

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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I Don't Care What Anybody Thinks

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It's the motto of the ideal man—independent, autonomous, self-made—"I don't care what anybody thinks." I can't tell you how much I admire those words or how I wish I could say them myself.

The nursery business is a macho world. It runs on sweat and force. It takes place in the great outdoors. Nurseries don't require bathroom facilities, much less conference rooms or PowerPoints. It requires getting to the point. And that point is productivity. Get it done, fast. Right the first time. Work hard. Play hard. (But only after you've worked hard.)

Okay, time out. This is only the third paragraph and I've already mentally edited out nine swear words. The truth is nobody at my nursery would actually say, "I don't care what anybody thinks," because if it were true, they'd say it more forcefully. "I don't give a \$%#@," perhaps, or maybe "they can all go ..." Well, you get the idea.

The nursery is a different world than a garden center. I worked at one for a few months when I was 20, so I guess that qualifies me to have an opinion. Some of my coworkers pretended they were working, but it wasn't really work. "Hey, we have to move these plants!" What, all 20 of them? On a farm, that should take about a minute tops and didn't require a water break. Nursery people view retailers like Mario Andretti must have viewed bumper cars. Yes, both involve steering wheels, but it ain't the same sport.

I've never worked at a greenhouse, so I can't say for sure what it's like. But on a nursery—where strong and manly plants like trees and shrubs are grown—greenhouse work is considered ... wimpy. (Again, I can't use the actual words used on nurseries. My mother would be horrified.) Basically, nursery folks think everyone else in the green industry plays patty-cake. At the end of the day, if your muscles don't ache, then you're dead weight.

Yeah, we farm workers have a chip on our shoulders. Care to knock it off? Take your best shot.

But the thing is, like all bravado, it's not really true. It's a projection, what we want others to see. Which means we do, indeed, care what others think. We want everyone to think we don't care what they think.

And that's not a bad thing, caring. It's what keeps us civilized. It's what prevents us from all sorts of vices:

drinking too much, working too little, putting swear words in an essay your mom might read. Being independent and confident isn't the same thing as being a sociopath. There's a line between the two and it's not a fine line. It has a name: conscience.

"Do the right thing." But who can say what's right? What's true? What's fair? You can. Be the leader who dares to decide. Don't outsource your judgement to the crowd, to what you imagine other people think. Should you care? Yes, but you must care about discerning for yourself what's right, and then doing it no matter what, more than you care about deciphering what others think or—let's not even go there—what they feel.

Fire the problem employee, even though you worry what people will say. ("They're heartless! They're greedy! They think people are disposable!") Eliminate the product line that's dragging you down, even though some customers will complain. ("I was counting on you! I guess I'll have to take my business somewhere else!") Cut your losses. ("Boy, they sure failed! Do they have a clue what they're doing over there?")

Imagine the worst thing people could think about you. You're a liar. A cheat. You're mean and unreasonable. You're arrogant and selfish. Guess what? They already think that. They've thought it all along.

I had a customer in a city about two hours from us. They were a wholesale distributor, selling to landscape contractors. They came to visit the farm and I shared a business idea with them—a unique delivery service we do for our local landscapers. We call it the DropStop. (It's essentially a rendezvous at a given time and location.) A year later, I went to visit the customer. One of the owners sarcastically snapped at me, "How's your 'dump-stop' thing doing? You know, I really don't appreciate you trying to steal our business!"

I was shocked. They thought I was doing the DropStop in their backyard? I'd shared the idea with them so that they could do it! I'd never even considered doing it myself in their town because I didn't want to upset them. But they assumed I was anyway.

The real lesson? The customer had thought the worst, yet their sales with us that year had increased substantially. People are going to think what they're going to think. They'll see what they want to see. Stop worrying. Do what you know is right. And don't fret about what anybody else thinks. **GT**

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