

The Plodding Tortoise

REGARDING RESEARCH, IT'S NOT AS IMPORTANT
TO BE FIRST AS IT IS TO BE RIGHT

By Karl Danneberger

I was glancing through a copy of *BusinessWeek* earlier this year and two articles caught my eye. The first article, "Why GM's Plan Won't Work," by David Welch and Dan Beucke, outlines the fiscal difficulty facing General Motors if not its outright survival. Obviously there are many factors involved in the decline of General Motors (the day I read this article GM's debt was downgraded to junk), but what really struck me was the research expenditures for GM were half that of Toyota, which is not as large as GM but is seeing a steady rise in profits and market share.

Like Toyota, our own industry has had an unwavering commitment to research and education. I'm a product of that investment through the support of my undergraduate and graduate education and the research support that has been provided to me for more than 20 years here at The Ohio State University. I am, however, just a miniscule part of what has been produced — bright, well-trained individuals conducting turfgrass research at both universities and in the private sector; and just as important, if not more, an enthusiastic intelligent entrepreneurial workforce.

Although I do not have the figures, I'm willing to bet

that support for turfgrass research and education continues to grow at a steady rate within our industry. It has manifested itself in the expansion and growth of the turf industry and in innovative new technologies. From a global perspective, the amount of turfgrass support and research generated in the

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United States has no peer. The basic management practices that are instituted internationally are driven by turf research generated here in the United States.

From a cautionary perspective, research is not something that is flicked on and off like a switch. The continual support that has been provided in the past by public institutions, turfgrass-associated organizations, foundations and private companies has resulted in an industry vitality that is not matched by many same-size industries. The future of our industry is bright as long as we keep the light on.

The second article of importance is "Genentech's Lessons for Big Pharma" by Catherine Arnst. She describes Genentech's past 15-year business plan as a "willingness to plod through the science," while its competitors paid attention to marketing, acquisitions or patents. Genentech is now the out-front leader in cancer drug discovery.

In our industry, research is not immune to market pressures, nor should it be. However, in a constantly changing world we often get caught up in quickly producing — something, anything — that might be a saleable item or get us promotion and tenure. It's important that we remind ourselves that research does not lend itself easily to "spin," "market forces" or "quick results." Research is a "prodding" process, a tortoise in the race with the hare. Frequently changing research objectives or pressure for instant results produces shallow, questionable research

that in the long run probably does us no good.

Focus and staying the course is the guiding light when conducting research. To stay the course, however, takes a lot of nerve and trust by both the industry and the scientists.

The ideas and support of the turfgrass industry, in combination with scientific freedom to conduct research that scientists think is of value, has been the hallmark of turfgrass research. But that trust takes constant communication between everyone associated with turf.

Finally, in this race — and contrary to what some of you might believe — I'm reminded that it is not as important to be first, as it is to be right.

(Disclaimer: Neither my family nor I own stock in Genentech. And I currently drive a Pontiac.)

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Quotable

"Primo is a mechanic's best friend."

— Scott Niven, certified golf course superintendent at the Stanwich Club in Greenwich, Conn., during a seminar on fine turf management with plant growth regulators.

"WARNING: If you aim for the road, you will be asked to hit the road."

— A sign at the Fenmivay Golf Range in Medina Township, Ohio, which is located next to a busy thoroughfare.