GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Widgets? Yes. Commodities? Nope.

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Horticulture resists hypotheticals. We're a practical bunch. When we hear things like, "Big data is releasing equitable synergies across diverse self-organizing silos of competencies," we roll our eyes. Growers have an affinity for potting, an antipathy for postulates. We find sufficient mysteries in our greenhouses, thank you very much. Why imagine more? We distrust anyone who suggests skipping a step or two.

Why are our businesses so personal? Growers belong to an uncommon and unavoidable fraternity. Our competitors are friends and our employees are family. We don't trade with strangers. Our customers have names and our products do, too. The plants we grow aren't interchangeable. The details always matter.

Whether you work in a tiny TC lab or in fields of B&B trees, hypotheticals don't get the job done. We are farmers, in the end, and agriculture has never enjoyed academic abstraction.

Meanwhile, in business school, every professor talks about "widgets", hypothetical manufactured products. To academia, every company is in the widget business. A begonia is a bagel is a blender. The details don't matter because the details are distracting. It's an age-old dilemma: some can't see the forest for the trees, while others can't see the begonias through the greenhouse plastic.

I've only met one grower who happily called their crops "widgets". There's something about the word "widget" that gets under our skin. Is it an insult? Is it degrading?

I can think of a worse word that I hear far too many growers use: commodity.

This is a paradox. We have made our plants too precious—"we ain't growing widgets"— while also trashing their true, innate value. When we throw the word "commodity" around, we only prove our foolishness. A commodity is a product that every buyer treats as equivalent with no regard for who produced it. A commodity is business hell. Thankfully, there are no commodities in ornamental horticulture and I can prove it with one word.

That word is "re-wholesale".

Look it up. The word literally does not exist for any other business anywhere in the history of planet Earth … except for the nursery business. Humans have been buying and selling an awful lot of different things for a really long time, and only we felt the need to use the word "re-wholesale". Pipe distributors, lumber supply companies and every other business that buys goods from a manufacturer and sells 'em to other businesses call themselves wholesalers, not "re-wholesalers". We invented the word.

Why did we need to do that? I know the answer because I knew the people who coined the term. They were growers who began purchasing some plants from other growers to “re-sell” to their customers. They thought it was dishonest to pass these plants off as their own because they didn’t actually grow them.

Turns out the market still cares who grew the plant. Why? Because some growers are better than others. In our business, the details matter.

The word “commodity” should make you irate, but we should embrace the word “widget”. It’s a word that’s designed to force you to examine the system, ignoring the specifics of the species in question. Of course, those details matter. You’ll kill everything if you only think about “widgets” and never about weigela.

We must become comfortable setting individual details aside. Don’t worry—we won’t suddenly start babbling about “manifesting asynchronous paradigms” just because we admit we’re in the widget business, just like everyone else. **GT**

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