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The Right Answer

Jennifer Polanz



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Remember when the biggest moral and ethical decision of spring was whether or not to sell tomato and basil plants before the frost date?

Sigh.

The global pandemic created by coronavirus has prompted the most difficult times our industry has gone through. I've heard many stories of garden center owners and managers and the choices they're faced with. This column can't solve those dilemmas and it can't tell you the right answer. I wish it could. I wish I could.

I just want you to know I see you. I see the difficult decisions you faced in April and could be continuing to face in May. Choices like do I stay open? If I stay open, how do I protect my employees and customers so no one gets sick? If I don't stay open, how will my business make it through? When you

make 70% to 80% of your revenue in five to seven weeks, how do you make it when you're closed? And what does that do to your employees and their families?

If you're forced to close, how do you get the stimulus money available? Do you lay off workers and hope they receive unemployment, even though unemployment offices are overwhelmed with millions of workers filing? But will additional stimulus money even be available for small businesses?

The industry has taken a bit of a PR beating in some places, too. While some independents were able to stay open as essential businesses due to offering food, and produce seeds and starts, there were the inevitable stories asking if garden centers are truly essential. As food supply chains continue to be disrupted, I absolutely think our products are essential to those who are clamoring to grow their own Victory Garden this year, and freeze and can the results.

I don't want this to be all dark, so I'll point out the light, too, of creative retailing. I saw Facebook Live auctions and retailers posting availability lists in their newsletters and on websites. I saw Google Forms created for simple online ordering and well-formulated curbside pickup plans. Most of all, I saw customer appreciation.

Long-time *Green Profit* freelancer Katie Elzer-Peters has been boots-on-the-ground in the last month, helping retailers formulate their digital strategy. In this issue, she provides some advice for on-the-fly ecommerce. And next month she'll take that one step further with how to make that digital component permanent.

Also in these pages are stories from our issue theme on houseplants. It may seem somewhat trivial now, but with all

this time spent inside our homes, aren't they more important than ever? To that end, Ellen provides a look at how to expand and contract the houseplant department based on demand and time of year. And I look at which varieties continue to translate from Instagram to the cash register.

Finally, I want to extend our most sincere gratitude to the great Bill McCurry for all the time and effort he put into his insightful series on buying and selling a business. This month's article concludes the five-part series and here he highlights essential questions to ask before signing on the dotted line.

In the end, we all have to make difficult choices. I can't tell you if they're right or wrong, but if you made them with the safety and health of everyone around you in mind, I can't see how that could be wrong. **GP**