Connect with consumers on sustainability, environment

By Bridget Behe

Some of the top concerns for consumers are the economy and the environment. While more companies are turning “green,” some horticultural businesses have always been there. With just a little proactive planning and work, your company can better connect with consumers on sustainability and the environment.

The meaning of sustainability

In the past three decades, more than 70 definitions of sustainability have been offered. USDA uses a definition that focuses on goals of improved production and profitability, stewardship of the natural resource base and ecological system and enhancement of the vitality of rural communities.

What does sustainability mean to you, your business and your employees? Most importantly, what does it mean to your customers? Now would be a good time to think about your own definition of sustainability and to discuss your employees’ perspectives.

Forrest Stegelin, associate professor of agricultural and applied economics at the University of Georgia, conducted a study in 2008 asking 438 customers exiting independent retail garden centers to describe “sustainability.” More than a dozen words were offered. Among them, the most often cited were “green” (68 percent), locally-produced or locally-sourced (64 percent), “organic” (63 percent), environmentally-friendly (57 percent) and energy-saving (35 percent).

The list was diverse, indicating that consumer opinion of sustainability doesn’t center on one concept, idea or word. This is good and bad news for companies trying to truthfully portray the sound decisions they make as being sustainable and good for the environment. Keep the terms in mind as you develop a plan to communicate your company’s sustainable decisions. The key to your plan is to identify sound business decisions your company has made and truthfully highlight them in many ways to show your sustainable side.

When Frito Lay’s Sun Chips brand snacks began advertising its use of solar power to manufacture its chips, the company’s sales rose 17.6 percent over the first year the information was printed on the packages. Your company may not realize that much of a sales increase, but promoting your sustainable actions will positively influence your customers’ perceptions of your sustainable choices. Think about what your company is doing differently in regards to water, fuel, electricity, chemicals, plastics and plants. Then, talk about and promote those choices.

Water consumption, savings

Water is a critical input for plant production. Are you consuming less water? Have you installed water saving devices or systems? Are you recycling water or are you just being more conscious of how it’s used? Are you collecting rainwater? Recent research shows that irrigating cyclically can also reduce water use.

Post a discrete sign near water outlets and/or faucets showing how much water your company has saved or the changes that were...
made to conserve water. Consumers will feel better about doing business with a water-wise company.

**Electricity, fuel, chemicals**

Electricity operates equipment in your greenhouses and offices. Have you switched to lower input fluorescent bulbs in office and warehouse fixtures? Are you using natural light to enhance artificial light where possible? Has your business benefited from adding solar or wind power to supplement some of the electricity you use? Have you lowered the thermostat setting during the winter and raised it for the summer to save electricity? Are you saving on other energy sources like oil, gasoline and natural gas? Consider adding information to your company’s Web site and/or newsletter that talk about the savings.

Do you have a local labor force? If you do, you are saving energy by employing people who don’t have to drive very far to work. Do you have energy-efficient vehicles? Have you switched to alternative fuels or purchased hybrid vehicles? Some companies that are using these fuels or vehicles have posted signs on their vehicles reinforcing their good choice, making current and potential customers aware of their good choices.

Do you work with smarter chemistry than you did a few years ago? This covers several areas including plant production as well as office cleaning. Have you made choices to use less chemicals and products that have a lower impact on the environment? You don’t necessarily have to be growing organically to be working smarter with the chemical inputs you use. Those choices may seem trivial to you, but added to your other choices, make you a greener company. Is there a quick take-home message there that you could communicate to your customers?

**Handling waste**

The horticulture industry consumes a great deal of plastic. How do you discard of the plastic you use? Do you reuse or recycle containers? What about tags, glazing materials and other plastics? Do you offer your customers an opportunity to return and recycle containers? Have you adopted alternative materials that potentially have fewer inputs than virgin plastic? If you have, are you talking about those choices with your customers? If you are recycling, how public is that business decision? It would be an important footnote on the bottom of a receipt or bill printed on recycled paper.

Are you also recycling your plant waste? Does it go into a landfill or are you composting discarded growing media and plant debris? Those choices have a positive environmental impact worth talking about.

**Oxygen producers**

Not many consumers are aware that plants produce oxygen. When consum-
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ers purchase and use plants, they are creating an oxygen credit (www.oxygenfootprint.org) that helps to offset some of the pollutants in our environment. Yet most businesses, and as a collective industry, we’ve done very little to communicate this major environmental benefit.

No matter what other green choices you’ve made, this is one benefit that few other companies and industries can claim. Box stores, supermarkets and non-horticultural retailers don’t offer this eco-benefit. Our industry and your business, sell oxygen manufacturing machines.

As horticultural professionals, it’s our job to be sure customers put the right plant (oxygen machine) in the right place. Failures in the garden don’t produce oxygen or happy customers.

Do you educate customers about native plants or invasive species? Do you set a good example with the plants you include in displays or display gardens or by showing photographs of invasive species that are problematic in your area?

If you use integrated pest management, are you demonstrating some of those techniques to your customers? You can teach them to scout for insects in their own yards and gardens, offering them a choice of environmentally-friendly control strategies.

Sustainable certification

Have you taken steps toward certification for your sustainable decisions, practices and business operations, including LEED (www.usgbc.org), VeriFlora (www.veriflora.com) or MPS (www.mymps.com)? If you have obtained certification, it is something to be proud of, to talk about, and to communicate every chance you get. If you are working toward certification, kudos to you. If you haven’t considered certification, it is certainly something to think about.

Communicate your efforts

Even if you choose not to attain certification, you have made responsible business decisions that can help you connect with consumers in regards to the environment and sustainability. You should be regularly communicating those choices to your customers. You can add them as a tag line on e-mails (already environmentally friendly), on any print materials you distribute (on recycled paper), on containers, vehicles and in areas where customers interact with your products.

The key is to identify all of the responsible choices you’ve made and develop a plan to communicate them in places where customers will see them. Everyone will feel better about buying plants that not only increase the beauty of their environment but also the health of it.

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