

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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“I Can’t Find People”

Abe VanWingerden



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While spring was its typical up-and-down season as always, we’ve seen continued consumer shifting to buying later and not as “event” driven as in the past. While Easter, Mother’s Day and Memorial Day are all still big events, we can still have a good season even if we miss one or two of those events due to weather.

In the past, if we missed Mother’s Day, the year was basically difficult to hit our goals, but we’re seeing a later-buying consumer emerge the last three to four years, and as long as you present them a fresh and relevant summer assortment, they’ll buy. June/July are now becoming very important months for us and we’re planning for that to continue in the future with a selection of plants that makes sense for that time of year.

The other emerging trend or comment in our industry this summer is “I can’t find people.” I always find that interesting when we have an unemployment rate of any kind, but I also know the reality of finding strong seasonal labor in a rising minimum wage environment, as well as a rebounding construction market in many cities around the country. Either way, the thing I do know—as is the case in any issue in our industry—is waiting for the government to change or to take action isn’t the answer. We have to own the issue and find solutions. At Metrolina, the team is focused on four areas to build our team better each spring.

Recruiting—First, start early and stay on it. Posting jobs in December is key, as this is when many other jobs are ending in the seasonal workforce and you want to get first voice in these folks’ planning. Second, none of us have huge recruiting teams on staff, but your best recruiters are more than likely your own employees. In tracking incoming employees, we found over 60% of the employees wrote in “word of mouth” on how they heard about the company. Due to this, we’re going to do more next year to use our current employees to help recruit others.

Retention—If you’re not tracking it, you need to start now. We actually bring in more than enough people each year to fill our seasonal work needs, but we have less than a 50% retention rate, so we have to hire 50% more than we need each year just to fill the staff each day. If “word of mouth” is so good, then why are we losing 50% of the folks we hire? We all ask this question and our team focuses on three areas.

First, we have to show them a pathway to a possible long-term plan at Metrolina. Second, new folks need a mentor in the company that's not their boss. Third, we have a "Refer a Friend" bonus for our employees if they bring in another employee and they stay for 60 days.

Know your company strengths—Most of the seasonal work in the U.S. isn't at family businesses; it's at places like Amazon, Shutterfly and big retail outlets. We're a big company by industry standards, but the feedback we got from employees is that they love working here because they love working for a family business that cares about people. This isn't to pat ourselves on the back, but more of a new awareness of how important it is for everybody in our small industry to not only treat folks like family, but also to use that as a recruiting tool.

Training your crew leaders/managers—This is probably the biggest outage we miss each year. When your staff goes up two times in the spring, we want to magically believe our crew leaders can all handle a doubling of their staff with no help. This last year, we invested in crew leader training, but the training was on the basics of managing people in a seasonal environment. Modules were items like "How to appropriately discipline an employee" and "How to understand different cultures."

We encourage our teams daily to show a positive attitude at the start of each shift and we tell them to let their teams know it always looks better than it did when you arrived and what you did mattered. Nothing is more important than your people, and if they feel their work is valued, they'll give you 110% every day and come back the next day. **GT**

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.