

# ARE YOU READY FOR WHAT'S NEXT IN A POST-COVID WORLD?

The pandemic has forced consumers to rethink how they live their lives. Are you ready to help them achieve their new goals?

BY MARK RICHARDSON



I am writing about this topic not because we are past COVID but because most of us are so ready to think about and be post-COVID.

For all the reasons you know, gardening has been a “green lining” industry during this historic pandemic, but what might the rest of 2021 look like and what is this post-COVID world all about?

In June 2020, a friend of mine and a thought leader declared that there were four pandemics (COVID-19/elections/social unrest/economy) in the past year and a half, not one. These were like a perfect storm that all would come together and make 2020 a very uncertain year.

While many of our specific forecasts and predictions were wrong, we at least could visualize these four storms being out there and merging to create an environment (mostly positive for the horticulture industry) like we have never seen before.

While there continues to be uncertainty, we do know who is in the White House and we do know that many people have been vaccinated and there is light at the end of the tunnel. This has allowed us to begin to think more about the future — and not just getting through next week.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

So, what is next?

Consumer demand: Over the last year we have seen a tidal wave of consumer interest in gardening. This is a product of many things (living at work/more time on their hands/home being a sanctuary/no travel/more savings to

spend). How will 2021 turn out? Will there be a second tidal wave out there that could be bigger than 2020?

This is driven by all the folks that may be feeling safer post vaccination. Consumers continue to enjoy the newfound benefits and pleasures that plants offered them in 2020. Many people now feel more confident about their employment and their discretionary spending ability. This second wave could continue the momentum and continue well into 2022 and beyond.

One of your biggest priorities now as we move toward a post-COVID world is to manage and control forecasting, inventory, and expectations. If you can accurately (and honestly) tell a customer what product you have, how much you have and when it will be available, then you will differentiate yourself from your competition.

You will increase your close rate. Your marketing dollars will be more effective. The tidal wave I mentioned will make backlog and speed as important as price and quality — consumers have been eager to garden and they want to get their project done now. Those who own their forecasts and production schedules will be not only ahead, but they will be more profitable.

## NEW THINKING AND HABITS?

If the pandemic would have been a three- to four-month process as many people predicted in March of 2020, then new thinking, processes, and new gardening habits would not have been formed. Most likely, consumers would have just

gravitated back to the same priorities that were there before COVID.

Because this has turned out to last for so long, many of the memories are now scars that may never go away. Our priorities have changed. Our habits might not be able to be reversed. And many now believe a pandemic is possible to happen again and therefore we should be prepared for a second one in the future.

I believe we will see more importance (not less) put on the home. This will be a real cultural shift, not just a trend (sort of like the way Europeans or Asians see their homes and their gardens differently than Americans). Outdoor living (with fresh air and lots of plants) will be forever important. Healthy indoor environments with air exchanges and sanitation (and houseplants) will be a priority.

There will be many more things written about life after COVID, but the important thing is to start thinking about it now. Begin to spend time listening more. Begin to have more conversations with your team and your clients. Humans are resilient creatures, but we do need to adapt to survive and thrive. ■

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