

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Living With the Noise

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As I write this on a cold, snowy Sunday afternoon from my home office, I'm coming off three weeks on the road. Trade shows. Airports. Hotel coffee. Conversations with growers, retailers, sales reps, vendors and longtime industry friends from all corners of the country. Different regions, different operations, same underlying theme: uncertainty.

Which, honestly, isn't exactly new for our industry. Uncertainty is practically a business model in horticulture. Weather, labor, freight, markets—we're always navigating something. But, right now, the noise feels louder. The economy feels touchy. Labor remains unpredictable. Headlines bounce between optimism and impending doom. And sitting right in the middle of it all is the question everyone

keeps asking: Will people buy plants this spring?

Here's my take: That's not the real question.

History has shown us—again and again—that people love plants. They buy plants. They may change how, when and why they buy them, but the desire doesn't disappear. The real question is what they'll buy, in what form and in what quantity.

The concern is understandable. If I were in construction or real estate right now, I'd probably be staring at the ceiling at 3:00 a.m. Big-ticket purchases are the first thing consumers pause when confidence wobbles. Even personally many of us are making quieter decisions—spending less during the holidays, spacing out purchases, sticking to budgets. Economic uncertainty has a way of sneaking into both our business outlook and our personal lives.

But this is where we all need to take a breath. We let the news influence us far more than we should. Yes, people are worried. Yes, the economy feels fragile. But when you look past the headlines the story is far more nuanced. Holiday spending didn't fall off a cliff—it grew. Even with inflation and caution, holiday sales increased by 4.1%, according to the National Retail Federation. Modest? Sure. But growth is still growth. People are spending money. What's changing is how they're choosing to spend it.

Today's consumer is prioritizing experiences and services. And if there's one thing our industry excels at, it's delivering experiences—especially wholesome, family-friendly ones. Gardening, planting, refreshing outdoor

spaces—these are feel-good activities that don't require plane tickets or big commitments.

At the same time, consumers are “trading down” to manage budgets. They're hunting for deals, leaning into coupons, bundles and off-price options. That's not bad news—it's an opportunity. We can meet that customer with smart promotions, value-driven offerings and creative packaging.

The subscription economy is also still going strong. Monthly container refreshes. Seasonal porch updates. Ongoing garden care programs. These ideas aren't futuristic—they're practical ways to offer predictable value to customers who want their spaces to look good without constantly thinking about it.

Even the way consumers shop is changing—AI is officially part of the conversation. Consumers are using it to compare prices, find deals and get recommendations faster than ever. The question for our industry isn't whether AI matters, it's how we show up where consumers are already looking.

Meanwhile, in a story as old as time, major home improvement projects are getting delayed. New floors, windows, kitchens and roofs are being pushed down the road. And, historically, that's often good news for horticulture. When people aren't ready for a renovation, they still want their homes to feel better. More welcoming. More “them.” That usually means plants—new containers, refreshed patios, hanging baskets that make outdoor spaces feel intentional instead of tired.

Plants live in that sweet spot between necessity and indulgence. They're not essential in the strictest sense, but their emotional value is undeniable—beauty, comfort, stress relief, normalcy. And in uncertain times those things matter more, not less.

That doesn't mean spring will be easy. Labor remains a real concern. Staffing production and retail operations continue to stretch teams thin, especially with tight margins. Add economic anxiety and unpredictable weather, and it's no wonder nerves are frayed.

But anxiety doesn't automatically mean inaction.

When consumers feel uncertain, they don't stop spending—they become more selective. They look for value, longevity and flexibility. They delay decisions rather than cancel them. They downshift instead of disengaging. A customer might skip a full landscape overhaul, but they'll still grab an extra container or hanging basket for an instant lift.

That shift requires us to be thoughtful in how we tell our story. It's not just about selling plants—it's about helping people feel good about buying them. Durability matters. Ease of care matters. Emotional payoff matters. For many consumers, a plant purchase isn't frivolous—it's a manageable way to invest in their surroundings when bigger investments feel risky.

Internally, we also need to give ourselves some grace. Businesses are navigating staffing challenges, weather-related supply disruptions and an ever-changing economic landscape. Families are juggling college visits, aging parents and life transitions. Not every economic signal is a stop sign—some are just reminders to slow down, recalibrate and pay attention.

At Raker-Roberta's Young Plants, we're weathering the storm that's spring by staying focused, disciplined and

responsive to what the season is telling us. We're managing to what the numbers are showing us. We're managing labor tight. We're closely monitoring facility, travel, marketing and purchasing budgets. We're staying hyper-flexible on production planning, knowing that spring uncertainty means forecasts can change week to week. We're protecting cash flow like it's a crop.

But, most importantly, we're supporting our growers and retailers in whatever they may need to stay successful through this busy season.

And always—always, always, always—staying nimble so we can adapt quickly to whatever situation is thrown at us.

Spring will likely be intense, compressed and a little unpredictable. That's nothing new. What is new is the emotional backdrop. Consumers want reassurance—about their choices, about their spending, about whether it's okay to buy something that simply makes them happy.

Our job is to meet them there. Because, despite all the noise, people still crave beauty. They still want their spaces to feel alive. And, sometimes, in an uncertain world, buying a plant is a quiet, hopeful act of optimism. **GT**

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