Being a professional grower in the floriculture industry takes passion, energy and determination. It’s the only way you can endure the long hours of hard work. It’s definitely not a career for the faint of heart! That’s why, for the past six years, GrowerTalks magazine, with the generous help of sponsors such as Ball Seed and OFA—An Association of Industry Professionals, has sponsored the annual Young Grower Award competition. We want to recognize and reward those young (under 35) greenhouse growers who are dedicated to crop production.

Our finalists each received an essay assignment, given at the height of spring busy season. They were asked to address the question, “Give at least three specific ways you will keep your business relevant to your customers, so you and they will still be around in the year 2020.” They all offered excellent ideas, with some common themes and some unique perspectives.

For instance, Val Bednarek, Liner Grower for Oglesby Plants International in Altha, Florida, believes the 21st century grower must be “an entrepreneur who needs to synchronize concepts and resources. He’s a manager who has to organize and execute around principles of sustainability.”

Dan Chaney, Production Manager for Ivy Acres of Calverton, New York, sees three areas that are key: “If growers are able to embrace future legislation, decrease operating costs and provide innovative products and ideas to the consumer, the greenhouse industry will be as relevant and sustainable in the future as it has ever been.”

And Dana Langhoff, Plug Grower Manager for Floral Plant Growers of Denmark, Wisconsin, puts an emphasis on his plug customers. “I sometimes hear the antiquated phrase, ‘no news is good news’ in reference to a lack of customer feedback,” he says. “To me, no news is no news. We can’t just focus on the plants and not on the customer.”

A panel of expert judges will choose the 2010 Young Grower Award winner based on their nomination applications, their essays, and a phone interview. Judges are:

- Anna Ball, Ball Horticultural Company
QUESTION:
Give at least three specific ways you will keep your business relevant to your customers, so you and they will still be around in the year 2020.

Val Bednarek
Age: 32  |  Title: Liner Grower  |  Operation: Oglesby Plants International, Altha, Florida

It will be a very interesting decade! Growers will have to adapt to constantly changing realities, and establish a successful connection with customers so we will be in business in the year 2020.

The consumer is the ultimate boss and supreme educator who needs to be heard. They provide our job security, and are the most important people in the entire production process. Growers have to maintain confidence with consumers and remember that dealing with them requires knowledge and patience. We need to create exceptional products and remember the consumers are buying plants and the experience. Breeders and growers have to study and research trends on the retail market. Sales, production and R&D need to effectively communicate. Production planning can’t be a guessing game, ending up with huge unsold inventory and a financial nightmare.

The industry should follow the consumers’ changing perception of gardening. Modern gardeners expect less maintenance and longer-lasting plants, produced in a greener, more eco-friendly way. It’s important to realize the economic power of the younger generation, who are overall better educated than previous generations and are willing to spend more money on landscaping and gardening. Producers can attract more consumers by effective marketing, educational seminars and tours. Interesting expositions and fashion-forward decorative pots and tags will certainly help with promotion.

Producers, however, tend to forget that the average consumer knows little about cultivars. Standardization and streamlined products could be a simpler choice for confused customers. The pay-by-scan system is an excellent example of how growers and consumers can connect together. The grower works directly with the buyer based on the marketplace, and therefore has easier access to information and better way to control the
sales. Pay-by-Scan has helped significantly to develop sustainable sales, loyalty and profit.

Much has been written about sustainable production in horticulture. Every grower knows what this term means. Principles of sustainability (energy-efficient, eco-friendly techniques; recycling) incorporated with automation (technologically progressive solutions) and innovations (the Internet, PGRs) will help to create higher-quality product and a better offering for the consumer. Total Quality Control teaches us how to improve the production process and product quality. It leads to fewer losses and discards, plus decreases overhead costs and increases productivity.

Effective leadership and efficient management should be an objective. The industry has to promote talent, proactivity and initiative, and demote egoism and deceptiveness. The grower as a leader must have the ability to motivate employees (the most important asset of every enterprise) and “fix” or eliminate bad morale when it deteriorates the business. The right people in the right place means success.

By tearing apart the cost structure, benchmarking and reviewing ROIs, it’s possible to determine financial weaknesses and losses. Low-margin products should be discontinued and replaced with more profitable production that have an emphasis on long-range planning. Growers make decisions based on collected data, like buying rooted liners versus propagating in their own facilities, hiring trucks versus running their own fleet, and so forth. In a slow-growth market, growers will have to work to increase their prices, at least according to the inflation rate, and collected earned revenue in an equitable and transparent way.

Management advice, production protocols and crop culture data are easily accessible in industry magazines, research publications and on the Internet. Professional consulting is an option. High integrity between suppliers, breeders, growers and brokers is essential for the strength of our industry. Close collaboration with accountants and financial institutions could help solve budgetary dilemmas and negative cash flow problems.

Education is an important investment in the future. It’s in the industry’s interest to sponsor university research, scholarship programs and promote networking to attract young talent.

The 21st-century grower is an entrepreneur who needs to synchronize concepts and resources. He’s a manager who has to organize and execute around principles of sustainability. There is no other alternative way to succeed and achieve the highest degree of permanent success in the horticulture business. Innovations are remarkable “powerful tools” created by science. They will help growers to better serve their customer, who is also a grower. With that in mind, there’s no doubt that growers and their customers will enjoy gardening beyond the year 2020.

Dan Chaney
Age: 30 | Title: Production Manager | Operation: Ivy Acres, Inc., Calverton, New York
Entering our first season of a new decade, we’re not sure if the country is out of the economic recession, but signs point toward positive growth for the economy. As we go forward, not only are we at the mercy of the weather and economy, but there will be many new challenges facing us in the years to come. As margins become tighter and the quality demanded by the retailer and consumer increases, growers need to find ways to improve efficiency, quality, service and delivery; and anticipate and take proactive measures to changes in the industry.

Greenhouse businesses are in a constant struggle with the competition to gain market share and increase revenues while at the same time maximizing operational efficiency at their production facilities. Many obstacles can prohibit growth and/or survival in today’s market. To overcome the obstacle of increasing costs in labor, energy and materials, growers must continuously review all processes that affect production costs. We must constantly improve the operation of our facilities and analysis of the market.

More than ever, growing products that work for both you and your customer will be critical for success. Focus must be directed to minimize decisions that contribute to decreased yields and sell-through, reduce inventories of materials, and explore possibilities of outsourcing materials from China and other emerging markets. After successful seasons and thorough financial analysis, we need to be ready to make intelligent capital investments that will prepare us for changes and uncertain economic times.

Automation in environmental controls, movement of materials and transplanting are all ways we can look to further streamline our operations while decreasing our labor costs. Implementation of these systems can require large allocations of funds, but can make instant impacts on operating efficiencies and will pay for themselves over time.

At Ivy Acres, Jack Van de Wetering has always encouraged new ways of thinking and adjustment of our product mix and operating processes to provide the highest quality product to the consumer. We’re constantly analyzing what we offer our customers, how we provide these products, and when they should be available. Jack is an originator of ideas, and the implementation of his ideas in the market by offering differentiated products can increase profit margins. The creation of new products requires experimentation. In real-world experimentation there are many risks and variables involved in offering new crop/product mixes, product packaging, and the marketing of new ideas. The more we become comfortable with the risks and variables associated with this process, the more likely we are to successfully create and implement these ideas and products. To achieve future innovation, Ivy Acres will need strong leadership, sound organizational structure, communication, collaboration and vision.

If only the process of innovation existed in our government, new legislation would produce needed results that could have a broad and positive influence on society. Although the lack of innovation in lawmaking has been dangerously absent, we can expect widespread changes that will have a huge impact on agriculture. We must proactively address and prepare for future legislative changes before they happen. For instance, with the recent controversial passage of Arizona Immigration Law SB1070, federal immigration reform is being
brought to the forefront. Our industry is extraordinarily dependent on seasonal labor for our survival. Any change may increase wages and cause a decline in the available workforce. We need to reduce our dependence on immigrant labor, strive to create more permanent positions, implement mechanization of labor-saving tasks, and diversify our product offerings to include less labor-intensive crops and techniques.

Additionally, tough new reform will likely be directed at water, fertilizer and pesticide use. Improving practices to optimize production while decreasing use of these inputs will lower our operation costs. Growers’ most effective chemicals are being phased out or have reduced effectiveness, and fewer are being introduced. Incorporating biological controls into your IPM regimen has become essential. We will need to depend on our suppliers for the development, improvement and marketing of crops that tolerate heat, cold, drought, insects, disease and other extremes.

If growers are able to embrace future legislation, decrease operating costs and provide innovative products and ideas to the consumer, the greenhouse.

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Dana Langhoff  
Age: 34 | Title: Plug Grower Manager | Operation: Floral Plant Growers, LLC, Denmark, Wisconsin

When I think about how Floral Plant Growers will keep its business relevant to its customers over the next 10 years, or 50 years for that matter, three focal points come to mind: I believe strong relationships, a dynamic organizational culture and applicable metrics are the key to any business.

Without our customers we wouldn’t have a business, which is why I believe strong relationships are critical for customer retention. It’s up to us to get out there and talk to our customers to find out what it is they want. I sometimes hear the antiquated phrase, “no news is good news” in reference to a lack of customer feedback. To me, no news is no news. We can’t just focus on the plants and not on the customer. It’s very difficult to guess accurately or even decipher data to figure out what it is that people are thinking or what they’re going to purchase the next year. For this reason, I like to travel throughout the spring and fall plug seasons with our plug account manager and the plug broker representatives to find out what it is that these growers are interested in and how we can better service them.

This also gives me the opportunity to assess the crop quality of our plugs after transplant and offer any insight pertinent to the crops. This open line of communication strengthens our relationships, as these growers now know exactly who is growing their plugs and can gain a level of confidence in our plug program. From that point it’s a matter of continuous communication between our plug account manager, the plug broker representatives and our staff to ensure that the customers’ voices are heard throughout our company.

I feel that if we are going to support our customers effectively we need to maintain a dynamic business culture. What customers value changes over time, and our industry changes so much from year to year with all
of the various marketing programs and enhanced genetics offered by breeders, that we have to get in front of the parade, not just follow it a year or two later after the excitement has worn off. We constantly look for what’s new and secure sample seed from our suppliers—sometimes a full year before it’s released—so we can evaluate its growing habits and establish our own crop culture.

We have to be willing to try new things and step outside of our comfort zones in order to keep moving forward. It seems like every year we have a customer who comes to us with a unique request. Instead of turning our backs on the customer, we entertain the idea and figure out how we can make it a reality. We even set aside a certain percentage of our production for special requirements, such as specific seeds per cell, crop times, bud set or tray configurations. Quite often these special requests become part of our standard program. This is why it’s vital to stay open to new ideas.

Now that we’ve listened to our customers and adapted to their needs, we need to measure performance. Back in 2005, we started tracking our order fulfillment percentages every week. The purpose was to gauge how well we were meeting our customers’ needs by shipping what they ordered when they ordered it. After a year or two, we started sharing this information with our plug brokers. This simple act increased our plug business dramatically. We still use this tool to report our performance, but now we also track the number of complaints that we receive during a given season. After all, it’s one thing to ship plugs and another to have them arrive safely, transplanted and grown for our customers.

These metrics let us know if we understand our business, and by using this focused feedback, we know if we are gaining or losing ground in the industry. We understand that it’s imperative to focus on our customers’ businesses and their needs in order to be successful and to remain relevant to them in the future. GT