

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Turning Green

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I sometimes wonder if you greenhouse and garden center owners aren't a bit too practical for your own good. I speak from experience: I used to own a wholesale greenhouse and the only frivolous thing I ever did was ... actually, I can't think of anything frivolous I ever did ... except, perhaps, going into business, but that's a whole other topic.

No, green industry folks are practical to a fault. You do what makes rugged good sense because money is generally tight and form follows function (meaning function comes first). Also, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Don't even paint it.

The result is that many of our businesses look, to the outside observer, a bit, well, dull. Practical offices and square greenhouses designed to fit the site and the pocketbook, not to impress the eye.

Not that many new garden centers haven't been constructed with visual appeal as the first concern and that's great. I once spent a week in the company of Cleveland retailer Angelo Petitti visiting gardens around Paris and the very next center he built (Avon, Ohio) had design cues taken straight from the Eiffel Tower. And on the grower side, I can think of some ranges I've visited that look more like high-end furniture showrooms than production greenhouses. Then there's Anthura, in the Netherlands, which used the Palm House at Kew Gardens for inspiration for their new young plant range. Stunning! (Check out my video at <https://tinyurl.com/anthuragreenhouse>).

Does it really matter what your business looks like from the outside? I say it does ... and so agrees Apple, Amazon (see page 12), Google and any number of corporations who are investing in swanky new headquarters. It's not just that they can afford these shiny edifices to their success; it's about putting a public face on their hip culture. And it's about attracting the best and brightest talent, who can then brag that they have the magic ID card that gets them inside.

You, too, are trying to attract people: both customers and employees. Is the façade of your business helping or hurting? When you give a tour, do you brag about your amenities and modern systems? Or do you warn your guest to watch out for the trip hazards and apologize for the smell coming from the break room?

If your facility is in need of a makeover, one area that seems completely overlooked is “green.” As we always say, we are the original green industry.

For instance, why do we use so few wind generators and solar panels in horticulture? Heck, a greenhouse is one big solar panel! Why not a few that generate actual electricity? Also, why so few green roofs on our wholesale offices and retail stores? What better way to promote the products that put the roof over our heads than by actually making them the roof over our heads? The same goes for our landscapes, which should include water features that hide bioswales, along with wildlife, pollinator gardens and edible gardens.

I was lunching with a good friend the other day and he commented that businesses that are struggling should first figure out what they can do that nobody else is doing and focusing on an environmental message is an area that’s wide open. Walmart is a long, long way from being considered an environmental icon. Home Depot and Lowes aren’t about to replace their massive black parking lots with permeable pavers and turf. Even Google and Facebook can only pay lip service to the topic via architecture—and OUR plants in their interiorscapes.

Environmentalism is a powerful, positive message among today’s consumers, especially younger ones—including those looking for gainful employment. Yes, the work is hard, the hours long. But working for a company that practices what it preaches might just give them the incentive to try it long enough to get hooked. **GT**