



A CHALLENGING JOURNEY...

Here are some things garden centers should be constantly thinking about as we go through the pandemic.



By Stan Pohmer

I think it's safe to say that, in modern history, no individual or business has ever been subjected to such rapid change of almost unfathomable magnitude as we have experienced in the past few months starting with the COVID-19 pandemic — and the economic collapse that resulted from it.

It's touched almost every part of our existence ... the way we live our lives, the way we learn, the way we work, and the way we interact with each other, and it's dictated what we can and can't do in almost every facet of our being. And I also think it's safe to say that no one has any idea what the "new" normal will look like in the short or long term as we deal with this crisis; our reactions and responses to it are fluid, constantly changing as we learn more about what does and doesn't work.

Uncertainty Abounds

As an industry, we're used to dealing with problems. But the kind we have experience with are very specific, like weather or a crop disease; we clearly know what the issue is, what action will be taken to resolve or overcome it, and that it has a point of resolution. The frustration for us with the current challenge is that there is no timetable or even a guesstimate on when it will be over, no clear and definitive path or plan as to how it's going to be resolved,

what actions we can take to control our own personal and professional destinies.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are many moving pieces creating a multiplier of combinations and permutations that impact us that we have absolutely no control over. Simply said, there's no certainty about anything. At the end of the day, a virus that we have little knowledge about or control over is driving our decisions, all we can do is react to its unknown behavior.

The operative question is: When can we get back to business as usual? The answer most likely is that we'll never be back to where we were. Our customers' psyches are changing, how we operate our businesses is changing, and how we sell our products and services is changing. Customers have a sense of fear and foreboding about catching the virus, making them hesitant to physically go into stores, and this fear is accentuated in our older customers, the base who spends the most money in our industry, as they are the most vulnerable to the virus.

Working from home will likely continue in some form because companies realize that it works and because, until schools and childcare institutions are re-opened, some parents can't physically go back to offsite places of employment.

More customers are now becoming more comfortable with purchasing products, food and services on the Internet for no-contact pick up (BOPIS) or home delivery, and this will become more of the permanent norm in the future. Whether you are doing it because it's the right thing to do, or because it's being influenced or mandated by national, state, county, or city/town guidelines, you may have to limit the number of customers allowed in your store, maintain social distancing, enforce customer

and employee use of masks, and make hand sanitation available on your sales floor.

Changes like these will be further ingrained in our lives as it's estimated that the only way to gain control over this virus is by the development and roll out of a vaccine (12-24 months away) or the result of herd immunity resulting from 70-85% of the population having contracted the virus (if the virus doesn't mutate, and this will also take a long time to develop).

Looking Ahead

Some economic forecasters suggest that our pre-COVID economy was fundamentally strong, so the recession we're in will quickly rebound as soon as we reopen our businesses from our stay-at-home mandates instituted to flatten the curve and mitigate the spread of the virus. However, if the economy is reopened too quickly and the infection rate increases as a result of more relaxed social contact standards, the more restrictive mandates will be reinstated to re-establish virus control. Add to this the belief that a second wave of the virus will naturally occur within the next year, and any economic recovery could be short lived, causing severe economic hardship on debt-laden businesses and households.

The recovery will likely come in fits and starts on a local or regional basis. Rather than a traditional V-shaped recession recovery, we'd be facing a W-shaped recovery (back to back

recession-recovery-recession-recovery cycle). It will be a tough period to go through and there will be a shakeout of the retail marketplace, with the weak performers not making it through.

Next Steps

So, there's no roadmap to guide you through this pandemic crisis and recession because we simply don't know how or when all the contributing elements will interact and impact outcomes. But there are some things you should be constantly thinking about as you go through this journey:

- Stay fluid, agile and move quickly ... things will change, and you'll need to react fast, with innovation and creativity.
- Listen and learn ... first and foremost to your customer and how they value what you offer and how they can access it, so you can adapt to them. And secondly, to the guidelines issued by the CDC and government entities, so you can implement them quickly. Safety and customer service are inseparable!
- Communicate ... let your customers know what you're doing to ensure their safety and what options you're offering to serve their needs; keep the communication current as you make changes.
- Messaging ... plants and flowers are essential for sustaining quality of life. Make sure your customers know this, too.

- Update your website ... for some customers, your website IS your store! Keep the information current and inviting, and automate it for on-line ordering and contactless pick up/delivery options.
- Cash flow is king ... protect it with a passion.
- Re-vision, re-think and re-plan ... with the rapidity of change today, this must be a weekly review process.
- Make your employees a priority ... in addition to protecting their safety, remember to consider what you are asking them to do as you make your constant changes. Now, more than ever, they are the face of your business and your customer's experience.

How we as a society "tame" this virus is dependent on how the American people and you as a business manage it, while at the same time protecting your business. We're counting on (and praying for!) you to make it happen!

Best wishes and stay safe on your challenging journey... 🌱

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group in Minnetonka, Minn. He can be reached at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com or 612.605.8799.



Circle 115