

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Lessons Learned in 20 Years

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This year marks a real milestone in my career: I've now been working at the family nursery for 20 years. Where did the time go?

I'd like to share a few things that have been some of the biggest achievements and let-downs over my first 20 years in this industry. I know this article will seem a lot like I'm just writing about me; however, there are hundreds of young people graduating from college, returning to the family nurseries and garden centers, and hoping to do it like Mom and Dad did. Or those who are brave enough to venture out to start their own horticulture business from scratch. I hope this article brings you encouragement and spurs you to ask the right questions that will bring knowledge and success in your career.

A person is only as strong as their team. In 2004, I was just finishing an internship at Ball Seed in West Chicago. My horizons had been broadened and I walked away with some amazing experiences and some cherished lifelong friendships. I was excited to return home and begin my career with some of the tools learned during my internship. However, the second week after returning home, the first of three major hurricanes hit roughly two weeks apart in succession. Our structures were blown, racked and/or on the ground from every direction. As soon as we could get temporary shade pulled back over the plants, the next storm would come and reset all the previous work accomplished.

Looking back, the line was blurred between determination vs. foolishness in trying to rebuild between the storms, but we had no idea the next storm was coming! Having a trusted team as a new person just starting in their career is paramount. One person holds the other up, resting assured the next day will come and it'll be better than the last. Looking back, this event galvanized my family's resolve in remaining in the industry.

Failures aren't negative if they count as experience. In the aviation world, it's said you start your flying career holding two bags. One bag is labeled "Luck" and the other "Experience." Just starting out in your career the experience bag is empty and you're not sure how much luck you've got. Every time something happens and it doesn't work out, but you continue on, you take a chip out of your luck bag and place it in the experience bag.

One of my biggest disappointments starting out involved not having a better understanding of the importance of credit applications and contracts. From 2008 through 2015 it was a difficult time in my career filled with low sales and high volumes of past-due accounts. Today, our credit application is four pages long. I've sold plants to both local and international crooks who have swindled me for thousands in almost any way you could think of. From fraudulent checks to fake business fronts and missing freight schemes from trucking companies tied to end customer deliveries.

Gather credit applications and contract agreements from other companies and read them thoroughly. Gain knowledge and experience the free way, not by adding one section after another to your own application due to bad debt that was uncollectable because of a powerless agreement. Personal guarantees in credit applications are paramount. A bank would never issue a line of credit to a corporation or LLC without someone on the named board of directors signing a personal guarantee. Why should you as a small business offer credit without personal guarantees where a bank whose business it is to lend money will not? Credit applications are important when dealing with 1% of your customer base. I'll leave it to you to guess the 1%.

Buy and sell to friends. A friend should have no problem signing an agreement because there's no intent to default. Ultimately, it's up to you as the "creditor" whether to collect the debt and decide the terms of that collection.

The real core of this topic is the companies' names you have in your Rolodex may change, but the people's names stay the same. We all know a pot salesman that used to sell fertilizer and now sells liners. People change positions and you never know where they'll end up. Through my 20 years in this industry, more than once I've seen people rotate positions and roles from selling to me to buying from me.

Always have an open-door policy to see and talk with vendors and the salesman that represent them. Just because you may not be in the position to purchase doesn't mean there isn't a reason to meet the person and see what they're offering. Be friendly, even in springtime when there is absolutely NO time and little patience. Some of my largest customers' buyers weren't always buyers for that company, but met in other roles in the horticulture industry.

A vendor salesperson who was treated harshly makes for a cantankerous customer. You set the tone for a relationship with a person the very first time you meet them. Some genuine conversations and following that Golden Rule we were told about as kids will pay dividends through the next 20 years and beyond. **GT**

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