



SHOP ONE: THE ARTISTIC TECHNOPHOBE

THE FIRST 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**

"Paint takes too long to dry, so when I realized that I could be artistic with flowers instead, I became a florist," states **George Cuellar**, the owner of **Coqui Designs** in Cedar Grove, N.J. George and his staff are the first of three florist shops to be featured in this new behind-the-scenes "florimentary," **SOS: Flower Shop**, demonstrating how typical flower shops, like yours, can easily become more profitable.

My name is **Tim Huckabee, FSC**. You may know me from previous contributions to *Florists' Review* and my educational work in our industry. Last year I approached *FR* Publisher Travis Rigby with a novel concept for the magazine: Let's show readers how "average" flower shops, run by busy, stressed-out, artistic entrepreneurs, can invigorate their sales. I proposed to feature three florists from different demographics who share your struggles about staffing, design, sales, technology and general business issues. I want to inspire you as I coach them to implement easy, practical solutions. And we'll supply all the tools so you can have the same success.



The three winning shops to be profiled are from New Jersey, Illinois and Texas. I started on the East Coast and worked my way west.

Coqui Designs was started in 1986 and operates in a converted house in affluent leafy suburban New Jersey. Though only 20 miles from New York City, George's customers are more likely to shop at a local mall than on Fifth Avenue. They want value, service and great design. And George knows that he must adopt 21st-century business practices to keep them happy.

SNAPSHOT

Like many small shops, Coqui Designs grosses less than \$1 million a year, split about 80/20 between phone sales and walk-in business. There are virtually no online sales. Although the shop uses wire-service technology, it doesn't fill incoming orders and sends out very few. The current average sale is \$72, healthy by national standards but not as high as it could be. The staff coordinate roughly 50 weddings a year. In addition to flowers and plants (heavy on orchids), Coqui offers an eclectic range of giftware from sassy greeting cards to locally made woodcrafts. There's a cool "loungy-y" vibe to the store, making it enjoyable to shop there.

STRUGGLES

"Customers don't have realistic expectations for their budgets," George shares with a gentle eye roll. Sound familiar?

"I never did much with our website because I'm not good with technology. I figured customers would see something on our site and just call us," he states.

This is not the first time I've heard that excuse for not having an e-commerce-enabled website where customers can shop 24 hours a day.

"And it's a pain when they ask for a picture of their flowers before I send them out," George adds.

But that's about to change. (*Hint: See the list of sponsors on Page 41.*) Although Coqui uses POS technology, they first take orders on paper and then enter them into the system. Who wants to do double the work?

Further impacting the company, George does not do any type of marketing or promotion beyond placing weekly arrangements at a local bakery and restaurant with the shop's business card. Once we get his sales on track, we'll tackle getting more traffic into the store.



ACTION PLAN

The first step in changing the mind-set and culture at Coqui was to train the team to listen better and, when appropriate, sell higher. I took George and the team through an intensive three-hour workshop during which they learned new thinking, like the simple concept of not being afraid to hear “no” from customers. You won't lose the sale; you just give them another price point or option.

We also explored opportunities to generate easy extra revenue. For example, as in many small shops, George does not charge customers an express fee when they need flowers designed and delivered in a flash. He does it “as a favor.”

I reminded him of two points: You can't pay your bills with “favors,” and customers are prepared to pay for extra service. Coqui has implemented (and already sold) a new “Express Delivery Service” for an extra \$10 when customers request a rush order.

Although there is not a lot of walk-in traffic, we discussed keeping at least a \$100 arrangement in the front cooler always. And several have already sold. Customers can buy only what you offer them, and, too often, they settle for a \$75 design because that's the highest price you're comfortable to display.

Coqui does lots of funeral work but had not been charging for scripted ribbons, instead, claiming to “back them out of the total cost.” Sounds good, but it rarely happens. After explaining that the national average for a basic “Beloved Grandma” ribbon is \$10, George agreed to adopt the same pricing. Upon my calling the shop a week after my visit, George mentioned that not a single customer has voiced opposition to the price!

I have always said that adopting new sales and service techniques is like going on a diet. Even with the best intentions, it takes a while to change old habits and learn new patterns. However, if you stay focused

on the plan, you will begin to see steady increasing results. Check back here next month for an update from George and his team about how their new policies and procedures are working. Coqui also is enrolled in **FloralStrategies' TOTALtraining program** for ongoing sales support including mystery shoppers calls and other tools to keep the momentum going.

GEORGE SAYS

I asked George a few questions starting with what he sees as his shop's biggest struggle. He responded, “Getting customers to spend more. It feels like pulling teeth sometimes to get them out of the budgets they have been spending for years. Now I realize that I may be part of that problem!”

Next, I asked if he could wave his magic wand (all florists have one, real or metaphorical), what would he change about his customers' habits. “I wish they would be more realistic about their budgets,” he answered. “They seem to always have champagne tastes and beer budgets!”

Finally, I posed the tough question: Where does he see the industry in 10 years? “I expect more contraction and fewer brick-and-mortar shops opening, with grocery stores picking up the slack. I just hope that consumers don't start to settle for cookie-cutter designs instead of coming to us for our unique creativity.”



THE FINAL WORD

As I was winding down my visit, George made a powerful comment that I hope all hear as a loud and clear mandate. “I did not realize just how big a role technology plays in our customers' lives and how much it needs to



be integrated into the way we run the shop. I know I have to stop making excuses and embrace this new way of doing business if I am going to thrive." ■

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