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AI in an Emotionally Driven Market

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I've always been a big fan of sci-fi movies and TV shows. Every sci-fi writer when creating a futuristic story involving a computer or robot as a main character instantly creates an unnatural story conflict by submersing an "aware machine" into human society. The computer can't read emotion or "compute" the feelings of people. Most episodes of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" have moments where Data the android is constantly perplexed by some unique human emotion it can't seem to grasp. The scene is followed by the interaction between two other characters who laugh off the jovial moment with no consequences.

But what if there were consequences? What if we as business owners put that machine prematurely in a position to forecast markets that are driven by emotions it just can't compute? In our company, the decisions concerning what and how much product is produced for speculative sales are determined by past market data and that old gut feeling of what next year might bring. If we ran with last year's "market forecast" of companies outside our industry, we would be throwing away massive amounts of material now due to our "normal" slow July sales. The forecast wouldn't have seen slow sales in July, but the seasoned grower just knows better than to overlook it.

The May 2023 issue of GrowerTalks had an article titled "Innovation in All We Do," which rightly defined the importance of our country's investments in technology and briefly describes results of what has happened to family farms in America as an unknown result. The article notes that advancements in technology for the farm are necessary to stay competitive by producing more with less input. However, the unfortunate repercussion of higher technology is increased cost, which often prices out its use in smaller farms. Many of the rules that apply to larger commodity producers simply don't apply to our industry due to its non-economic value without "emotional" demand.

For example, if I was growing corn or soybeans, a true commodity item, excluding the variable of quality (which is presumed to be nominal with all other corn or soybean growers), I would "guarantee" a sale of my product in a market where there's a "guaranteed buyer" who'll pay me within pennies per bushel as compared to my fellow competitive producers.

However, the horticulture industry is far from this. In the houseplant world, we can grow the most beautiful houseplant with the risk of it not selling, then overgrowing and dying due to there being no guaranteed buyer in the general non-commodity market scenario. You cannot eat, squeeze oil, create textile or burn value out of our houseplants. Their only value is 100% derived by happiness. The value of our plants is created by the emotional wellbeing that interiorscapes, landscapes and houseplants provide for the home or business. This is a marketing hurdle that I don't believe AI will ever be fully able to master.

I recently purchased a pair of dress shoes from a small independent company. They were the same price as a pair of nice shoes purchased through a large department store. However, I was sold on the story of a small tannery

producing a quality shoe for me and how my purchase directly influenced the local economy of that small town. As the shoes were being made, I was emailed progressive updates on that along with personal stories of workers who take pride in their jobs as cobblers.

AI will prove to be a creative tool for engineering new production methods and finding unthought-of marketing niches. However, there will always be a facet of our market that even the most well-tuned AI computer with unlimited inputs of information cannot compute. That's how plants make people feel and in turn what compels them to make a purchase. There's a huge disconnect between what people say they like in our industry and what they're willing to spend money on. Every person would agree they love having the presence of plants in their home and a beautiful landscape at their house. It makes them feel good. However, very few Americans budget any money for landscape and plant purchases.

Many times, it's more of an impulse buy event. AI can read marketing trends of the past and forecast future sales to a degree, but it won't get any closer to figuring out why people buy flowers and plants any more than a computer's ability to tell where a hurricane is going.

We've come so far in technology during the last 20 years, but even the largest super computers armed with AI have no greater chance of telling where a hurricane will go versus how many plants someone will buy for Mother's Day. I guarantee that one day AI will be an amazing resource for growers and sales personnel to confer with. It'll be another tool we'll become way too reliant on like a cell phone. However, the final decision to buy a non-commodity, emotionally driven product in a speculative market should always be the person who's expected to buy it—a human. **GT**

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