

Time of great reward, great temptation

I FOUND myself in a conversation with Tom Burrus of Burrus Hybrids the other day, when he commented that he'd been told he and his company are too honest. Really? That's possible?

In the hyper-competitive seed business, it seems it could be, at least for some folks. "We had somebody tell us, 'Don't tell people you're out of that



My Generation
By HOLLY SPANGLER

number! Write the order and make a substitute later," he recalls. "But that's not the way we do business. We want to write orders to their sons and grand-

sons. We want to be around."

Don't we all?

The question is, will we, like Burrus, make even the small choices honest ones? Or might we be willing to bend the ethics rules occasionally to our benefit?

A wise farmer once told me that with great reward comes great temptation. That may never be more true than in

production agriculture's current economic situation. We have the opportunity in 2008 to potentially triple our per-acre incomes, compared to just a couple of years ago. But when the chance to make that kind of money presents itself, what happens in the everyday situations?

Sticky fingers

Most of us aren't going to run out and steal a container of Roundup, but how tempting is it to double-book your seed orders, just to guarantee you get the hybrids you want, and figure you'll cancel them later? Burrus reports that it doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

Or what about grain sales? Say you've contracted December corn at \$4. That's a decent price, but now it's \$5.10. Banking and grain elevator industries harbor serious worries that farmers will attempt to walk away from those contracts.

Land may be the biggest pitfall. A 2006 ethics study conducted by our sister publication, *Farm Futures*, revealed that readers witnessed the biggest ethical lapses when it came to land competition. And 41% reported that competition for land had cost them friendships.

I don't know that the temptation is any greater for younger producers, but we definitely feel pressure to expand our land base, perhaps to a greater degree than our parents' generation. Interestingly, the ethics survey showed that most respondents wouldn't outbid a young farmer who needed to rent the land to survive. Perhaps this plays out differently when the rubber meets the road, or maybe different folks have different definitions of survival.

We do know that producers find it more difficult to figure out where the ethical line lies. Four out of five said they've never done anything in their business they're ashamed of. Yet the same number gave questionable answers to a variety of ethical scenarios. Seventeen percent chose flat-out illegal options.

Shifting sands

As young farmers, it feels like a particularly precarious juggling act. We want to be aggressive in our business decisions, but not at the cost of trampling over someone else. We want to take advantage of opportunities without taking advantage of anyone.

One farmer recently shared that he thinks a guy's more likely to be dishonest when his back is against the wall, as opposed to when he's just trying to make a little more. Unethical behavior may not look so bad if you believe you have few other choices.

Yet despite the rush to lock in exactly what they want, 99% of Burrus' customers do what they say they're going to do, he says. "There's not a sales agreement at Burrus. We do business on a handshake basis," he adds. "And honestly, growers appreciate being trusted."

Don't we all?

■ Comments? E-mail hspangler@farmprogress.com.



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