



## Follow your white rabbit

**A**lice in Wonderland has been called one of the best examples of the “literary nonsense” genre. Not really the biggest compliment. In fact, when the book was released in 1865 depicting a ‘Wonderland’ behind a small door reminiscent of the forbidden Cathedral Garden in which the author wasn’t allowed to play, it received little attention and poor reviews.

But by the end of the 19th century, Sir Walter Besant said it “was a book of that extremely rare kind which will belong to all the generations to come.”

From nonsense to infamy.

Alice has been on my mind a lot lately. During February’s Great Big Home & Garden Expo in Cleveland, OH, landscape contractor exhibitors created gardens inspired by films. Attendees were lined

up outside some of the most iconic, which included the *Alice in Wonderland* garden by Barnes Nursery. No one can deny the imagery an Alice-themed garden can inspire.

To become a literary classic, *Alice in Wonderland* had to be different, unusual. The author had to take extreme risks, fearing ridicule and failure.

As business owners, you make these same choices

everyday. You can choose to follow the status quo, conduct business as usual and be moderately successful as a result (the straight and narrow path). Or you can step outside of your comfort zone and do something completely different, risking failure and remarkable success beyond industry expectations and business norms (Wonderland). It’s a classic gamble where the resulting failures and successes are equally great.

One of the best examples of a risk-taking innovator who took a chance on an idea and is today experiencing great success while its main competitor suffers great failure is Netflix. When Netflix execs

first came up with their business model of mail-order video based on convenience and limited fees and labor costs, they took the concept to Blockbuster, and “they just about laughed us out of their office,” says Barry McCarthy, Netflix CEO.

Today, Blockbuster execs aren’t laughing. Netflix has more than 20 million members as of January. With a \$9 per month membership fee, that amounts to more than \$2 billion annually in gross revenue. Basically, “a small new entrant ran by a brilliant tech savvy individual tore the heart out of a giant video rental,” shares Don Seal of the Smallcap Network. “Blockbuster’s board members ... didn’t understand that generation ‘Y’ would rather watch TV on their laptops.”

Today, Blockbuster has stock trading at \$0.09 and is going through a slow, painful bankruptcy, while Netflix remains one of the hottest stocks, trading at \$217 per share, Seal explains.

All because one business was thinking outside of the box and the other was “too little, too late,” Seal says.

If the rise and fall of Blockbuster has taught us anything it’s “evolve or fall by the wayside,” points out Mike Schuster, a Minyanville.com staff writer.

While it’s not easy to translate Netflix’s idea to the landscape industry, it’s not as hard as you think to put a new spin on something you do. At PLAN-ET’s Executive Forum this February, innovation was the theme, and I was surrounded by new ideas. Yardmaster’s Kurt Kluznik tried a weekend work schedule to gain better equipment utilization (see more on page 28). Davey Tree helped the USDA Forest Service develop i-Tree to track the relevance and value of trees on properties (see more on page 14). Dennis’ Seven Dees Landscaping’s David Snodgrass introduced “checkbook” thinking to his foremen to help them better understand job costs.

The ideas don’t have to be big or transform the industry. In fact, they may even prove unsuccessful. That’s the risk you take. If the new concept ultimately improves the way you and your people think, you win.

The lesson: Never be afraid to follow your white rabbit. You never know where it’ll take you.



Tea party anyone? Barnes Nursery’s *Alice in Wonderland* garden.