

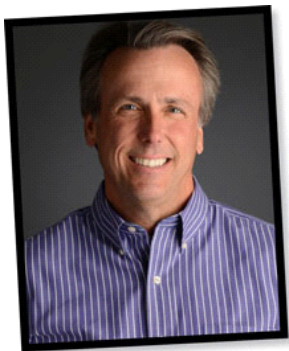
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

10/1/2023

Good Questions! (So-So Answers)

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

Exactly one week from when I'm writing this, I'll be participating in a panel discussion at the 2023 Griffin Expo in Edison, New Jersey, on the topic "Navigating the New Norm." My fellow panelists are pretty illustrious: brothers Abe and Art VanWingerden, co-CEOs of Metrolina Greenhouses, and Mark Schermer, global head of Syngenta Flowers. Heavy hitters all, which leaves me to wonder how I got invited ... perhaps the email went to the wrong Chris.

Regardless, I'm in the brochure, so they're stuck with me and my opinions.

The moderator, Bill Riffey, Griffin's Director of Sales, sent us some of the questions he'll be hitting us with, and while ruminating on them I decided I might as well share my ruminations with you, my loyal readers, since few of you are liable to be in the

room next Wednesday. There are three questions specifically addressed to me. Let's see what I think about them, shall we?

Chris Beytes, as the editor of a horticultural trade publication, you have a unique perspective on industry trends. What recent developments in the horticulture sector do you believe will have the most significant impact on businesses and professionals in the coming years?

"Recent developments in the horticulture sector" that will have the "most significant impact" on businesses and professionals, eh? My first thought is that I can interpret "developments" in two ways: 1) market factors such as mergers, new businesses, emerging or shrinking market opportunities, etc.; and 2) tools, machines, processes, breeding breakthroughs, etc.

I was going to say the pandemic—but that was a global development, not a horticulture sector development, so it doesn't count. Still, you can't deny it had a major impact on us. Same with the rising minimum wage and labor shortages, which is leading to more interest in labor-saving tools (like you read about earlier in this issue). I'd perhaps mention social media, but it's not a horticulture sector development, either. (Plus, I'm saving it for the next question.)

I guess my answer is that we're a maturing industry, and we can't expect major breakthroughs or developments to come along. Instead, we get small, incremental changes that are hard to recognize until after the fact. Think about this: Houseplants were hot in the '70s, then they went away. Why? And why did they come back? It wasn't anything we did. My question is, "What is the next thing we do that will fall out of fashion, or come back into fashion, and how do we recognize it?"

In your interactions with horticulture businesses, what are some of the most innovative and successful marketing strategies that have allowed companies to stand out and connect effectively with their target audience?

I can think of two: First is LiveTrends Design Group and their super-creative plant packaging. Founder Bisser Georgiev has assembled a team of young, creative designers who are putting simple plants in on-trend containers. He has built an entire brand personality that speaks of cool, modern and youthful.

The second would be social media use. Our current Young Retailer Award winner, Michael Fiore of Smith's Gardentown in Wichita Falls, Texas, is all over Facebook (50,000 followers) and TikTok (more than 100,000 followers). He now employs a full-time person to film, edit and post. Why Education. And it draws customers from unlikely places, like Wisconsin.

The horticulture industry has seen a surge in interest from younger generations. What strategies do you recommend for garden centers to attract and engage Millennial and Gen Z consumers? How does this differ from engaging older generations of plant enthusiasts?

Hortistician Marvin Miller and I were just talking about this. Should we do things differently for younger customers? Or can we offer one product or service that ALL customers appreciate? There's staffing—everyone says to hire younger employees and more employees of varying ethnic persuasions, backgrounds, etc. because people like to shop where they see other people like themselves. But does that outweigh great customer service or quality? And it's hard to ask a business to provide products and services for a multitude of generations. Geriatric plants? Hip-Hop plants? Kiddy plants? How about just really great plants?

And really great personal service—that's something I think every generation appreciates. Last month, I wrote about Chick-fil-A, now the No. 3 fast food chain in America because of their "Core 4" hospitality: Make eye contact, smile, speak enthusiastically, stay connected. Chick-fil-A doesn't offer different products for different customers; just one great product and service. If it works for them, why not for you? **GT**