

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Winning or Learning

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I'm a fan of the TV show "Yellowstone" and I like this bit of advice cowboy Rip Wheeler once gave an aimless young man: "There are two roads in life. One is you're winning or learning. The other is you're losing. All the way to the grave."

Ignoring the morbid ending, I like the idea of winning or learning, which implies that you can't always win, but you can always learn something from those times you don't. Thomas Edison took Rip's advice to heart, as he's known for saying, "I have not failed 10,000 times. I have successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work."

This all came to mind after I asked Metrolina Greenhouses CEO Abe Van Wingerden a question about the coming spring and how growers he knows are feeling going into it. I'd heard that some growers have been slower than usual to commit to ordering

seed and liners, and I was curious what he was hearing. Abe opened his reply a bit philosophically, with a story about two instances of competing retailers:

Case 1: Macy's vs. Lululemon. Both are in the luxury retail space. Both serve the same customers. Macy's says their fourth quarter was bad, while in the same quarter Lululemon broke sales records.

Case 2: Target vs. Walmart. Both sell everyday consumables, serving the same basic customer base. Walmart had a great Q4, beating Wall Street's expectations, while Target had a tough Q4, falling short of expectations.

"Net," said Abe. "The ones presenting new/different and/or compelling value are winning, and the others fall behind."

Hmmm. I had to stop and think about that one ... but not for long. I've long seen that success and failure takes place simultaneously in this industry—while some businesses struggle, others skyrocket.

I see this in my weekly spring sales summary, when I ask you to rate the previous week/weekend on a scale of 1 to 10. It's amazing how often respondents from the same state often give wildly differing scores and explanations thereof—one had a record weekend and rated it a 10; another said it was dismal and gave it a 6. They experienced the same weather conditions ... so what made the difference? All too often I learn it was an event, a seminar, a sale or some other tool for attracting customers—a compelling value, as Abe said.

I also see it in data from The Garden Center Group that Managing Director Danny Summers is kind enough to share. In their overall sales data for 2024—a tough year for even excellent garden retailers—Danny said 76% of his members were down over the previous year, 4% were flat ... and 20% were up.

Why were some up? Was it strictly geography? Great weather for 20% and bad weather for the rest? I doubt it. Was it economics? Perhaps the top performers are in communities with growing business bases—tech or financial or something that was on the upswing in 2024? Also doubtful.

More likely some retailers are catering towards enthusiastic new customers with more interest in plants and gardening. A bit like the Macy's/Lululemon topic above—one business is established, known ... and perhaps a bit boring; the other fresh, youthful, with a modern message tapping into wellness and community.

Fresh ... that's a word I like apply to our industry. You ever go into a florist or garden center and the place just seems ... stale? The plants should have been tossed out weeks ago; the stock on the shelves is the same you saw in that same spot a year ago? I used to sell potted plants wholesale to florists across Central Florida. And, boy, some of those old shops, it was like you could smell the decades of dust on the ancient FTD containers. Ugh.

Conversely, I had customers with stores so fresh, I'd get goosebumps seeing the new designs and new seasonal displays. There was a place on Merritt Island called Tropical Treehouse that was painted all black inside—wow, did the foliage and flowers pop!

Abe once told me a key to selling to big box customers season after season was to bring them something new, something fresh. If you did that, you could even ask a fresh price for it. But don't expect to get a price increase if you offer the same plants and packaging they saw last season.

The same applies to retail customers of all sizes—and to the end consumer. If you don't excite them, they'll move on to someone who does.

If you don't win the sale or the weekend or even the season ... at least learn why you didn't. **GT**