

## The Power of Children in Branding

Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2009, 2:30 p.m., EDT

Since she could talk, my daughter Olivia has been our spokesmodel for Across the Pond. (We feature Bennett Nurseries' Jamieson and our Olivia in joint advertising to reduce costs. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole) An old showbiz adage says, "Never work with animals or children." We throw caution to the wind and work with both.

Do not underestimate the power of children in your pond, koi or water garden business. Children are excited by the birds, the fish, the nature and the water -- all elements of pond, koi and water garden businesses.

Because female purchasers make most of the buying decisions at our stores, we target the young family members who most likely visit the store with her. Our store is child-friendly and fun for kids. We encourage a hands-on experience, from feeding the fish to talking to the parrots.

We use children in our advertising. My 6-year-old daughter Olivia has been our featured spokesmodel since she was old enough to talk. One of her tag lines is, "Bring your family to see our family at Across the Pond."

Olivia is part of our identifiable brand. People recognize her and immediately think of our stores. Waiters approach us at restaurants and ask for Olivia's autograph (jokingly, of course).

Earlier this summer my family and I were at an outlet mall about 350 miles from our closest store. Another customer pointed out my daughter and wanted to know if she was the little girl from Across the Pond.

Other tourists gathered around, with some exclaiming that they too had seen her on TV or heard her on the radio. People asked about the stores, where they were located and what we sold. All this hoopla over a little girl who is not a celebrity; she is just a cute and constant feature in our ads.

All of your ads should conjure a similar reaction. Whether your theme is a child or another consistent tangible element, it should make consumers associate positively with your business.

Because I am English, we use the sign-off line "Cheerio" in our ads. I didn't realize the power of that branding until I had my car painted with our store logo. The first time I stopped in a petrol station, three people shouted "Cheerio" as I pumped gas. My advertising dollars are reaching the audience.

Experts say that 50 percent of all advertising dollars are wasted. The problem is, we don't know which 50 percent. You must experiment.

Your goal is to build an identifiable brand in your market to create top-of-the-mind awareness. One profitable way we have focused our advertising dollars is to partner with a neighboring business. To make such a relationship work, you must be open, honest and genuinely interested in the benefit for both parties.

We are fortunate to be located next door to Bennett Nurseries, an established, well-regarded, family-owned garden center. By gentlemen's agreement, we do not compete with products or services. Our target customers share similar interests so we joined forces to reduce advertising and marketing costs. Our business has grown with fewer marketing dollars spent.

We opened a pathway between the stores to encourage foot traffic. During busy seasons, we share overflow parking. Our advertising campaigns, jointly and separately, feature a common thread -- the children. My daughter and Jamieson, their son/grandson of the same age, are featured in all the ads.

With good branding and positioning, Bennett Nurseries customers feel comfortable doing business with us and vice versa. It's a win/win for everyone and no one gets 'upstaged.'