

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Who Can They Trust? You!

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Within a few days of popping the New Year's bubbly, the headlines reminded us that nothing is certain in this world. Washington is whacked out, the Middle East is crazy, Australia is on fire, the Dow is through the roof (but a recession must be imminent) ... Yes, there's still the dependable "death and taxes" thing, but other than that, anything can happen, and what amazes us today will be old news tomorrow.

Speaking of which, show of hands if you're old enough to remember Walter Cronkite at the helm of the CBS Evening News. Certainly, you've seen old film clips of his calm, fatherly voice keeping America informed and reassured during some of its most challenging times.

Who can you trust today in a Walter Cronkite way? Can you even name a national news figure (other than for the scandal he or she may have

perpetrated or been a victim of)?

Who else can you trust? Big Pharma, Big Ag, Big Govern-ment, Big Banks or Big Tech? We're certainly all suspicious of them. I recently got on the topic of Amazon with an industry colleague, who stated in no uncertain terms that she hates Amazon and its gray vans that speed through her neighborhood. She went so far as to tell her friends and family to not order her any Christmas presents from Amazon or she'd send them back. She wanted only products from local businesses that care about the community (and, presumably, that drive more considerately, too).

Can you trust election results or social media? Can you trust that when you ask Alexa for the temperature she isn't sending your personal info to North Korea? Is your Ring doorbell spying on you? Is your new Wi-Fi fridge teaming up with your Bluetooth scale to tell you to ease off the starchy foods?

My point is, we're bombarded with technology, information and data, and we don't know who or what we can trust. We're worn out and we need an escape.

That is where you, the friendly local business owner or manager, can be an inspirational oasis in a desert of mistrust.

Think about the small businesses you deal with regularly, both professionally and personally. I hope you have at least a few you can trust implicitly—a plug supplier, a hardgoods vendor, a garden center, a restaurant, a physician,

a plumber, a house painter, a mechanic. They're experts in their craft and always have the right answer. They provide an honest respite from the outside world, a place where you can relax and know, with certainty, that you're getting sound advice, the best service and a solid deal.

Any small business can be a bonafide expert in what it does ... and, in fact, should strive to be considered so by its customers. In most every town, folks know where to find the honest mechanic, the chef with the tastiest food, the dentist with the gentlest touch ... shouldn't you have the reputation as the town's most green-thumbed horticulturist?

These traits of expertise and honesty are, to me, a key to surviving and even thriving in the age of Amazon. Chances are you can't offer Amazon's convenience, assortment, low prices or fast delivery. But the one thing Amazon doesn't offer is expertise. In fact, Amazon, like most online-only businesses, depends on its customers, via reviews and ratings, to provide that for them.

So how do you put this into action? I hate to say it, but first make sure you and your employees are actually providing good information. Haven't all of us horticulturists and horticulturist wannabes (that's me) talked to a nursery or garden center employee at one time or another and gotten blatantly wrong info?

Second, put yourself (or your smartest employee) out there in the limelight, via public presentations, newspaper, TV, even your own blog or Facebook posts. Let folks know you know your stuff, that you're the place to bring questions, and get correct answers and great service.

Lastly, foster a culture of warmth, confidence and trust at your business. Make it a priority. Instruct employees in the art of putting customers at ease, in the value of being the one positive encounter that customer may have all day.

None of this will guarantee your success, of course. But if you can't be counted on for your honesty and expertise, then what are you offering that Amazon can't? **GT**