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Features

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Adapt or Die

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The series is scheduled to be released in 2026 and will be exclusive to this magazine in this country. The message is a global one, written by three industry experts based on three different continents.

John Stanley: John has been a consultant to the industry since its origins 50 years ago. He's an author of numerous books on garden retailing and operates in 35 countries. John is based in Western Australia, where, along with his wife, Linda, they also operate an award-winning sweet chestnut agritourism farm.

Sid Raisch: Sid has worked with garden centers across the USA for many years and is based in California. Sid and John have joined many times to present workshops across the U.S. Sid has the capability of challenging your thinking and will bring that insight to the articles.

Dries Jansen: Dries, along with his business partner Fred, are the owners of Garden Center Advice, an international advisory company to garden centers based in the Netherlands. They have advised on garden centers from Iceland to Dubai. Welcome, let's get started.

Flower Power … It's Back

This series of articles aims to look at the future opportunities, changes and challenges that independent garden centers around the globe face in the next few years. Before we look into our crystal ball, we should first take a look back.

The first garden center in the world, it is believed, was developed by Edward Stewart, a nurseryperson in Dorset, England in 1955. This was followed by Siebenthaler's Garden Center in Dayton, Ohio, and Lasscock's Garden Center in Adelaide, South Australia.

By the time Scott McKenzie was singing "Be Sure to Wear a Flower in Your Hair" in 1967, garden centers were a part of the marketplace in most developed countries. The horticultural colleges were full of students and the industry was booming.

Garden Centers were the places of innovation as nursery owners developed new ways to display and grow plants,

and new product categories related to gardening were introduced. Their customers, who we now call Baby Boomers, purchased plants based on flower and color.

Independent Garden Centers had a wonderful decade of innovation that carried on until around the mid-'80s. From that period on, three things happened.

One is hardware retailers eyed up the garden category and decided they could construct product-led garden centers alongside their hardware stores. These departments have proved to be very successful and continue to take market share under the format of "box stores."

Secondly, most independent garden centers have failed to evolve. They often look the same as they did a decade ago. In many countries, the only visual difference in garden centers is the addition of brands for plants. Now, the consolidation into small chains and emerging private equity-controlled groups will change the cost structures, but not the consumer experience.

Thirdly, Baby Boomers have been replaced by Gen Y and Gen Z, who are looking for sustainability and plants that attract pollinators, birds and butterflies, and often produce food.

As a result of these three factors, many independent garden centers have disappeared from the retail scene.

In the same period, other retailers in other sectors have changed their retail models as the market has changed. As a general rule in retailing, you should make minor changes to your retail model every two to three years and a major overhaul every five to seven years. This is why Marks & Spencer Food Stores in the UK look completely different to a decade ago, as do McDonald's and other leading retailers.

Many retailers have become experiential, such as RH Gallery stores in the U.S. and Canada. This luxury home furnishings store was formerly known as Restoration Hardware. These stores are large, gallery-like showrooms that often feature a restaurant, wine bars and an interior design studio.

Another experiential store that comes to mind is Seed to Table. This grocery store is part of the Oakes Farms family of companies, owned by Alfie Oakes. Oakes Farms, which has 3,500 acres of farmland in Immokalee, Florida, grows a variety of fruits and vegetables that are distributed to their retail stores. This is a unique grocery store as you've never seen before, featuring several restaurants, bars and live entertainment seven nights a week.

Yet every other category of retail has changed, becoming more experiential. And nearly all other retail segments are now completely omnichannel, with more like Walmart and Amazon leading the way into becoming media companies.

Why change the model? It means your customers won't get bored with your store. It enables you to keep up with trends in the marketplace, evolve as customer preferences evolve and is often driven by data insights into the industry and your business.

Adapt or Die

The question is not why we should change or what we should change—as an industry we need to change as soon as possible or independent garden centers will die.

This series of articles will look at the future evolution of the independent garden center. It will look at why we need to

change at this period in time, and more importantly, what we need to change and why.

Hence the title of this series of articles, which we also plan to develop into a workshop. Each article will take on a specific subject and go into depth on the Why, Where and How. We hope you enjoy the series. **GP**

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