

# GROWERTALKS

## Growers Talk Business

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### No Pressure, No Diamonds

Abe VanWingerden



**ABE VANWINGERDEN**

*(Editor's note: Abe was busy touring in California for Spring Trials, so we decided to run a "Best of" column this month. This one was previously printed in May 2010.)*

Early spring brings hope ... and it brings pressure, too, as you either have it too early and your customers don't want it or you were too cautious and you don't have enough.

This year, we've had our best early spring since 1984, with record results and growth. We had a store call us the other day and tell us the Health Department was in the store. I asked, "What for?" thinking that something bad had happened. The store manager responded that the

Health Department was there because "Spring Fever has broken out and everyone has caught it!"

There's nothing like the rush of an early spring, 75-degrees-and-sunny weekend, and we've had three of them in a row this year. On the other hand, last year, early April had snow on the ground and product backed up in the greenhouse. Sound familiar?

Either way, this business brings pressure. An old saying you hear sometimes is, "No pressure, no diamonds." If you're in this business, you have to love the pressure, since it's that pressure that delivers the best rewards. Rather than run from it, we have to use the pressure to motivate our teams to do better on a daily basis.

Here are some thoughts on pressure in your organizations and what I see as some industry barriers to success that you need to break down in your own company:

**Don't accept mediocrity.** The easy way out is not normally the right way out. Recently, we had a new consumer-preferred container design, but for some reason the UPC stickers we've used for years wouldn't stay on very well due to the grainy surface of the new container. For a couple of days, we spent time trying to redesign the pot or talking of eliminating the consumer-preferred pot altogether. All this over a 5-cent sticker.

It took time, but cooler heads eventually prevailed, and we came up with a new sticker and a new application process to resolve the issue and save the new pot. Unfortunately, however, eliminating a consumer-preferred option over a 5-cent tag is something we've seen happen in our industry. We have to think broader and be more "consumer-centric" in our thinking.

**Know each of your customers.** One item does not fulfill all of your customers. In the "old days," it was okay to be good at a single item and every customer wanted it. While those days were great, they're gone, and if you hold onto them too long you'll only have memories of "how it was" rather than plans for "how it will be."

The easy way out is to fall into a cycle of how the customer messed up your plans. The more difficult, but more successful, way of driving your business is to align with your customers and work a game plan together on the right items, sizes and timing. Don't wait for them to come to you with a plan and then complain about it. Take a plan to them, have options in your plan and be VERY willing to adapt the plan. While it'll be hard work, watch your business grow.

As I noted before, spring brings hope. That's quite evident for all of us here at Metrolina Greenhouses. We lost our leader and founder in December, and more importantly, I lost my dad. It's been four months since Tom VanWingerden passed away. I still think of him every day and what he would do in specific situations. I'm sure each of you does the same for those who've lost a parent or someone else close to you. But it's the spring season that energized my dad most (as it does for all of us in the business). I can still see him running around, looking for better ways to do things, tinkering with new inventions and driving the business every day.

We're honored and humbled to continue his legacy here at Metrolina and our tribute to him is to never accept the status quo and never fall into mediocrity. Being customer-focused, pushing your teams to get better every day and not accepting the status quo are the keys to success in this business. **GT**

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*Abe VanWingerden spent eight years working for Procter & Gamble in Sales and Marketing and is now part owner and President of Sales/Marketing at Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, North Carolina.*