

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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More Than One Way ...

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I'm fond of cats, so I won't finish that old saw, but I've long known that there's more than one way of doing things in the greenhouse business. In fact, I believe that's one of our industry's most appealing features: being your own boss and doing things your way. You growers are fiercely independent (retailers, too) and each one of you has your own way of running a business, growing a crop, solving a problem. You're open to new ideas (I trust you enjoyed my article on ROI this month), but you're also leery of fads and quick fixes.

I got my first lesson in the many ways of looking at things from the great Gerry Raker, former owner of C. Raker & Sons. Gerry, a long-time *GrowerTalks* columnist, spoke several times at our GrowerExpo conferences in the '90s. The topic I most remember revolved around the high cost of a messed-up order—in Raker's case, a wrong plug order.

Most plug growers would see the obvious costs of shipping the wrong variety and having to write a credit for it—tray of plugs plus shipping. But Gerry identified dozens more costs associated with the simple mistake: the time spent in picking and packing both the wrong order and its replacement, the paperwork required by several companies (the plug grower and the selling broker) to deal with the problem, the boxes, the shipping costs, the damaged goodwill with the customer ... I can't begin to recall all the ways Raker would have lost money on one goof. But Gerry, who operated in four dimensions, could outline them all. It's what has made Raker (now Raker-Roberta's) a leading plug producer for generations.

The story on ROI I wrote for this issue reveals much the same individualism. While David Vos built his new garden center based on gut instinct, Bill Swanekamp carefully calculated the number of years of payback on his new boilers while also thinking about the long-term savings an upgraded boiler could deliver. I appreciate that every one of my eight contributors saw multiple ways to calculate ROI and they most often included intangible benefits—such as Bill's justification for an office upgrade: "There is no return on investment, but you and the rest of the office staff feel really good about coming to work."

Art Van Wingerden and Dave Van Belle said much the same thing about investing to make a job easier for employees (and themselves).

Possibly my favorite "calculation" came from J.D. Boone, who asks himself, "What's the worst that could happen if I go for it? Nine times out of ten, once I think it through, the worst-case scenario isn't nearly as bad as I made it out to

be.”

Doug Cole said something similar: “The nice thing about being the ‘decision maker’ (and the owner) is that you are allowed to make these decisions. (Then you can only kick yourself if it was a bad decision.)” Entrepreneurs are willing to take the risks—and accept the blame.

Plant shipping is another place where growers express their individuality (at least here in the U.S.). Go to Europe and you’ll see one universal style and size of shipping rack—the Container Centralen (CC) Trolley, 135-cm long, 56.5-cm wide, 190-cm high. Millions upon millions of them circulate between the greenhouses, auction halls and garden centers of Europe. But here, every grower has his or her favorite style and size and shelf configuration and even color of shipping rack to suit their crops, their greenhouse aisles, their production barns. The wide variety makes for a pretty interesting sight behind our big-box stores during spring, that’s for sure!

I’m happy that our industry—both growing and retailing—hasn’t been consolidated into a boring, homogenized, impersonal lump. Even those operations that have succumbed to corporate or private equity ownership still retain some actual PEOPLE who keep the business running. The individualism you all possess makes my job as a journalist infinitely enjoyable. As does your willingness to share your ideas and opinions—again, I’ll refer back to my ROI story, to which eight of you contributed so willingly (plus a few others who, alas, were left on the cutting-room floor).

So keep being yourself and doing it your way! Your unique approaches not only keep our industry vibrant, but also inspire the next generation to carve their own paths. Here’s to the many ways of cultivating success—may your greenhouses thrive, your risks pay off and your racks, in all their glorious variety, roll on! **GT**