

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Who's Driving Your Bus?

Art Parkerson

(Editor's note: Art is the newest member of our esteemed rotation of business owners for this column and we're looking forward to reading his thoughts on the industry. Welcome, Art! —JZ)

The best drivers remember what it feels like to be a passenger. ("Are we there yet?") But when you've been in the driver's seat for decades, it's hard to suddenly "just go along for the ride." I didn't see it coming. It caught me by surprise the day I had to relinquish the wheel ... to my 16-year-old kid.

My oldest son, Charles, just got his license. I didn't know how scary it would be to lose control. The world is different in the passenger seat—45 mph feels like 80, turns are tighter, the car in front of us is "closer than it appears." Call it parental parallax, a distorted risk perception. It makes me appreciate my own father so much more—he taught me to drive his tractor, then his car and then, finally, his company.

Thankfully, fathers still have some control over their sons, even if they're no longer the ones driving. I can guide Charles, advise him, train him. I have influence, but lightly, I hope. A backseat-driver is like a burned chocolate chip cookie—wonderful ingredients, just overdone.

But the other jokers on the road? There's no way to control them and that's what's really scary. Can you believe the number of people using their phones while they drive? Talking, texting, reading email. What's so important? "LOL C U SOON."

Last week I saw a guy playing Solitaire while driving his plumbing van down the road. Solitaire? Really? The "thing you do when you have nothing better to do" is now the "thing so vitally important that you'd put your life on the line for it"? I mean, Candy Crush or Angry Birds, maybe I could understand. But Solitaire?

Here's what I've re-learned through my son about driving things (cars, families or companies): The passengers have the least amount of control. And while the driver may have the most control, it's not total control. There are many, many dangers and threats the driver can't prevent; he can only anticipate and avoid.

But there's one danger that stands out from the rest—distraction. The good news: this is 100% within the driver's control. The driver chooses to distract himself. The bad news: the defining characteristic of our post-

modern age is the uncontrollable urge to distract ourselves. We've trained our brains to avoid long, prolonged spells of concentration. We can't handle staring at the road without interruption. It's like watching flowers bloom, paint dry or children grow up.

We get bored. We get distracted. And then, all of a sudden, the blooms are out, the paint is dry and the kids look like adults. They're shaving. Listening to rock music. Making jokes that don't start with "knock knock."

When Charles was still in diapers, I was learning to drive the business my father started with Lancaster Farms. About that time, I read Jim Collins' book, "Good to Great." Here was my favorite part: "Start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus and the right people in the right seats."

That sounded so nice to me. Running a great company? That's a passenger problem, a seating arrangement puzzle. It's not a direction problem and it sure ain't a driver problem.

Oops! Maybe not. Re-read the book. The example Collins gave of "getting the right people on the bus" and his role-model for leadership? Fannie Mae. Yeah, that's right—the guys who drove the entire U.S. economy off a financial cliff with their mortgage-backed securities did a great job of getting the right people on the bus before they figured out where they were going or how they should get there. Beautiful!

I don't know if I believe "first WHO, then WHERE" with the same fervor as I used to. I think all the questions—who, where, when, how and why—have to be answered simultaneously. And you have to keep asking them over and over and over again. The order in which you answer them doesn't matter so much. Do you need good people on the bus? Sure you do, but you also need a good map, a reliable engine, a full tank of gas and plenty of cup holders. But clearly, above all, a good driver is the one essential thing.

The people on your bus may determine how enjoyable and rewarding the trip is for everyone, but you can't blame the passengers for where the bus goes. It's your job to drive and that responsibility requires constant attention. Eliminate the distractions. Drive like you care. Drive like you intend to go somewhere worthwhile. And never forget: all the passengers are depending on you to get there safely. (So stop playing Solitaire, dummy.) **GT**

Art Parkerson lives and works at Lancaster Farms, a wholesale nursery in Suffolk, Virginia. To say hello, write to art@lancasterfarms.com.