

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

5/1/2020

Plan, Don't Panic

Abe VanWingerden



ABE VANWINGERDEN

To start, I feel at risk in writing this article, as the news cycle is so unbelievably fast right now that my article penned on April 20 will probably be outdated by May 10 when you're reading it. But I think the impact of COVID-19 will remain with us for months, if not years, so it's good we explore the subject and the impact on our business, our industry and most importantly, how we interact with each other as we move into this new decade.

History shows us that "norms" are only changed by disruptive innovation or by monumental events like COVID-19. New norms are formed and we act like we always operated that way in time as we all learn to adapt. The last notable change in behavior was after 9/11 in how we travel, and I think COVID-19 will have even more wide-ranging impact. Our ability to enjoy certain freedoms are going to be forever changed (sporting events, concerts, as well as traditional events like weddings and funerals, will have some level

of change) and the term "social distancing"—which seemed so foreign just six weeks ago—will be the phrase of the year as we learn new ways to interact with each other.

As we lead our teams over the next five to 10 weeks through the process of understanding how we handle this crisis, I remember an article that Frank Blake, former CEO of Home Depot, was quoted in saying: "What a leader does today at this critical point in history may very well determine their team or company's next 10, 20, 50 years of existence. This is the event that five years from now people are going to be looking back on as setting the culture and tone and heart of an organization, recognizing that the leaders of the organization need to be doing the things that you know everyone is going to be proud of having done five years from now."

Wow, powerful words and his advice was that the best practice was to communicate often, transparently, and purpose-filled in each interaction with your teams. Your teams need you to be that leader more than ever, and any delay or slip in communication can drive distrust quickly through an organization.

Be data-driven. One of the biggest errors from what I see in the handling of COVID-19 has been our willingness to accept terms like, "When we get more testing" or "When the curve flattens." Those clearly are goals, but they have ZERO metrics behind them. We have to get more detailed and data-driven to drive trust into the system. Is it 100% testing or is it each person showing these three symptoms can get a test at any point?

Same thing applies to our businesses. When we say social distancing, we need to define it (6-ft. circle for more than three minutes). When we say don't come in if you're not feeling well, we need metrics behind it (100.4 or above

temperature). When we recommend face coverings, we have to define how we want that to look and lead by example.

Be transparent. Most everyone now knows someone either with COVID-19, recovered from COVID-19, or sadly, passed away from COVID-19. It goes without saying that if we know of a case in our facilities, we have to be 100% transparent with our teams and operate with 100% confidentiality with the person/people who have it. Clearly, you have to have a pre-written protocol that you share with your team BEFORE it happens, not during or after. Now we would seem completely tone-deaf and off base if we don't have a written policy we've shared with our teams before anything happens and then a transparent communication plan if something does.

Be decisive with the long-term in mind. At Metrolina, we've implemented staggered breaks/lunches, have spread out our production lines at both facilities, have a team of additional cleaners after each break or lunch to re-clean, are spraying down every company vehicle, and are providing face coverings to our team. Additionally, we ask people not to come in if they don't feel well and offer temperature checks confidentially at any point. Everyone has different things they can do, but don't wait for the government to tell you to do it or wait for an issue in your facility before acting. Also, start talking NOW about what you'll keep in place as a going operation and what can be eased out over time. It's vital your teams know this and can anticipate what's the "new normal" and what is temporary.

Lastly, we can all argue whether plants are essential at this time and everyone has input on this. I think plants are essential, but that's my opinion based on my value set, and for now, most government agencies in the U.S. have agreed with that premise. Consumers use plants to grow food, practice social distancing as they work in the garden, stop erosion, interact with their families, provide calm during a stressful time, and give idle hands something productive to do. We can all sit around the campfire or keyboard and argue if plants are any more essential than alcohol, puzzles, curbside restaurant pickup, etc.

In reality, plants aren't the issue; the issue is how consumers shop for them and our ability as consumers to follow the rules that retailers lay out in the shopping process during this time. If followed correctly by consumers and enforced by retailers, shopping for plants can be just as safe as shopping for any other item. The word "essential" is over-used and we all use it to either justify our actions or blame others for their supposed non-essential actions.

The one thing I've learned through this so far is that relationships still matter. Our ability to interact with each other and support each other are more important now than ever. Take the time you've saved not traveling, not eating out, etc. and invest in those relationships, as they'll be key as we process through this. Make that a part of your "new normal" and something good with have come out of this pandemic. **GT**

Abe VanWingerden spent eight years working for Procter & Gamble in Sales and Marketing and is now part owner and President of Sales/Marketing at Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, North Carolina.