



SHOP TWO: THE PUZZLED VETERAN

THE SECOND IN MY NEW SERIES OF ARTICLES IN WHICH I EXAMINE AND ANALYZE THE INNER WORKINGS - GOOD AND BAD - OF THREE REAL FLOWER SHOPS.

BY **TIM HUCKABEE, FSC**

"I've been in business for 40 years, and suddenly, it's all just slowing down. Very frustrating!" **Debbie Samford**, the owner of **Carriage Flowers & Gifts** in Lake Jackson, Texas, shared with me when I visited her shop in June. Debbie's story is the second installment in this new three-part series spotlighting *real* florists, like you, and the steps we'll take to make them more profitable.

My name is **Tim Huckabee, FSC**, and I have been contributing to *Florists' Review* since 2007. I've also coached more than 6,000 retail florists around the world on how to increase sales every day. While on site, I also learn their best practices, many of which we're going to implement in Debbie's shop. I encourage you to read about all three flower shops, both here in the magazine and on the new Facebook page, "SOS Flower Shop."

Now, back to Carriage Flowers & Gifts.

Lake Jackson is located about one hour south of Houston, and with a population of around 30,000, it's archetypal small-city America. The competition includes two other flower shops, big-name grocery store floral departments and the usual online vendors. Debbie has a beautiful store and offers great design, but she worries that customers perceive her



store as being too expensive. Nevertheless, Debbie remains passionate about serving her community with great design and exemplary service, but she knows she can't simply wish her way into being busier.

SNAPSHOT

Carriage Flowers & Gifts generates less than \$500,000 in sales annually, primarily in cut flowers and plants, with some giftware. Most business takes place over the phone though customers regularly stop in to browse and visit. The web business is steady, but Debbie knows she could grow those sales if she spent more time managing her website and promoting the store on social media. Debbie uses an independent POS system but has no wire-service affiliation and doesn't deal with inbound or outbound orders. The current average sale is \$85, and I expect that number to rise as the ladies start using their new **FloralStrategies** skills. Debbie does not produce many weddings nor does she get much prom work. As you see in the photo on Page 55, there's a lot of space dedicated to premium jewelry – great add-on sale items. Her team consists of one full-time designer and three part-timers.

STRUGGLES

"It really hurt me when two long-term employees, whom I treated like family, took advantage of my generosity," Debbie told me as we sat on the back patio of the shop. A very real issue in smaller shops is not drawing the line between a work and personal relationship, often ending





Debbie and her team to the FloralStrategies process of selling, which is based on educating customers better in terms of size and style while, ironically, steering away from talking about specific flowers. We also talked about the worst question you could ever ask a customer: “How much do you want to spend?” Now, Debbie and her ladies know the smarter, easier way to engage customers.

Additionally, we talked about not being afraid to offer customers higher price points, when appropriate. That thinking applies not only to phone and web sales but also to the front cooler. Ask yourself, reader, could a customer come in to your shop today and find a design for more than \$100 on display, or would he have to settle for one at \$65?

During our session, I identified several opportunities for Debbie to earn more every day.

When customers call the shop, they're told there is a minimum for delivery. This is a common practice but not the best one if you're trying to keep customers happy. What if the caller wants to send only a single rose for sentimental or symbolic reasons; does he really have to pay \$45? Not anymore. Don't chase customers into the hands of your competition because you won't deliver a small order. Furthermore, don't let the exception dictate the rule: How often do customers really try to spend only \$15 on a product for delivery?

badly. Thankfully, Debbie found great new staff (*above*), and she's more careful about maintaining boundaries now.

“There are some major companies in our backyard, and they use us for some work, but I would like to get a bigger chunk of their business,” Debbie shares. “Likewise, I've tried getting my flowers into local businesses, but they don't think that way or have the budget.” I replied that we just have to rethink her approach and tactics, and, hopefully, we can spark some new business from those companies.



ACTION PLAN

I started my day by motivating the team with my real secret weapon: black-and-white cookies from New York City (a little sugar boost always helps to keep their attention!). Over the course of the day, I introduced

On the social media front, Debbie had been paying hundreds of dollars a month to have a company simply shuffle images on her site and post generic Facebook updates. Luckily, there is a nearby vo-tech school with a floral department. Debbie is going to bring in an apprentice to help manage her website and social media and teach her how to do it herself. Tick the box for saving money!

When I broached the topic of fruit/gourmet baskets, I heard the typical small-shop response: “We don't sell them very often, and it's a hassle to go shop for the ingredients, and we never make enough money.” So, the first step was to rethink their pricing and how baskets are sold, doing away with outdated statement, “Our baskets start at ...” in favor of the smarter 21st-century approach, “Yes, we can create a

wonderful fruit and gourmet basket for you. How many people would you like it to serve?" Then the staff member simply has to read the description and price range from Debbie's new sales chart. Additionally, I suggested keeping a basket on display (with marble or quality plastic fruit) with signage stating, "Ask about our NEW basket collection. Perfect for congratulations, get well and much more!"

Rather than just settling for the random event work or get-well arrangement from those big local companies, Debbie is going to take the bull by the horns. She is going to call and make appointments to meet with the HR people and bring a free arrangement (for a potential weekly lobby order) and talk about offering all employees a discount or special deal at Carriage Flowers.

Finally, I found the staff guilty of a financial mistake that's all too common in retail florist shops today: not taking an outgoing order and, instead, offering to google a shop or simply telling customers to do so on their own. Carriage Flowers is doing a 180-degree turn on that topic, starting by offering that service and actually promoting it to customers (sending outbound orders is easy money!). Customers rely on us to help get flowers delivered anywhere. If you turn them away, you're really giving them one more reason to go elsewhere for flowers or, worse, send some other type of gift.

DEBBIE SAYS

"I'm not ready to retire yet," Debbie says. "I love this business and my community. I think we need to get over some of our old habits and misconceptions about spending patterns and the way we've been doing some things in the shop."

I called Debbie shortly after my visit, and she told me that the very next day, she made several \$100 sales and was surprised at how easily customers spent what she had feared offering them before!

THE FINAL WORD

After scrutinizing all of Carriage Flowers' fundamental business practices, I believe Debbie will realize that the biggest change to running her shop is to simply focus on making it easier for customers to spend more. And they will. ■

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