

Shaping our identity

Spring is upon us, and the economic winter of the past seven years is beginning to thaw. It has been a difficult time and — let's face it — we are not the same industry as we were before the Great Recession. Our industry felt the tilt of the axis of our world in a profound way.

However, the 2014 spring season is full of transformation. Where companies once wilted under punishing economic conditions, we are seeing the budding of growth and renewal.

What will manifest itself through our recovery and regeneration is our identity.

I consider myself fortunate to interact with small and large growers, retailers, greenhouse operators, landscapers and allied members. What others see in them is not necessarily the true picture of what is happening on the home front. How we see ourselves is what matters more, and that is what will shape the industry, and those who serve it, for the coming decade.

Finding opportunity in recovery

Not many industry onlookers saw the length of the economic downturn coming. It was painful for us all to see good companies struggle at both a local and national level.

For those who have survived the storm, markets are beginning to rebound. The opportunity of a spring renewal is that the industry can remake its image. The fight for survival has forced many to alter their business models. A new beginning, built on the experience and hard work of the past, will build the bridge to a promising future.

There is no shortage of issues that could sap our soul. Transportation, water, changing customer preferences and “just in time” purchasing windows are just a few. But we also have tremendous opportunities to establish new market segments. Our industry can help people utilize trees and green goods to build sustainable environments, create shade in cities and improve water quality.

The industry is already remaking its image and identity through the use of Internet search capabilities, focused retail campaigns such as “Plant Something,” and more efficient labor and product mixes. Google has changed the face of the new economy. It is more critical than ever that we build our identity to match the emerging sales culture.

Knowing your identity

One lesson of the new economy is that outside forces are not always accurate in knowing your identity. Take me as an example.

There are many Jeff Stones on the Internet, and a quick search suggests I am not one of the more popular ones. Other Jeff Stones include an author who writes kung fu fiction for teens, a PR machine politician in Riverside County in California, and a retired journeyman major leaguer who played for Philadelphia, Baltimore, Texas and Boston.

There was a guy from NASA, and Paul Petersen, who played Jeff Stone on the Donna Reed Show, for goodness' sake. I cannot even crack the top five most followed Jeff Stones on Twitter. A state representative from Greendale, Wisc., tops the list. He's followed by a random bartender somewhere in the U.S., and an equity fund holder in Japan. I am even getting schooled (in terms of follower count) by a magician.

According to Facebook and a personality test, I don't even belong in Oregon (where I have lived my entire life) and should be in sync with the great Keystone State of Pennsylvania.

The most famous Jeff Stone of them all is probably better known under his birth name, Jeff Gillooly. You remember him: 20 years ago, he orchestrated an attack on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan to clear the way for his Oregonian wife, Tanya Harding, to make the Olympic team. I still get calls from ESPN from time to time whenever the mercurial skater does something in public. Gillooly became a verb in the cultural lexicon of our country.

I am not asking to be a verb, mind you, but it does show that just throwing a name out there may not result in success. It is what we do, who we are, and how we see ourselves that matters.

Spring is about renewal

My grandparents lived through tough times. The Great Depression made an indelible impression on them and shaped how they navigated the modern world. Their shared hardships made them stronger.

This spring, there are signs that the industry has begun to thaw from the cold hand of economic winter. As we celebrate the renewal of the season with soccer and baseball games in the rain, let's take our cue from the hardy plants and flowers breaking through winter's grip on the weather. A great opportunity has presented itself to remake the nursery and greenhouse identity.

I believe we are ready to grow again. ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Stone'.