

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

1/1/2018

What I Learned Last Year

Chris Beytes



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I'm not one for New Year's resolutions ... usually, my resolution is to not make any resolutions. I'm also not one for telling YOU what sort of business resolutions you should make—no magazine editor knows as much about your business as you do. That said, I am one for offering up inspiration—laying out a New Year's buffet, if you will, of ideas that you can load on your plate as you desire. To that end, here's a sampling of stuff I learned in 2017.

- **“Don't sell a product, be a brand.”** This bit of advice came from TPIE keynote speaker Jane Lockhart. The idea is, products come and go, and can be price-shopped and low-balled by competitors. But your business brand can be strong, long-lived and basically unbeatable. I've long preached the same idea, only I didn't put it so succinctly. Think about your favorite company: Do you love it only for a single product they offer? Could a competitor with a newer, shinier product easily win you over? Do you love

Starbucks only for the tall latte or for the experience? Apple only for the iPhone or their cool, easy technology? Amazon for cheap books or unbeatable service? Of course, your product has to be good—that's a given. But you've got that; build your brand around your people, your services and your culture.

- **Pinterest is powerful.** That's what I learned when I was in Australia last month, where, like here, foliage and houseplants are seeing a resurgence. I spent a day on a bus tour with a group of Millennial-aged growers and I asked them about the foliage boom. To a man (and woman, of course), all gave the main credit to social media in general and Pinterest specifically. Based on that, I think we should all spend more time searching for trends and ideas on Pinterest and similar sites, and incorporating what we find into our businesses. And posting our own ideas.

- **Packaging is essential.** I learn this every year when I travel to IPM Essen in Germany. And I'm reminded of it more and more often here in the U.S. when I see the cool designs coming from companies like LiveTrends Design, which grows not a single plant, yet does millions in business selling their innovative finished products. Yes, plants are wonderful things unto themselves, offering untold beauty, health and wellness benefits. But getting the consumer to notice and to buy takes more than just a pretty plant; it takes attractive packaging and creative messaging. The most successful brands, like Proven Winners, Knockout Roses and Endless Summer Hydrangeas, prove this week in and week out. In this day and age when even house brands rival national brands in stylish packaging and consumer appeal (think Trader Joe's, Archer Farms, 365 Everyday Value), why are we still marketing so much of our stuff in plain black pots?

- **Efficiency is on more growers' minds.** We've bitched about labor for a long time, but I think the situation is getting critical enough (both availability and cost) that tools that replace people are becoming more and more attractive to more and more growers. As the biggest guys look at the new automatic cutting stickers from ISO and Visser, even the smallest annual grower is considering a transplanter. Lean Flow remains a hot topic as growers look to get more out of their facilities.

- **We're not going to grow the industry selling combo planters.** Hortistician Dr. Marvin Miller tells me the industry (at least the bedding/garden category) has declined in three of the past five years and he puts some of the blame on the fact that consumers do much less gardening in the ground than they used to. If all they do is buy a container or two for the front door and back deck, how do we grow the pie? One way might be by getting new veggie gardeners in the all-important 18 to 35 demographics to expand into flowers, and we do that by once again offering flats of annuals AND showing them how to use them in their landscapes. They're already digging in the ground to plant their tomatoes and peppers; what's to stop them from adding marigolds for natural pest control? After that, it's a short step to planting the front walk, the mailbox and the picket fence bed. **GT**