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Who Decides What's Important?

A couple of months ago, February to be exact, I gave the opening talk at the National Floriculture Forum (NFF) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For those of you unfamiliar with this event, it is an annual meeting of university faculty, staff and students; government officials; and industry from the United States and Canada.

Some of you probably think the meeting doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun; you know, two days in a room with a bunch of academic types. I would answer that you probably haven't ever sat around after hours with these guys...funny and smart is a pretty good combination. Besides, think about it for a minute: A majority of the research for our industry comes from the participants in this meeting.

And when you get right down to it, the sessions weren't that different from lots of other meetings I've been to. We discussed branding, how to get more money, using technology effectively and what brand of liquor best controls the height of bulb crops...ok, so that one's a little off, but the other topics could have fit in anywhere.

Asking Hard Questions

Each year, NFF sets a general topic for the meeting. This year's topic was "Survival Strategies For Floriculture Programs," so I knew going into my talk that attendees were really thinking about their future and were ready to tackle some of the tough issues they are facing.

My role was to lead a session about "Industry Trends and Research Needs." Less a formal lecture and more a group discussion, we covered topics such as differentiating areas of speciality among universities, whether or not so many universities need to conduct landscape trials, and how the needs of growers are changing.

And even though the evening session is tra-

ditionally somewhat "light," we ended up touching on topics that question the direction of our industry. How do academics decide what to research? How can we make sure the industry, and in particular growers, are getting the information they need to be more successful? Who should actually be conducting this research?

We certainly didn't come up with any answers in an hour, but the questions we asked pose an important question that our industry will eventually have to address if we are to continue growing: Who decides what's important?

A Changing Paradigm

Attendees were willing to admit that in years past they chose research projects based on what they thought was interesting. If you were a pathologist, you might study how much of a virus had to be present for symptoms to appear. Why? Because you wanted to know.

The days of limited budgets and decreasing state and federal funding are starting to alter that way of thinking. They're starting to create a new paradigm where university research is sponsored, at least in part, by manufacturers, breeders, etc., where the different parts of the industry communicate better, where the last of the academics are coming out of their ivory towers. For example, if a flower breeder is sponsoring your research, you need to give tangible results that will help the breeder sell product. That might be how much PGR is needed for 4-inch production or how much light is needed for flower initiation, but it will definitely be something applied — something growers can easily use in their operations.

And perhaps the best part of the entire discussion was seeing how engaged the participants were, how much they wanted to give the industry what it needs. After seeing this group in action, I have a whole new respect for the academics and a renewed faith about the role they will play in the industry as it moves forward. **GPN**

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by the numbers

75: Number of people attending the 2006 National Floriculture Forum.

10: Number of non-association, companies sponsoring the conference.

28: Tentative starting date of next year's conference, to be held at IPM Essen in January.