

## STRATEGY

A featured segment designed to share business-critical information to seed-selling professionals. Visit [SeedWorld.com](http://SeedWorld.com) to download this department and other tools to help you sell seed to farmers.

## Performance

**PRODUCT PERFORMANCE**

- “Your variety was beat by 20 bushels per acre.”
- “Your variety lodged worse than anyone else’s.”
- “Your variety didn’t dry down.”
- “Your variety was too light in test weight.”

Hearing those kinds of statements is every seed seller’s nightmare. Whenever you *do* hear these kinds of statements, two things immediately come to mind. One, I am about to lose a customer and two, I should have practiced my story better so I would have known how to respond to those comments.

In every business, feelings of fear and apprehension regarding product performance are natural. We always want our products to win. The problem is that seed is a living organism whose ultimate performance is largely dependent on the amount of environmental interference it is exposed to during the growing season. The chance of every variety getting through a year without a so-called performance issue is rather low. And any issue with product performance can make it more difficult to resell to a customer, especially if he is a first-time buyer.

**PREVENTION TACTICS**

If you want to keep from hearing product complaints, the best approach is to avert that problem in the first place. Actually, 99 percent of all product complaints can be prevented. At harvest, a customer should never be surprised by the performance of any of your varieties. If you follow the progress of each of your varieties, *with each buyer throughout* the growing season, both you *and* he/she will be aware of the possible performance issues way before harvest. By doing this, the buyer learns almost all performance issues are related to the environment or his/her management system and are not the fault of the particular variety.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR PRODUCT GETS BEAT?**

What *can* you do when trouble strikes and your customer says, “You got beat?” Here are a few tips to getting buyers back after they tell you your product was out performed by a competitor.

First, know it’s *not* your product’s fault. Virtually every product complaint I’ve had in my career was a result of the 1,000 plus variables that affected its intended performance, rather than a

deficiency of that variety. If you really don’t believe that, you need to let the customer go because you cannot possibly help him/her improve production by trying to *guess* which varieties will perform best next season—in an environment which will certainly be different from the previous year.

Second, be there at harvest. This fall, I received numerous phone calls from desperate field sellers asking what to do because their variety got beat and the buyer wants to leave. I ask them one simple question, “Did you ride their harvesters?” Most say no. The number one reason we ride harvesters is to get a progress report and gauge how far the grower has come toward our way of thinking since planting season. Complaints on the harvester tell you that you did not improve that grower’s understanding of product performance enough for him/her to blame something other than variety.

Third, know what to say. When the grower says, “Your variety got beat by 20 bushels,” the standard reaction is a three step process: 1) Panic. 2) Probing to find out why it happened. 3) Replacing that variety with a different one next season. All of which are the wrong reactions.

**EVERY PRODUCT COMPLAINT I’VE HAD IN MY CAREER WAS A RESULT OF THE 1,000 PLUS VARIABLES THAT AFFECTED ITS INTENDED PERFORMANCE.**



## RELATIONSHIPS

Always remember, the real problem involved in any product performance complaint is the grower's relationship with the sales representative. If that relationship is strong enough, the customer won't assign blame to the product's lack of performance. Instead, the grower will ask the representative what he/she, the grower, should be doing to improve next year's crop. End variety blaming immediately and start solving the relationship problem.

## HIT IT HOME

Tell him that your knowledge of products, his farm and what he needs is very important to his success. Tell him that you will be there when he plants, you will walk his fields during the season and you will be there when he harvests. Look him in the eye and reassure him that you will be with him to help minimize the effects of the variables and maximize performance. Remember, if he doesn't buy from you, his only other choice is to buy an unknown product from a competitor. That is a true shot-in-the-dark and a sure-fire way for him to lose. So, use the only meaningful sales tool you have to get a customer to buy and keep on buying—his faith in you.

## FOLLOW THIS DIALOGUE

As soon as a grower tells you that you got beat by 20 bushels, ask him this question in a very relaxed, non-intrusive manner,

"How long have you been farming, John?"

"20 years."

"How long have you been raising corn?"

"All of those 20 years."

"In those 20 years have you ever seen the same environment two years in a row or the same varieties on top two years in a row?"

"No, I guess not."

Now, look him in the eye and gently put a stop to this insane conversation.

"John, this is not a variety problem. The cropping plan we put together for you last year was the right one. It was designed to protect you from the more than 1,000 variables that hit us again this year and it did just that. Varieties are living, breathing organisms like you and me and there is no way of knowing which ones are going to perform the best from year to year because we can't predict all of the variables it will be exposed to. That's why we protect you by making sure we place several varieties on your farm every year."

## WHERE ON THE WEB

This column was written by Rod Osthus, publisher of the *Seed Seller Training Journal*. For more information and tips on selling seed, visit [RCTHOMAS.COM](http://RCTHOMAS.COM).

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