

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Modifying Mindsets

Gary Mangum



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Events over the past year have opened my eyes and caused me to look more broadly at our business—our philosophies and efforts around sustainability in particular.

Being in a politically charged state, where a Republican governor was elected from a voter base that's 2 to 1 Democrat, I've witnessed a lot of "looking more broadly" in order to gain bipartisan agreements on many issues. Sometimes, we really need to get to know "the other side" and learn to find the common ground we can agree upon.

In the past month, we've hosted several groups at our business to share and educate. Leadership of the state's largest County Chamber of Commerce collected most of their Department of the Environment team

and also invited the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department for an in-depth discussion and tour at our Burtonsville facility. It was an amazing visit, really, and not necessarily something I first looked forward to. One of the benefits of opening up our doors to folks that could create angst is the need to prepare. Preparation can take many forms, but in the case of this opportunity, we were able to focus internally on what are the net contributions we and our industry make to the environment. And what could be perceived as the negatives by people either less informed or with impressions informed or enhanced through media.

When first asked about the visit, I thought back to the first time Home Depot talked to me about picking up other people's plastics from their stores and having it recycled. Initially, we weren't going there and today it's something at which we're doing a very good job and we've made a meaningful environmental impact. Similarly, I wasn't sure what value we'd see from 20-some folks from any Department of the Environment visiting us in the middle of our busiest week—Mother's Day Week. In the end, the decision was made. We started with the notion that we'd be transparent and further decided to incorporate my three favorite catch-all phrases, "Act Like You Own It," from my dad, and in this case it meant we would set the agenda and tone; "Let's Do This," borrowed from the Home Depot, and in this case it meant make it happen and make it a good experience for all; and "Make an Impact," something we're trying to do in every opportunity or relationship.

This visit during our rainiest, cloudiest, coldest spring any of us remember really left us all feeling very good about what it is that we actually do and how many things and people we actually impact. There was no way that we could put on an act of any kind, as many of these people shop in the Home Depot garden centers and, in some cases, knew more about our practices and products than I could have possibly imagined. The long visit provided the forum for some great dialogue about native plants, pollinators, pesticides, storm water management and our sustainable efforts—each subject discussed circled around to what business opportunities may be there for us. We're looking forward to further engagement with these folks, as I believe we can collaborate on some high-profile issues in our home county and state.

Shortly after this visit, and still in the midst of our monsoon season, scientists and administrators from the USDA Plant Protection office toured our facility. This science-based group was interested in our trialing around seed varieties and getting a look at what happens well after they've been involved with the breeders. It was surprising that many had no idea what takes place in the production phase, and the marketing and sales path, though far downstream for them, created lots of conversation. As expected with any visitors, the media around pollinators was top of mind for some.

Also in May we were happy to host a visit from Anna Ball and Bill Doeckel, something we always look forward to. Anna has always had special industry and developing trends insight that's very valuable. For the first time ever, we were visited by the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Maryland. Using the same thought process we had in preparing for the meeting, we all left invigorated as we think about the future, and what we might give and what we can take from a new relationship that's ultimately student and ag education-centered.

In another month, some friends from the EPA will be at our doorstep—another opportunity to demonstrate, educate and learn from others.

Opening our doors and our minds to all of these folks took time and energy during a very busy time of the year, but I believe it was well worth it. We had the opportunity to share our story in a transparent way and they were engaged and wanted to learn more. **GT**

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