

DON'T PLAY THE FLORAL BLAME GAME

The future of floral retailing can be rosy and bright, but common issues plague far too many shops. Tim Huckabee, FSC, identifies five of them and offers suggestions for fixing the problems.

BY TIM HUCKABEE, FSC

After 20 years of visiting flower shops across the world and speaking at hundreds of conventions, I have observed some recurring trends and patterns shared by many florists. I am thankful to *Florists' Review* for giving me the chance to share these observations and to offer you a new perspective on the big issues impacting our industry.

The number of retail flower shops operating in North America today is a fraction of what it was 10 years ago, let alone 20. Paradoxically, the population, and its buying power, has steadily increased.

So what happened? Ask nearly any florist, and you'll hear a quick list of culprits: the Internet, grocery stores, wire services, order gatherers, direct shippers, deceptive advertisers, "in lieu of flowers ..." obituaries, the lady on the corner selling from a shopping cart, and on and on. Curiously, one responsible group is never mentioned. More on it later.

None of these factors is the sole source for the industry's contraction. Rather, it's a toxic combination of many of them.





Colored ICE DECORATIVE GLASS

Stylize décor with sleek, clear Colored ICE! Great for home décor, & floral centerpieces. Drop them into vases, bowls or scatter them onto your table for the perfect accent!

Get your Sandtastik Colored ICE today!



Reflective!

16+ Colors
to choose from!



Sandtastik Products Ltd.

t. 905.734.7340 | e. support@floralsand.com
www.floralsand.com

ORDER NOW • We Ship UPS Daily!

However, with some fresh thinking we can turn things around.

While it's too much of a broad stroke to use terminology like "a typical retail florist," there are certain habits, patterns, philosophies and mind-sets that I have observed over and over, regardless of the store's size, length of time in business or location. And I am going to delve into those common issues this month and next: This month, 1) asking customers, "How much do you want to spend?"; 2) acrimony toward grocery stores; 3) reluctance to embrace technology; 4) relying too heavily on wire-service membership; 5) always buying the same flowers; and next month, 6) fear of offering higher prices on all goods and services; 7) letting sales drive design instead of the inverse; 8) not offering an updated mix of products; 9) complaining on social media; and 10) crushing profits by selling too low.

This article is a strong dose of tough love, but it's meant with the best intention: to empower our industry, from the smallest shops to the largest, to take back our customers, serve better and sell bigger!

1. ASKING CUSTOMERS HOW MUCH THEY WANT TO SPEND

Can you think of any other retailer on the planet that starts transactions by asking, "How much do you want to spend?" I hear only florists making that mistake. Take a step back, and think about what's going on. Your customer just found out that someone in her life was taken sick, closed on a new home, just got engaged or any other of a dozen possible *emotional* experiences. Rather than connecting with the customer and offering something special, we insult her by coldly asking for money. That silly approach takes the customer's focus off her special needs and forces her to choose a random price out of thin air. Customers typically sputter back with a response like, "Uh, I don't know. Is \$50 enough?" And then you're locked into that price.

It's insane when you pause and recognize that asking that question has become the accepted norm in our industry for engaging customers. We ourselves have set the bar so horribly

low. Remember, I forewarned you about some tough love.

GET PROACTIVE Suggest an appropriately priced item, based on the customer's needs, and she will let you know if she wants to spend less (or, sometimes, more). Sell to what you learn from the card message (which you should take *before* discussing flowers). Pause and ask yourself these questions:

- What is the customer celebrating?
- What is the relationship between the sender and recipient?
- How many names are listed on the message?

Then share your advice: "To celebrate such a big event, I recommend one of our beautiful large vase arrangements filled with bright spring flowers and priced from \$100 to \$125."

It's really that easy. And the worst that the customer can say is, "No" – but you won't lose the sale. I promise.

2. ACRIMONY TOWARD GROCERY STORES

A lone retail florist will never match (let alone beat) supermarket prices for flowers, so give up the fight. It's a David-and-Goliath battle not even worth waging.

Instead of worrying about something you can't change, focus on giving customers better design and better service — the elements of the shopping experience at which you can excel. When customers comment, "I saw these for half this price at CheapoMart," respond professionally: "I don't know how they price their items, but we carry only *florist-quality* flowers that we will *professionally* design and *hand deliver* for you, happily. Thanks for choosing to call/visit us!"

GET PROACTIVE Don't apologize for your prices. That thinking just feeds the customer misconception that you're simply overcharging for the same product that supermarkets offer.

Instead, as outlined above, teach your staff to educate your customers about the differences beyond price, and grab the sale. Furthermore, you're the creative source, so let customers pay a premium for your talent. In other words, make your poinsettia or bunch of tulips

look more special than your competition, and customers will pay for the upgraded option. Remember, they came to you *after* visiting the grocery store.



3. RELUCTANCE TO EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

Have you ordered a pizza by phone lately? It's amazing that they know it's me, where I live *and* what I want — in an instant. That experience is a perfect example of using technology to make for a quicker, bigger and easier sale. “Mr. Huckabee, in addition to your favorite pizza, we're running a special on garlic bread tonight ...”

Why don't we *really* use our technology to run our shops better? Some readers have been on the same technology for more than a decade, but does your staff know where to find a customer's average sale? Ditto for being able to quickly find and duplicate an old order.

Worse still, I visit shops where it is actually *policy* to take orders on paper and then enter them into the POS system later! That approach is as illogical and time-consuming as delivering the flowers in the morning and then sending your driver back with the card in the afternoon.

Customers expect us to have and use technology — to remind them of what they sent before, to be able to confirm a delivery address, to *instantaneously* email a copy of the order. If you're not operating that way, you're wasting time, increasing the likelihood of making mistakes and *underwhelming* customers with your 1997 pen-and-paper experience.

GET PROACTIVE Learn your system; it's that simple. Whether you have a legacy system from a wire service or a new web-based program, you need more training. Reach out to your vendor and *demand* more education, by either live or recorded

webinars or a visit from a tech trainer. You and your team need to know all the amazing things your technology is capable of beyond the order-entry fundamentals.

If you have staff members “of a certain age” or who are keyboard phobic, that is no excuse for them to take their orders on paper. There are many online tutorials for basic typing skills aimed at adults. Check out my favorite, Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing (mavisbeaconfree.com).

Every week, I see that shops that actively integrate technology into selling flowers continue to grow and prosper. Don't be left behind!

4. RELYING TOO HEAVILY ON YOUR WIRE-SERVICE MEMBERSHIP(S)

Think about drinking wine. Some recent medical research suggests that a glass of wine with dinner is good for you. But a bottle of wine every night will undoubtedly lead you in a very different direction!

I see many florists leaning on incoming orders for too large of a portion of their daily business. Remember, those are heavily discounted orders. Would you tell every customer who calls or comes in that she'll automatically get a 30 percent discount (or higher)? Probably not.

Beyond just filling orders, I see some owners turn over to their wire service nearly every aspect of running the shop, from managing the website to supplying fresh flowers, from determining what to offer at holidays to what to charge for what's in their coolers. It's great that the wire services provide all these options; just make sure they're the best choice for *your* bottom line. Again, think about moderation.

I am not taking a stance on whether you should be in a wire service; that's a business decision you have to make on your own. I'm simply asking you to ponder my wine analogy: Enjoy the benefits, but don't go overboard. Also, I'm asking you to remember that now, more than ever, wire services *need* you and what your shop is capable of producing and delivering on their behalf.

GET PROACTIVE Don't succumb to high-pressure sales tactics. Like all of us, the wire services are in business to make money; however, buy their products and



Express Universal 300

Keep it Simple:
Don't Cut Your Stems!



Express Universal 300 is our new technology that eliminates the need to recut your stems.

- ✓ **Saves Time:** NO need to recut
- ✓ **No Mess:** No cut ends to clean up
- ✓ **Same long-lasting flower arrangements you come to expect from Floralife® products**

SEEING IS BELIEVING.

Get Your **FREE** Express Universal 300 Trial Kit Today! *

See first hand why you can stop cutting stems!

**While supplies last.*

The Express Universal 300 Kit includes:

One pint of Express Universal 300, instructions to see Express Universal 300 in action and an evaluation form to share your results.

FOR YOUR FREE KIT EMAIL US AT:
marketing@smithersoasis.com

www.floralife.com

THE #1 GARLAND- MAKING SYSTEM IN AMERICA



**MAXIMIZE PROFITS...
MINIMIZE LABOR**

Now, **YOU** can
make quality
garland, expertly,
quickly, cheaply.

**CORD AND WIRE
ALWAYS AVAILABLE.**



1-877-688-6889
www.garlandmaker.com

Classico Mfg. Co.
P.O. Box 660656 • Arcadia, CA 91066
Phone (626) 355-4600 • Fax (626) 355-0431

services on your schedule after you have done the research and price comparison to other vendors for websites, POS technology, containers, etc. Likewise, remember that you are their customer, and make them work for your business. Don't be afraid to ask for better deals and better rates. Negotiate with them like a businessperson so you're making maximum profits for your all hard work.

5. ALWAYS BUYING THE SAME FLOWERS

Do you remember when Gap almost went bankrupt about 10 years ago? They offered good design, and their staff was friendly – but that wasn't enough. Customers wanted excitement. Their problem was lack of innovation; customers were tired of buying the same old khakis and polos. Gap did its homework, brought in new designers and turned itself around.

Now think about your shop. Look in the cooler: Are you still selling the same flowers you were offering 10 or 20 years ago? Have you noticed how supermarkets bring in new floral product all the time? I'm not talking about high-end merchandise — even a purple carnation

is something new and eye-catching for some customers.

But the fault isn't totally yours for possibly falling into a "floral rut." I hold wholesalers partly to blame because they can get too comfy and fall into selling you only what you've historically bought. Ironically, it's never been easier for shops, even in the smallest markets, to get exciting new product from either a nearby wholesaler, an online source or farm direct. Please shake things up at your store, and customers will show their appreciation with their wallets.

GET PROACTIVE Shop differently. I know that some wholesalers call you every day with the same tired old question: "Do you need anything?" The answer is *yes*; you need some diversity of product!

Ask your sales rep point blank, "What are you selling to other area shops that you're not selling to me?" or "What's hot or what do you *love* – regardless of cost, tell me about it"

As you start to bring in new product, make sure to showcase it in your cooler, on the phone, on social media, in email blasts to customers, etc. Customers want new and different; make your shop is offering those choices!



FloralStrategies Celebrates 20 Years

The airlines love **Tim Huckabee**. Since 1997, when he started **FloralStrategies**, Tim has journeyed more than 2 million miles by plane, let alone miles traveled in rental cars.

Why so much travel? To train florists to serve better and sell bigger, one shop at a time.

Conservatively speaking, Tim guesstimates that he has visited more than 6,000 flower shops on four continents. And when not jetting around the globe, he continues to educate retailers with monthly webinars on topics ranging from wedding sales to staff management, holiday boot camps to design trends.

In 2012, Tim started a new division of his company, **TOTALtraining**, to give ongoing support to his customers by making secret-shopper calls to their staff and providing additional coaching.

Tim regularly speaks at regional and national conferences for organizations like the **Society of American Florists (SAF)** and the **British Florist Association (BFA)**. In addition, to keep in tune with consumers' ever-changing habits, Tim spends every busy floral holiday working at a different flower shop, answering the phones and taking orders, listening and learning.

Recognizing that Tim has observed so much about our industry over the past two decades, *Florists' Review* invited him to share what he sees as opportunities for improvement in retail flower shops, regardless of their size or locale. We hope you find his words inspiring and motivating. ■



Tim Huckabee, FSC, is president of FloralStrategies, a company that provides on-site sales and customer-service education to retail and wholesale florists. Contact him by e-mail at tim@floralstrategies.com, or visit www.floralstrategies.com.



ONLINE florists' review SOURCEBOOK

Your comprehensive source for products and services in the floral industry

Find products, services, schools, associations, wholesalers and more — right at your fingertips.

Connecting to the industry has never been easier.

sourcebook.floristsreview.com

ATTENTION TEACHERS

Give your students an edge in the floral industry with



Call or visit our website for a special low-rate student promotion package!

florists' review

(800) 367-4708

www.floristsreview.com/instructors

Visa, Mastercard, American Express and Discover accepted.