

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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“The New N ...” Nope, Not Gonna Say It

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In times like these, journalists fall back on clichés and old saws and other embellishments because ... well, because it's quick and easy and sometimes they're lazy or else unimaginative. Writing is work and good writing is hard work.

We journalists try to stir emotion with our words. You ever watch “World News Tonight” with David Muir? Nice young guy, I'm sure, but when he delivers the evening headlines it's with the full-throated fervor of a horror movie trailer narrator. News is “shocking,” statistics are “grim,” discoveries are “horrific,” storms are “devastating” ... I took to jotting down his colorful adjectives for my own use until I realized they're useless for anything other than death and dismemberment, which, thankfully, as a general rule, I don't report on.

Well darned if last night David didn't open his broadcast with the very phrase I am avoiding: he called our current situation “the new normal.” That's why I refuse to use it here: every journalist is using it. Every person is using it. I suspect you're sick of hearing it.

There's a bigger reason I'm avoiding it: I don't believe it's true. Yes, it will change some of the things we do, like our contingency plans and savings strategies and digital/online capabilities. Maybe we'll equip our employees with company masks to go along with the company shirts. But there's nothing “normal” about this abnormal event we're in the midst of and we will roll through it into the real “normal.”

Don't believe me? Here's some precedent to back me up:

When the nursery business went to hell in 2008-2009, it was because the housing market crashed and construction stopped and so did landscaping. Nurseries were forced to discount millions of trees and shrubs and burn what didn't sell. I remember hearing folks call that period “the new normal” ... I probably wrote it myself. I also remember “flat is the new up” in reference to sales. But housing came back, as did the stock market (with a vengeance) and in a few years we were back to normal and up was the new up. Granted, we learned a few lessons. For instance, we learned to run leaner, meaner businesses. Which is good, because fat and happy rarely ends well.

How about the energy crisis of 1973? I was only 13 then, and I don't recall if the phrase “new normal” was even a thing, but it could have been, as folks waited in long gas lines and greenhouses suddenly got really short to conserve heating fuel (little did we know how inefficient a short greenhouse is!). But the shortages and the lines quickly went

away and we got back to life as usual—and with disco! Some excellent technologies came out of that, including double poly and energy curtains. (By the way, do you know that crisis happened because OPEC quadrupled their oil prices to ... wait for it ... \$12 a barrel?)

My grower friends in Florida know about disasters. Think hurricanes Andrew, Irma or Wilma. One day business is great, the next, their nursery is blown into the next county. Do they view the ruins as “the new normal”? No. They work their tails off to rebuild to get back to the previous normal. (I might add that those who have been through a serious hurricane have learned to prepare for the next one—a topic that is probably fodder for another COVID column.)

Regarding our current situation, one of my readers said it best: “This is just another kind of weather.” If you’re extremely lucky, perhaps by the time you read this, the stay-at-home orders in your market area will have been lifted and you’ll still have four to six weeks of good spring sales ahead of you. In which case, you may find that the pandemic cost you no more than rainy spring weather would have.

Unfortunately, I’m a realist and I’m not anticipating that, certainly not for everyone. Most likely, retail will come back slowly, piecemeal, with limits on customer traffic. Success will come down to how well individual retailers are set up for space and staffing. Growers, meanwhile, will have to be creative and communicative to help their customers succeed. It’s going to take an enormous effort and those who put in the work will reap the benefits.

But given all of that, an optimist could view COVID as just like bad spring weather really ... I’m talking rain-every-weekend—and-floods-and-tornadoes-too bad. It’ll put some out of business, and others will hunker down and get soaked and bruised, but survive. It will end, the sun will come out and we’ll go on to face another “normal” spring.

Whatever that looks like. **GT**