

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

3/1/2021

Rules for 2021

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The good old days aren't coming back. We all hoped this pandemic thing was a “this-too-shall-pass” moment in time, but it doesn't look like it's going to be. And if you're biding your time and treading water and avoiding planning for a new sort of future in hopes that 2019 will return, well, you're going to be sorely disappointed. I am, too. I liked how it used to be. I hate wearing a mask and keeping my distance. Now, masks are part of the wardrobe and strangers are to be feared. You'd better adjust your mindset—or at least your business mindset—to dealing with customers and employees under these new terms. Even when we can put away the masks, we'll still be living with the after-effects of COVID—I suspect it will be like the Great Depression's impact on our elders—you know, the string and aluminum foil hoarders. (My dad was one and a frugal New Englander to boot. His favorite saying was, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.”) A segment of the population will be permanently altered by COVID.

There are new expectations. In 2020, our customers tolerated jury-rigged Plexiglas, hand-written signs and general confusion about how to conduct business. Yeah, the occasional confrontation over an ice cream cone made the news, but I'd say that, all in all, folks behaved in a mature fashion. But now we're less forgiving about sloppy protocols and shoddy business. Since it looks like we'll be doing the masking and distancing thing for at least another selling season, it's time to bring your COVID protocols up to the professional level of the rest of your business. I knew this was a thing when I started seeing the big chains installing permanent Plexiglas barriers and better signage and moving beyond the panic mode of one-way aisles. It's fairly painless to conduct commerce now and your business should be the same. That includes how you treat staff. Your tools for social distancing, sanitation and flex-time should be more permanent and less slapped-together, as the situation is bound to be with us for a while, and your systems need to be both effective and user-friendly.

Consumers want us. Thank goodness! We've not only proven to be recession-proof, we're pandemic-proof, too. We didn't even have to advertise—consumers sought us out, including the estimated 20 million new gardeners who tried our products for the first time. Most experts think a large portion of those will return to our stores this year. Halleluiah!

But we need to wow them. Or “seduce” them, as Chuck Heidgen of Shady Hill Gardens likes to say. We should never take our customers for granted, no matter how desperate they may be to get their hands on our products. We

have a chance to win over many new and inexperienced customers and hook them for life. But just having stuff for sale isn't enough. They need hand-holding (figuratively speaking, of course) to ensure success with their new hobby, whether vegetables or foliage plants or kitchen-window herbs. The experience they get when they visit your business should be amazing, and one they should want to have again and again. Make it hard for them and they'll get turned off and go elsewhere—or drop us altogether.

Customers are spoiled. Convenience is here to stay. We've gotten spoiled by Amazon and Instacart and curbside pickup and web-based services and so on. Admit it, you use these services, too. Why shouldn't your customers expect some sort of enhanced convenience options from your business? Whether you're wholesale or retail, the bar has been raised, and businesses that rise with it will beat out those who think they can keep operating like it's 2019. Well, maybe you can ... but you must offer enough other best-in-class benefits, like superb quality and mind-blowing service, to make your less-convenient business worth the extra effort.

As an industry, we learned a few things about ourselves in 2020—most notably, that we're capable of a lot more than we thought. Yes, doing business in a pandemic is a pain in the rear. But in the end, the No. 1 principle of good business hasn't changed from one year ago or 10 years ago or 100 years ago: Exceed your customers' expectations and you'll be fine. **GT**