GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Plant to Plan: “Insertion”

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Last month, Ball’s Dr. Will Healy taught us about the first half of his favorite topic, “Plan for profit, plant to plan.” This time, chapter two of the lesson.

I said in last month’s column that “plant to plan” sounds pretty simple. Suppose your “plan for profit” plan is to increase sales by $50,000 and you’re going to do that by dropping 10 non-performers, adding 15 exciting new varieties and upgrading some existing products and charging 50 cents more for them. You figure you can put an extra $50k to the top line. Just plant what you said you were going to and you’re golden, right?

That’s how I put it to Will when he again plopped (by invitation this time) into my guest chair.

“That’s Chris’ simplistic, literal view of the world,” Will said of my illustration. “Because as a journalist, you have to be literal. Or literary.”

“Okay, then, smart guy,” I countered, leaning back with my hands behind my head, “Explain it to me.”

First, began Will, you need to learn to think in terms of KPIs—Key Performance Indicators. KPIs are the tool you use to meet your plans. Take plugs, for instance. If you can achieve 95% usable plugs, that’s your KPI for that task. If you want to produce 1,000 plugs, you sow 1,050 seeds. But if you goof up and only produce 90% useable plugs, you missed your KPI and you missed your plan.

There are scores of KPIs in every greenhouse, but to Will, there’s one that’s most critical: insertion rate. “Insertion” is his term for planting, whether sticking unrooted cuttings or planting plugs. Insertion rate is how many insertions your employees average per hour.

“We are an insertion industry,” he says. “Insertion drives the whole process.”

Curious, I asked if many growers actually know their insertion rate.

“No,” Will answered. “They have no clue because they’ve never sat down and thought about it. ‘Why do we need to worry about insertion rate? We’ll just throw more bodies at it!’”

“But seriously, how in the world do you calculate this?” I asked. “All the different plant sizes and pot sizes and multiple people doing multiple jobs …”

“You’re overthinking it, Chris. It’s simple. X number of people planting X number of plugs in X number of weeks.”

Here’s an example: 10 employees do 1 million insertions in four weeks (50 work hours per week). That’s 1 million divided by 200 hours divided by 10 people equals an insertion rate of 500.

I asked Will if there’s an industry average. He answered with a story.

“The fastest person I’ve ever seen stick cuttings—and I watched her do it—was sticking 3,600 cuttings per hour. She was a machine. She was also the trainer and she trained a group of about 60 women to stick at 2,400 cuttings per hour. Now, you go into the average operation, they’re at about 700 to 900, day in and day out.”

But, emphasized Will, don’t focus on what other growers do, focus on what your team does. Calculate your number as it stands today, then set a new aspiration number.

“Shoot to improve,” he said. “Use verbs in the future tense: It’s not where you were, it’s where do want to go. Where you were is a money-losing proposition tomorrow.”

Now my head was hurting—math and English in one session?—but another question came to me:

“Do you get your whole staff involved in calculating the insertion rate and establishing your new aspirational goal?”

“Yes,” he replied to the first half of the question. “You need them to help track the time spent planting. Although it doesn’t have to be perfect or down to the minute. But YOU set the new KPI. That’s your job as boss.”

Will offered another reason insertion rate is so important: achieving turns. “Your ability to do a second turn is dependent on your ability to get it in the ground,” he said. Plus, those later turns happen when you’re even more time- and labor-crunched.

“So,” he concluded with a smile, “That’s the first part of planting to plan: being able to physically plant the plant you planned to plant. But if you plant to plan, the issue is that you actually convert the plan that you planted into profits. When you plant to plan, that means you plant what you need and you get 100% conversion into saleable plants.”

“Enough with the tongue-twisters. You mean there’s more? In that case, let me change the batteries in my recorder.” **GT**

In Part III: How 25 dead plants is more like 100. Plus, how growing plants is like going to school.