Consumers and our retail customers continue to evolve, just as our industry continues to change and recalibrate to stay ahead. Are we working to evolve our own business and discover and promote change in a way that will leave our own business better? Or are we doing things the way we’ve always done them, hoping for the best results possible? This question has real meaning to me as my long-time business partner and I seriously asked ourselves this very thing earlier this year.

As I’ve said and written countless times, Mike and I have been blessed with an outstanding team that’s worked in all conditions, at all times of the day and night, and with a consistent passion for our business that’s still hard for me to imagine. I continue to be energized when I walk into a Home Depot that we serve and catch the first glimpse of a purple shirt tending to our products or helping a consumer. As strange as it sounds, I get choked up when I think about the millions of gardeners that have been helped by the Bell service team over these many years.

The key to our continued growth is based on decisions that we and our leadership team make, and ultimately, remains in the hands of our customers and their decision-making consumers. How are we “graded” by those consumers and the various sales channels? What are we doing, by design, to make sure our consumers have the best experience and results possible? Gardening and landscaping results in shoppers sharing on Facebook or Twitter, bragging at the local PTA gathering, or talking about it in their corporate brochures. That chatter can be very energizing when we see or hear it.

At Bell, we’re renewing our efforts to excite the general public about gardening on a regional level. Added investment in consumer-related public relations and aggressive outreach to news media in 2011 will help bring more customers into the garden centers this spring. We won’t be promoting Bell Nursery in any way, but will focus on gardening (indoors and outdoors) and the related benefits.

A renewed commitment to the landscape trade and special orders through the Home Depot garden centers has already paid off, and will clearly be part of our growth in 2011. We anticipate the environment for landscape pros continues to improve. We’ve found that contractors appreciate local-based growing, and by
focusing energy on prompt turnaround and exceptional order fulfillment, many contractors that used to go three or four places to complete a project have found that one stop at the Home Depot of their choice can really improve efficiency and work to their advantage.

A commitment to hire and staff the garden centers we serve with bilingual individuals whenever possible has absolutely helped us grow sales at most of the stores we serve. Bilingual tagging driven by our customer has had a dramatic impact as the Hispanic community clearly feels better served.

We know we have to grow what consumers will be willing to buy. In our own business, that has translated the past few years to 90% bread-and-butter production and 10% new or innovative, or newly configured, mostly revolving around containers. We’ve recently determined that to be more aggressive and relevant, we really need to start with production and our mix. Renewed vigor and more “outside-the-box” thinking starting with our suppliers will help us evolve our mix and offerings more quickly, and stay ahead of the general marketplace.

Our team is looking forward to 2011 with enthusiasm. Anyone in the mid-Atlantic and North can relate when I say we’re due for a weather break. As I write this, we’re in the midst of record-setting cold that recently was responsible for killing millions of feeder fish in the Chesapeake Bay because they missed the opportunity to migrate south to deeper waters as they’ve traditionally done. The waters here got much colder much earlier, and only a small percentage were smart or lucky enough to head south early. The fish that perished were the followers, not the leaders, and unfortunately, they were caught doing what they’ve always done. GT

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