GOOD NEWS, FINALLY, ON THE ECONOMY?

Several months ago, when the 14 members of SAF’s Board of Directors gathered together in Alexandria, Va., for our fall meeting, I heard something I haven’t heard in nearly a decade: unanimous agreement that the current year had been strong — along with a universal feeling of optimism about the coming new year.

As each person weighed in, I realized the good news was coming from all segments: growers, wholesalers, retailers and suppliers. As a longtime member of the volunteer board, I left the meeting feeling pretty good myself.

Maybe, I thought, we’re finally leaving this recession behind.

Since that time, as I’ve visited with floral industry members around the country and read detailed news stories and economic reports, my own sense of optimism has intensified. A number of important indicators are signaling a turn in the country’s economic future. Consider:

■ In November, retail sales rose by the most in eight months, according to U.S. government reports, and many experts were predicting a strong holiday season.

■ The Thomson Reuters/University of Michigan preliminary Index of Consumer Sentiment reading for December came in at 93.8, the highest since January 2007 and above the median economists polled by Reuters.

■ The survey’s Index of Consumer Expectations also rose to 86.1 from 79.9, also the highest since January 2007.

These numbers are critically important to our industry, because the U.S. depends more on consumer spending and retail sales than any other country. When consumers feel confident and have more disposable income (as many do now, thanks to record-low gas prices), our industry stands to benefit, particularly those businesses that survived the economy by becoming leaner and more focused.

This is not to say that everything is rosy. Many Americans, including floral industry members, still feel the pain of our long recession. And we all face challenges, some of them outside our control: potential disruptions along the supply chain, immigration reform, and foreign affairs, including the battles and economic woes of far-away nations that, in our globalized economy, aren’t that far away at all.

Still, even though I am a fairly optimistic guy, my positive outlook now isn’t a result of speculation or magical thinking. Instead, it’s a product of reading widely, talking to people inside and outside of the industry and reflecting on the key indicators above, along with many others.

I’m not alone in coming to the conclusion that we have reason to feel better lately: After the midterm elections last fall, our government may finally have received the message that we need them to find common ground on tough issues. In addition, the Economist magazine recently outlined the countries in greatest danger of prolonged economic hardship. For the first time in years, the U.S. wasn’t on their list. That’s an important step forward.

As we move into 2015, we must ask: What do we as business leaders do now? How do we grow even stronger this year?

Those of us who came out of the recession by adapting our businesses are in the best position to capitalize on these positive dynamics. But we have to take advantage of that common ground on tough issues. In addition, the Economist magazine recently outlined the countries in greatest danger of prolonged economic hardship. For the first time in years, the U.S. wasn’t on their list. That’s an important step forward.

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