GROWERTALKS

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What, Me Worry?

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You want one single sound piece of advice that will help you deal with uncertain times like these?
"Focus on the things you can control."

I didn't coin that, of course, but I've sure seen it more than once in the Growers Talk Business column in this magazine.

But I was reminded of this wise maxim as I was skimming a recent issue of Furniture Today, which keeps me in the loop with an industry other than my own. I figure furniture has similarities to floriculture—it's a discretionary purchase, it varies in price from cheap to whatever you want to spend, and many of the suppliers and retailers are family-owned businesses.

In the issue of which I speak, they were bemoaning the state of the economy, tariffs, fuel prices, supply chain struggles and so on, and they asked numerous executives, "When is the recovery and where will it start?" It was Christian Rohrback, president of A-America Furniture in Seattle, who answered, "We are focusing on the things we can control."

He explained, "The industry has been through six years of chaos, which hopefully is becoming baked into the equation. We are focusing on the things we can control. We can control our product, lean on a diverse supply chain and make adjustments as needed in a way that is calm rather than reactionary."

Smart man, our Mr. Rohrback. Worrying about fuel prices or speculating about tariffs is about as useful as hoping for a sunny weekend. Also note that he mentioned "six years of chaos." He's going back to the pandemic, so the furniture industry hasn't had a moment's peace and quiet since then (lest you think you're alone.)

There's more good advice to be had from the furniture world. Here are a few more thoughts from executives: "We believe that great operationally excellent companies that remain focused on 'overdelivering' for their customers will thrive in any economy."—Rodd Wanek, CEO, Ashley Furniture

I am 100% with you on that one, Rodd. If I've written about anything repeatedly in the 30 years I've penned this column, it's customer service. Not good customer service, not fine customer service, but mind-blowing customer

service. It doesn't take much to blow some minds, either, because the bar out there is so low. Think about the last time someone "overdelivered" to you. Can you even come up with an example?

"The average consumer will remain cautious and uncertain about the future … if they are to make a change, consumers want to see new products, and retailers must keep their floors fresh to excite them."—Doug Townsend, president of Banner House

Another simple idea. Keep the experience fresh for customers so there's something new to discover each time they visit. Set up some endcaps you can change weekly with new (or new to your customers) products. Some fresh paint colors by season. Anything that will make your customers say, "I didn't notice that before!"

"The industry has to shift from products and price to outcome and experience."—Eugene Alletto, founder and CEO of Bedgear

A bit more challenging … and yet very possible with our products. For years, we've been asking of our plants, "What else does it do?" That is, besides looking pretty or smelling good. For Bedgear, the answer is, " … stop selling mattresses and start selling sleep. Consumers are not looking for another box with coils or foam; they are looking to feel better, recover better, live better."

How can what we sell help our customers live better? That's worth figuring out. Great food at a beautiful table under the cool shade of trees surrounded by flowers … sounds good to me!

All the execs interviewed by Furniture Today agreed that some consumers are "taking a pause" on higher-ticket purchases. However, they seem to be prioritizing quality over price point. You might recall a few weeks ago in my Acres Online newsletter, when reporting on sales for the weekend of April 18-19, Abe VanWingerden reported, "People are staying with their preferred varieties and brands, but leaning more toward the smaller sizes of that item." Such as opting for a 10-in. Proven Winners hanging basket instead of a 14 in. They're seeking value without compromising quality.

One more piece of advice: The manufacturers in the group emphasized being "disciplined in inventory management, pricing strategy and brand positioning, while continuing to invest in marketing and product development."

Call those the fundamental "blocking and tackling" of business, regardless of what you're selling.

So relax! I've just eliminated about half of everything you were worried about this season. **GT**