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We're in fashion



by MARIA ZAMPINI

'It dawned on me just how closely related the green industry and the fashion world are, and I wondered: If we haven't taken a cue from them yet, isn't it time we should?'

Maria Zampini is president of Lake County New Plants LLC, Madison, OH. She co-founded the company with her father, Jim Zampini. Their focus is sales and marketing of LCN Selections along with research and development of new plant introductions. She can be reached at maria.zampini@yahoo.com.

I've just completed a weeklong marketing trip for LCN Selections through a few Midwestern and Great Plains states. The customers I visited on this trip echoed what I heard at the winter trade shows — overall, there's an upbeat mood for spring. During conversations on the state of the industry, one recurring comment, however, was that things are never going to be the same. I think, then, isn't it only logical that the approach to sales shouldn't be, either?

As a colleague and I traveled many a scenic mile lined with corn stubble, cattle and silos, it gave me plenty of time to contemplate the future (which I realize can be dangerous). So, I decided to take a break from the repetitive, Midwest landscape and my computer screen by glancing through the latest issue of *Marie Claire* magazine. I flipped through, reading and looking at pictures of the latest clothing styles; what's in, what's out, what's supposed to be hot for this spring and summer. It reminded me that I saw something on TV the night before about Fashion Week in New York City's Bryant Park. It is the major event to showcase the work of American fashion designers. And then it dawned on me just how closely related the green industry and the fashion world are, and I wondered: If we haven't taken a cue from them yet, isn't it time we should?

Thinking like a consumer. I must first take a moment here to confess that shopping is in my blood. I'm a firm believer in retail therapy, even though my wallet and credit cards tell me otherwise. I'm not sure if my love of shopping is genetic or a learned behavior from my mother — or both. She was able to ferret out a mall long before there were Garmins or TomToms. I've definitely learned from the best.

That's right: I'm a nursery professional and a shopper. Last year I had the pleasure of visiting with Robert Kerns and Stanley Foster of Greenleaf Nursery Co. in Tarboro, NC. As we walked through their test plant area, Robert asked me my opinion on several plants. I teasingly told him my opinion actually counted as two votes because I fall into the end-user target de-

mographic many of us are trying so hard to reach.

As a working mom, I'm busy. I like things to be quick and easy. For instance, I find myself relying more and more on outfit combinations that are displayed on store mannequins or on models in catalogs. This fall I had seen what I thought was a great sweater-dress combination in the J. Jill catalog. I walked into the store and told the saleswoman, "Here. This is what I want." She pulled the clothes, I tried them on and was good to go (and I got the compliments in Baltimore to prove it).

In my mind, displays in garden centers are no different than store window displays or pages in a catalog. Whether you have predetermined plant displays from Novalis, for example, or you create your own organized displays, these "models" can only help you increase your turns. Light green pot colors and Plants that Work® banners are this industry's version of the blue banners with a black scroll border that advertise Vera Wang's "Simply Vera" apparel in a Kohl's department store. Vera even insists that the black hangers go home with each clothing purchase.

Basic green. So often I hear from retailers that they only want plants with "color". This implies that green isn't a color. Well, why can't "basic green" be the nursery industry's equivalent of fashion's "basic black"? Black never goes out of style. It makes you look thinner and can hide a multitude of body flaws. Every really good wardrobe has its little black dress and key pieces in black. It is like a

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foundation: When you add color accents, it makes them pop.

So it is with green.

Every season, new styles and colors are popular. For instance, skirt lengths go from long to mini and back again. Not everyone can afford to redo her entire wardrobe, but most of us likely will buy a piece or two (or in my case three or four) in the hottest new color or cut. And if you pay attention to Pantone, the authority on color, you know in advance what the upcoming season's new fashion colors will be. (This year's color is turquoise. Or more specifically, Pantone 15-5519 Turquoise, the 2010 Color of the Year.)

Likewise, we all want our plants to be the latest new accent in a homeowner's yard — that one makes her outdoor living room the envy of her gardening neighbors.

With the economic downturn, we've had to become more financially responsible business people. I think part of positively affecting the bottom line is learning how to be more marketing savvy. Many in our industry have been — and still are — production oriented. Even with that expertise, you need to consider who in your organization, or outside of your organization, has the marketing know-how to help you succeed.

Whether you're marketing plants or clothes, making things simple and easy and giving them mass appeal are necessary. Sure, there will be those educated plant lovers whose decisions will not be swayed by colored pots. But there is still a large majority who will be influenced by such marketing strategies, and those who want and need help with their buying decisions.

If you don't market your product, there is another plant designer who is marketing theirs. Guess who the consumer is going to choose.



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