GROWERTALKS

Features

4/28/2017

High Qualitree Teamwork

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Anyone who's experienced high school or college group work at some point will agree it can be as frustrating and stressful as aphids. Sometimes it even leaves you feeling the same way about your group members as you do about those little suckers. But, occasionally, a unique combination of brains can work out, like it did when Gary Neels and Tony Van Oort joined forces on an enterprise project at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia.

Pictured: Qualitree's management team (and five partners), left to right: Henk Rozendaal, Gary Neels, Gerrit Rozendaal, Willem Neels and Tony Van Oort

By the time they finished the business plan of Qualitree Propagators—complete with marketing strategies, finances and growing details—they had their heads so deep into the idea, it was just a matter of answering the question, "Why don't we just do it?"

So they did. They purchased a hoop house out of the newspaper in 1994 and Qualitree moved from paper dreams to plastic-covered reality. From then on, nights and weekends were spent propagating cedars. That first year was a great start into the Fraser Valley's exploding cedar business; propagation success was nearly 100%!

"At that point, we were the world's experts on cedars; we had the world by the tail," laughed Tony, who currently manages all things sales. But the world bit a hole in their helium balloon the second year—1995's propagation attempt ended rather abruptly in a dumpster load of black, rotted cuttings. With some volunteer help frantically recruited from family and friends, they were able to re-stick and try again. That was only the first of many challenges navigated by the duo as the company grew.

Teamwork Inc.

Today, Qualitree operations spread over 100 acres in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. If you hike Mt. Cheam, the rocky guardian of the Valley, you'll see the propagation houses and neat blocks of color of the main location nestled right beside the Fraser River.

The bank had no way of predicting the success of their dream back in 1997, otherwise, it probably wouldn't have laughed in Gary and Tony's eager young faces when they wanted to buy 5 acres nearby on Ferry Road. Luckily, Gary's dad Willem was willing to make it a triple partnership, which later expanded to five partners when Henk Rozendaal, and later his son Gerrit, joined.

That small plot on Ferry Road evolved into the sprawling home-base you can see from the mountain. Qualitree's passion and specialty also evolved and expanded; now they supply the industry with quality plant products from 14 genera, grown by a large, busy team headed by Gary.

High-quality plugs and liners and unique plant products, such as their lavender standards, are the pride, joy, bread and butter of Qualitree. But propagating and growing the plants is only the beginning. Combining growing, sales, technology and customer service resulted in an idea Qualitree is very proud to call "unique to the industry."

Pictured: An aerial view of Qualitree Propagators, nestled in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia.



Group huddle

Far from your run-of-the-mill plug and liner supplier, the Qualitree experience doesn't end as the truck leaves the dock; this is where it begins.

"Horticulture doesn't do well with hands-off operators; those operations never seem to last," Tony explained. It's a family style, personal business, where direct involvement by passionate people is essential. The industry is rooted in deep relations and it's these relationships that Qualitree wished to solidify with their Grower Support Program.

Qualitree cares about their products beyond the sale and they wish the customer ultimate success with the plants they've put endless amounts of effort and experience into. If they're able to work with the grower receiving their plants to ensure optimal performance and quality of the finished products, Qualitree believes they've reached their goal.

Since Qualitree sells through brokers, they felt there was a gap between the company and the "boots on the ground" growers receiving their plugs and liners. The Grower Support Program is the bridge between fellow growers.

It's conducted through an online community portal, which connects the grower-customer with the growers at Qualitree, creating a trail from propagation to the final product.

"Growers are usually leery at first; it seems like a marketing scheme," Tony said. "But we really have the best interest of the customer at heart. They are our colleagues."

Having access to the Grower Support Program is an instant perk of purchasing plant products from Qualitree.

"We don't charge for this; our goal is to build up customer relationships for the long term and we work hard towards that 'a-ha!' moment," said Tony.

Group hug!

The route towards that lightbulb "a-ha! moment"—as it's fondly nicknamed by the Qualitree folks—begins as soon as an order is placed with Qualitree.

"We have a conversation with the broker and the customer to find out what their plans and end goals are and identify if it will work for them," explained Micah Butler, Qualitree's Grower Support Liaison. Usually this discussion revolves around plug or liner size and variety selection, and takes place in the form of a conference call with the customer, broker and Qualitree growers.

Once the order is confirmed, Micah creates a customer-crop specific case on the online Grower Support platform. "It works like a Facebook page; the grower-customer, broker and Qualitree are all linked and have access, keeping everything very transparent," he said.

From that moment until the end of the growth cycle, Qualitree works very closely with the grower-customer. Each time a photo or comment is posted, the grower team at Qualitree is notified and Gary carefully reviews everything, from general updates to questions on a specific problem.

This continual "live" feed of communication ensures success.

"The customers that participate from the beginning—accept conference call invitations, keep us updated and are part of the discussion—are those that are shipping beautiful finished product at the end of the growth cycle," stressed Micah.

Once the crop is finished by the grower-customer, the case on the Grower Support platform is closed, but

everything remains available as a future reference for all linked parties.

Growers have always consulted with other growers and helped each other out, except now technology plays a part. That “a-ha!” moment of realization, where fellow growers find an answer and a solution to a problem, is the ultimate purpose of the Grower Support Program.

“We go from seller to colleague once they realize we are genuinely involved, treating the issue as our own problem and really digging in,” enthused Gary. “It’s very rewarding!”

Teamwork Co.(ntinued)

All this—the company growth, the quality plants, the grower support and communication—would have stayed just a dream on paper without, as Tony described it, “a great team of A players that are all pedaling in the same direction.” Literally, the Qualitree team bikes—yes, with pedal bikes—in all different directions on the nursery’s concrete paths. But, everyone is working towards the same purpose and have the best interest of the customer and the company at heart.

Now that the company has a foundation of quality products, a name, reliability and a solid team of A players, they’re ready to “emerge from that ugly duckling stage”—with growing space spread out over eight facilities in the Fraser Valley—into “an ultra-modern swan.” They hope to achieve this by standardizing, mechanizing and automating the operation over the next five years as they expand container yard and greenhouse facilities into the recently purchased 50 acres of land adjacent to the main farm on Ferry Road.

That, of course, will take dreaming, on-paper planning and a whole lot of group work. **GT**

Sylvia Schaap is graduating this spring from the University of Guelph with a Science in Agriculture degree. She’ll then be moving to British Columbia to work at Qualitree, grow plants and hike mountains.