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JACQUELINE GOLD

All I want for Christmas...

The Ann Summers chief executive explains why green fingers are likely to come in handy for the run-up to December

Sunshine, the garden's in bloom and the diet to get into that fabulous new bikini is in full swing. It can only mean one thing: Christmas.

It's everywhere. The buying team has taken over the boardroom for the final presentation. The design department is putting the finishing touches to the Christmas catalogue. Not content with mock shops, the visual merchandising teams are planning dawn raids to stores to see how good it'll all look in November, while the PR team is asking where their press samples are.

I tell you what: Christmas doesn't half spoil a great summer. I just thank God nobody's offered me any mulled wine.

Right now, I can't decide whether every retailer is looking forward to Christmas or dreading it. If your glass is half full, you'll be confidently predicting that it'll be a bumper season and that it will right all that's wrong with sales at the moment.

The glass-half-empty brigade will be updating their CVs and getting out quick, while they can blame it on the products given to them by the buying team. Many of you will have sat through presentations in the past couple of months - some of you will have given them - where the opening slide tells us that 'while we're doing badly, we're not doing quite as badly as so and so'.

Or, for the first time, the sales team have stopped talking about sales growth and have gone to make friends in finance to see if they've got a healthier-sounding profit figure they can borrow.

So, with Christmas on its way, perhaps the first thing to put on our wish-lists is that those of us who are still experiencing decent sales growth should stop banging on about it. So I hereby promise to keep quiet.

What else are we going to wish for this Christmas and in the months leading up to it? A long hot summer to clear all those gypsy skirts and shrugs you bought deep into, when they assured you they were so on trend and were sure to fly? Or a cut in interest rates to boost consumer confidence? Like all these elements that none of us can control, we might as well address them to Santa Claus, North Pole and hope for the best.

Alternatively, you could step out of the office, go home early and get some inspiration from your summer garden. A little weeding here, a little phosphate there, some water and a lot of sunshine and in a few weeks - maybe a few moths - you'll be surprised how good it'll look.

Like most parts of our businesses, there's probably not an awful lot wrong with your staff, but sometimes you've just got to be patient and nurture what you have. In particular, you've got to give your retail staff some sunshine.

At the moment they, more than anything or anyone else, are the ones who can have a positive impact on your business. If they think they're going to get pruned, they probably won't bother flowering.