GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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A Peek Behind My MASC

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What are you going to do with all that marketing money? In case you haven't heard, just about every ornamental nursery and greenhouse in the USA just had a pile of cash dropped in their laps, all thanks to the USDA's Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crop (MASC) program.

Leave it to a farmer to get anxious over good news, but I find this incredibly disorienting. "Who am I?" I'm a taxpayer, not a moocher! Suffer no illusions: this is welfare. I deeply respect anyone who chose not to apply for this grant money. My pragmatism trumped my principles. I figured the money was going to go somewhere, so I had a responsibility to my company, employees and customers to get whatever I could.

On the one hand, I'm delighted. "Woo-hoo! Free money!" On the other hand, this feels like a trap because, as we all know, "There ain't no free lunch." If you don't believe that in your bones, I'm afraid you're not much of a businessperson. This money is a moral hazard. I didn't earn it. I don't deserve it. It ain't right.

But it's mine now.

So how am I going to spend it? Here are some guidelines and thoughts on the right thing to do:

■ **Honor the intent.** Spend it on what the people who gave it to you said they wanted. I'm not an attorney or an accountant, but it sure seems to me that this money has no strings. The wording is vague. "Marketing assistance" makes me think of advertising, but the language of the USDA seems to take a broader definition, more like "all the activities required to bring a product to market."

■ **Spend it, but not too quickly.** The money was meant to be used, not sit in your account. This isn't supposed to be a "savings account." But don't blow it all like a drunken sailor, either. Aim to have the money gone by the end of the year, not the end of the month.

■ **Don't spend it on normal business activities.** This is hard because for most of us the money all goes into one big mixing bowl. Everything is connected. But I think it's really important to realize that a sudden influx of cash can do your business long-term damage if you aren't careful. How? It warps your brain, and if it leads you to write checks you can't cover in the future, the free money hurts more than it helps. If the grant goes to what you're already doing, you aren't really spending it on what you think you are. Where did the money go that you were going to spend anyway? That's what you actually spent it on.

■ **Don’t use this money to give raises.** Trust me, that is not smart. Compensation must be linked to value created. If you can’t figure out how to reward your employees for the value they create, your business is broken. A Band-Aid won’t heal the problem; it will only make it worse. The only person who should get a windfall is the owner because they aren’t really paid for the value they create, but for the risk they take. (That’s capitalism.)

■ **Pay off your long-term debt.** This is the one and only “investment” with a guaranteed return.

■ **Listen to your people.** In my company, we do most of our capital expenditures in certain months (in late winter when we know exactly how much money we truly have to work with). When my employees learned about the “free money,” they came out of the woodwork with ideas of where it should go. Suddenly, most of our equipment (all of which was fine in February) needs to be replaced or upgraded. My initial reaction might be wrong. In February, they were making decisions based on “normal business.” This money isn’t normal (see above), so it shouldn’t be treated that way. Maybe our people have the right idea?

■ **Invest in the industry.** I won’t dare tell you the best way to give back, but I will boldly say you must do it. (But … if we were ever going to invest some seed money in an industry marketing campaign, this would be the time for “Got plants?, right?) Listen, not everybody received this money. Some people didn’t apply because they were more principled than pragmatic; others had their applications rejected. A few weeks back, I took my son and his buddy, Kai, to a local sporting event. Their whole rec soccer team was there as ball boys. I wanted to purchase some candy for my son and his friend from a Boy Scout troop that had a stall. Ideally, I would have purchased only a few pieces of candy, but the bags were huge! I told the boys, “Make sure you share with your teammates.” I found out after the game that Kai refused to share. This didn’t make me angry; it made me sad, for him. Kai didn’t earn the giant bag of candy. It was a gift. His heart was such that as soon as the gift was in his hands, it was his alone. He looked at others and said, “You have no right to what is mine!” But five minutes before, he had nothing, and no way to acquire it, either. If fortune falling out of the sky doesn’t produce in you some modicum of generosity, something is wrong.

■ **Be different.** If we all rush out to buy a new spray tractor, guess what the law of supply and demand will do? Be original. Be creative. The money is unusual and rare, so do something unique and unexpected in return. **GT**

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