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# Knowing our customers

Last fall, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Bridget Behe, a professor of horticulture at Michigan State University.

She was giving a presentation on her research into the marketing of edible and ornamental horticultural crops, which is her area of expertise.

If you are not familiar with Dr. Behe's podcast, "Connect 2 Consumer," I recommend that you check it out and subscribe. You can find it at [www.connect-2-consumer.com](http://www.connect-2-consumer.com). Each week she gives condensed talks about the horticulture industry and how it can best be marketed.

Dr. Behe and I had an interesting conversation touching on many topics. One of the most interesting was the importance of knowing who our customer is.

Businesses can have many different types of customers. They can be consumers, other businesses, government agencies, nonprofits, and sometimes competitors. But for me, the end consumer is the most important customer we need to address with our marketing efforts.

In the process of growing plants, we do many things that may not seem important to our consumers. In fact, some of these things may not even be visible. However, these things are necessary so we can give people the beautiful plants they want to have in their yard.

It's not just about growing plants. I wish it were that simple!

We still have businesses to run and they need to be profitable. Otherwise, we wouldn't have the resources we need to fund research, breed new plant varieties, or explore new production techniques that will grow a more consistent, durable and beautiful product.

Continued research is imperative for our industry. It keeps us on the forefront and helps us stay competitive in the marketplace. Horticulture has many competitors for people's leisure time as well as their money, whether it's their disposable entertainment dollar, their food budget, or money they spend on their own well-being and good health. These last two are real things for us that we can and should be chasing.

How can we best show value to the customer? That is a fairly simple question but difficult to answer. Does the customer know how strictly we monitor fertility? Do they realize that we use beneficial insects as part of an integrated pest management (IPM) system? How can we explain to them — in short enough words — that not all bugs are bad?

Have you ever heard of *Phytoseiulus persimilis*? If yes, you are either a grower, an entomologist, or someone working for an insectary. It's one of the beneficial insects we use in growing plants. I am sure many consumers would have difficulty saying the name. I can't blame them — I did too, the first time I heard it. This is a good bug that eats spider mites, but do people know?

It's so important to educate the public on what we offer. With the help of academia, we can be armed with the facts about the benefits of plants. The consumer can learn the basics of what we do. They can see how deliberate we are about our growing practices. They can realize we are good stewards of the land.

Oregon is so well situated for growing beautiful plants of all kinds. We send them out across the country and into a world that eagerly welcomes them. People in-the-know associate Oregon with quality, in part because OAN helps promote our state's green industry day in and day out and has done so for decades.

On a related note, the OAN website was recently updated with a great new look to make it mobile-friendly, as well as giving you the ability to find out more information about a specific topic. I like the "I want to..." tab where you can find answers to common questions. If you have not looked at the new [www.oan.org](http://www.oan.org), then I highly encourage it.

I hope you are having a great spring season! ☺



Mike Hiller  
OAN PRESIDENT