TECHNOLOGY UNDERCOVER: POS SYSTEMS

Part 1 of 2: Vetting the vendors and the products.

This two-part series will provide you with all the info, insight and perspective you'll need to make the best technology choice for your shop.

BY TIM HUCKABEE, AIFSE

Which point-of-sale (POS) system should you buy? That's a complex and layered question. And it has always been a hard one for flower shop owners to answer—until now!

This first-of-its-kind, two-part column is a comprehensive, objective look at all the technology options available for various types of flower shops—from those that are just starting up to those looking to switch providers to those (at long last) making the leap from paper to keyboard.

I say "comprehensive" and "objective" because for the past 20 years, my team at **FloralStrategies** and I have taught thousands of florists across the world how to better sell to and serve their customers—and how to integrate technology into that. Because of that, I have intimate first-hand knowledge of the various POS programs. I jokingly but truthfully say that I am "non-denominational" because I know every major POS system but have no favorite.

I also know how these systems are sold: promises that are made, features that are stressed, weaknesses that aren't mentioned as well as installation and training stories, staff feedback and much more.

My goal for this two-part article (Part 2 will appear in the November issue) is to give you all the perspective and insight you need to make the best technology choice for your shop—based on facts, not emotion or sales pressure.

get with the program

I regularly meet shop owners who use no technology at all, and I would like to address that group first. I began working at a flower shop in New York City in 1993, and we took orders on paper. About a year later, we computerized, and there was no looking back. I remember asking my co-workers just days after our installation, "How did we ever manage to do all this work on paper?"

To those who are still holding out on transitioning from scratch pad to keyboard, I have some tough love: *Get with the program!* Point-of-sale software today is easy to use and very affordable. There is no excuse for a flower shop, no matter how small, in the 21st century not to be using technology to run the business.

Customers want their totals and email receipts during the sales call, not afterward. More than ever, shoppers are in a rush and don't want to have to hunt for

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Grandma's address or their niece's phone number, and they expect you to have it instantly available from their previous orders.

My final rant is that you're literally robbing yourself if you are not selling from a computer screen showing the caller's average sale and buying patterns. You need software. Now, let's move on.

questions to ask

Whether you are an established florist looking to make your initial leap to POS, one who wants to change suppliers for any number of reasons, or a new florist

looking for a system, I've created a list of questions to ask each vendor and noted some factors to consider so you can make the best choice based on facts, not a snap decision that you may later regret.

Typically, the first step is reaching out to a vendor to learn more about his or her product, how it's priced and what's involved with getting on board. That initial outreach triggers the sales call. And this is the first place where things can go very bad very fast.

I have no problem with a sales pitch; sales techniques are what I teach. I just don't want you to fall for sales pressure. Don't be intimidated by the "You have to sign up now to get this special pricing" shtick. Take your time, and do your homework; there will always be a deal to be had.

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After your initial demonstration (which is designed to excite you and motivate you to sign on the dotted line), ask each of the vendors you're considering for the following information:

1. Ask for the names and contact information for at least three shops your size that have been on the system for at least a year. Let the vendors know that you want to talk candidly to those people about their experiences.

Each POS vendor should have an army of happy users who are willing to talk about their experiences, from installation through heavy use at the holidays. And when you're talking to those shop owners, ask them about their training experience and what support is like from each vendor.

2. Ask for the name of at least one shop that is using the software and is within an hour's drive from you so that you could maybe visit to see the system in action and talk to staff about how they like it.

3. Ask each vendor the main reason(s) shops stop using his or her software. If you get anything other than quick, complete answers from a potential vendor, end your dialogue right there. If a vendor avoids sharing shops' grievances or, worse, makes the claim "All our users just love us!" move on.

This is what I call the "homework phase"; it should take you at least a month to complete—just in time for the second part of this column. Take copious notes as you do your research. Mark down highlights of your conversations with users, remembering to ask them what they *don't* like about the systems they're using. And if you have any questions while you're interviewing vendors, email me at tim@floralstrategies.com.

what you'll learn in part 2

Next month I'm going to delve into the many options including buying a POS system from a wire service versus an independent source and buying a trusted "legacy" brand versus a newer (cheaper) system on the market. I'll discuss hardware, cloud-based versus server-based systems, website integration, hidden costs, contract pitfalls and much more.

In the meantime, get started with this homework assignment so that you can prepare to have a new POS system operational in your shop before the Christmas rush—or at least right after the first of the year, before Valentine's Day and the rest of the spring holidays and occasions hit. ■

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