GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Who’s Gonna Fill Their Shoes?

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The famous country song “Who’s Gonna Fill Their Shoes” released in 1985 by George Jones speaks about a gap between two different generations in country western music. It’s true nobody could replace those older iconic individual artists and the unique styles mentioned in the song, but new ones would come along to fill that void.

The opinion on whether today’s artists are better or worse than their predecessors is an opinion that just doesn’t matter. Country music today IS different than in the past and it’s become a rather lucrative genre of music due to the diversity of artists. Looking back 25 years ago, I know I would have laughed at most of today’s younger artists, never believing they would be standing on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry. The same way I would have laughed 25 years ago at the idea of Amazon or Home Depot selling houseplants online with UPS or FedEx delivery. But who’s laughing now?! The reality is these venues are capturing a measurable portion of national retail sales.

Staying relevant is crucial for every business, from the small things like current color trends and website design to business sales models and next year’s forecast. All of those are affected by shifting public opinion of what types of plants are “becoming” popular and how that sales service is going to be fulfilled.

How does a business adequately keep up with the times to stay relevant with consumers? It all starts with intentionally hiring outside of its circle. But to do that we need potential candidates applying for jobs outside the field of horticulture.

I met a bright and wonderful new friend named April Graham from Essential Salt Marketing at an interiorscapers conference a couple of months ago. She specializes in marketing for interiorscape firms. We were exchanging stories on the way to the airport, where I learned she was a participant in the Collegiate Plant Initiative at the University of Florida and also took Dr. Dave Clark’s course called “Plants, People and You.”

The Collegiate Plant Initiative was a multi-university project aimed at identifying “plant blindness” in college students and, ultimately, introducing a non-horticulture major to the idea of being in our industry at a variety of levels. April graduated from UF with a degree in Business Administration with a focus in Finance from UF’s Warrington College of Business. As mentioned, during one of her last semesters she needed to take an elective course and chose Dr. Clark’s. During that course, she was deeply influenced and knew in her heart that horticulture and plants would forever be an important part of her life. Even as her degree was non-agricultural in nature, she chose the path of plants.

How many more times could this same story repeat itself and our horticulture industry massively reap the benefits of pulling high-level talent from non-traditional agricultural backgrounds all by simply offering an experience of horticulture that could change career direction? This genius program was designed to intentionally look outside the

circle of traditional horticulture majors and pull that talent into our industry. By doing this, our industry guarantees its ability to stay relevant in the eyes of the consumer. First, by pulling those outside opinions into our lane of business development. And second, by conversing with those outside our circle to learn what they want in their plant-purchasing experience. Remember: Growers don't grow what we want to grow, we grow what sells!

Another great way for a business to stay up with the times is by creating an internship program. Having interns is a great way to get manager-level leadership at an introductory cost with no strings attached. As a former intern, I know I was "voluntold" to do many things outside the scope of my internship. But the whole point is to have an experience outside the scope of traditional education or training. The exchange of knowledge works both ways.

Often, businesses who have internship programs simply use the program as a vetting process for potential future hires, but the program could be so much more for the employer. True, the traditional horticulture intern is probably not outside the circle of the horticulture field. However, they're outside the circle of the managing generation of the company AND high-level consumers of plants. What's important to the younger generation in a plant-buying experience is different than in an older generation. We need to be continually identifying what that consumer purchasing experience looks like for the next generation.

Another fantastic organization who's doing the heaving lifting in getting potential hires from outside the circle is Seed Your Future. One of the main goals of this organization is "to increase the skilled workforce in horticulture and develop a strong pipeline of future talent." This means pulling high-level, non-horticulture students from majors like engineering, medical and healthcare, and business finance and showing them a future in our industry.

The first rebuttal offered from horticulture business often is, "We can't afford these high-level graduates." However, when SpaceX is hiring future talent, the biggest draw is not the pay. (Yes, the pay does need to be competitive.) But it's the culture of the company that attracts. The horticulture industry has a fantastic culture full of health and wellbeing. This is a leveraging point in hiring we aren't taking full advantage of.

Staying relevant as a business in a changing industry means evolving the business to be something different than what it was. The core values and mission will stay the same, but eventually, as the customer base changes to a new generation, the business must change as well to serve them.

Charles Darwin said, "It's not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change." The easiest way to stay relevant as a business is by looking at future talent as not only labor, but also as a bridge between each generation of consumers. The answer to the question "Who's gonna fill their shoes?" is future talent and we as an industry need to actively work to help facilitate getting and hiring the best talent possible. **GT**

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