonal plants were interesting: some said that as soon as they heard the word “bedding” they wouldn’t buy it as they assumed it would die. But they didn’t think of crops such as primroses as bedding. Others, notably the younger consumers, liked buying bedding because they knew that if what they tried didn’t work out it didn’t matter, they could try again next year, and they could change the colour each year and keep coming up with new designs. The key element in the buying decisions of all of the focus group members was that they wanted a good quality plant, to the extent that they would only shop at their trusted garden centre or shop with their parents or another older trusted gardener, as they were not confident enough to make the decision on their own. The most important factor was that the plant looked good: they were planting to make their gardens pretty and exciting, and so they wanted the right plants to make sure this happened, hence the desire for quality.

### **LAUNCHING THE BRAND**

The information from the focus group enabled us to make some tweaks in the marketing in readiness for the launch weekend at Plymouth Garden Centre’s Container and Patio Festival held over a mid-May weekend in 2013. We set up a retail area in the garden centre with the living labels, the point of sale material, and the plants for sale, with a view to getting consumer and retailer feedback on how the branded plants would be regarded; what implications are there in terms of space, location, and profitability per square metre; and what maintenance and merchandising requirements would there be on the shop floor.

The display area was staffed for the whole weekend and demonstrations were run regularly during this time. There was also a competition running for consumers to vote for their favourite planting recipe.

Probably the biggest single thing learned over the weekend was that the Proven Winners range is incredibly easy to sell to consumers. The higher price point of £2.99 per pot proved to be no barrier whatsoever to purchasing with the consumers understanding that the larger pot size would ensure more rapid establishment and quicker results. The only objections were either customers who had a large area to cover and were happier buying more, smaller plants and waiting for the results a bit longer, or customers who wanted particular cultivars that were favourites of theirs and weren’t in the Proven Winner offering on the day. The recipe sheets combined with the living labels and then the relevant plants merchandised adjacent to these were also definite winners. However we realised that we needed to work on making it more intuitive in order to ensure consumers were able to make purchasing decisions without assistance.

From the retailer’s point of view, they were very happy with the sales and they compared favourably with similar products such as pack and 9-cm bedding in both

volume and profitability per square metre. They also saw higher sales of related products such as planting containers and compost.

There is still reticence from growers as to the worthiness of the Proven Winners branding. This is understandable because we have just had two of the most difficult trading years for a long while in the U.K. and very few growers are willing to “take a gamble”. At the National Plant Show we presented our findings so far to potential growers and retailers with mixed reaction. Some of the key retailers are very keen on the concept and believe that the market is ready for branded plants. It is now a case of completing the supply chain and getting the concept into more outlets.

### **PROVEN WINNERS IN OTHER TERRITORIES**

The Proven Winners network covers North America, Japan, Spain, Italy, Poland, Germany, Denmark, South Africa, and Australia.

North America is the most advanced, with a marketing budget of \$5 million and using the whole gamut of marketing tools including radio, TV, and magazines. A complete marketing package enables retailers to increase their business, including a kit to put on a container festival and specific plant promotion days tied to fund raising appeals. There are also training academies for retailers and Proven Winners branded growing media and fertiliser.

The brand is starting to build in Japan by promoting plants within the Proven Winners range.

Other territories include Spain and Italy where they have already set up an academy for retail staff and have recruited numerous garden centres as Proven Winner stockists.

In Poland, Germany, Denmark, South Africa, and Australia Proven Winner members are starting down the same route as us here in the U.K. and are trying to emulate what has already been achieved by our partners in North America.