

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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This is Going to be “THE YEAR” ...?

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Similar to Bill Swanekamp's great article in June, we at Metrolina also have had to embrace the “glass is half-full” approach to this season, as we were faced with a super late start to the season (the latest in our history) and then we had more-than-adequate rain in the Mid-Atlantic states for the month of May. This strained our systems because we were trying to do 100 days of business in 30 days, but our team pulled together more than ever, and in the hardest of times, that's when your best people show their best qualities.

As we begin planning for next year, the general consensus we heard is to go with “it was bad this year, so it is going to be great next year.”

While that's a popular idea, it's not a data-based concept. How do you forecast for “next year” if you had a bad year (or if you had a great year,

for that matter)?

First, we have to focus on what we can control, not what's out of our control (did I mention we don't control the weather?). So, as we embark upon 2019, our team sat down and laid out some base fundamental focus areas we're going to attack in 2019 versus just hoping it's going to be a great year.

Talk to your teams—You have to put in the time and effort to gather feedback from your teams so you have all of the data points. A great way to do this is to NOT wait until the end of the season. We have monthly recap meetings to assure we gather the input on the season as it happens versus waiting until August or September to ask everyone's input. This is key, as the input is relevant. Additionally, when we work numbers in August, we trust that input from April and May since it happened during the season.

Talk to your customers—The discussion with the customers can be hard, but that transparency is key to drive future success. Have the hard conversation now versus waiting until next season. Talk about the good and the bad, and lay it out in an organized chart to assure all of the input is heard. Additionally, after leaving the meeting, assure to send a recap of the discussion so everyone is on the same page.

Five-year trends, not five months—We always say that a great six months of planning can be ruined in six

hours if we allow ourselves to panic and not follow our plan. The same can be said for data analytics. The easy data is the data from this year, but it takes discipline and consistency to warehouse that data every year so you have five-year trends. Even if you don't have access to that data today, start gathering it now so you'll be better every year.

10% new items—Innovation is actually at the heart of what it takes to stand out and grow. New items and innovation can come in many forms—product, packaging, growing innovation—it all counts and is needed. One of the best ways to sell more product is to get MORE PEOPLE to buy our product. By trudging out the same old mix every year, you're effectively asking the same consumers to buy more of the same thing you have to grow sales. But we all know that “non-users” of live goods shop at our retail partners (big-box stores) on a regular basis, and they even do home improvement projects on a regular basis, but they don't buy plants. Bottom line, you need to have a pipeline of ideas, so 10% of your current mix is new items.

Test at least 10 ideas—It takes testing and research to assure you keep a fresh pipeline of new items on a year-over-year basis. You need to have a set of test items for 2019 that will be your possible new items in 2020. Try them in one store, or for one week, or find a way to get them in front of consumers before you spend the capital and investment on producing a large amount of them.

Quality still matters—Even among our most novice garden consumers, quality of the product is still the number one factor for them in deciding what to buy at the garden center. It's a universal attribute that's been the core of our industry for years and it's good to see consumers still value this more than any other attribute. It's the number one way to drive growth.

All of this forecasting work has to be done with discipline and consistency. You need a three-to-five-year forecasting plan as a company so everyone on the team can understand the direction and be a part of the plan to achieve it.

A simple thing I see in successful businesses is a sense of their employees believing in the vision of the company. Every team member, no matter what their role is, needs to feel their job played a big role in making the company successful. Without this, the team is too dependent on a few folks to get the job done, and then you lose the “ownership” mentality that you need every employee to have to make you successful.

We all know consumers have choices of how to spend their limited free time, and if they fear that time will be wasted and the plants will just die before they have enough time to enjoy them, then we have an issue. We all want to find ways to grow the industry and it seems to me that the number one way to do this is to get more people using our product. Use that mentality in your forecasting process and we can all grow this business EVERY YEAR, not just in that one “GREAT YEAR.” **GT**

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