

Are we sailing into uncharted territory?

An intriguing question, indeed. How much territory can be left uncharted? It's hardly as if this industry is in its infancy. On the contrary, we are in a mature phase. Therein lies the answer.

As we mature, we tend to want more simplicity in life. We just want to coast along and not upset the apple cart. Likewise, as a mature industry, too often we tend to glide and just operate as we have for many years. This philosophy is precisely the wrong attitude for any industry.

As the business world gets more and more competitive, we have to step up to the plate. The likes of Lowe's and Target are stepping up, doing a much better job of merchandising. Have you seen their commercials lately? They are selling lifestyles, not furniture and gardens. Have you seen The Home Depot Direct catalogs? They are selling high-end furniture and decor for interiors as well as outdoors.

As indies, not only do we need to carve out our own niche but we need to do it better than the boxes and discounters. We need to offer better quality, more service and unique, fun ways to draw more customers. Now, the shameless plug ... that's what *Garden Chic* is all about.

Here's a loaded question for you: Are you aiming too low? Visiting garden centers around the country, I can say with confidence that I wonder what some are thinking. I note the surrounding area and compare that to the merchandise in the stores. Unfortunately, too many times, there seems to be a total disconnect.

I have seen somewhat cheap, discount-store-quality items in stores that are surrounded by nice neighborhoods. I just wonder why they are aiming so low. Surprisingly, some of the managers even admit their merchandise selection doesn't match their clientele. Don't get me wrong here,

I'm not condemning every garden center out there. On the contrary, there are a lot of great operations doing really great things.

Now, the next question is, why? Why are too many garden centers under-selling their markets? Are people just going about business as usual? Is the problem with the vendors? Are they not offering any wonderfully unique items? Are they selling their nice items to the boxes, and then asking garden centers to sell the same? As they do offer new, great items, are you buying them? Are you supporting vendors' efforts, or are you just taking the easy way out and buying the same-old?

I know these are tough questions, and ones you probably would prefer to just ignore. Maybe you just think I don't know what I'm talking about ... I want to stretch you. I want you to think about things in a way you may have never before.

These are exciting times! There are more opportunities in front of us today than ever before. Consumers have gone from frilly buying to how-low-can-you-go. Although they continue to like the low-pricing strategies of Wal-Mart, they are tired of the discount store ambiance. Consumers continue to be into brand names and status. They will pay for the high-priced items, if, and this is a big if, there is a higher perceived value.

This scenario is the perfect jump-off point for IGCs! Let's take our lead from Starbucks. If a company can take a commodity item like a cup of coffee and turn it into a higher perceived value through their stores and presentation, can't our industry do the same thing? The possibilities are unlimited. This is exciting stuff! And the best part is, we can all have a great time in the process. All we need to do is imagine, stage and inspire.




