

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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The One Thing I'd Do (Three, Actually)

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If there's one thing that will keep me in the magazine business until I'm ready to fully retire (in about 15 years; sorry JZ, you don't get the George J. Ball Memorial Desk just yet), it's finding and sharing ideas and inspiration. That's what you growers and retailers want most. That and new ways to kill bugs and diseases. Oh, and labor-saving technologies. Also generational demographics. I almost forgot new varieties. And the latest automation. Heck, who am I kidding? I can't retire—there's too much left to do!

In service to the above quest, I visit with lots of folks and ask lots of questions, and I answer a lot of questions in return. But there's one question I've never been asked and that is: "Chris, given all you've seen in your career, if you had a greenhouse business, is there one thing you would do that might help ensure that you'd be successful?"

If you encountered me in the aisle of some show and hit me with that question, I'd smile. Then I'd say, "Good question!" Then I'd ruminate on it just a bit ... but not too long, because I already know the answer—three answers, actually.

1. Grow exceptional quality. There are lots of good plants on the market. Lots of average plants. Lots of "not bad" plants. Nice plants. Pretty plants. But when was the last time you saw a plant so beautifully grown that stopped you in your tracks? I don't mean a rare or unusual specimen; I mean an exceptionally grown geranium, poinsettia, 16-in. combo pot or 10-in. hanging basket annual—our bread-and-butter stuff. Who among you is growing the Rolex or Rolls Royce of plants? Bob Frye of The Plantation in Nebraska did it for a while with geraniums before retiring. His plants were so spectacular, even the breeders could barely recognize their own handiwork. His prices would go UP as the season went on because his plants got bigger and better. Is that supreme level of quality hard to achieve and maintain? Yes. But I have long said that the most-underserved niche in our industry is ultra-high quality. It's a sure way to stand out.

2. Develop a business personality that's creative, enthusiastic and fun. People love to do business with people they like. Think of your own experiences as a customer: Are there suppliers you look forward to dealing with and others you'd rather avoid? Is there a business you'd give more of your business to if you could? What is it you like about them? Chances are they're cheerful, energized, full of ideas to help your business and deliver consistently—you don't have to worry whether or not they'll come through for you. This style of business isn't as rare as ultra-high quality, but it's rare enough.

3. Foster a culture of mind-blowing service. In my talks, I often ask the audience to raise their hands if they'd had a mind-blowing customer service experience in the last week or two. I rarely see a hand up. Then I ask if they'd had a bad customer service experience in that same timeframe—most every hand hits the air (some raise two!). This one is tough because it requires that you and your staff adopt a servant's heart—humble and being genuinely interested in helping others without expecting something in return (thanks to Dr. Charles Stanley for help with the definition). To blow your customers' minds you have to always be looking for unexpected ways to surprise them, please them, "romance" them, as my friend Chuck Heidgen would say. It can be as simple as a free gerbera plant given to the child of a customer or as involved as a late-night delivery for a special event. The key is it should make the customer feel a bit special, even if only for a little while. With so many businesses pissing people off these days, those that do right by customers are few and far between.

You don't have to do all three, of course—doing one would be a heavy burden, which is why they're untapped niches. Nor are they guarantees of success. But without adopting one of these, you'll just be another business card in the crowd.

And then what will you do? Become the low-price leader?

That market is already saturated. **GT**