

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

12/1/2017

More from Jonathan

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

I hate leaving good stuff on the cutting-room floor, but that's what an editor does: takes 8,000 words of an interview and boils it down to 2,000, or whatever, to fit the allocated space. Which is why it's nice to have this spot at the back of the magazine for a little more Q&A with TreeTown USA's Jonathan Saperstein:

GrowerTalks: Everyone makes mistakes. What's your biggest?

Jonathan Saperstein: I think overall, our biggest mistake has been—and it's something we've worked to correct over the last couple of years—making sure that we have the right resources to enact what our goal is. It always sounds great to get this big sale, or to want to grow your business by this amount, but do you have the resources to do that? That's something that we definitely learned. You can only stretch your people or yourself so far. And

over time, we definitely push ourselves a little bit. We said, "Oh, we can definitely do this." We ended up getting it done, but it wasn't pretty. And on the other side, "We need to add people, resources, whatever," and we add it without necessarily having a strategic plan as to what to do with that resource. You bring them in so fast ... are they really the right fit for the business? Is that tool or whatever it is really going to do what you want it to do, or was it just nice and bright and shiny? That's probably the biggest mistake that we made.

GT: What are a few key business lessons you've learned in your short—but intense—career?

JS: First of all, I believe that you really need to sit back and look at what you want to be. What do you want to do with your company? Do you want to sell to this customer base or that customer base? Do you want to grow this material or that material? You know, trying to reinvent yourself every couple of years in this industry is really tough.

Once you do that, you have to make sure you lay out a goal for yourself. Plan it out and stick to it. Write it down: "I want to accomplish this. And going into next year, these are my big goals."

But more [important] than anything is knowing what your costs are. More often than not, nurseries aren't fully realizing what their costs are. They don't understand what it costs to produce that item.

GT: It's not that they don't try, but some owners would rather grow plants than wrestle with spreadsheets.

JS: People are going to inherently gravitate towards what they're most comfortable with, whether that's driving a tractor or sitting behind a computer figuring out financials. There are resources available, whether it's through trade

organizations, online resources, magazine articles ... You have to make a concerted effort to not just head in the right direction, but also to stick to learning how to cost your inventory. I've talked to nursery owners who've made the comment, "How is it even possible to cost inventory that's multiple years old?" There are a lot of different ways to do it, but you really have to make the effort to find those out. There are plenty of resources available if that's what you want to do. If they spent half as much time researching costing as they did researching a new tractor, they'd probably figure it out.

GT: When it comes to HR, do you look to tech companies like Amazon or Google for ideas?

JS: To a degree. But believe it or not, I'm a little bit old-school. ... When I look at some of the trends in recruitment, how offices are laid out, things like that, we haven't quite gotten there. I guess I'm still just too old-school, wanting to have a traditional office, come to work every day ... I have a lot of friends who work for some of these companies; they don't have offices, they go through Web portals and everyone is able to work from home. They gave the stats as to how much more productive they're supposed to be. But when I talk to my friends, they talk about how little they get done.

GT: It's hard to prune a tree from a portal.

JS: Yeah, we're not in that world.

GT: So, no bean bag chairs in your new offices when you build them, eh?

JS: No. That's not happening! **GT**