

Going halfway to understand the new buyer

In the nursery and greenhouse industry, we have always had to follow and understand consumer trends.

Otherwise, we will never be able to build business models capable of enduring countless shifts in behavior.

The changes in preferences and mores also influence a government that is tone deaf at times, more concerned with shaping behavior than fostering growth.

In Oregon, we're an income tax state. State revenues rise and fall based on the number of people working. It's in the state's interest to preserve jobs — one would think. Nevertheless, our legislature is often rife with bills that are just solutions in search of problems. Why?

It has a lot to do with how legislators see their jobs. Oregon voters elect people interested in the pursuit of justice. Why do they do this? I think it is generational. Younger people have been shaped by events well beyond their control. Now they have the voter to influence election outcomes.

It's a numbers game. People my age are now the outnumbered. My daughters — one a college senior, the other a frosh — are at the young end of the Millennial and Generation Z group that's taking power.

That's why it behooves our industry to take a peek into the psyche of the young consumer.

Shaping a new millennium

I had a great conversation recently with Dr. Eric Fruits, who holds a Ph.D. in economics. Our children and those in their age group are coming of age. We don't have simple answers for why they act the way they do, economically and politically.

We joke that as we get closer to assuming room temperature, our children will be the ones raising families, managing businesses, and running our government. We'd like to think that day is far off, but it's coming soon.

Millennials and Generation Z are comprised of people born after 1980. In about seven years, they will make up a majority of registered voters — and likely voters, too.

These groups have entirely different historical guideposts. Even the oldest among

them have no memory of Ronald Reagan. Most don't remember Bill Clinton, either.

Their first political memory was Bush vs. Gore. FDR and JFK are ancient history. Washington, Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt may as well have been medieval kings.

These generations are on track to be the most educated in history. But they also believe that college is too expensive and not worth the price.

Millennials, who are the children of Baby Boomers, were raised on Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings. These were stories of friends coming together to complete a quest. There was moral ambiguity in books and movies. The bad guys were bad, but they had backstories that made you think twice about what is good and what is evil.

It went a step further with Generation Z. They have been raised on dystopian fiction such as the Hunger Games, and superhero movies. So often the bad guy is a businessman or a faceless corporation out to destroy the environment just so they can line their pockets.

How did this generation get so dark? Easy. They've lived through dark times.

The oldest Millennials were born during the deep recession of the early 1980s. Although we think of them as youngsters, most Millennials and Gen Z have already lived through three big recessions. For many of our emerging purchasers, their earliest economic memory may be their parents losing a job or even the house.

My generation is comfortable with "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps." Reagan's deregulation and Clinton's optimism and economic boom served us well. It built our belief in the system.

The next leaders, by contrast, may believe the economy failed them. Capitalism failed them. As they reach their peak economic earning years, we must realize the foundation that shaped their outlook. It will be important to go halfway and meet them where they are at.

A generational shift in our industry

As society is shifting generationally, the OAN is doing the same. We're in the middle of a very cool shift in leadership. Where titans of the industry once led, now their sons and daughters are at the wheel. They



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bring us broad perspectives, grounded in current mores and values, but with a strong connection to the earth and the industry.

The OAN knows it must provide members with tools no individual operation can provide for itself, so the association adds to what you can do each day. Our new generation of leaders guides how we do that.

The last 10 years of changes have been fast and furious, but the ag economy survived. We will make sure it does into the future.

Early in the last decade, the OAN launched the online Nursery Guide to help our members reach customers during the abyss of the Great Recession. Since that time the association has enhanced that tool with a cell-phone-friendly layout, and the emerging Nursery Guide LIVE virtual trade show coming on March 17-18.

In these times, we face a choice: "Evolve or fade away." We'll take the first one. The OAN will provide a scalable avenue to capitalize on Nursery Guide listings and get to Nursery Guide 2.0.

The value of listening

For me, politics is life. One of the first principles I learned was, "God provided two ears and one mouth for a reason."

In order to understand a different perspective, you need to listen twice as much as you talk. First, listen to understand what a "win" means to them. Then, find that pathway for mutual success.

Our emerging generation has been shaped in ways completely unlike their predecessors. If we apply that knowledge, we'll be up to the task of building that bridge into the future.