



The power of branding

Building a solid reputation pays big dividends for nurseries who do it right

Little Prince of Oregon and its logo are one of the strongest brands in the industry. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

BY JON BELL

The way Mark Leichty tells it, there's a little bit of lore behind the naming of the **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** in Aurora, where he serves as director of operations.

As a child growing up, nursery cofounder Keith "Ketch" de Kanter would listen as his parents read him the well-known novella, "The Little Prince." Eventually, de Kanter's parents began calling him the Little Prince of Oregon. Years later, in 1997, when de Kanter started up the Aurora nursery, he pulled the name back out.

To accompany the name, de Kanter had a friend draw a logo, which turned out to be a frog wearing a golden crown.

Almost 30 years later, Little Prince of Oregon and its logo are emblems of one of the strongest brands in the industry.

"I think we have one of the most recognizable brands in all of horticulture," Leichty said. "Today in garden centers,

that logo is on the top of every single tag on our plants, it's embossed in our pots. It's become a symbol of great plants, and people look for it. I think in retrospect, that logo and name have been one of the great parts of our success."

A good logo and name can go far in helping a nursery carve out a name for itself. But there's more to a solid brand than that. Some of it can be tangible, like one-of-a-kind plants developed by a nursery itself or specialty soil mixes that a certain nursery comes to be known for. Other pieces are less concrete — think a years-long reputation for trust and good service, an unspoken commitment to customer success or an image that evokes craftsmanship and care developed over years of practice (and maybe boosted by the right marketing and social media).

There's no textbook recipe for what makes a strong brand. But nurseries who've nailed it will tell you it's a key part

of their success.

"Through effort, goodwill and a good image, the work you've done to cultivate a positive image eventually pays off," said Chuck Pavlich, director of new product development for the Canby, Oregon-based **Terra Nova® Nurseries, Inc.**, "and sometimes when you need it the most."

Building on history

Like Little Prince of Oregon, **Monrovia Nursery** has a telltale symbol of its brand, but it's not necessarily its logo. Instead, it's a distinctive green pot that's become synonymous with Monrovia over at least the past three decades.

"We went to that pot in the '90s, and ever since then there's been a strong affiliation of the pot as our brand," said Katie Tamony, chief marketing officer for Monrovia, which has the largest of its four nurseries in Dayton, Oregon.

Of course, there's much more to »



Bailey Nurseries, Inc. launched its first consumer brand, a hydrangea lineup called Endless Summer®, 20 years ago. PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES

the Monrovia brand that a plastic pot. For starters, the nursery has a long history. Founded in California in 1926, Monrovia has had nearly 100 years to develop its brand. Tamony said Monrovia has been committed to the idea of craftsmanship from its early days, a key component that runs through the nursery still. Part of that image comes from Monrovia's long-standing commitment to and investment in advancing plant science.

"We believe there is a science and art to growing plants, and we invest a lot of time and resources into how we grow plants," she said. "Monrovia has been known for decades for the research we started doing in the '40s and '50s about what plants need to grow in pots out in the field."

That research led directly to another ingredient in Monrovia's brand — custom soil mixes.

"That is something that we are known for as well," Tamony said.

The science and soil elements together

have helped Monrovia grow robust, healthy plants for long enough that people have come to associate the name with plants that are going to flourish.

"For people who garden a lot, they know when they see that green pot, they know that's a plant that's going to work out," Tamony said. "They know they're going to get consistent shape and form, which is part of our brand as well, that premium look and feel. Our brand is very elevated and elegant."

Longevity has also been a big part of the success of **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas**, which was founded in Woodburn, Oregon in 1968. Though it's not a consumer-facing company, the nursery nevertheless has built a brand that revolves around high-quality plants and bringing value to its wholesale customers.

"What we've really focused on over the life of the company has been growing good-quality products and being able to provide them to our customers consistently,

year over year," said Kyle Fessler, co-owner and production manager at Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas. "If you got it last year, you can expect the same this year."

Building trusted relationships has also been important to the Woodburn brand, according to Noah Fessler, who's in sales at the nursery. Customer service makes a big impression, and doing the right thing has helped the nursery earn many long-time and repeat customers, he said.

"If there ever is an issue, we make our best effort to satisfy the customer so we can all move forward into the future."

Reputation for innovation

Terra Nova has built its brand in large part around tissue culture propagation. When the nursery started more than 30 years ago, Pavlich said tissue culture propagation wasn't new, but tissue culture of new plants hadn't been widely encountered. Over time, Terra Nova made big gains in that field and became known for



Over the years, Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas has built a brand that revolves around high-quality plants and bringing value to its wholesale customers, says Kyle Fessler, co-owner and production manager.

introducing new varieties of *Heuchera* and selections of plants like *Coleus*, *Tiarella*, *Nepeta* and *Leucantherum*. It didn't happen overnight though.

"At that time [the early '90s], it was still traditional propagation methods, and the build-up for product introduction took years," Pavlich said.

The nursery hasn't invested in pricey marketing campaigns or advertising to spread its brand. Instead, Pavlich said Terra Nova has made a name for itself by sticking to innovative, thoughtful breeding that's unique in the market.

"The popularity of Terra Nova plants around the world is humbling," he said.

Offshoot brands

Another way some nurseries have solidified their brands is by launching their own unique plants, which often are brands of their own that are unaffiliated, at least >>



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A brand above

on the surface level, with the nursery itself.

One of the leaders in the industry to do this is **Bailey Nurseries, Inc.** (St. Paul, Minnesota), which launched its first consumer brand, a hydrangea lineup called Endless Summer®, 20 years ago last year. Today, according to Bailey, Endless Summer is the best-selling brand of re-blooming hydrangeas in the world. Bailey operates three farms in Oregon: Dayton, Sauvie Island and Yamhill.

“I think it really paved the way for not only Bailey, but other brands, to see what could be done with well-marketed programs,” said Alec Charais, chief marketing and product development officer for Bailey.

The innovation-focused nursery, which has a breeding facility in Georgia to develop new plants, has since launched other successful consumer brands like First Editions® and Easy Elegance®. Charais said there is much thoughtfulness and strategy that goes into Bailey’s brands.

“Great brands have to be an innovative concept and be something that provides intrinsic value to the marketplace,” he said. “We are very strict about the criteria of what we are going to select for any of our brands. It has to be a top-performing plant, and there has to be some clear reason why it exists, like it has fantastic garden performance or production performance, heat tolerance or cold tolerance or disease resistance.”

While brands like First Editions and Endless Summer may not have a visible connection to Bailey, at least to consumers, the link is clear to the nursery’s wholesale customers, which in turn strengthens the overall Bailey brand.

“We don’t market Bailey directly in the consumer messaging,” Charais said, “but Bailey and our brands are definitely known in the supply chain.”

Little Prince of Oregon’s brand has been strengthened by its own plant brands as well, each one demarcated with a unique and color-coded tag that draws customers in. Their succulents go by the name Water Misers®, for example, while rare and unusual perennials are called Fit for a King®. The giveaway that they are from Little Prince of Oregon? The



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crowned, green frog on every tag.

“Our product mix is very carefully thought out,” Leichty said. “We do things that make people stop and look at us.”

Committed to the core

The thing about having a strong, well-respected brand is that it takes diligence and consistency and work to protect it. Making wild moves as a

company can ding a brand big-time — anyone remember New Coke? — but there’s also risk in stagnating.

“The best way to move forward and



“The best way to move forward and stay fresh is to evolve.”

— **Katie Tamony**
CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER

stay fresh is to evolve,” Tamony said. “You don’t need to be disruptive, but you want to keep moving and not be stale or irrelevant.”

It can be a tricky walk, and there will be missteps along the way.

At Little Prince of Oregon, for example, Leichty said the nursery shifted from its wholesale-only approach before COVID and dabbled with selling directly to consumers for about five years. The move initially helped increase brand visibility, but it also proved to be expensive and made it hard to manage inventory between online customers and garden center customers.

In the end, Little Prince shuttered the consumer sales and recommitted to its core business.

“We realized this is not who Little Prince is,” Leichty said. “We are a wholesale supplier of high-quality plants with a highly recognizable brand. That has to be our undeniable focus.” ☺

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is JBellInk.com.