

# Simply Successful

By Christine Montgomery

**Sylvia Nichols' sales continue to grow in a tight economy that's caused at least 200 other flower shops to close in her state in the last three years. *Floral Management's* Marketer of the Year in the under \$1 million sales category shares her secrets of success.**

**L** imagine trying to do business in a place with a high unemployment rate and low household incomes. A place where more people are moving out every day than are moving in. A place where more than 200 florists went out of business within three years. This place was Connecticut in the early 1990s, when a statewide recession made it one of the most difficult places for a florist to do business.

Despite the bleak economy — which still continues to take its toll on Connecticut's floral trade — Sylvia Nichols has been running a stable flower shop in the tiny town of Cheshire during the last 18 years. While Cheshire is a relatively sound financial enclave of the state, it, too, felt the





## FLORAL MANAGEMENT'S

### Marketer of the Year

*under \$1,000,000  
in sales category*

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effects of recession, says Nichols, AIFD, president of The Window Box Inc. During the last couple of years she has seen her growth slow down and even her steady customers reign in their spending.

That's when Nichols took action. She implemented a highly-targeted marketing campaign to draw her local customer

base back into the shop and level out the sales peaks and valleys without increasing costs significantly.

"We didn't want them to think that we were too expensive and that the only place they could afford to buy everyday flowers was at the supermarket," Nichols says of the customers she thought she might be losing.

And the result of the campaign: success. Nichols came up with a program featuring an expressive yet inexpensive gift item that quickly became a branded product that customers ask for by name. At the same time, she positioned herself as a top-notch bridal florist and even booked a wedding with the largest floral budget in the shop's history. The bottom line: a 14 percent sales increase in 1995 over 1994 and a healthy profit margin. Here's how she did it.

## The Hook

Nichols knew she needed to create a compelling "hook" to draw customers back into the store. An inexpensive impulse item, she thought, like a bouquet. Something she could sell for \$6.95 with a 50 percent profit. The make-up of the bouquet would depend on the day's "leftover" product and would be fashioned into a small arrangement or a single flower in a little vase, flower pot or saucer she could buy at close-out sales.

In order to get customers interested, she needed a catchy name. And since she wanted all of her nine employees involved in the marketing effort, she called a meeting to explain her general concept and challenged them to a name-that-promotion contest. The person whose name was selected would receive dinner for two at a local restaurant.

"Simply Said" was the winning name. "It exemplified what we wanted the product to do," Nichols says. "It can be something for any occasion, it's short, alliterative and something we could easily incorporate in our print ads."

## Getting the Word Out

Nichols targeted existing customers and prospects in her immediate area with the Simply Said promotion. Her clientele, she says, are upscale, sophisticated professionals who have an appreciation for quality flowers and classic designs.

**Sylvia Nichols' simple plan brought more customers into her shop.**

**Photo by Stan Godlewski**





To promote the product in the shop, one display window featured several Simply Said arrangements under a large round neon-green Simply Said sign. Inside the shop, another display challenged customers to submit reasons for giving a Simply Said bouquet. Nichols used some of those suggestions in her print advertisements, and the customers whose ideas were used received a free Simply Said vase as a thank you. A few



of the best reasons for giving a Simply Said included: "I'm sorry I put the red socks in with the white"; "Thanks, Mom, for driving me to the mall."; and "Oops, my dog loved your garbage -- Sorry!"

"... WHEN WE CAN TALK TO THEM ONE-ON-ONE, THAT'S WHERE WE MAKE THE SALES. NOT FROM A NEWSPAPER AD."

Cheshire's weekly publication was the ideal print vehicle to reach her target, Nichols says. Many people in her community get the smaller paper, and it has been the most effective place to advertise in the past. And, because it's not a major daily newspaper, it has less-stringent publication rules and it granted Nichols' special placement requests. "You'd be reading about the zoning committee and see this little box that read 'Simply Said — Thanks, Mom, for driving me to the mall,'" she says. Nichols followed these small ads with larger ones in the classified, running several of the \$10-\$15 ads each week during the start of the promotion.

Building on the print ads, Nichols mailed 500 postcards to current customers telling them about the new product. Then she placed Simply Said arrangements in about 200 high-traffic locations throughout the community, including retail shops, the library, schools, the town's municipal offices, medical centers, the dry cleaners, and even at the service counters of two grocery stores that have floral departments of their own. Each arrangement had a Simply Said tag and the name, address and phone number of The Window Box.

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## The Results

After the first month of marketing, the shop sold 192 Simply Solds. In fiscal year 1995, total sales of the product equaled \$8,979. In all, her marketing costs totaled about \$1,500 — including the employee gift certificate (\$40), signs (\$62), postcards (\$56), postage (\$160), print advertisements (\$888), and the



200 free containers and flowers placed around town (\$283).

Today Nichols continues to sell an average of 100 Simply Saids a month. And as a result of the promotion, sales of other products and services have increased from the extra foot traffic. "I'm firmly convinced that once people come in and see what we have to offer, when we can talk to them one-on-one, that's where we make the sales," she says. "Not from a newspaper ad."

## Building Bridal Business

Nichols also wanted to increase her bridal business. She was booking about \$65,000 to \$70,000 in weddings a year — many of them from the residents in surrounding towns. She knew there was plenty of business to be had in her immediate area and she wanted to do something to attract it.

**"WHEN SOMEONE SAYS THE WINDOW BOX DID MY WEDDING AND IT WAS WONDERFUL — IT REALLY HELPS."**



She had participated in large bridal fairs in the past, but they attracted few people from her local area and they usually ended up costing Nichols more than they were worth. "I don't need to pay to see 2,000 brides when only 20 of them might be getting married in my area," she says.

So she decided to hold her own bridal fair in the shop and target her immediate area. Nichols invited other local vendors to participate. Eight other businesses (including a jeweler, caterer and limousine service) joined



her and paid \$50 each to be in the event. As a Chamber of Commerce member and an active member in her community, hosting her own bridal event was a natural and easy-to-implement idea, she says. Nichols saw the bridal event as a way to boost local retail. "I believe the small business owners need to stick together in this world, and if we support one another it only benefits all of us because it keeps the local retail viable," Nichols says.

## Promoting the Project

Nichols mailed fliers advertising the event to about 70 soon-to-be brides whose names were culled from the

engagements listed in the newspaper and a list provided by a hotel that had booked upcoming receptions. She included a flier in all statements sent out in the weeks prior to the event and provided fliers and centerpiece displays for each participating vendor to use in promoting the event. She placed ads in the weekly paper as well.

## Bring on the Brides

About 75 people came to the bridal event despite having to travel through

6 inches of snow that fell the night before. Though the turnout was a bit smaller than Nichols hoped, 31 of those attending were brides with wedding dates in the upcoming year. More importantly, half (16) of those people booked their weddings with Nichols, including a wedding with a \$12,000 flower budget — the biggest the shop has ever had.

Nichols earned \$37,000 in bridal work generated from the event which only cost her about \$600 to promote and host after reimbursement from the participating vendors. She also met her goal of increasing wedding business by 10 percent over the previous year. And she continues to get referral weddings from those brides who attended the reception. "Because a lot of the brides knew one another," she says, "they really tended to reinforce one another's decision to use us. When someone says The Window Box did my wedding and it was wonderful — it really helps."

## The Big Picture

Nichols' gross sales rose about 14 percent in fiscal year 1994 from fiscal 1995 — an increase she attributes to her highly targeted marketing efforts. So while much of her home state seems to be in a shaky economic condition, Nichols continues to keep customers and increase sales. "Our philosophy has always been to get to know the customer," she says. "This is a very personal business, and in 17 years I've had the chance to get familiar with my customer base. We need to work to keep them as customers. It's about perseverance and targeting the people you need to market to. Sometimes we tend to expect everyone will be our customer. I think we need to look at what we market and go after those customers." ■

*Christine Montgomery is senior editor of Floral Management.*



# A Magical Marketing Tour

By Christine Montgomery

It's those slow summer months that can make even the most dedicated business owners think about taking a vacation. Here's how *Floral Management's* Marketer of the Year in the more than \$1 million in sales category turned a "Tour de Fleur" program into a profitable adventure.

**f**rom the foothills of

California to the beaches of the Hawaiian Islands... Where redwoods tower, cool breezes blow and hot volcanoes simmer... What at first sounds like a tourist brochure is actually part of a 13-week marketing campaign that garnered a flower broker more than \$70,000 in sales, found them 24 new customers and changed the buying habits of many clients for the better.

United Floral Exchange (UFE), a Carlsbad, Calif., and Denver, Co., floral wholesaler and shipper, suffered from the same slow summer as most of the floral industry. Owners Thayis and

"We like to think the biggest winner was the consumer," says Jim Dionne (right), pictured with Steven and Thayis Dionne.

Photo by: Glen Cormier





FLORAL MANAGEMENT'S

**Marketer of the Year**  
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Jim Dionne and their son, Steven, say that the summer "slump" combined with the "creature of habit" buying patterns of their customers and the competitive nature of the industry was equaling flat sales. With a small sales staff of just five, the Dionnes say it was getting tougher to find ways to grow the business.

"We started brainstorming how to combat the summer sales slump and decided the only way was to increase our customers' flower sales," Steven says. "One good way for us to do that would be for them to get an assortment of fresh-from-the-grower flowers with new varieties that they may not have had access to. So then anytime their customers came into the shop they'd see different flowers in different colors of high quality."

And so the Dionnes came up with the "Tour de Fleur" summer program as a way of getting the attention of customers and prospects. The idea would be to expose customers to new and unusual flowers on a regular basis as a way to stimulate new buying patterns throughout the year. Here's how the Dionnes made it happen:

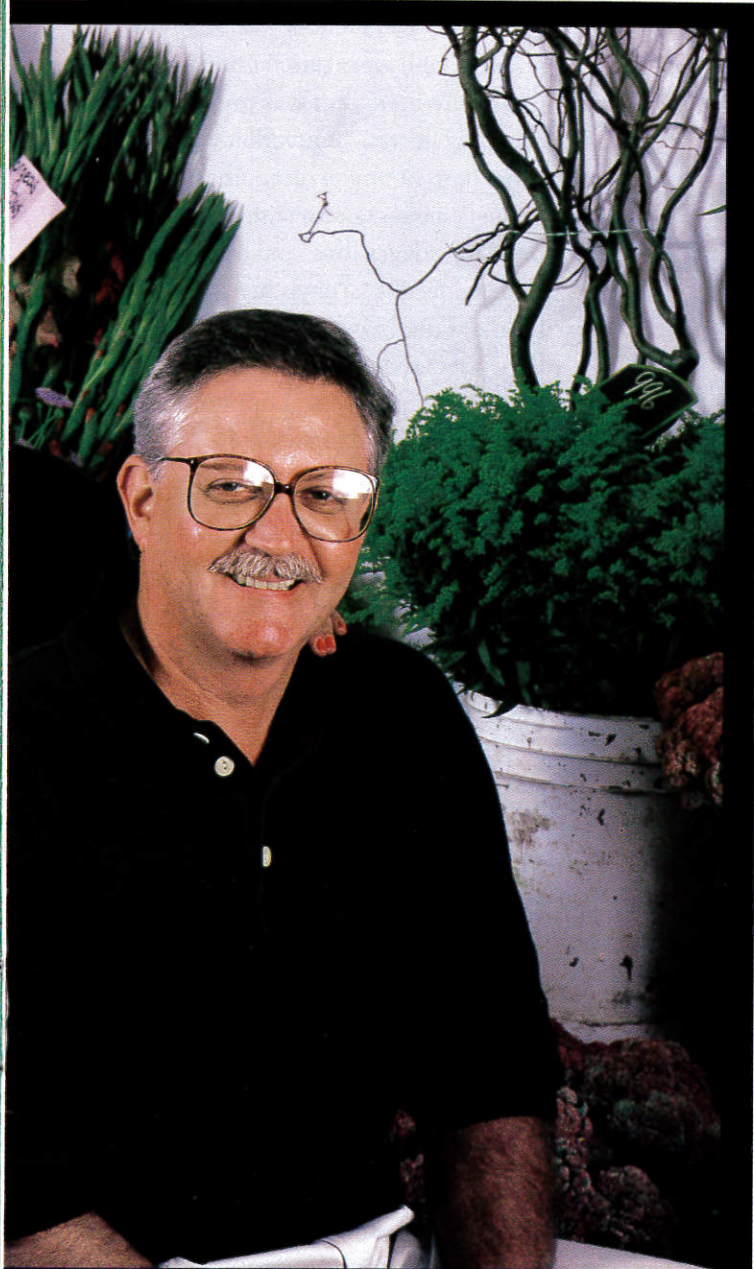
## The Pitch

In April — two months before the promotion was set to begin — UFE sent statement stuffers to all customers announcing the Tour de Fleur. Those fliers promised "13 weeks of sheer excitement" by "visiting" the "majestic flower fields of the world as fabulous, colorful blossoms tantalize and excite the creativity within you..." Each week from June 1 to August 31, the fliers said, those who signed on for the Tour de Fleur would receive a beautiful variety of flowers from their carefully selected growers. Tour-takers could sign on for the summer or buy only the number of weeks they wanted. Each shipment cost about \$140 or less, making it affordable for even small florists.

"With the volume that we're able to give each grower, they're able to give us excellent pricing," Steven says. "So another advantage of the program is that throughout the summer, the florists combine their buying power to get better pricing."

To make the deal sweeter, UFE offered \$10 coupons with each shipment that was ordered. Florists could use the coupons for future purchases. Those who took the program for the entire summer would get an additional \$100 in gift certificates — equaling \$230 in total rebates for those customers.

"When people took the program for the whole summer, they had no idea what they would receive other than what we told them about the growers — whether they were from





Hawaii, or Holland," Thayis says. "Some growers had overlapping products so we would try to vary the growers and not have any product repeats. Sometimes they might see Larkspur throughout the summer but from different growers."

## The Pitch, Part II

In May, the Dionnes sent a direct mailer to existing clients reminding them again about the Tour campaign. A selected group of 100 potential clients also received the mailer — theirs included a letter, a brochure describing what UFE does and a business card of a UFE customer service representative. Coinciding with the mailer, the sales staff followed up with calls to offer



ding tips, an occasional gift such as a floral-related book or poster, usage tips for the flowers, and a sheet to record feedback on what they liked, didn't like and would like to order more of.

"In the letters we tried to identify specific growers' year-round production along with seasonal availability, and we'd also talk about the growers," Jim says. One grower, for example, was the first in California to install extensive underground heating and cooling systems for iris and freesia. "That kind of information," Jim says,

**The tour is a creative way to build summer sales and bring the grower closer to the end consumer without disturbing traditional channels of distribution**

more information and to book orders.

"We were trying to enhance our image," Steven says. "A lot of times when people think of direct shipping, they may think of just pompons and carnations. But they found out a lot more can be shipped to them."

## The Program

UFE sent out a total of 565 boxes of Tour de Fleur flowers during the three-month program, which met the Dionnes' goal of increasing June, July and August sales. When the florists received their first order on the Tour, it included a Tour de Fleur folder to store weekly shipment information, a UFE note pad and pen and the gift certificate. Each week with the mixed assortment, florists received information about the particular growers — what they specialize in, where they're located — care and han-

"gave our customers a broader appreciation for what contributes to the cost of the flowers and factors into the value equation. We try to promote better understanding between all segments of our industry."

## The Follow-through

When the program ended in the last week of August, UFE sent each participant a letter that summarized the tour and thanked them for their business. The sales reps also called Tour-takers about any standing orders the retailers might want to order with their favorite grower(s) from the tour. "A lot of customers at the end of the summer ask us to continue to chose growers and send different varieties," Steven says.

"Another advantage we found was that we can combine these shipments with other flowers on a regular basis and by

consolidating the freight, save them a lot of money."

## The Tour Results

After honoring about \$8,000 in coupons, UFE earned just more than \$70,000 in sales volume for the Tour de Fleur. The total promotional costs only came to about \$700, giving the Dionnes about a huge return on their investment. In addition, 24 new retailers have become regular customers as a result of the promotion, and many of their existing customers have broadened the product they buy.

One item in particular, Thayis says, got back in good graces with many retailers who were purchasing it less frequently because it was prone to dropping florets. "Bouvardia was a featured item in one of our domestic growers' boxes, along with care and handling suggestions, and our customers loved it," Thayis says. What had been a tough product to sell became very popular again. "They couldn't believe the quality, and our bouvardia sales increased dramatically."

## A Win-Win-Win-Win Situation

The Tour helped all involved come out winners, the Dionnes say: The growers sold more product, the retailers had a huge assortment of summer offerings for their customers at competitive prices and UFE escaped the summer sales slump. The overall long-term relationship nurtured among the three was a benefit of the program as well. And Jim adds, "We like to think the biggest winner was the consumer."

The Dionnes pass along some comments from both the retail and grower side of their business:

"As a retail florist I sometimes get in a rut of buying product from the same growers through United Floral Exchange because I know and trust



# What Makes a Marketer of the Year?

their product," writes Kirksey Gregg, AIFD, TMF of Mark Knox Flowers in Odessa, Texas to the Dionnes. "I particularly enjoy the Tour de Fleur program during the summer months because it broadens my buying options by letting me get familiar with new farm product that I may have never been exposed to before. The extra information that is provided by the grower and UFE has been especially helpful by using the care and handling tips of each."

And from the growers' side: "The tour is a creative way to build summer sales and bring the grower closer to the end consumer without disturbing traditional channels of distribution," writes Doug Dobecki, sales manager of Sun Valley Floral Farms in Arcata, Calif. "An exciting marketing idea with positive results." ■

Christine Montgomery is senior editor of Floral Management.

**W**hen *Floral Management* launched the Marketer of the Year Award in 1994, we hoped to draw attention to some of the industry's outstanding marketing efforts – and inspire the rest of the industry with their ideas. This year's winners certainly exceeded our expectations. Once again, *Floral Management* invited retailers, wholesalers and growers to take part in the contest, luring them with the prospect of a \$2,500 cash prize, sponsored by Design Master color tool, Inc. All entries are divided into one of two categories – above \$1 million in gross sales and below \$1 million in gross sales – and the winner in each receives a \$2,500 cash award.

## THE CRITERIA

What constitutes an outstanding marketing effort? The judges were charged with reviewing the entries and rating each entrant in the following six categories:

- Effectiveness of Campaign
- Originality
- Success
- Use of Available Resources
- Professionalism
- Overall Excellence

## THE JUDGES

We knew that only experienced marketers with a track record of success could make such judgments. So we chose a panel of seasoned professionals from within and outside the floral industry:

**Joan Watson**, AAF, retailer, Sunflowers 1-800-FLOWERS in Phoenix, Ariz.

**JoLynn Gustin**, retailer, Jones the Florist, Inc. in Cincinnati.

**Dr. Barbara Fails**, horticulture marketing professor, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.

**Leo Roozen**, grower, Washington Bulb Co., Mt. Vernon, Wash.

**Steve Dahllof**, vice president of marketing with Ogilvy Adams & Rinehart, the agency that handles the American Floral Marketing Council's (AFMC) national consumer relations campaign.

## GIVE IT A TRY NEXT YEAR

Think you may have the marketing savvy it takes to be Marketer of the Year? Keep an eye out for next year's contest – we'll be ready to send out entry forms in January, with a **May 31 deadline**.

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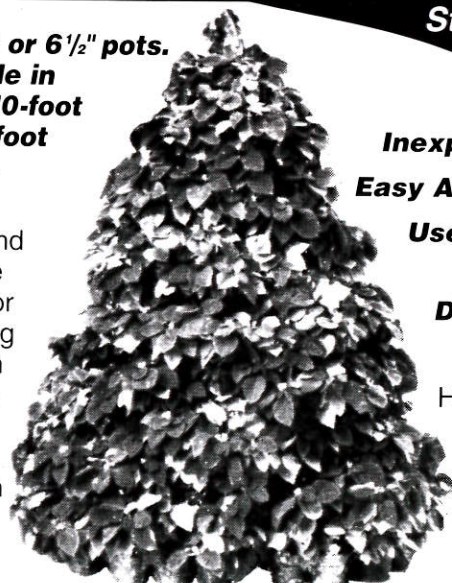
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