



Walk

By Mary Westbrook

How Under A Foot Plant Company made groundcover (yes, groundcover) funky, fun and inspirational to consumers.

Sometimes, it pays to be bad. Take Las Vegas.

More than 37 million visitors poured into the city in 2004, a record-breaking number, and a direct result of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority's 2003 national marketing campaign, "What happens here, stays here." Other marketers cash in by helping consumers be good, namely, to themselves. Think of the L'Oréal cosmetics company and its "Because I'm Worth It" campaign. But, every so often, a company succeeds by telling people to be good and bad. Case in point? Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore.

In 2004, the company, which sells Stepables, a line of groundcover hardy enough to walk across, launched a comprehensive nationwide marketing campaign with the trademarked tag line "Good For Your Sole." Online and at retail garden centers, consumers saw the campaign's signature branding, including a bare foot walking through a soft field of blooming plants. That image resonated with consumers, reminding them of how good it feels to walk barefoot, says Frances Hopkins, the company's president and CEO. But it did something else, too.

"We hit a nerve," Hopkins says. "It's taboo to step on your plants, but with Stepables, it's OK. It's like having the little angel and devil on your shoulder."

Hopkins' ability to take an existing product and repackage it with enough



Photos by Lincoln Ross Barbour

this Way

A photograph of Frances Hopkins, a woman with blonde hair, smiling and wearing a black floral patterned top. She is standing in a field with a large, curved structure in the background.

GREEN MACHINE Until last year, Frances Hopkins, president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore., was actively involved in the growing process of Stepables plants. Today, she relies on 23 partner growers for that task, which allows her to focus entirely on marketing and developing the brand.



FAMILIAR SETTING The consistent high quality of Under A Foot Plant Company's marketing and point-of-purchase materials impressed Marketer of the Year judges. Frances Hopkins, the company's president and CEO, encourages prospective customers, her own employees and her kids, Mitch, 12, and Rachel, 9, to test the hardiness of the plants by walking or sitting on them.

pizzazz to create substantial consumer and floral industry buzz, coupled with her fastidious attention to detail and consistency, impressed the panel of judges that named Under A Foot Plant Company Floral Management's 2005 Marketer of the Year, an honor that brings with it a \$5,000 cash prize sponsored by Design Master color tool Inc. "(Hopkins) is giving something to our industry, which it needs — a repackaging and revising of something

we already have," says judge Guenther Vogt, AAF, of Bouquets in Denver, and Floral Management's 2002 Marketer of the Year. "Groundcovers have been around forever, but (this campaign)... makes consumers look at them in a different way. It's marketing in the highest degree."

Every Garden Has a Spot

Long before she launched the Good For Your Sole campaign, Hopkins was

knee-deep in frontline research, digging to find out the \$64,000 question that plagues every marketer: What do consumers want? In her case, garden center consumers. Reading through customer e-mails and talking to her 3,000 garden center and 23 grower partners, she quickly seized on a common thread: Every garden has a spot, a patch of land that sits conspicuously, stubbornly bald throughout the year. For non-gardeners in need of a translation, having that



Behind the Scenes

When Floral Management launched the Marketer of the Year Award in 1994, we hoped to draw attention to some of the industry's outstanding marketing efforts — and inspire the rest of the industry with their ideas. Floral Management invites retailers, wholesalers and growers to take part in the contest, luring them with the prospect of a \$5,000 cash prize. For the 11th year in a row, that cash prize is sponsored by Design Master color tool Inc.

The Criteria

What constitutes an outstanding marketing effort? The judges are charged with reviewing entries and rating each in four categories: effectiveness of campaign, originality, professionalism and overall excellence.

The Judges

We know that only experienced marketers with a track record of success are qualified to judge other marketing efforts. So, each year we choose a panel of seasoned professionals from within and outside the floral industry.

J. Sten Crissey, AAF, Crissey Flowers & Gifts, Seattle, past president of the Society of American Florists (SAF) and 2004 inductee into SAF's Floriculture Hall of Fame.

Danielle Mackey, senior vice president of consumer marketing at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide in Washington, D.C., the agency that handles SAF's consumer relations campaign.

BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, and **Guenther Vogt, AAF**, Bouquets, Denver, and Floral Management's 2002 Marketer of the Year.

Carol Caggiano, AIFD, PFCI, A. Caggiano Inc., Jeffersonton, Va., former SAF Consumer Marketing Committee Chair and current member of SAF Board of Directors.

Dean Georges, Irene Hayes Wadley & Smythe LeMoult Florist, N.Y.

Sylvia P. Nichols, AIFD, The Window Box, Cheshire, Conn., and Floral Management's 1996 Marketer of the Year.

How to Enter

Want to enter Floral Management's 2006 Marketer of the Year contest? Call, fax or e-mail a request for an entry form to Kate F. Penn, at Floral Management, (800) 336-4743; fax (800) 208-0078; E-mail kpenn@safnow.org. Applications for the 2006 award will be mailed after the first of the year.

Past Winners

- 2004** Marty and Jane Loppnow, Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse, Waukesha, Wis.
- 2003** Scott Carlson, Florabundance, Miami
- 2002** BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, and Guether Vogt, AAF, Bouquets, Denver
- 2001** Andrew Manton-Zamora and Rutger Borst, Apsis Group, Miami
- 2000** Southern California Plant Tour Days
- 1999** Greg and Heather Katz, Al Manning Florist, Kansas City, Mo.
- 1998** Bill Cutting, Kuhn Flowers, Jacksonville, Fla.
- 1997** Brooks Jacobs, Greenbrook Flowers, Jackson, Miss.
- 1996** Sylvia Nichols, AIFD, The Window Box, Cheshire, Conn.
United Floral Exchange, Carlsbad, Calif., and Denver.
- 1995** Mary Dark, Broadmoor Florist, Shreveport, La.
Greg Royer, Royer's, Lebanon, Pa.
- 1994** Mary Lore, McFarland Florist & Greenhouses Inc., Detroit
Tom Aykens, AAF, Memorial Florist & Greenhouses, Appleton, Wis. 🌿

— Cheryl M. Burke

E-mail: cburke@safnow.org

spot in your garden is like having an itch in the middle of your back, just beyond the reach of your fingertips.

With 130 different plants in her Stepables line, Hopkins knew she could come up with the right plant for each person's spot. (Hopkins does not hybridize new plants. Instead, she looks

for appropriate existing plants and markets them as Stepables.) But to get that message to consumers, Hopkins turned away from her competitors' more aggressive marketing strategies that emphasized bigger, closer-to-perfect gardens and plants, which she says can inadvertently intimidate customers who

just want to have a little fun in their gardens. "Much of the horticultural marketing out there tries to create . . . bigger, better, faster, more bloom time, etc," she says. "Our approach is different. We want people to say, 'I can do that.' When we get them to do that, we have a sale."



Under A Foot Under the Microscope Under A Foot Plant Company

Salem, Ore.

President and CEO: Frances Hopkins

Number of Employees: Four, not counting subcontractors

Company History: Founded in 1996. Before that, Hopkins co-owned Hopkins Nursery in Salem, Ore.

Total Annual Advertising Budget: 20 percent of gross annual sales (Gross sales from marketing and point-of-purchase materials and Internet plant sales were \$580,000 in 2004. Expected gross sales in 2005: \$604,000. Hopkins expects sales to increase 40 percent in 2006.)

Quirky Company Fact: Hopkins encourages employees to walk through a test area of new plants to make sure plants are strong enough to be Stepables.

Future Goals: Worldwide distribution by 2007; increase product

MARK OF SUCCESS Under A Foot Plant Company's marketing and point-of-purchase materials encourage customers to "look for the foot," a symbol of the company and its "Good For Your Sole" campaign.

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PLEASE, STEP ON THE PLANTS

Frances Hopkins, president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore., came up with the name

“Stepables” after she shocked a landscape architect by jumping on her plants to demonstrate their durability to him. “Oh my gosh,” she remembers him saying, “they’re stepable.”

With that philosophy in mind, Hopkins started building the campaign and its branding from the ground up. No detail went unstudied, and Hopkins’ office became a sea of yellow Post-It notes: Every time she thought of a word or phrase that fit with campaign materials, Hopkins, a former greenhouse grower, scribbled away.

Defy Traditional Approaches

Hopkins wanted the campaign to be



Go Ahead: Reinvent the Wheel

Across the country, and, for that matter, the world, companies such as Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore., are kicking “if-it-ain’t-broke-don’t-fix-it” mentalities to the curb, opting for a mindset that says, “It may not be broken, but is it as effective as possible?”

Take the sandwich: Sandwich-shop sales grew by 9.5 percent last year, according to The Wall Street Journal, meaning that, collectively, places like Subway and Quizno’s are pulling in about \$16.8 billion a year. What’s behind the sizeable increase? Toasted bread. People seem to like toasted sandwiches better, and sandwich shops are making the relatively small adjustment.

Companies are finding that you can reinvent the wheel: GoodYear just unveiled its “Fortera” tire for SUV drivers who want a tough, but quiet, ride. And old dogs? They like new tricks — after 50 years on television, the Lassie franchise has its own Web site.

The real trick for small-business owners is figuring out what isn’t being communicated well to consumers, say experts, a process that can feel like you’re looking for your

blind spot while driving at high speeds (without high-tech tires).

When Mark Stevens, CEO of MSCO, a marketing firm in Purchase, N.Y., was hired to market a home computer file storage system, he found the product’s blind spot quickly: It was dull. The solution? Make it sexy and fun. Now, the product is packaged and labeled as “Red Boomerang.” A boomerang sells a filing system? You better believe it. When it comes to marketing, “there are no rules,” Stevens says. “Once it’s ‘conventional,’ it’s no longer wisdom.”

Building on her experience buying for a jewelry shop, Karen Ross, owner of Montgomery’s Florist in the Raleigh-Durham (N.C.) metro area, generated interest and attention for her four-year-old shop by using unique containers no other area florist carried. “In our newspaper, they do a home remodeling section, and one of the new remodeled kitchens had one of my containers,” she says. “That was my first ‘Eureka!’ moment, when I knew (using the containers) was working.” Now customers come in specifically for the containers, which Ross always mentions in local ads, and ask for them to be refilled with new arrangements. The best part? Ross says her funky finds are the same price or less than traditional glass and plastic containers. 🌿

—M.W.



warm, inviting and educational, meaning that any marketing materials consumers see — from plant tags to point-of-purchase merchandising — needed to be easy-to-read and free of floral industry jargon.

Her approach goes against the traditional marketing grain for groundcover. Good For Your Sole brochures and plant display cards include a picture of the plants in a landscape setting. “Why do you need a picture of the plant on the tag?” Hopkins asks. “The customer’s got the plant in her hand as she’s reading the tag.”

Another valuable tidbit from her customer research: if she can minimize the “error” aspect of trial-and-error gardening, she’ll have a better chance of selling more product. To that effect, tags include “foot-traffic indicators,” allowing customers to choose the most appropriate plant for their needs. Light-traffic plants can stand the occasional step as you reach behind them for the garden hose; heavy-traffic plants bounce back from pick-up football games and tumbles with the family dog.

Hopkins also loathes the industry’s standard planting instructions, which typically call for full sun, shade or partial shade. “Partial shade is misleading because afternoon and morning lights are different,” says Hopkins, who modified the terms, adding specific requirements such as morning and afternoon light. “(Ambiguous instructions) are one of the reasons consumers fail.” If they fail, they don’t come back, she says.

Online Aspirations

Thanks to welcomed but unexpected exposure in the early 2000s in several national news and entertainment outlets, including a 30-second spot on ABC’s Good Morning America with celebrity florist Rebecca Cole, the public’s interest in Stepables was growing, and Hopkins was scrambling to keep up. She needed to polish the company’s brand image, and the most cost effective way to do

that was through the Internet. So Hopkins turned a critical eye to her existing site and decided it could use a major overhaul.

The redesign constituted the campaign’s biggest expense, \$8,000 over a two-year period, and became its biggest project, says Hopkins, who used a subcontracted Web master to

augment her on-staff Web talent. Keeping as much of the project in-house as possible gave her more creative control and kept costs down, Hopkins says.

“The Web site was the fastest way to

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PLANT TECHNOLOGY
 Frances Hopkins, president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore., says she hopes to increase the Stepables line from 130 to 400 plants and have worldwide distribution by 2007.

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make us national" and the only way for her small business to do so cost effectively, she says. "In deciding to be a brand and not just a marketing campaign, we had to figure out how to create staying power" with consumers and retailers. Consumers can buy Stepables online and get "ideas and inspirational photos to awaken their creative juices," Hopkins says. At the same time, the site hosts support material for garden

centers such as clip art, landscape photos and plant photos for newsletters and ads. "By giving access to the garden centers, it allows them much more freedom for creativity, while ensuring they continue to send the proper Stepables message to the consumer," Hopkins says.

Hit the High Notes

Hopkins keeps promotional costs strategically low by capitalizing on national press. Along with Good Morning America, the Stepables line has been in publications such as Southern Living and Better Homes and Gardens magazines. At press time, a Wall Street Journal reporter recently had interviewed Hopkins. Last year, she complemented the free plugs with two ads in Garden Center Merchandising and Management trade magazine.

Hopkins also targets trade shows,

which allow industry members to see (and more importantly) feel the plants and get a glimpse of the company's in-store marketing and support materials. Hopkins depends on her 23 grower-partners to hit their local shows, and she makes a point to personally present each year at the Farwest Show in Portland, Ore., produced by the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

"The Farwest Show is only an hour from my house," Hopkins says. "I can give the design and construction of the booth 110-percent effort because it is so close. When a booth has to travel, (conventional wisdom says) it needs to have that 'cookie cutter' concept to go from place to place, but there is never anything 'cookie cutter' about what I do. I



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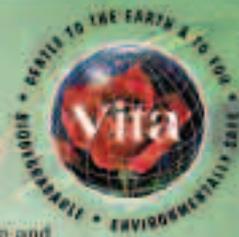
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Numbers Game

A nationwide marketing campaign comes with a price tag, but it's not always easy to tease out precise numbers midway through the game, says Frances Hopkins, president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company in Salem, Ore. The company's annual advertising budget (20 percent of gross sales) may seem high, but Hopkins is predicting a 40 percent sales increase next year, thanks to the Good For Your Sole campaign she launched in 2004 for the 2005-2006 season. "Next year's numbers will tell the whole story," she says. "This year's story (estimated 5 percent increase over 2004) is just a scratch on the surface."

But there are several early indicators of success. Hopkins says there's been "an enormous amount of internal growth of the current distribution network and new grower/distributors coming into the program." Among the tangible evidence of that growth are plant tag sales, which are up 50 percent among the company's 23 grower partners.

Specific costs of the Good For Your Sole campaign include a Web site redesign (\$8,000 over a two-year period), participation in the Farwest Trade Show in Portland, Ore. (\$5,000) and print advertising costs for two ads in a national trade magazine and fliers sent to 1,000 garden centers (\$4,000). Creative costs for the campaign were built into Hopkins' annual advertising budget and are spread over several years to cover multiple ongoing campaigns. 

— M.W.

always aim for the big 'wow' and I can get that by staying in my hometown."

Consistency: Marketing's Golden Rule

Protecting the Stepables brand and finding a way to make the Good For Your Sole campaign applicable to customers from Washington to Florida became both an enticing challenge and a pesky headache. Because as much as Hopkins likes to talk — genuinely — about feeding consumers' souls and connecting them with their gardens, at heart, she is a businessperson. The buck stops with Hopkins. She approves (or develops) everything that bears her company's name and spent the last two years traveling to retail garden centers to make sure the product and her campaigns are presented uniformly to consumers. That's no easy task, but the load is more manageable because the campaign — a combination of whimsy and education — is tied to the company's core principles, says Hopkins, who penned the campaign slogan herself.

"I'm an avid gardener, and I have Stepables all over the place," she says. "I can't ever see us being a massive corporation where I sit behind my desk. I love jumping up and down on plants," a trick she's presented to grower and retail partners as a guaranteed way to surprise and delight would-be buyers.

"Every aspect of the program is based on the philosophy of forming a win-win situation for all concerned," she says. "Our plants have to be of outstanding quality, backed by excellent service and support. So, too, does the garden center and the grower. By keeping this at the forefront of our marketing, it makes it easy to create campaigns like (Good For Your Sole)."

The company's strict adherence to consistency sets it apart from other small businesses, says Mark Stevens, CEO of MSCO, a marketing firm in Purchase, N.Y., that has worked with American Express, IBM and Guardian

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“Opportunities come and either you have enough guts to jump on, or you miss the ride.”

— Frances Hopkins,
 president and CEO of Under A Foot Plant Company,
 Salem, Ore.

Insurance. “Small- and mid-size companies generally fail to be consistent with their marketing. They put a toe in the water, spend some money and, if the return isn’t there, they cut bait and run in a matter of weeks/months,” he says. “Consistency itself is a powerful force in marketing, and that the ability to capture, amplify and maintain customer relations is the universal equation for achieving perpetual growth and no

longer being a small company.”

So what’s next for the not-so-little-anymore plant company that could? “World domination,” says Hopkins. And, while she laughs as she says it, you get the feeling Hopkins isn’t kidding (and she does intend for Stepables to become a worldwide brand by 2007). Still, for now, Hopkins is concentrating on building and maintaining her brand and launching tangential projects,

including Stepscapes, a landscape franchise unit Hopkins unveiled in August at the Farwest show in Portland, Ore.

“Opportunities come and either you have enough guts to jump on, or you miss the ride,” Hopkins says. “The opportunities are there for Stepables, and I’m not about to miss out on the fun.”

Mary Westbrook is managing editor of Floral Management. E-mail: mwestbrook@safnow.org



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