In the past, when you’ve reached this page you know you’ve hit the “last-but-not-least” part of GrowerTalks where I make some deep, insightful observations about the business, coupled with references to welding, food or whatever else I manage to relate to the topic.

But with this “flipped out” new magazine format “Acres & Acres” is no longer the final word. It’s now part of the setup point for “Consumer Buzz,” the centerpiece of our joint magazine. In fact, we’ve used our four best business-oriented columnists to create a “consumer sandwich.” Over here you’ll find “Growers Talk Business,” featuring rotating musings by Gary Mangum, Gerry Raker, Abe Van Wingerden and Bill Swanekamp; and my column. On the other side of “Consumer Buzz,” on the Green Profit side, you’ll find beloved columnists Kerry Herndon (“Kerry On”) and John Friel (“The Friel World”) providing the other slices of horticultural bread.

This positioning isn’t random. We redesigned the magazine in a way that would build the interest and excitement the farther back you go (that’s why we redesigned the classified section and moved it forward; otherwise it acted like a roadblock). We wanted to showcase “Consumer Buzz,” which is why we put two thought-provoking business columns on one side and two more on the other. But don’t worry, our styles won’t change. Kerry and Friel and the “Growers Talk Business” boys and I will continue to focus on topics of interest to all businesses, whether production or retail.

Which means, of course, that I should be writing about growing or retailing or consumers, and not about GrowerTalks. So let me do so.

As the name implies, Consumer Buzz Live is the live version of “Consumer Buzz.” Maybe you’ve attended one? It’s a live, on-stage focus group of typical off-the-street consumers, moderated (usually) by your scribe. I pick their brains, asking them any manner of questions about their gardening and shopping habits. What do they like, what do they hate, and what can we do better?

After hosting dozens of these events, we’ve found two things consumers consistently say that they want most from garden centers (besides quality plants, that is).

First is information. Nothing frustrates these consumers more than not being able to find out how to be
successful with what they’re buying. Their biggest beef is small tags that are hard to read, or are too generic, or are in the wrong pot. They want better tags, clearer signs and more-informed (and better-informed) employees. They want accurate, detailed information that’s also clear and simple. A few bullet points on a sign describing care and use, and maybe one or two points that will help guarantee success. Most importantly, remember that they’re not horticulturists. Many aren’t even gardeners. Put it in plain English, please!

Second is inspiration. They want ideas about how to use what you sell. Where to put it, what to put it in, and what to put it with. When they buy meat, fish or veggies at the grocery store they’re surrounded by recipe ideas. At the department store they’re shown which blouse goes with which skirt. Yet garden centers tend to lay out all the raw ingredients and assume customers know what to do with them all. They want photographs, idea gardens (featuring real-world situations such as mail boxes and front doors) and easy-but-trendy recipes: “Put this plant and that plant in this cool new pot, and you’re guaranteed a dynamite container.”

Finally, remember that most customers are even more ignorant about our products than we imagine. It’s up to us to introduce them to the pleasure and satisfaction of gardening slowly but surely, starting them off with easy plants that they can have success with.

If you inform them and inspire them, selling them should be easy as pie.