

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Table Stakes

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You may be reading this in July on a plane headed to Columbus for Cultivate and Spring 2025 may be in the history books (who's got time to read the May issue in May?). But I'm writing this in early April, with spring just to break across North America, and uncertainty abounds a bit more than usual due to tariff policies, recession fears, a down stock market (which rebounded 2,900 points yesterday!), consumer confidence and all the rest. Which—as I write this—has some of you worried that customers may not spending as much on their gardening efforts this year.

To that, I say, let's take another page from the furniture industry!

Why furniture? Because I read *Furniture Today* magazine (which I've referenced on this page before) and I enjoy the fact that the furniture industry seems much riskier and more of a roller coaster than even our little industry. I mean, when was the last time you went to a furniture store? And when you did finally go to buy something, when was the next time you visited a furniture store? Maybe years later. And, of course, much furniture comes from Asia and is higher-ticket than plants, meaning furniture sellers are even more worried about the economy than you are.

In one of his columns, Editor-in-Chief Bill McLoughlin took a look back at lessons learned during a truly big crisis for all industries, the pandemic, and he suggested the following to his readers: Don't panic. Don't overreact. But don't under-react, either.

"That does not mean standing pat and doing nothing," he explained. "It does mean focusing on the basic blocking and tackling that drives business day in and day out, in good times and bad."

Fundamentals—you can't go wrong sticking with them. Shifting from football to golf, you've perhaps heard the story of how Jack Nicklaus' long-time coach would use the start of each new season to review Jack's fundamentals—grip, stance, ball position—to make sure the pro hadn't picked up any bad habits—the blocking and tackling of golf, you might say. If it's good enough for a pro like Jack, it's good enough for all of us!

What bad habits might have you picked up in the last season or two? Have you strayed away from your company mission? Do you still know who your core customers are? Warned Bill, "Among the lessons of the pandemic was that companies that understood their customers and remained true to their business model and mission were

quicker to recover and less prone to major downturns.”

“Core” is a good thing to define. It’s what got you where you are today. You can test “adjacencies” to the core—products or markets that are just outside your core—but be cautious about straying too far away while chasing new revenue streams or you can alienate your core customers. A furniture store that branches into electronics or appliances, for instance. Or a garden center with a restaurant. It can be done, but it’s not easy!

Furniture Bill offered up another blocking-and-tackling lesson from the pandemic: “Good value, regardless of price, is never out of style.”

Amen! As I always say, you don’t make money growing plants, you make money selling plants ... and you won’t sell them unless your customers perceive a value in them. That value can be price, it can be quality, container sizes you offer, depth of your availability list, consistency of your crops week in and week out ...

But while YOU may see the value in your offerings, do your customers? And is that value relevant to them? Value can change with market conditions and consumer needs. Perhaps what they need this season is different than last season. How can you know? Talk to your customers. And listen to them! Wrote Bill, “The importance of creating and communicating value is critical, particularly in a disrupted environment.”

Perhaps that was the biggest lesson for floriculture from the pandemic: the importance of communication. And not just about value, but about supply, about price, about needs and wants ... everything, really. It seems to me that the best businesses I know are also the best communicators. I firmly believe the two are related. Like the time my buddy Billy and I were both failing high school algebra. In the last few weeks before the final, Billy went to the instructor for help and that communication got him a passing grade. Me? I earned my only F.

While it may be too late to adjust for Spring ’25, there’s still, Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring ’26 in which to go back for a refresher on the blocking and tackling, the grip, stance and alignment, of this wild and wacky world we call the greenhouse business. **GT**