GROWERTALKS

Features

2/27/2026

Building Trust

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Spend enough time around growers and talk to enough sales reps and you begin to hear a familiar phrase. In my work as an advisor and coach for growers and sales teams, I often ask what sets a business apart. The answer is almost always some version of, “Our quality is better and our customer service is stronger.” The intention behind that answer is real. People care. They work hard. They take pride in their crop and in how they treat their customers.

But when every supplier says the same thing, those words stop differentiating. Quality and service become claims. Trust becomes the deciding factor. And trust cannot simply be declared—it has to be concluded by the customer over time.

If you want to become indispensable, not replaceable, the path runs straight through how customers experience working with you day after day. That experience is shaped less by what you say about your service and more by how consistently you communicate, how well you understand their business and how reliably you show up as a partner.

The problem: Good intentions without a defined standard

Most growers I meet aren’t careless about customers or searching for one-off orders; they want long relationships. They want to be the first call. They want loyalty on both sides. This pursuit can often send a company or its reps down a path of bending over backwards or wanting to be a one-stop-shop without really seeing what efforts are truly bringing them closer to that trust factor.

Where things break down isn’t effort; it’s in the definition of how you earn trust.

- What does “great service” mean in observable behavior?
- What does “strong communication” look like in a normal week, not only when there’s an issue?
- What does “partnership” look like beyond friendly conversations at trade shows?

Without clear answers, service becomes personality-based and inconsistent. One rep communicates often; another waits until the customer calls. One person gives detailed updates; another assumes no news is good news. Everyone believes they're doing a solid job, yet customers experience different levels of clarity and support depending on who they talk to and when.

From the customer's side, this creates unnecessary friction. Not always big, dramatic problems, but more often there's a hint of uncertainty and longing.

- They wonder if availability will hold. If it will really deliver like the picture you sent.
- They wonder if they'll hear about a delay or if the truck will just show up unannounced.
- They wonder whether you understand what's happening in their business right now and why they're asking for very specific instructions.
- They wish that if you would just (insert wish here) they would be able to put in more orders.

Even if your product is strong that uncertainty keeps you in the category of a "supplier" rather than "THE" supplier. At the same time, many growers define value by what happens inside their gates. Crop quality, production practices and operational effort are front and center. Customers define value by what happens on their side of the gate. Bridging that gap between internal focus and customer experience is where "indispensable" is either built or lost.

The solution: Learn the customer's business like it's your own

When I'm working directly with a sales team one of the first things I tell them is that the role of a salesperson is to work more for the customer than the grower you're representing. You have to put yourself in their shoes, really dive deep into what their needs are and where their needs aren't being met, not just on an inventory level.

Many sales conversations stay at the product level: quantities, varieties, timing and pricing. Those are important, but they aren't enough to build a partnership.

A partner-level conversation includes questions like:

- What are you trying to accomplish this season?
- Where are you seeing growth or pressure?
- What types of customers are you serving more of lately?
- What challenges are making your job harder right now?

These aren't abstract questions. They're designed to open up conversation so you can ask deeper, more hard-hitting questions later. These questions help you understand how your decisions affect their outcomes. A garden center owner managing labor shortages, a landscaper juggling tight installation windows or a buyer dealing with changing consumer trends all operate under different pressures. When you understand those pressures, your communication changes. You stop talking only about what you have—you start talking about what might help them succeed. Over time, customers notice who asks about their business and who only talks about their own.

Make communication proactive, not event-driven

What I see in many sales-only relationships is that communication spikes completely around the customer only when they need to check availability, place an order or, worst-case, something goes wrong and they want you to fix it, immediately. The supplier responds quickly and feels responsive. The customer gets what they asked for. On the surface, everything works. But this pattern keeps you in a reactive role. You become efficient at handling transactions, not essential to how the customer thinks and plans.

Partnership-level communication looks different. It's not random contact and it's not surface conversation. It has a

reason behind it that ties back to the customer's business. Instead of reaching out to ask if they need anything, reach out with something that helps them think, plan or prepare.

That might look like:

- Letting them know early about a crop that's moving faster than expected so they can adjust their plans before it becomes a shortage.
- Sharing what you're seeing across multiple customers, such as stronger demand in a certain category or slower movement in another, so they can compare it to their own experience.
- Starting a conversation about how their season is shaping up and what pressures they're feeling, then connecting that to how your production or scheduling could support them.

These aren't casual touches or "check-ins;" they're business conversations. They tell the customer that you're paying attention to how your world effects theirs, not only waiting for their next order.

Over time, this changes how they see you. You aren't just someone who answers the phone; you're someone who helps them prepare for and make better decisions.

Turn problems into proof of reliability

Issues happen in every supply chain. Weather, labor, transportation and production challenges are part of this industry. Customers know that. What shapes trust isn't the absence of problems—it's how they're handled.

Trust shows up in three ways when something goes sideways:

- You communicate early, even when you don't have every answer yet.
- You focus on solutions, not explanations.
- You stay engaged until the situation is resolved.

Customers remember how they felt during a problem. If they felt informed, supported and not left alone to figure it out, trust often increases. If they felt surprised, confused or ignored, trust drops fast. Handled well, a challenge becomes a moment that proves you're committed to making sure their business succeeds and that you're serious about the relationship.

Create consistency across the company

Trust grows from consistency. One great interaction doesn't make you indispensable—a steady pattern over time does. That means defining what good communication and partnership look like inside your own business as shared expectations.

Everyone who touches the sales process should be clear on what good communication looks like: How quickly messages are returned, what information is passed along when orders change, how to call when the product doesn't meet spec, what details are important enough to make sure others know. These aren't technical systems; they're agreed ways of working.

It also requires a mindset shift. As a company, we aren't building transactions, we're building relationships. That means making sure key information is visible to others, giving teammates context when needed and thinking beyond individual control. When customers see that your team operates with the same level of awareness and professionalism across roles, confidence rises. They stop worrying about who's available that day. They trust the organization.

That kind of consistency makes your business feel stable and dependable. And stability is a major part of being seen as indispensable. When customers experience the same level of reliability from multiple people in your company, confidence rises. You start to look like a stable partner, not a collection of individuals.

Talk about the future, not only the current order

Suppliers tend to focus on the next shipment. Partners talk about the next season, the next trend and the next challenge, how they're improving their business to help meet your needs (that you already established earlier because you have proactive communication).

When the relationship stays focused only on current availability, pricing and shipments, you remain tied to the transaction cycle. Each interaction solves an immediate need, but it does little to strengthen long-term alignment. Trust grows when customers feel that you're thinking ahead with them, not waiting for the next purchase order. Future-focused communication means stepping back from the week-to-week rush and asking bigger questions about where their business is headed and how you fit into that picture.

That can include discussions about:

- How their customer base is changing and what that might mean for product mix.
- Where they expect growth or pressure in the coming season.
- What operational challenges could affect how and when they buy.
- How your production plans might support those goals more effectively.

These conversations shift your role. You're no longer only responding to demand; you're helping shape how demand is met.

One of the best settings for these deeper conversations can be the trade show environment. In many relationships, this is the only time all year you get to sit across a table from each other rather than communicating through email, text or phone calls. That physical presence changes the quality of the discussion. Setting aside time during a show for a focused conversation sends a strong signal. It says this relationship is important enough to talk about more than the next order. In those meetings, the goal isn't to walk through a price list; it's to explore the road ahead together.

You might talk about how their past season actually went, not only how it was expected to go: What surprised them, where they felt stretched, where they see opportunity in the year ahead. Then you can connect that to your side of the business: What you're planning to grow more of, where you see trends across other customers, where you may face constraints. This kind of exchange builds mutual understanding. Both sides leave with a clearer picture of what to expect and how to support each other.

Bringing it together

Notice that none of these habits depend on having the largest operation or the most unique crop list. They depend on how you show up in the relationship.

Quality remains essential. Without it, trust has no foundation. But quality by itself doesn't make you indispensable. Many suppliers can grow a good plant—fewer consistently make customers feel understood, informed and supported at a business level.

When you do that, the conversation inside the customer's mind shifts. You're no longer evaluated only on price or

availability; you're evaluated on the role you play in helping them succeed. That role is harder to replace.

Indispensable is earned over time

Becoming indispensable isn't a title you give yourself; it's a status customers give you after repeated experiences that build confidence. Over time, trust moves from a general feeling to a working assumption. They assume you'll communicate. They assume you'll be reliable. They assume you're thinking about their business, not only your own.

In a market where plants can be sourced in many places, availabilities are at your fingertips, and everyone shouts that their quality and service is what sets them apart, if you want to stand out, start by defining what partnership looks like in your daily behavior. Then deliver it consistently. Customers will decide who to trust. **GT**

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