GROWERTALKS

Features

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From Forecasting to Commitment

Rayne Gibson



Walk into almost any nursery sales meeting in early summer and you'll hear some version of the same conversation. Someone says, "We had customers asking for X all spring and we ran out in week three." Someone else says, "We grew a ton of Y and couldn't move it." The production manager mentions crops that were ready two weeks too late. The sales rep quietly admits they told a customer something would be available without actually confirming it with anyone.

I promise it's not just you that this happens to.

The inventory exists (or it could exist). The demand is real. The relationship is in place. What's missing is the structure to connect those things earlier in the process before the season shotgun-starts and puts everyone in scramble, reactive, stressed, hair-pulling mode. Formalizing that process even slightly changes everything. You don't need contracts, sophisticated software or a dedicated booking manager to get started. You need structure, communication and the discipline to follow through on both.

What offering booking actually is (and isn't)

There's a tendency to over-complicate this concept and that's usually what stops operations from starting. When people hear "booking program," they get gun shy thinking about their neighbor who got stuck with a crop when the customer didn't take them or they imagine legal paperwork, rigid allocation systems and customers who want guaranteed pricing locked in 18 months out. Some programs do operate that way. Most starting-point programs don't and they don't have to.

At its core this is nothing more than structured communication and trust between you the supplier and them as a customer. Offering a booking is early demand communication with structure attached to it. You're asking customers to tell you what they think they'll need, earlier than they normally would, so you can make better production decisions earlier than you normally would. That's it—a way to make better judgments from that crystal ball we all talk about.

It helps to think about booking in three general levels rather than one fixed model:

Level 1 (where most are) is the basic everyday informal intent gathering. You're asking customers to share rough expectations. "We're thinking 500 units of (ENTER VARIETY) shrubs in the 3-gallon this spring." Nothing is legally binding. Nothing is confirmed. But now you have data to shape your production planning instead of just making

educated guesses.

Level 2 adds structure. Customers submit a more formalized list by a specific deadline. Your production team reviews it, compares it against crop projections and issues a soft confirmation. You're reserving an inventory window. The customer gets early visibility. You get more reliable planning.
Example: They want 500, we have 7,000, with an early ready date, so it's not stealing away from other customers. Last year they bought 400, so it's not a huge stretch. Yeah, let's do this. I'll put you on a list to call as soon as they're ready!

Level 3 is where bookings start to look more like contract growing without all the legal mess. I call them "hard bookings." The key distinction is that you send them an acknowledgment tied to a master purchase order that holds inventory from being sold. This is a legitimate destination for some operations and some customer relationships, but it's not where most nurseries should start.

The goal in year one is not to build a Level 3 program. The goal is to move from scattered conversations and spreadsheet guesses into something with a deadline, a confirmation step and a follow-up cadence. Even that incremental shift produces real operational value.

Get honest about operational readiness first
Here's the honest truth about your readiness score: If your inventory records are inconsistent (or non-existent), customers will notice very quickly when you have to repeatedly cancel the orders. If your production team and sales team are operating from different information, you'll make commitments you can't keep and never could.

Before launching anything externally, run a quick internal audit. Can your team accurately tell you today what's in production and when it's expected to be ready? Not approximately, but with reasonable confidence? Can they easily say what's ready right now, with confident numbers and know what's already sold? Do your sales team and production team have a regular forum for sharing information? If those questions make your sales people uncomfortable, that's important information.

Don't worry, it's not as hard (or risky) as you think it will be.

Start small and build a process before you build scale
None of this needs to be perfect before you start. Assuming your operation has reasonable inventory visibility and basic communication alignment, the most important advice I can give is this: Start smaller than you think you need to.

Pick your Top 10—heck, even just your Top 3—customers and products. Not your biggest accounts or best sellers necessarily, though that's often where the overlap is. Pick the customers who have strong relationships with your sales team, who communicate clearly and who you believe will engage with the process in good faith and who also pays well—that always helps, too. Those relationships are the right testing ground.

From there, the mechanics are simple: Send your selected customers a straightforward booking request form. Ask them to identify quantities, sizes and approximate timing windows for the crops on your list. Set a submission deadline.

Once submissions come in, your production manager and sales team review them TOGETHER. This meeting matters and one voice isn't louder than the other. (I'm looking at you sales manager.) It's where you reconcile what

customers want against what you're actually growing and what will realistically be available. Some requests will be easy to confirm. Others won't align with your production capacity or timing. That's fine. That's the entire point of doing this in early fall instead of spring.

From there, build a monthly communication cadence through the tail of winter season, then build to a weekly come early spring. What shipped, what's still coming, any timing adjustments and any crop concerns that need early conversation. That follow-up structure is where most programs succeed or fail.

The business impact beyond inventory

Operations that commit to booking programs consistently report benefits that surprises those who haven't started yet and sometimes even themselves.

Labor planning gets easier. When you have better visibility into what's actually going to ship and when, you can schedule harvest crews, loading teams and delivery logistics with much more confidence. That reduces overtime scramble and the quality problems that come from rushing.

Cash flow becomes more predictable. You're not eliminating volatility, but you're reducing the peaks and valleys that come from boom-and-bust spring ordering patterns. Some operations layer in deposit structures as their programs mature, which adds another layer of cash flow stability.

Customer retention improves. Buyers who book with you and have a positive experience—meaning they got what they expected when they expected it with clear communication throughout—are significantly less likely to start shopping around. You've made their planning easier. That has real value to them.

In my experience, booking programs often reveal more about a company's internal and external communication habits than they do about production capabilities. Operations that struggle to follow through on the communication commitments usually already knew, somewhere in the back of their minds, that communication was a weak point. The booking program just made it visible and urgent.

The objections you'll hear (and how to think through them)

"What if the crop fails?"

This is the most common concern and it's the most manageable one. Crop failures happen—everyone know this. What you're committing to when you run a booking program isn't a guarantee of perfect fulfillment; you're committing to early, transparent communication. Build shrink margins into your production planning, communicate proactively when issues arise and have substitution conversations before the customer is already planning their spring floor.

"Our customers won't commit."

Some won't. But many of your best customers are actually hungry for more predictability, not less. They're managing their own planning cycles. If you can give them more certainty about what they're getting, most of them will engage. You may be surprised by how many customers are already informally trying to communicate their needs early because they want the same visibility you do.

"Our inventory changes too fast."

That's actually the most compelling argument for doing this sooner. If your inventory is volatile and your customers are experiencing that volatility as surprises, earlier visibility is exactly what reduces that pain. You're not trying to lock everything in stone; you're trying to have the hard conversations earlier in the cycle when everyone has more options.

“What if they cancel something or don’t take it?”
As long as you’re diligent about having frank conversations with the customer often, this will drastically mitigate that risk. If they do cancel something … that’s when you get to see your A-plus sales team kick into action. It should be viewed as an opportunity for other customers, not a loss.

One more thing worth remembering
Booking programs aren’t really about locking customers into plants; they’re about building better visibility, better planning and better relationships across the supply chain. The nurseries that figure that out early tend to run calmer operations, communicate more proactively and keep customers longer.

The industry is moving toward more intentional planning. Buyers are getting more sophisticated. The operations that invest in systems, communication and early collaboration with their customers will be better positioned than those still running entirely on instinct and availability lists.

You don’t need a perfect system to get started. You need a manageable starting point, a commitment to communication and the willingness to learn from the first season. Pick one crop category. Pick one customer group. Pick one season. Start there. The progress you make in year one will tell you exactly what to build in year two. **GT**

Rayne Gibson is the owner of Taproots Horticulture Consulting, where he works with nurseries on operational systems, sales structure, software implementation and communication. If your operation is ready to build or improve a booking program, he can be reached at taprootshc.com.