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Marginal Gains

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My son, Josh, just started running cross country. As a sophomore, this is his first year doing a school-sanctioned sport and it's been a fascinating journey so far. I've always believed that sports can teach us a lot about ourselves and life, and running is no different.

It was apparent early on that there's technique to learn and master, and a strategy to race mechanics and pacing. All new stuff for us (I was a volleyball player, where running was anathema to me). It's been thrilling, though, to watch his improvement at each meet, first shaving off several minutes, and now down to seconds off each time as he gets faster.

That led me to think about the importance of small gains and how they can add up. I started researching this more and came across something called the Theory of Marginal Gains. Perhaps you've heard of it? It apparently turned the British Cycling Team into a powerhouse. Their new performance director (this was back in 2003), identified key areas where they could improve by just 1%. For example, they redesigned the bike seats to be more comfortable and had riders wear electrically heated oversHORTS to maintain ideal muscle temperature. They determined the best pillow and mattress to improve sleep, and hired a surgeon to teach riders how to wash their hands properly so they would reduce the chance for illness. These are just a few; there were many more small changes.

The idea was, all of these changes aggregated to create greater improvement over time. Within 10 years, the British Cycling Team held Olympic records in the sport and multiple medals, as well as a Tour de France winner. Within 20

years they had even more global success.

Can you use this in your business? If you deconstruct your business to look at all the ways you could improve something by just 1%, could it add up? I like this idea because making big changes is often difficult and creates a little bit of decision paralysis, but small changes are manageable.

In this issue, there are strategies that can help start these small changes that can add up in a big way. One example is our cover story on getting a bag of soil in every cart. Estimate now about how many people buy soil and amendments with their transaction. It's probably not enough, considering most people are embarking on planting a new perennial or shrub, or potting up a mixed container, all of which require some amending or new soil mix. Turn to this article for strategies on increasing the likelihood customers will go home with what they need to be successful.

Another way of adding marginal gains is through technology that helps you communicate directly with your customers. The marketing team at Stauffers of Kissel Hill shared with us their successes so far using an app created by Sunrise Marketing and app developer Eddy Ahmed. At the time I chatted with them, they had more than 18,000 users. Find out how they did it and how it's been beneficial for them.

One interesting way to achieve more gains is through the use of technology and columnist John Friel has more on the use of drones to do work that has been challenging for humans.

I'm not sure if these count for marginal gains or not, but we also have our last installment of coverage from the California Spring Trials with new potted and gift plants for indoors and out, starting on page 28. New plants are essential to create excitement and there's no better gift (in my opinion) than a beautiful plant.

Back to my runner, he's still got a long way to go to get to the times of the fastest at these meets (it's crazy how fast these kids are!), but I can see at some point it's going to be small tweaks that start to make the difference. Perhaps that's where you're at right now in your business!

Here's to marginal gains!