



Growing a Successful Business

Greg Blankenship tells how it's different from a regular job.

My friends tell me I'm in the right business. Not because I know a lot about plants or because it's obvious I enjoy growing things. They say it's because my approach to the business is often different from others who are in my line of work. They credit my ability to recognize the potential for a new product or perhaps a new way to present a product to the market. I guess it's no secret that I enjoy trying new approaches and I've been blessed to find success in many of those innovations. In this business, it makes no sense to do things like everybody else. Those who know me know that I've done things differently all my life.

An accident when I was a child resulted in a serious head injury that required me to learn how to walk and balance all over again. The injury caused me to need special education classes. I was labeled a child who would never be able to read or write at a functional level without help.

I discovered I could learn, but not in the way conventional education expected. I could learn words by memorizing them with their definitions and I eventually was able to read. All my childhood friends were my age, but because of my accident, they were two grades ahead of me in school. When I started high school, I decided I would graduate with them. It required extra classes and summer school, but I completed high school in just over two years.

It was during high school that I started earning money by growing dogwood trees. I actually employed my high school friends to harvest dogwood seeds that I sold to nurseries. I also became involved with Junior Achievement and was our chapter's top salesman.

Out of high school, I enrolled in the horticulture program at Walters State Community College, where I was selected to participate in a summer internship at Calloway Gardens in Georgia. More classes at the University of Tennessee and employment at the Botany Center, a local nursery, further prepared me for my career. It was Botany Center owner Dick Ott who taught me three rules for selling to the public in a way that can make some money: Be neat, be clean, be organized. To his rules I added one of my own: Be creative.

I convinced myself I was ready to start my own business and launched Gregory's Dogwood Nursery in 1991, mixing in some lawn care clients with landscaping to generate the cash that would get me established. The lawn care was phased out over three years as I built greenhouses

and learned how to grow an expanding variety of plants.

People started noticing my unique way of presenting plants in the commercial marketplace. Stories about my approach began appearing in nationally published trade journals, such as *Greenhouse Manager* and *Greenhouse Business*.

Unrelated to my business, I also gained some notoriety as a regular on a national cable TV show called *Club Dance*. I learned how amazing TV exposure is. I just never could get used to receiving fan mail.

Nothing can take the place of a loving life partner, though, and in 1995 I was blessed to meet my future wife,

Mary Grace. We married in 1996. Mary Grace worked with me for several years in the greenhouse before returning to her career as a Registered Nurse. The business has evolved over the past two decades and is now Gregory's Greenhouse Productions LLC. While we still focus on flowers, we've recently expanded into vegetables and herbs that have quickly been embraced by our customers. We do some retail, but most of our business is in supplying area retailers with high quality plants.

I enjoy encouraging others who want to venture into their own businesses. It's not easy, but I believe there are many people out there who could stand to gain a lot by taking the risk. It's not for everybody. Working for yourself takes a lot of dedication, especially in my business where you're dealing with living plants that need daily attention. You can't look at it as a job, or as simply earning a living. It's a lifestyle that has allowed me to be creative in marketing my products to customers whom I truly appreciate and enjoy.

It has been a way to build a reputation as an entrepreneur who is committed to exceptional quality and originality. It can be a career with certain rewards for somebody who does things a little differently than the others. I'm blessed to spend my days in work I thoroughly enjoy. And that's something I would never want to do differently.

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About Greg Blankenship

Greg Blankenship
Gregory's Greenhouse
Productions, LLC

- Graduate of Knoxville's Central High School
- Studied at Walters State Community College and the University of Tennessee Knoxville
- Launched business as Gregory's Dogwood Nursery in 1991. Known today as Gregory's Greenhouse Productions LLC.
- Products available at:
 - Downtown Farmers Market on Market Square
 - Laurel Church of Christ Farm Market
- Involved with
 - Dogwood Arts Festival
 - Friends of the Garden
- Preparing to expand his company's farm market products.
- Online at www.gregorysgreenhouse.com

