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Make It and They Will Come

A few weeks ago, I attended a friend's gallery opening. Both he and his wife are artists, and their work will be displayed side-by-side in this new space — his style bright, abstract and angular; hers soft, impressionistic and romantic. One of their styles would appeal to almost anyone.

In their minds, the gallery opening marks a new chapter in their lives. Each has worked a full career at a day job and now, approaching retirement, they are finally trying to settle into their dream of pursuing art full time.

For four full hours on a Saturday afternoon, I watched people come into the gallery, admire the paintings, sample the buffet and leave. Not a single piece of art was sold. Afterwards, I asked my friend how he thought it went. "Great," he said. "I think I have a piece sold." "You think," I questioned. "Sold is like pregnant — either you are or you aren't. There's no 'kind of.'" He went on to explain that he had to take a couple of pieces over to someone's house to see if they looked good in a certain spot and let the patron make a final decision.

When I was growing up, my mother used to tell me "a closed mouth gathers no feet." Well, I wish I had remembered those words at the time because I went on to have a very painful discussion with my friend about sales and about how making everyday people part with \$800-1,500 of their hard-earned money would not be easy.

At the end of the conversation, my friend was a little confused and more than a little discouraged. And while I hadn't meant to rain on his proverbial parade, I couldn't help expressing my surprise at his naiveté. You see, he is a typical artist type and had never considered the business side of art. It never occurred to him that he would have to do anything more than create beautiful paintings to succeed in the art business. And he still doesn't realize that the most important skill in art is sales. And this is what makes me think his gallery will not see the end of the year.

ART AS LIFE

Nice story, but I bet you're wondering what it has to do with you and/or floriculture. Right? When I came into the industry four years ago,

this story could have described most of the growers in the industry. Take out art, insert plants and voila — you had a fairly accurate representation of our industry.

I'm not so sure the same can be said now. I see and hear so many growers focusing on the true business side of floriculture instead of the operations or the growing because just like with my friend's art gallery, sales and administration are the really important parts of the business. So many people can grow nice plants, but can they all deliver them on schedule; can they help their customers with marketing and merchandising needs; can they maximize their workforce; and most importantly, can they actually sell the product?

Sales really is the critical link, and more and more greenhouse businesses seem to be learning this "secret." With increasing regularity now, growers point proudly to their crop and tell me how much of it is sold. Tiny little plugs recently transplanted are already 90-percent or more sold. Empty bays that will be filled with product in the coming weeks that has already been sold. Front offices with at least one desk devoted to selling the product, or better yet, entire departments full of sales people — not part-time grower, part-time sales; dedicated, trained sales people.

All this isn't to knock growing on spec. I certainly think there is a place in the industry for speculating about a certain crop or a certain retail outlet. I'm thinking more about the signs of a maturing industry that I have seen over just the past few years. We all knew that our industry would have to become a business one day — that we couldn't always be farmers. But the rate at which we are maturing into this new role is impressive, and maybe a little bit scary. It is, however, the only way we are going to stay alive in an increasingly competitive marketplace, and I don't mean competition from other growers. I mean competition for discretionary dollars from restaurants, movie theaters and furniture stores.

Our industry has always had the idea that if we grew it, it would sell. It's just so nice to see our industry taking a more studied approach to its livelihood, and seeing my friend struggle with this same process made me realize how far we have come as an industry in such a short time.

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next month...

- Marketing Innovation Award: Runner-Up
- Sanitation and shipping from Central America
- Annual Winner's Circle

plus...

- Microbial resistance
- Floral Plant Growers success
- Ornamental grass production