

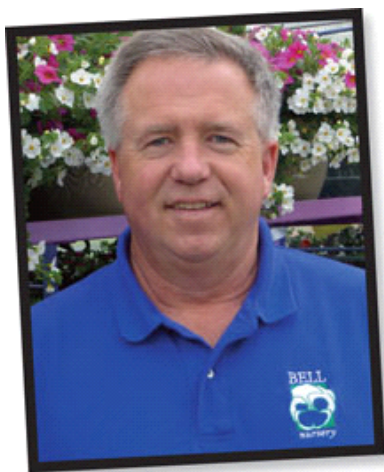
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Building a Brand

Gary Mangum



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So many different things go in to building any brand. How we want to be perceived on a daily basis, and those things we can do to influence that based on our daily activities, is clearly critical. Reputations developed over time can be torn apart in minutes through a moment in time where a flawed decision is made. We don't need to go beyond the news of the day to understand how critical it is to align and stay aligned with doing the next right thing—all day every day.

IOU

We've often reflected on things learned over time from my parents in business. They were a great team—we learned the importance of teamwork early. Dad and Mom wanted to make sure suppliers were paid when an invoice was received and Mom wrote the checks. They developed relationships with their supply community early on and established a

reputation that has stayed with Bell Florist, and eventually moved to our nursery operation when established in the late 1970s. As business grew and others were hired that purchased and paid for products, that direction remained intact.

My siblings and I learned early the importance of paying ahead of expectations through our many years of seeing the results. During the gas crisis of the '70s when everyone was lining up for hours, our tank at home never dried. As a new driver, I was never allowed to use the gas, but I remember thinking how "lucky" they were. A call to Southern States today meant a full tank tomorrow. It wasn't until 30 years later, during a chance meeting of the long-retired manager of Southern States, I learned that our Dad was literally his only customer that had been handled that way. He said that due to how he treated them from a payment standpoint, and the drivers from a respect standpoint, he'd never be allowed to run low on fuel.

For the vast majority of our business life, our checks were cut and mailed in 10 days. Supply disruptions, though they do occasionally occur, are always minimized based on establishing and maintaining credibility in this area. If we were starting a new enterprise today, I'd start by paying every invoice received weekly.

Positive relationship building

"Relationship" is an often-used word in business. We like to think, that over time, the Bell business has grown through the development of many different relationships over many years.

Within our own brand, we've deliberately worked to stay focused on those things that are most important to the end influencer or user of our products—and the ultimate consumer. The consumer that purchases the products we grow for The Home Depot want predictably good quality, every time. That same consumer wants to purchase something they can be successful with and they want to know they're getting a good value. While there are many other points related to buying decisions, these are very solid, and a continued long-term focus on these has helped us grow our relationship over time with The Home Depot.

Mutual respect, consistent credibility and candor are the keys to the development of any business relationship. Relationships need to provide benefits to both parties. Without mutual benefits, the partnership will be on shaky ground since the incentives to stick around are lacking.

Trust

Building trust provides the cornerstone of any relationship or brand promise. Trust is a two-way street that needs to be cultivated and handled as a priority at all times. Trust becomes very important when times get tough and as opportunities arise. To earn any individual's trust, we must be sincere and consistent.

Over the nearly 25 years working with The Home Depot, there were several situations that could have led to, what seemed at the time, a disaster for us. These didn't rise to anything beyond a blip along the path because the situations were handled with complete candor, and in most cases, ended up being part of larger industry issues.

In thinking about our relationship and bond with The Home Depot, all of these traits have been important. In our earliest days of expansion, we talked openly about the benefits associated with developing a network of Maryland farm families that could benefit from diversification of their income, while we benefitted from the beauty associated with more owner-operator eyes on quality. Home Depot celebrates these relationships with us, and over time, efficiencies have become integral parts of the process that were never initially envisioned as the business evolved.

As I reflect on my parents' early efforts at their own brand building, I'm happy that much of their thinking impacts our business and our relationships today. When people know what to expect and know we can be trusted, we benefit personally and professionally. Always listening, always learning and a willingness to think with an open mind should be a healthy part of our brand as well. **GT**

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