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## Defining quality in hard times



by MARIA ZAMPINI

**'Meeting customers' expectations might fulfill the definition of quality, but to me, exceeding their expectations — and doing so consistently — is what sets you apart from others.'**

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**A**s I pen this column, I'm in the midst of attending winter trade shows. When greeting friends and customers, the question arises: "How's business?" My standard answer is, "Things could be better, but they certainly could be worse." I also say there is no sense whining about the situation, as we're essentially all in the same boat. What can we do but pull up our bootstraps and move forward? And why complain when all one has to do is turn on the world news to see the suffering of the Haitian people to get a reality check and realize how lucky we actually are.

Of course, that same news program tells us that the recession has supposedly bottomed out. Only time will tell if that proves to be true. Since this appears to be an appropriate time to interject political opinions, I'll refrain from doing so other than to give my standard refrain on the economy: This country didn't get in this situation overnight. In my mind, to think it can be fixed overnight is unrealistic. I think the Republicans, Democrats and Independents alike had a hand in the mess, and until they actually know how to work and play together nicely like big boys and girls (I know — *that's unrealistic*), it will be one steep, uphill battle. And guess who gets to carry the burden? You guessed it: us! Which is why all of our voices need to be heard when it comes to contacting our local, state and federal officials. Alas, that is a topic for another day.

Regardless, I don't think we're out of the woods. Our industry is what I would term "the tail end of the dog." Meaning, even if everything is on an economic upturn, it still takes a while before it will filter down to the green world. Unfortunately, I'm

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afraid that before all is said and done, there will be more good people and their companies that succumb to the economy and to the changing times. I suppose that is just the circle of life.

No matter what, I'm quite certain that business will never be the same again for most, if not all, of us. I think the times we're in have certainly been a good example of "things must change to stay the same." Sometimes, though, that is easier said than done. I was recently reminded of this while talking with an old friend at the Green & Growin' Show in Greensboro, NC (a really great little show if you've never been). Our conversation essentially revolved around the question: "What sets you apart from your competition?"

Just thinking about competition brings to mind a couple more favorite sayings, such as, "The view of the lead dog is better than that of the pack." A newer one brought to my attention by ag economist extraordinaire, Dr. Charlie Hall, is from the great hockey player, Wayne Gretzky: "I skate to where the puck is going to be ... not to where it has been."

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things differently.'**

In the days of my misspent youth, it was enough to claim that you had better quality and service or your staff was more knowledgeable than your competition. You were able to concentrate on being a grower (or retailer or landscaper), getting your hands dirty and performing the work you really loved day in and day out. Nowadays, you have to be a marketer and so, so much more.

I think that in today's world, when it comes to defining quality and why you're a better choice than the guy down the road, simplicity is nowhere near sufficient. If your competition is thinking ahead and being proactive, by the time you've reacted and caught up to him, he's already on to the next race — and you're pretty much left sucking turtle dust.

You must be able to explain, in detail, what your company does better or differently than the other guy. More importantly, the key players in your company must all be able to sing the same tune, repeating these points and succinctly explaining why and how they will help your customer succeed. Which, in turn, means you succeed. Otherwise, everyone likely fails.

As my friend pointed out to me, the term "quality" is overused. Quality is totally subjective and is in the eye of the beholder. The customer is always the beholder, and quality is whatever they say it is. Technically, then, their opinion is the only one that counts.

Quality is not achieved by doing different things; it is achieved by doing things differently. Quality is the perception the customer has not only of you, but also of your products and your services. Meeting customers' expectations might fulfill the definition of quality, but to me, exceeding their expectations — and doing so consistently — is what sets you apart from others.

In closing, I'd like to share one more way to define quality. It means never having to say you're sorry (cue "Love Story" soundtrack). And, if we should make mistakes, as usual, we can be smarter than our elected officials by not being afraid to admit and take responsibility for our actions — or lack thereof. It's one time when a simple plan is the best plan. Being honest and humble can be two key ingredients that define one's business quality and differentiate us from our competitors. ♥

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