

Peddling Your Wares

Cold, clouds, rain, hurricanes and an economic slow-down. Not an appealing list if you're in the live goods industries, but these are the conditions growers have had to deal with during the spring and early summer seasons.

We may have had a hard start to this year, but does that make our industry different from any other? Isn't the whole country feeling the effects of a sluggish economy and an unstable stock market? Didn't the bad weather this spring hurt other businesses?



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LIVE GOODS V. HARD GOODS

So are we in the floriculture business really so different from others out there peddling more traditional hard goods and services?

The federal government seems to think so. Mostly because of the devastating effect conditions like those mentioned above — rain, cold, hurricanes, etc. — the government budgets billions of dollars to promote agriculture, to fund agriculture relief and to sustain agricultural research. I know most of this money is intended for the more traditional corn and soybean parts of agriculture, but in the end, everything gets lumped together as agriculture, especially when there is some natural disaster like Allison, this year's first named storm.

And, in this limited area, the government might be right. Those of us in and around agriculture do provide a necessary product (yes, the government has grouped flowers in with the other truly necessary live products) that is more adversely affected by environmental conditions. But, in some respects a product is just a product...no matter how alive it is.

MAKING GERANIUMS INTO WIDGETS

How many times have you said or have your heard another grower say they were having trouble with a crop — had tried everything they could think of — couldn't get those gerberas to bloom — less heat, more light, extra fertilizer — dump the crop? No, they were going to try a few more things. By the time those gerberas made it to the market, if they ever did, the grower had so much money in them there was no chance to break even.

Do you think that's what happens at Mattel when Barbie's makeup gets imprinted slightly askew? No. They throw that batch of dolls away and mark them up as loss.

Is it because we are actually working with live goods that we feel this way? Is it because we grew plants from a seed or a tiny sprig that we throw good money after bad, trying to save a crop? Certainly that has to be part of the problem because almost every grower has another crop of impatiens right next to the ones that won't grow, and more importantly, some of those impatiens will probably go to fertilize the trash pile at the end of the season.

Another part of the equation is not so easy for growers to control. Customers want to plant certain crops at certain times. Stan Pohmer deals with this problem, on page 96 of the GNR section, in his monthly marketing column. We have to see our product as other industries do, convincing the customer that they can use our product at times other than what they might think. Stan calls this a "second spring."

One of the main problems growers have with looking at their product as any other business person (read hard goods manufacturer) would is the amount of time invested in each crop. Take poinsettias, which are one of the longest of the seasonal crops, as an example. If you get half way through a poinsettia crop and run into trouble, you have a huge problem. It's too late to start new plants, you have large sums of money invested in cuttings and this might well be the only crop in your greenhouses. It's not like making a new ball bearing, which can't take more than a few minutes, max.

In this respect, the green industry is much different, and as Roger Styer points out in his article about getting your poinsettias off to a good start (page 12), the best thing you can do to finish a good crop is start a good crop. There are certain measures, certain procedures that growers have to take into consideration that hard goods manufacturers don't. I guess the answer to whether producing live goods is really so different from producing hard goods is "kind of." It may not be easy to dump a crop, but it's not always smart to keep it — the real question is deciding on the threshold between keeping and dumping.

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