

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Table Stakes

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As a trade magazine editor, I like to peruse other trade magazines to see what challenges those industries are facing. Several cross my desk each month; one I like is *Agricultural Aviation* ... what can I say—I'm intrigued by crop dusting! Not that I've gleaned any insights from AA that would be useful to you, except perhaps to avoid hitting overhead wires (between 2017 and 2021, nearly one in four fatal ag aviation accidents in the U.S. were caused by wires strikes).

Nothing quite as life-or-death comes from the pages of *Furniture Today*, but furniture is much more relative to what you guys and gals do. And it has a casual furniture (i.e., patio) component that is one of our retail product categories.

In a recent issue of FT, Editor-in-Chief Bill McLoughlin wrote about the ways his readers' businesses were affected by the pandemic and what they're doing moving forward.

"Lessons from the pandemic are burned brightly in the industry's psyche," wrote Bill. "And much of the activity that companies will be undertaking in 2023 is aimed at addressing problems and weaknesses uncovered over the past two years."

What were those lessons? They fell into three categories and I couldn't help but notice that they could easily apply to our industry.

The first is inventory. Explained Bill, "The inability to deliver product in a timely fashion during the height of consumer demand has pushed companies to prioritize having goods in-stock and in proximity to the markets that need them."

Whether we're talking pots or patio furniture, inventory was a universal issue the last two seasons and it seems we're just now catching up. The difference is, much of our inventory is either: 1) an input, like pots or soil or fertilizer, which we do not want to have too much of; or 2) perishable plant material, which we can't warehouse in case of high demand.

In the case of #1, perhaps you growers have gotten a bit too "just in time" with your stock of inputs and maybe having more of a buffer on hand would see you through future tight-supply issues. Of course, the pandemic was an extreme example of supply and demand. Chances are that won't occur again. But if it does, at least you know where to stack a season's worth of trays and pots.

As for #2, plants, the best solution I know of is having a tight and trusted relationship with your suppliers. Those who did this time around seemed to have the best “luck” getting plants.

The second lesson learned is staffing. Wrote Bill, “Perhaps the most widespread area of investment is also where there is the greatest shortfall: employees. Companies continue to identify finding and retaining employees as among their highest priorities.”

Golly, what can you do about staffing that you haven’t already tried? I’m certain of one thing: You learned whom on your staff you can depend on when the going gets tough and, presumably, you’re rewarding them appropriately for that. Bill didn’t offer any other insights into how furniture companies are finding and retaining employees; suffice it to say that they’re your competition.

The third lesson is new product development. Offers Bill, “This week’s High Point Market will see the largest number of new product introductions in several years ... it’s good news for consumers shopping for furniture in the coming year, as the breadth and depth of new offerings will be substantial.”

That’s because the last two years have been all about supplying existing lines. Why innovate when you can’t produce or ship your bread-and-butter? Not that manufacturers didn’t have new designs on the drawing board, they simply haven’t rolled them out. According to Bill, 2023 could be a big year for new offerings.

Horticulture might be in the same boat. When customers and consumers will buy anything you have, you don’t need to get creative with your offerings. But I know breeders didn’t stop breeding, so there’s a plethora of fresh genetics out there, plus a million shapes, sizes and colors of packaging. Perhaps now is a good time for a few pizza-and-beer brainstorming sessions with your staff to dream up products and services that will set you apart from those who’ve gotten lazy or complacent.

Furniture isn’t floriculture, but we’ve got this in common: In today’s market, having innovative products, in stock with good people to sell them, is table stakes. **GT**