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## Record-setting marketing



by MARIA ZAMPINI

**For many, the natural focus over the years has been on production. And to some degree, it needs to remain so. At the same time, though, we need to sharpen our focus on marketing.'**

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I'm a die-hard Cleveland sports fan, and at this time of the year, I'm all about the Cleveland Cavaliers. In fact, my laptop screen saver happens to display the Cavs' No. 17, Brazilian-born Anderson Varejao, aka "Wild Thing." What can I say? His looks and long, curly hair remind me of my youngest son, Robert. And yes, that makes me feel old — really old.

One recent game pitted the Cavs against the Detroit Pistons. It also happened to be "Snuggie Night" at The Q — Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland. That night's promo focused on maroon-colored "Snuggie" blankets sporting the Cavs' logo. The 20,562 fans who wore them helped set a new Guinness World Record for the most fleece blankets in one color in one place — the lone Detroit fan in a blue Pistons Snuggie didn't count.

Around the same time I happened to see a segment on the CBS "Sunday Morning" show that featured — what else? — Snuggies. Did you know that the original fleece blanket with armholes is the "Slan- ket"? It was invented by a young man in Maine and sold in 2007 on QVC. The design, however, was not patentable. Thus, the door was left open for the entrepreneur of "Bendaroos" and "Aqua Globes" (the colorful glass bulbs you fill with water and put in potted plants). He saw the economy heading south and seized on the marketing and advertising opportunities that became available. He produced a cheaper version of the sleeved blanket, and in 2008, more than 20 million Snuggies were sold in versions for adults, kids and even pets.

To me, the best marketing ideas are ones that cause me to say, "Darn! I wish I'd thought of that first!" In fact, even though the Snuggie entrepreneur didn't invent the product, he took a mousetrap and made it better (sort of). He produced a less-expensive version of the original and exposed it to a larger audience. And he succeeded where the "inventor" did not.

Here's how I look at it: If I can't invent or be first at something, the next best thing is to take someone else's idea and improve upon it to make it work to my advantage. Is this stealing? No, it's just business.

**'To me, the best marketing ideas are ones that cause me to say, Darn! I wish I'd thought of that first!'**

If you happened to read my column in the April issue, I spoke about parallels between the fashion and green industries and what, if anything, might be learned from that comparison. Hopefully my words didn't cause you to roll your eyes too many times, because I think that in all actuality, be it with fashion or Snuggies, it really all boils down to one word: marketing.

Recently, a large, independent retailer commented to me that come June, that's it. Every year it's the same routine: By Memorial Day, their plant sales have dramatically diminished — and they're done for the season. They aren't the first garden center I've heard this from. But, if I relate the retail situation to fashion, I wonder: Does it really have to be this way? Maybe yes, maybe no. Either way, I can't help but ask — why?

For instance, as I pen this column, spring/summer fashions are already in the stores, and they have been for several weeks. Items like shorts and bathing suits will be plentiful until around Memorial Day weekend. Then, by the 4th of July, stores will deep discount these seasonal items and begin to display fall merchandise. Here's where it gets tricky: Even though fall and winter clothing begins to appear, new "transitional" styles are available. This is new clothing that's still appropriate for summer wear, such as long- and short-sleeved T-shirts. Some shoppers purchase true fall and winter items — like

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sweaters — in the middle of summer to take advantage of the best selection.

From this point of view, what makes the green industry so different from other retailers? I know it's redundant, but the answer is marketing.

In fashion, everything old is new again. This happens year after year. Some of the items that are hot this year include Jackie O-sized sunglasses, knee socks and over-the-knee socks, jumpsuits (yuck) and floral and patterned pants. I can't say I like some of these trends, but there are lots of consumers who do.

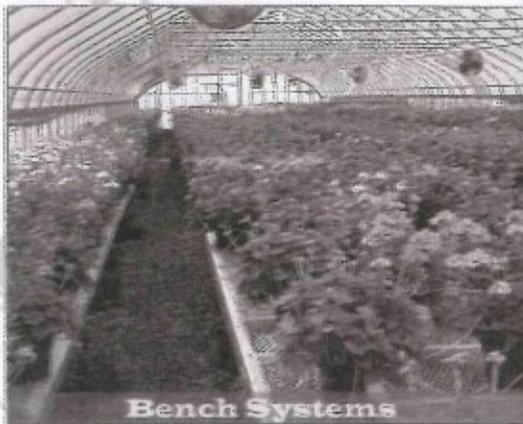
The marketing strategy of reintroducing old trends has found its way into our industry, but this has not always been viewed in a positive way. In some cases, plantsmen find landscape plants that have been forgotten or which have an unpronounceable or unappealing name, and they bring them back into the spotlight. Some invest via a trademark to increase desirability and back it up with marketing to support that plant. Some choose to openly admit these are not original finds, while others don't. Regardless, I believe that if someone has the foresight to find a good, valuable plant and put their money where their mouth is with advertising dollars, then who am I to argue? I admire the marketing savvy.

Competitors who are ahead of us determine where the market is going. As business people, we can't afford to follow our competitors at every turn. We need to go out on a limb and take our products — and the market — in a different direction once in a while.

Our industry is full of good, hardworking people. For many, the natural focus over the years has been on production. And to some degree, it needs to remain so. At the same time, though, we need to sharpen our focus on marketing.

Without savvy marketing, the Snuggie would have become just another cozy, blanket-with-sleeves knockoff. With savvy marketing in the nursery industry, maybe we can set some Guinness records for plant sales!

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