



Redefine your garden center by taking another look at the store's name, logo and tagline

The advice that I should start my own garden center is offered to me just as often as I'm offered new credit cards in the mail. That would be, a lot. Now, for anyone who has run a garden center, we know that it's just not that simple. The complexities of starting a new garden center are as bountiful as the blooms are in spring. Not to mention, it's an incredibly hard job and a tougher business that most outsiders can ever imagine.

Just choosing a name for a retail plant venture these days is fraught with minefields. Why, you might ask? Public perception of our industry is not what it used to be. Your ability to draw in customers can hinge greatly on how you refer to the business. So, while I have no current intention of actually starting a new garden center, I do often ponder the question of what I'd call it if I did.

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Using words like "gardens" instead of "garden center" in your store name may help eliminate confusion as to the type of store from the beginning.

A rose by any other name...

...May smell sweeter. If someone recommends to me that I start a "garden center," that person is typically in their late 30s or older and knows that I've worked in such a place for a long time in the past. They are accustomed to the term "garden center," either because they're old enough to have actually visited one, are one of those now-rare dedicated gardeners, or they're used to hearing me use that term.

However, when I have casual conversations with people outside of the industry that are younger than 35, they typically have no idea what a "garden center" is. That term simply has no relevance to them. They usually cock their head at me, look a bit confused and say something like "you mean a public garden you visit?" If they are familiar with the term, then it's usually because they visit the "garden center" at Home Depot or Lowe's. Say the word "nursery" to them, and they often assume you work in a daycare. Tell them you're a "horticulturist" and you'll receive looks of complete confusion and often a bit of laughter. "You mean that's a real job?" Yep, that last one is a real kick in the pants, but I'm sure many of you in the industry have received similar responses.

What language are we speaking?

Monikers matter. As I mentioned in a previous article in *Garden Center* magazine, gardening and horticulture are not part of the younger consumer's first language. They are often completely foreign to them. We have to realize we may be speaking an antiquated language and should update our vernacular in order to seem attractive and relevant. How can we successfully introduce our businesses to the up-and-coming group of homeowners or indoor plant enthusiasts if even our basic branding befuddles them? We seem old before we're even out of the gate.

I posed this question to followers on my Halleck Horticultural Facebook page recently and I received repeated comments such as "the name garden center sounds like a big box store," that "garden center means K-Mart" and also "it's dated." This reaffirms my assessment that most consumers have been well-trained to associate the moniker with Home Depot or Lowe's, rather than their local independent garden center.

There were also comments that reaffirmed the association of "nursery" with a daycare, whereas some respondents seemed more comfortable with the term "nursery" or "plant nursery." But again, we're talking about appealing to new customers, not those well-seasoned gardeners or industry members. While there was a mixed response about it, a traditional term that may still have some legs with millennials is "greenhouse." Probably because it's both more obvious and well, it has the word green in it. It still conjures a visual image of a place where plants grow, at least for now.



BLUMEN GARDENS: KAREN VARGA
GETHSEMANE: MICHELLE SIMAKS



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Management



"Greenhouse" and "gardens" are terms that resonate with younger customers.

Redefine and re-brand: It's all in the name

So, my first order of business would be to re-cast my theoretic venture under a new stage name. I definitely wouldn't call it either a garden center or a nursery. Terms that seem to resonate better with the up-and-coming homeowners, and even older Gen Xers, include names like boutique, shop, market, collective, design room, studio, exchange, and the like.

Conversely, more experienced gardeners offered up the criticism that a word like "boutique" infers "expensive," but it also evoked a number of responses like "local," "personal," "plant-focused" and "knowledgeable," which are all key factors that appeal to a younger customer who values locally sourced product, and health and wellness.

Here are some sample names (or pieces of a name; you could throw in your family name or some other title of significance) and taglines I quickly jotted down to define my new garden center business:

- Urban Greenhouse & Garden: *Indoor and garden plants for the city dweller*
- Landscape & Plant Design Studio: *One stop design and plant destination*
- Botanical Boutique: *Specialty garden plants and oddities*
- Homestead Farm & Garden: *Tools, plants & provisions for sustainable gardens*
- Green Gardens Market: *A plant lover's retreat*

Do you see where I'm going here? If I saw a business with that sort of name, I'd be there in a heartbeat. So would many of my friends, who are just the sort of people you're looking to get into your stores.

Our job at this point is to both better define who we are and further distinguish ourselves from the big box retailers. I think it's important to spell out exactly what you do in your business. If you offer design or installation services, say that in your tagline. If your focus is plants, spell that out, too, because simply using the term "nursery" or "garden center" isn't clear enough for many potential customers anymore.

It might be time to admit your name branding needs either a fresh facelift or a full face transplant! Just because you've had the same logo or tagline for years, doesn't mean you can't update it, or change it altogether if that's what is needed.

Now I'm not saying you need to completely change your business name. You might find simply changing or adding a well-crafted tagline to your existing name and branding could open the doors to a whole new world of customers.

The Naysayers...

I'm sure some of you will argue that abandoning the term "garden center" isn't the answer and that instead we need to reintroduce and define it for new customers. To a certain degree that may be possible, but that would require intense national and collective marketing on the part of our industry. I can't say we do a terribly good job at that, so I'm doubtful that's a realistic solution at the moment.

As long as big box stores continue to scoop up more of the gardening consumer dollars, sharing that title with them just might be a losing battle.

While that may upset many of you in the IGC industry, as well as some dedicated gardeners, we can't continue to take it personally. We don't "own" gardening anymore. But we can choose to own who we are as independents and better define why customers should choose us over a big box when they have that option.

Hopefully, this doesn't get me kicked out of *Garden Center* magazine! ☺

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Beth McCabe

McCabe's Greenhouse & Floral
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