GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

4/1/2020

Getting Through the New & Unknown

Jennifer Zurko

As I write this, I'm currently hibernating during a three-week stay-at-home period because of COVID-19. My daughter's school is closed, my trip to Spring Trials was cancelled and Ball has given employees the option of working from home if they can.

As the superintendent of our school district said in a voicemail to parents, this is an unprecedented time. Our country has never had to deal with something like this since after 9/11, and even then there weren't statewide closures. Large gatherings may have been postponed, but not indefinitely. Concerts were soon rescheduled. Sports organizations didn't suspend whole seasons or cancel major tournaments.

This is something new and many of us are having a hard time dealing with it. It's a scary time.

I ran to the store yesterday to get some food since we'll all be home for a while. There weren't long lines, but if you wanted toilet paper, Kleenex, paper towels or chicken of any kind, you were out of luck. It was bizarre. No chicken. Anywhere. And the whole side of the aisle with the paper goods stuff was completely empty. It's like I walked in when they were still moving in.

There are a lot of angry people on social media, venting about the lack of regular necessities because of the "toilet paper hoarders" and questioning their mental health. "Why are you guys panicking? What the heck is WRONG with you?"

I saw someone on TV recently talk about the difference between panic and fear. David Ropeik, author of the book "How Risky Is It, Really?" and an expert on risk perception and risk communication, discussed the emotional relationship we have to risk.

"When there's risk around we don't do smart stuff," Mr. Ropeik said. "We are hard-wired to use our emotions more than reason all of the time, but especially when it comes to keeping ourselves safe."

And this is what's happening with COVID-19. What happens, said Mr. Ropeik, is that when we get a couple of quick facts, we run them through a lot of subconscious emotional filters—our health, age, gender, etc.—and we let that dictate our actions. And we all share a set of instincts that make some things seem scarier than others. As a result, we end up being more afraid than we need to be or less afraid than we should be. People aren't flying, so we think it's unsafe to fly, for instance, whether the CDC tells us it's safe or not.

One of the things about the coronavirus is that it's new, he said. And it's scary because "new" is not knowing because we don't know what we need to do to protect ourselves. And we can't control our own safety.

“Masks and toilet paper are all the same,” he said. “For a sense of control, when we don’t have personal control, we look for it in other ways.”

But don’t confuse this loss of control with panic; those are two different things, said Mr. Ropeik.

“Panic is when the zombies are attacking us. Panic is society running amok,” he said. “We’re not panicking when we buy toilet paper. It may look silly. We’re not necessarily doing smart things. But we’re looking for a sense of control and that’s instinctive precaution. Our fears are what we’re going on. It’s the not-knowing.”

This month’s issue is all about new stuff—new structures, new ideas, new ways of handling a crisis. It seems to be a very apropos time to be talking about these things right now.

I reached out to a bunch of growers who’ve recently built new additions. Some are wholesalers and some are grower-retailers, and they all built different structures for different needs, but they all had something in common: the last few years have been good, so they were able to make the investment. I took that as a very good sign that gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling about the health of our industry.

If you don’t have the luxury of expanding, you have to figure out new ways of making the most of the greenhouse space you do have. Senior Editor Bill Calkins spoke to a few growers to ask them how they handle the peaks and overflows during the height of the season without adding more covered space.

Logistics is another element of the business where growers have had to find creative new ways to deal with increasing shipping costs and a shortage of drivers. See what some of them are doing to alleviate their worst logistics pain points.

Bossman Beytes ends the *GrowerTalks* half of our lovely publication with an uplifting message and positive ways you can help your customers and communities get through these anxious days. How what you do every day, what you’ve built your businesses on, can be a bright spot for many. Being in horticulture, you’re used to dealing with things that are out of your control (see: the weather) and it’s made you tough. What we can all do with that strength is to help those who’re having a hard time navigate through these new fearful times. **GT**