

Marketing Munchies Podcast Transcript

Episode #42

[music]

Announcer: Welcome to the Marketing Munchies Podcast series hosted by Dr. Bridget Behe. Each week Bridget and her guests will share information, insights, research-based findings, and her 30 years of experience to help your horticultural business connect better with current and future customers. Now, let's join our host, Dr. Bridget Behe.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Hi, and welcome back to the Marketing Munchies Podcast. I am your host, Dr. Bridget Behe. This week I am delighted to have Dr. Trey Malone back, assistant professor in the Department of Agriculture, Food, and Resource Economics here at Michigan State. Welcome back, Trey!

Dr. Trey Malone: Thanks, happy to be here again!

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yeah, well, we have been talking a little bit about “local,” and I want to switch gears ever so slightly (or maybe abruptly). Talk about some of your work on the social nature of making decisions and how social relationships influence the food and, potentially, the plants that we buy.

Dr. Trey Malone: I think that really those things dove tail together very well—a local aspect of a consumer’s choices and the relational aspect of a consumer’s choices. When we think about local (I mentioned this in the last podcast as well), we often times are actually, I think, trading the word “local” and meaning “social.” “Know your farmer; know your food” was a very large push about eight years ago for the USDA. That was a local food push, but again, you can even hear it in the name. That they are talking about this relational nature of a consumer’s choices. I have done quite a bit of work on this—especially in the last year with Lindon “Lindy” Robison who is another professor in our department. We have looked top-to-bottom in the ag-value chain as to how these relationships influence decision making.

For the sake of this podcast, it probably makes sense to focus more on the hort. marketing side in what this means. But, we have covered everything from how relationships influence land prices (ag-land prices) to pesticide application to tillage intensity. These social aspects really matter top to bottom. I cannot highlight that enough. Now, when it comes to consumer purchasing, we have actually tossed in a few different measures of social relationships and social motives to some choice experiments. We have talked about some choice experiments in the past.

In the studies that we have done, we have basically asked people to choose between a local product and a non-local product. Then we asked them what was the motive for that decision.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Okay.

Dr. Trey Malone: And what we found is, people quite often choose the local product and the motivation being that they are very much supportive of their local economy. However they define “local.” Again, that is a different conversation.

Dr. Bridget Behe: They want to be a good citizen. They want to support their local community.

Dr. Trey Malone: Yeah. You know, there is that idea (for better or for worse) that a dollar spent in your community stays in your community. That resonates with consumers very much. I would argue actually that resonates especially for this millennial, younger generation, even more than the older generation.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Hmm. So, what were some of the findings that you feel like could be applicable, especially, to growers of ornamental plants (the food stuff, I am sure, the research findings are readily applicable), but what were some of the more important findings that we could use in horticulture?

Dr. Trey Malone: I think it is just important to highlight (or maybe to think about), when you start thinking about marketing or promoting any product, think about it as what Lindy calls a relational good. Think about that good representing not just the widget or the succulent, but think about it as something that is establishing a relationship between you and the person that is buying it. If you really dig down and think about the intimate nature of a horticulture business, you are giving or you are selling something to somebody that they are going to keep in their house for a very long period of time—that they are going to see on a daily basis.

One could make the argument that food is a sentiment experience, but I think you can make an even stronger argument that the relational nature of succulents and houseplants and everything else, that is even more intimate. You are making this choice as a consumer or as a purchaser that is going to stick around for years. You are making this commitment—even more than food. If I do not like a cider, I can just not buy the cider next time.

Dr. Bridget Behe: A lot of your work really helps the independent garden retailer the most and also the independent producer the most. They could put a face to the grower’s name. They could put a specific geography to that. They can really, as you say, build that social capital with an individual with a consumer. It helps to strengthen, if there is such a thing as a purchasing bond or building up that relationship, they might be more likely to buy again if they have got that social capital with an independent garden center. Or they understand they are getting high quality plants from “X” garden center or “X” green house. I think talking about humanizing the retail outlet or humanizing the producer could go a long way to building that social capital.

Dr. Trey Malone: I think you are absolutely right. As we move forward into this new generation of online purchasing and everything else, you should be competing more and more on this relational aspect, because *Amazon* will never be able to match that. No matter how cheap the *Amazon* plant is, they will never be able to provide the service and the quality and the concern that you can provide to your consumers.

Dr. Bridget Behe: And that is a real boost of confidence, I think, to some of the retailers who are concerned about *Amazon*’s presence, and what they are doing in terms of selling plants. I see

that increasing, but by humanizing the relationship, by capitalizing on the social aspect of plant purchases, they might be able to get a leg up with some consumers.

Dr. Trey Malone: Yeah, absolutely. If you think about: right now we are in the middle of pumpkins and there is something special about buying a pumpkin from some guy's garden is going to charge a premium or is going to be worth a premium for a consumer that you just cannot charge even at a *Home Depot*. There is just something valuable to people that there is a relational nature to the products that they buy that as sellers, I think, we should address and appreciate more.

Dr. Bridget Behe: Yeah, that is great! Well, I appreciate you being on the podcast again this week, Trey, and look forward to having you back!

Dr. Trey Malone: Thank you, I look forward to it!

[music]

Announcer: Thank you for joining us on this week's Marketing Munchies Podcast. For more information or to download the transcript of this podcast, please visit, connect-2-consumer.org. That's C-O-N-N-E-C-T, dash, the number two, dash, C-O-N-S-U-M-E-R, dot, C-O-M.

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jeffrey W. Dwyer, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned.