



Party Your

BY MARY WESTBROOK

An old-fashioned, offline party may be just the way to grab the attention of tech-tied teens during prom season.

Way to Prom



TEEN BAIT Pizza, Red Bull and cupcakes give dozens and dozens of local teens enough reason to stop by Shirley's Flowers during the two weeks leading up to prom — and order corsages averaging \$65 apiece. Above, Shirley's team, from left: Shelby Shy, AAF, owner; Ebony Hart, Eric Buttram, Burgandy Hart and Chelle Gerhardt, AMF.

In 2010, Shelby Shy, AAF, was trying her hardest to get her shop, Shirley's Flowers in Rogers and Bentonville, Ark., into her local high schools. She wanted to build up prom business, and she knew the old adage: Go where your customers are. But after a series of dead ends (red tape, paper work, unreturned calls), Shy made a decision. If she couldn't take her shop to the students, she'd bring the students to her shop. As it turned out, her "second-best" solution was a first-rate winner. Three years later, Shy's average corsage sale is up to \$65 and her prom business is booming.

Pay no attention to the bleak economic news. When it comes to prom sales, teens reach deep into their pockets — or their parents' pockets — for a blinged-out, feathered-up, mega night out. Despite the recession, a national survey by Visa Inc. found that American families who have teenagers spent

an average of \$1,078 each on prom in 2012, a 33.6 percent increase over the 2011 average (\$807). Plenty of that money goes toward prom tickets, dresses, tux rentals, limos and dinner on the town, but florists who take the time to engage and entertain teens in a high impact way are finding that they can expand their piece of the prom pie — sometimes significantly.

That's not to say engaging teens is easy. In the time it takes you to read this sentence, your average prom customer will have checked her smartphone, like, a gazillion times. (OMG. RLY? TTYL.)

To non-digital natives, the hyper-connectivity of Millennials (also known as Gen Y) can be disconcerting. The generation — estimated to be about 80 million strong — is coming of age with smartphones at the dinner table, tablets in the bathroom, laptops in bed and a constant jangle of beeps and tweets

from who knows where. Experts at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School estimate that Millennials switch media platforms (from laptops to tablets, phones and TV) an average of 27 times in an hour, and Cisco's most recent Connected World Technology Report found that two-thirds of Gen Y responders spend at least as much time socializing online as they do in person.

The high level of online engagement, sometimes simultaneously on two, three or four small screens, has real-world implications for florists who want to make prom a priority. Teens (no matter the generation) can be fickle. Many wait until the last minute to place an order. In some ways, the expanding number of sites — Pinterest, Facebook, Tumblr — makes it even harder to connect with teens. If you feel like a drop of water in a tidal wave of new tech, you aren't alone.

KEN BLAZEPHOTOGRAPHY



WHO: Silver Fox Florist, Westlake, Ohio. Shown: Designers Joyce Palur and Laura Davis. **WHAT:** In-school fashion show, featuring the shop's corsages and boutonnieres / **WHO'S INVITED:** Junior and Senior high school attendees / **WHEN:** mid-February / **SIGNS OF SUCCESS:** The shop quadrupled its corsage orders from 30 to 120 and increased the average sale by almost 50 percent.

“(Technology) is embedded in (Gen Y’s) psychology, so much so that I call it their third hand and second brain,” explained consumer psychologist Kit Yarrow to U.S. News and World Report. “Among other implications, they get bored more easily and are attracted to higher levels of stimulation than older generations. And they’re highly attuned to visual symbols—be it their own appearance or through association. As consumers, this means that they want faster product turnover and require more personally relevant and high impact messaging and promotions.”

The trick, say florists who have managed to grow their prom segment, is to grab and hold teens’ attention long enough to educate them about floral possibilities beyond what was available to moms and older siblings... and the best way to do that may just be to throw an old-fashioned, offline party of your own.

Teens in the House

Teen-friendly music pumping. Snacks to munch on and sodas to sip. Friendly service and lots (and lots) of options for prom flowers. These are some of the things you’ll always find at Shy’s open-house prom parties in Arkansas. Originally conceived as a two-day affair, the shop now hosts its parties over the course of about two weeks, with students dropping by from around 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. to scope out fresh flowers and the season’s hottest accessories.

The hallmark of Shirley’s Flowers’ open house events is clearly the corsage bar, where students can see and touch the fresh product and choose from among a bevy of add-on accessories. (For a visual cue, think about the frozen yogurt bars that have become ubiquitous in most American cities, allowing patrons to dispense their own flavor and toppings.)

“This generation wants personalization,” said Shy, who creates a colorful flyer for the event and cross-promotes at other local prom vendors’ stores — in addition to advertising on social media and in the high school paper. “They want to feel unique. With the corsage bar, we get to show them all the fun things we can do.”

The experience is one that can’t be replicated online, and the bar itself has been the driving force behind the shop’s

BELLY UP Teens attending the prom open house at Shirley’s Flowers enjoy the corsage “bar,” where they can customize their corsage with feathers, bling and other add-ons to suit their own personal style.



SHIRLEY'S FLOWERS

CHEERLEAD YEAR-ROUND

Checking in with your local high schools once a year won’t help you create a lasting prom business. Instead, consider the value of forging a long-term partnership with your school district. That’s what Tara Prior and her staff at Silver Fox Florist have done in Westlake, Ohio. The shop handles many of the district’s floral needs and frequently participates in school events and fundraisers; they’ve even been a resource for students working on science reports.

“Any individual donation I make (of product or time) is part of a larger strategy,” Prior said. “When you help the kids out, they talk, and positive word-of-mouth is the best advertisement.”

Bringing in young staff members can also help. The first year Shelby Shy held a prom party at Shirley’s Flowers in Rogers, Ark., a high school senior on her staff helped promote and then host the event, which gave the party instant credibility among teen shoppers.

“After she graduated, we didn’t have another student lined up to take her place,” Shy said. “But I wish we did! It’s a great way to get kids involved and interested.”

Likewise at McNamara Florist in Fishers, Ind., Toomie Farris, AAF, AIFD, said part-time high school employees can fill out a team during prom season.

“The in-store experience is important to make sure (customers) feel their order is customized and special,” Farris said, and properly trained teens can often provide the extra punch of sincere enthusiasm — “Oh! Let me see your dress!!” — that can make or break sales.

Read about a designer-coach who’s bridging the gap between shop and school in Pratt, Kan., in our Hands On column on p. 12. —M.W.

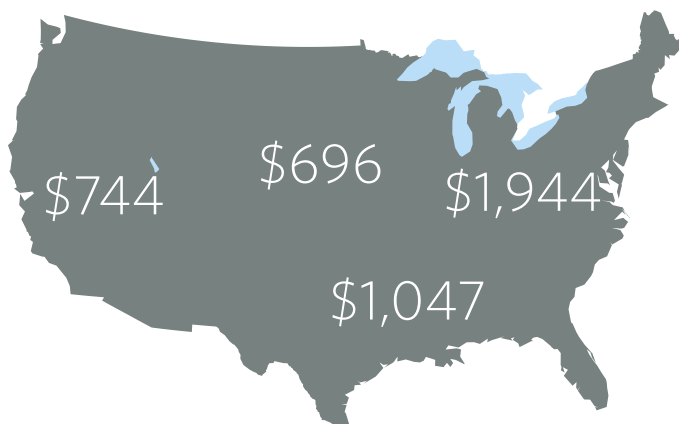


WHO: Shirley's Flowers Inc., Bentonville and Rogers, Ark. Shown: Jo Buttram, AMF, AAF; Trish Upshaw, AMF; Shelby Shy, AAF and Chelle Gerhardt / **WHAT:** Open house prom party, featuring pizza, corsage bar, etc. / **WHO'S INVITED:** 8 local high schools / **WHEN:** 3-6 p.m. daily, during the two weeks before prom / **SIGNS OF SUCCESS:** Average corsage sale increased from \$20 to \$65

NUMBERS BY REGION

Overall, prom spending jumped by more than 33 percent from 2011 to 2012, according to Visa Inc., but the amount kids and their parents are willing to shell out for the big dance tends to vary widely by region. The survey estimated that:

- **Northeastern** families will spend an average of \$1,944
- **Southern** families will spend an average of \$1,047
- **Western** families will spend an average of \$744
- **Midwestern** families will spend an average of \$696



\$45 jump in average sale, from \$20 to \$65. In fact, in 2012, Shy finally got the chance to sell in one of her local schools when she was invited to have a table in the cafeteria for a weeklong period. Two of her staff members manned the booth, which included some examples of the shop's designs, but the results were disappointing. The table was smack dab in the middle of the teens — just where Shy thought she needed to be — but sales were nowhere near what they are at the shop around prom time, when the festive atmosphere and wow-factor of fresh product pushes teens from casual window shoppers to enthusiastic buyers.

"Seeing the product and all of the different options really made the difference," she said.

It's also important to remember that teens don't generally plan ahead. Each year Shirley's sees prom customers from up to eight schools, which can make scheduling a single event difficult, if not impossible. That's why Shy hosts her

GEN 'HOOKUP'?

Prom events are all about engaging customers in-person, often in your store. They're also your best-bet opportunity to educate teens about flowers, but you might find yourself teaching them another lesson, too. Namely, what their dates expect from them (he'll need a boutonniere and she'll need a corsage or floral necklace, etc.).

For all their worldliness, this young generation has far less experience with romance than their parents or grandparents did at the same age, and they may need your gentle, face-to-face counsel to learn how to woo and wow at prom. As reporter Alex Williams recently pointed out in *The New York Times*, many Millennials have never been on a single date, making prom a potential pressure cooker.

"Relationship experts point to technology as another factor in the upending of dating culture," Williams wrote. "Traditional courtship — picking up the telephone and asking someone on a date — required courage, strategic planning and a considerable investment of ego... Not so with texting, email, Twitter or other forms of 'asynchronous communication,' as techies call it. In the context of dating, it removes much of the need for charm; it's more like dropping a line in the water and hoping for a nibble." — M.W.

open house events two to four weeks before the first local prom. Begin earlier and you may miss out on customers who are still shopping for dresses and trying out tuxes (and floral decisions always come after attire choices for prom). Start later and you may lose customers to competitors who have already publicized their own specials.

Take it the Schools

In Westlake, Ohio, Tara Prior was also looking for a way to drum up prom business. Her store, Silver Fox Florist, had long been the go-to flower shop for local schools, the place that administrators called when a teacher had a baby or a beloved secretary retired. Nonetheless, prom sales were lagging — and uninspired. ("Girls were basically asking for the same corsages that their moms or older sisters ordered; I knew my staff could do so much more.") So when a local PTA mom called looking for a donation of 18 corsages and 18 boutonnieres for an in-school prom fashion show, Prior jumped at the chance to get her message — that Silver Fox is the place to find creative floral designs for prom — directly in front of her target customers.

Prior's donation to the Westlake High fashion show came with one string, firmly attached: She wanted total creative freedom. No input from the moms wrangling the girls backstage. No dictates from the students strutting down the runway.

Instead, Prior wanted her team to try out some of the high style trends they'd seen for years at floral industry events (bright pops of color, keepsake accessories and updated mechanics, thanks to the wonder of floral glue). In doing so she would nudge young couples (and their parents) toward higher price points and more sophisticated work, trading generations-old standards of elastic wristbands, spray roses and gypsophila for the accessorized, personalized showstoppers already popular in larger markets.

"I told my designers to go crazy," Prior said. "This was our chance to show the students what was possible — the unexpected."

Once she committed to the show, Prior sprung into action. She went to the local shop providing the dresses and snapped a shot of each ensemble. Back at the store, she numbered the photos, and then she and her three designers worked together on a plan for each corsage and boutonniere. While most of the designs would appear "wild and new" to the shop's local customers, Prior also made sure to include one simple, elegant corsage, so that even conservative teens with an eye toward classic styling would be enticed to stop by.

Because Prior kept the atmosphere light and let the designers have a fair amount of autonomy, the show eventually became something of a team-building exercise. Thanks to a streamlined

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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Ready to plan your own prom event? Here are practical tips from Shelby Shy, AAF, of Shirley's Flowers and Tara Prior of Silver Fox Florist:



Promote the event. Create a colorful flyer with a clear, easy-to-read message. Cross-promote your event with other local prom vendors (dress stores, nail shops and tanning salons, etc.). Advertise your event in the student-run publications. Remember, Millennials update their Facebook pages more frequently than any other age group and have an average of 320 friends, compared to the Gen X average of 198, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, so don't forget to update your website and social media pages to showcase your event and your best prom work. Text pictures of corsages directly to your clients so they can post and share immediately.



Engage young staff members. If you have high school students or young adults on staff, bring them into the planning process. Gather their input on food, music, hours and logistics. Encourage high school students to wear some of your most innovative work — and eye-catching bling — to school. For the event itself, schedule a large enough team to offer personal service but don't overwhelm the teens with a bunch of adults hovering around.



Master the timing. Most kids don't think ahead. Schedule your event about two weeks before the first prom in your area. If you have the event more than four weeks ahead of time, you'll have a hard time attracting kids.



Show off everything. Millennials are as interested in the process as the final product. That may explain the popularity of Shy's corsage bar, which allows teens to feel personally invested in the customization process as they pick and choose among product, hardware and accessories. Put teens in the driver's seat and show them lots of options. You'll be surprised by how deep their pockets can be.

Even if you can't coordinate an event this year, consider setting aside a dedicated space in your store and online to promote your prom business.

"We have an area to create a customized design for each client, so it's like buying something special," said Toomie Farris, AAF, AIFD, of McNamara Florist in Fishers, Ind. "If they wanted a cheap corsage, they'd go to a pre-produced item at a competitor or a grocery store." —M.W.

assembly process — leaves and accessories were adhered with floral glue immediately and flowers "popped in" at the last minute — it only took the team a few hours to complete all 36 pieces.

"We included feathers, wire, bling and upscale wristlets," she said. "Honestly, it was the most fun we've ever had with prom."

That's not to say Prior broke her budget for the show. In all, she estimated that she spent about \$200 on the event, in time and wholesale cost of the flowers. (All of the hard goods — wristbands, feathers and bling — were returned after the show so that Prior and her staff could use them for the actual prom orders that year.) On the day of the event, Westlake seniors and juniors attended the fashion show, crowding into the auditorium during the regular school day to ooh and ahh over the runway, and Prior said the event announcers gave almost as much attention to the floral designs as the gowns and tuxes. At the end of the event, Prior had brochures and business cards at the ready to hand out. (Participants in the fashion show received a small discount on their prom orders; audience members did not.)

The payoff was significant. The year before the show, Silver Fox Florist received about 30 corsage orders for Westlake's prom, with an average ticket price of \$21.75. After the show, the shop created 120 corsages and 100 boutonnieres for Westlake, figures that represent well over half of the school's graduating class. Even better, the average corsage price jumped to \$30, thanks in large part to the showcased add-ons and upsells, including beaded wristlets.

"I credit the growth in our prom business 100 percent to the fashion show," said Prior, who plans to participate in Westlake's event again in 2013, even though it falls right around Valentine's Day. "We've proven that it works. It's an expense that (generates) a great return on your investment, and it works a lot better for us than any other form of advertising. The kids all talk to each other."

Most Likely to Succeed

While it's hard for Shy to estimate exactly how many teens have come through her open houses, on an aver-



WORK AHEAD To keep prom orders on track, Silver Fox Florist designers Laura Davis and Joyce Palur go to work immediately when an order comes in, collecting the accessories and even gluing items together when possible.



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TARA PRIOR, OWNER
SILVER FOX FLORIST
WESTLAKE, OHIO

age afternoon during the week of open house she has about 30 kids perusing the corsage bar. About 40 percent of the teens who come to the events are boys. Shy and her team have seen just about every possible combination of flowers and bling concocted at the corsage bar, but regardless of the result, her staff is quick to praise each customer’s creativity and excellent sense of style... even if a gal settles on a combo they’ve seen hundreds of times, such as spray roses and a basic wristlet.

“Teens can be hard,” Shy admitted, but if you treat each one as you would any adult client — and not “an interruption in your day” — the payoff can be substantial. “If you earn their business when they’re young, then you have the potential to have their business for a lifetime of events — graduations, collegiate events, weddings, anniversaries..”

For Prior, that message — that every prom customer is potentially a lifetime customer — rings especially true. As a teenager, Prior received her prom corsage from Silver Fox Florist, the shop she

now owns, created by a designer who still works in the store. After the dance, Prior took the design apart; she wanted to figure out how the designer had created the corsage. It was her first foray into the floral industry.

“Anything we do in life, we have an opportunity to make an impression,” she said. “If it’s a good impression at prom, the kids will come back down the road.” 📺

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CORSAGE COUTURE

Think you might be guilty of offering the “same old, same old” to prom-goers? Want to see how to raise the bar — and, as a result, profits — on prom orders? Check out the online gallery of prom flowers, from Silver Fox Florist, Shirley’s Flowers and several members of the Professional Floral Communicator’s International (PFCI). www.safnow.org/moreonline.