

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Normal ... Isn't

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Show of hands: How many of you are waiting for business to get back to normal? You know, normal sales patterns, normal customer demand, normal fuel prices, normal weather (I'm writing this in November in Chicago, but the temperature for the last week has been more like January).

My advice to those of you with a tentative hand in the air? Don't hold your breath waiting for normal to return. Don't even trot out that old saw, "This is the new normal." It's meaningless. "Change is the new normal" might be more appropriate, but it's useless unless you embrace the idea of change—and many of us don't.

You probably recall that I owned my own greenhouse business in Florida in the 1980s. Started it with my wife, straight out of college. Our only experience was a Mother's Day Weekend spent working for a local florist, Tropical

Treehouse, which set up a kiosk in a busy mall.

As a naïve 20-something, my expectation of operating a business was that I'd develop a customer base, then I'd supply said customer base with a plants on a weekly basis. Get things rolling and keep it rolling in a nice, predictable pattern.

What I didn't know was that in actuality a customer would buy 12 pot mums one week and none for the next two months. And they might or might not buy 12 the same weekend next year ... if they were still in business. I learned that business—at least the plant business—is never routine. I hoped for normal and never once spotted anything that resembled it.

That was when I understood a simple fact: Those who are most successful in their jobs are those who thrive on uncertainty. They don't curse the challenges, they embrace them, and they encourage their co-workers and teams to do the same. Not only are they more successful, they're happier, too.

It's said that the Chinese symbol for "crisis" is made up of the symbols for "challenge" and "opportunity." Actually, that's not true. But it should be, at least for successful businesspeople, for whom there is no crisis, only an exciting challenge and a potentially profitable opportunity.

Some smart fellow once said, "The human spirit lives on creativity and dies in conformity and routine." I like that. I may not have been a great greenhouse operator, but I'm pretty good at making a magazine, a job that is nothing if

not creative. It's here that I've learned that I thrive on deadlines, pressure, challenges and change.

I bring all this up now, in December, because the end of 2018 might have you feeling like the dog's breakfast. Poinsettias can make you wonder if you grow plants just to keep the lights on. For you retailers, two months of being cheery for your customers can make you want to strangle a few of them just for fun. And this fall had the bonus of the midterm elections—woohoo! I tell you, hauling that much baggage around is not good for the human spirit!

What's the answer?

Instead of hoping that 2019 will be a "normal" year, accept the fact that it's most likely going to be a crazy year—crazier than 2018, even—with plenty to keep you on your toes. Approach each day with the mindset that there is no routine, only opportunities for creativity.

Here's how one smart grower I know deals with challenges and problems: he goes in search of them, rather than hope and pray that nothing goes wrong. He knows that something is already going wrong. His satisfaction comes from finding it and fixing it.

Not only would I adopt this mindset, I'd expand it to my staff, too. All too often employees avoid problems. Hide them from the boss, even. "Don't tell the old man about that—he'll freak!" Instead, get them engaged in finding and fixing problems. Create contests for the most creative solutions. Set the example for them that our ever-changing business world is exciting, not frightening.

Lastly, I'd caution you that seeking "normal" can be a hazardous to your business. As J.R. Rim writes, "The more you get set into your own world, the smaller your world becomes."

So forget normal. It doesn't exist. Embrace the challenges, exercise your creativity and expand your world. **GT**