

A close-up photograph of a bouquet of pink and purple roses resting on a silver laptop keyboard. A person's hands are visible at the bottom, typing on the keys. The background is a light-colored surface, possibly a desk. The text 'Rank & Style' is overlaid in large white font, with a decorative flourish between the words. Below the title, the author's name 'BY TOM GRESHAM' is written in a smaller white font. A large, semi-transparent white arrow points from the left towards the bouquet.

# Rank & Style

BY TOM GRESHAM



**It's no longer just about  
being found online — it's  
about being found worth  
customers' time and money.**

These days, it seems like everyone is in the personalized delivery game. Clothes curated just for you show up on your doorstep. Meals you've carefully selected to fit your very specific diet arrive, after you've filled your cart from beautiful virtual shelves. You can find a partner and be on a date within minutes, just with a swipe of your finger.

This is the climate customers shop in, and flowers are no different. So, you have to work hard for customers' attention. Yes, your SEO (and digital marketing efforts) must ensure your shop shows up when someone starts looking — but what customers find when they click is even more important than getting that click. After all, just because you show up in online searches doesn't mean customers like what they see. If online shopping and dating have taught retailers, marketers and consumers anything, it's that there's always something (or someone) else out there vying for your attention. Why settle for the first thing you find?

While florists increasingly understand the significance of the website experience to their customers and have sought to improve their online offerings, many misconceptions remain. That's why this month, we're turning to local florists and some of the thought leaders in the industry — the people at major national brands tasked with ensuring florists' websites are delivering on all fronts — to find out how florists can capture more sales online.

### Get the Google-y Eyes

When people search online for florists in an area, the simple order of how shops appear in the results has a major effect on revenue. For that reason, Farbod Shoraka, cofounder and CEO of BloomNation, said "Google rules the world" of local online shopping, making optimization "in the eyes of Google" critical.

"The difference between the No. 1 spot on Google and the No. 2 spot is huge," Shoraka said. "The No. 1 spot gets 50 percent more traffic than position No. 2. In fact, if you are not in the top three positions, you are getting very little organic traffic."

That reality can be intimidating for florists who are juggling an ever-in-

creasing number of job responsibilities, acknowledged Timm McIntyre, ecommerce product manager for FTD.

"There is still a lot of uncertainty and even fear among small retailers and large ones when it comes to ecommerce," he said.

Landing in one of those top three coveted search positions often requires florists to work closely with their website providers. At Currans Flowers in Danvers, Massachusetts, for example, Paul Danehy said his business has tackled strengthening its search results in a variety of ways, including pay-per-click advertising and improvements in its use of SEO.

"We follow the best practices, which include using relevant naming conventions, quality images and relevant product descriptions," said Danehy, who partners with GravityFree for his site.

Picking the right partners for your shop is critical — because florists often need outside support to manage the technical components of search optimization.

"We code and develop the back and front ends of [our clients'] sites to support the organic ranking on search engine result pages such as Google and Bing," said Katie Kerr, CFO and head of EFlorist for Teleflora. "We also research keywords that are driving engaged customers to the site, and we work to optimize sites for those search terms."

Earning a top spot on Google requires savvy, and so does keeping that spot. Sundaram Natarajan, CEO of GotFlowers, notes Google and other search engines are constantly refining the algorithms that govern search — a

point Shoraka also emphasized. If you are not "continually optimizing" your website — for example, updating images to reflect the current season and upcoming holidays, blogging and responding to online reviews — "your competitors will be," Shoraka said.

"And you will lose your ranking, which means you lose your traffic and ultimately lose your revenue," he added.

### Secure the Sale

Of course, attracting people to your website is only part of the challenge. Once shoppers arrive, you need to make it easy, compelling and — did we mention easy? — to buy.

"Traffic, per se, isn't the goal of optimization," said Jamie Jamison Adams, director of SEO for the Flower Shop Network. "Creating a user experience that captures customers at every part of the buying cycle and leading them to conversion should be the goal."

According to Ken Sons, director of operations for GravityFree, the most common and consequential mistakes that florists make online often can be traced to one overarching oversight: failing to put themselves in their customers' shoes.

"Many florists don't consider how a customer behaves online," Sons said.

One example: Customers' expectations have grown high, and many anticipate the online shopping experience to be a simple one, free of unnecessary clicks and hassles. Consumers across demographics are accustomed to the smooth purchasing process on sites such as Amazon.

"Customers no longer put up with a bad ecommerce experience, especially



—BrightLocal

if another website provides a better experience,” Shoraka said. “Nine out of 10 times they will use the better website.”

A disorganized site that does not update product availability or one that presents arrangements in a haphazard way burdens customers with longer searches, prompting them to look elsewhere. (According to the Nielsen Norman Group, which specializes in user experience, consumers stay on a web page for an average of less than one minute; users often leave pages within 10 to 20 seconds.)

Another faux pas? Requiring too many clicks for customers to complete a purchase.

“Without an effective checkout process that removes as many barriers as possible, you will lose sales,” said Michael Delgorio, director of corporate development for Lovingly.

Danehy said his business emphasizes product placement on its site. That means positioning products online with purpose, for example, ensuring the first products a customer sees are the most relevant for the season. In addition, he said offering Paypal and ApplePay makes it easy for customers to use their preferred payment methods, and the Currans site employs stored address settings to speed the checkout process.

“Customers want a hassle-free shopping experience that lets them choose a gift and check out quickly so that they may go on with their busy lives,” Danehy said.

Search engines, too, pay attention to how fast people go from browsing to shopping, Shoraka said: Google has its eye on a site’s conversion rate to gauge how well a website ushers customers from arrival to purchase.

**“Customers want a hassle-free shopping experience that lets them choose a gift and check out quickly so that they may go on with their busy lives.”**

—Paul Danehy, Currans Flowers



# 10 seconds

That's how long you have to grab a customer's attention before she navigates away from a page.

—The Nielsen Norman Group

“Google actually gives you negative points if someone clicks on your website and leaves without making a purchase,” Shoraka added.

## Looks Can Kill

This is 2018, a time when everyone seems to have their own personal brand on Instagram, chefs remake dishes just to make them look more appetizing on Snapchat, and city neighborhoods have been known to commission selfie-friendly murals to attract Millennial visitors. In other words: Consumers are now swimming in beautiful images. Florists, who sell themselves as creative, inspired designers, need to have sites that look good.

“Florists need to remember that, according to [our company’s] research, more than 10 times as many people will see the website as will visit the store,” said Ryan Freeman, president of Strider Search Marketing. “Ignoring the presentation and maintenance of the website drives away customers and often contributes to people thinking poorly of the business.”

McIntyre said 20 years ago “online retailers could get away with difficult-to-use websites because online shoppers were early adopters who loved technology and relished the challenge of

placing an online order.” Today, shoppers are online “not for entertainment but because of price, selection and convenience,” he explained. “A bad website has the same effect as a dirty, disorganized shop. It affects your credibility, turns off shoppers and costs you sales.”

Kerr said a website’s design and appearance provide a telling showcase to customers of the shop’s brand and products.

“Customers will remember how the site made them feel more than what they ordered,” Kerr said. (Consider the difference between “That was easy! I found exactly what I wanted. She’s going to love it!” and “That took forever. I really hope the flowers look okay.”)

Great photos are more important than ever (and easier than ever to take thanks to advances in smartphone and



camera technology). To set himself apart from competitors, Danehy takes most photos for his site himself and updates the images seasonally. Rather than relying on stock images, shooting exclusive photos allows the shop to present “images that [customers] see nowhere else” — and customers, Danehy said, notice the difference.

“We hear it on the phones all the time: ‘I chose you because your flowers look amazing,’” Danehy said. “Customers want their gift to be received as pictured so it’s been important to make sure we are representing our work online appropriately by utilizing beautiful but accurate images and honest descriptions of our products.”

Additionally, the images should be arranged as “a curated catalog that can help customers feel like you are making recommendations for them rather than showing them limitless, confusing choices,” said Sons. “Ideally a florist should have photos for products in all variations so potential customers can easily visualize what they are buying and understand the value of upgrading.”

Freeman added that, without a product catalog that’s personalized for your

business, you’re giving customers a reason to simply price-shop online.

“Unique-to-you products with great descriptions let the customer create a scenario in their minds involving your product and service,” he said. “Tell them how it will make the recipient feel, push the benefits not the stem count.”

### Fresh Content Is Key

One of the most common website mistakes Kerr sees is an insufficient attention to content.

“Google interprets written content to confirm a site’s relevancy to a user’s search,” she said. “Without it, a site can appear less relevant to a search engine and therefore lose ranking.”

An easy way to add enriching content? Highlight the shop’s story in your “About Us” page, Kerr said.

“Is the business owner a third-generation florist? How long has the shop been serving the local community? Adding unique details about the retail shop and staff can build trust and encourage new visitors to place an order,” she explained.

McIntyre said personalization is key. “Your shop, your products and your personality make your brick-and-mortar

business unique,” he said. “Make sure your website reflects that.”

Freeman said a frequently updated blog is a strategic way to draw more people to your site.

“Customers might only need to purchase two or three times per year, but if you’re giving them something interesting to read or learn more frequently you can not only cement the customer loyalty aspect of the relationship, but also expand their awareness of your product and service mix, while also proving yourself to be a subject matter expert,” he said. “Blogging gives people an opportunity to increase their desire to do business with you.”

Ensuring a site is relevant means creating each page with a purpose so that it answers a question or solves a common customer’s problem, Adams added. For instance, including a page that focuses specifically on wedding work or birthday designs helps prospective clients.

That’s advice that Zsuzsana Hutchinson, owner of Flowers by Zsuzsana in Hillsboro, Oregon, has put into practice. Her site, hosted by Lovingly, provides a clear view of what makes both her shop and her offerings distinctive.

“My website shows pictures of my shop, has custom arrangements available, has a prom page and wedding page,” she said. “There also is a video on the ‘About Us’ page that features me talking about key issues,” including her connection to her local town and her reasons for becoming a florist.

Remember, too, that the demand for content is never-ending, meaning the managing and updating of a website must be treated as an ongoing operation. Websites that stay static will lose ground in searches and seem less compelling to customers, said Renato Sogueco, PFCI, vice president of digital strategy and education for BloomNet.

“The biggest mistake is to do nothing,” Sogueco said. “Google and other search engines want to see regular changes made to websites, not only to what is presented on the page for consumers, but also in the html code, such as the ‘Title’ and ‘Description’ tags for every page. SEO changes should be applied monthly.”



**AUTHENTICALLY YOU** Zsuzsana Hutchinson of Flowers by Zsuzsana personalizes her About Us page with a video that highlights her hometown roots and deep love of floral design.

## Mobile Matters

If a florist only worries about the way their website works on a laptop or desktop screen, then they are ignoring a critical component of their online audience. According to eMarketer, mobile sales comprised 34.5 percent of retail e-commerce sales in 2017 — a percentage that's expected to rise to 53.9 percent by 2021.

A takeaway? "Florists' sites should function seamlessly no matter how they are accessed — by phone, tablet or desktop," Kerr said.

Sogueco also said florists need to keep mobile shoppers top of mind in web design and management.

"We continue to see big growth in mobile commerce with more and more consumers utilizing smartphones for shopping and/or inquiring about brands and products," he said. "All businesses should ensure they are spending the appropriate time ensuring the mobile experience is a good one for their customers."

Kerr said customers not only expect "a device-agnostic experience" — so does Google.

"Google now factors mobile performance into rankings, so older sites that are not optimized for viewing on mobile — by layouts and load times — are losing out," Kerr said.

Working with GravityFree, Danehy said he's made his site more responsive for mobile visitors in recent years, ensuring top products appear in prominent spots, images are resized properly, and inconvenient scrolling is minimized. The payoff is real.

"We have seen an increase in mobile orders year-over-year of about 60 percent, and a 275 percent increase from 2016," Danehy said.



# 34.5%

Mobile sales in 2017 as a percentage of overall retail e-commerce. That figure is expected to rise to 53.9 percent by 2021.

—eMarketer

## Assist, Remind, Suggest

Most people expect their phones to tell them things: reminders, dates, appointments. And florists are used to reminding their customers of important flower-buying events and suggesting add-ons. Your shop must also extend that customer service to its digital interactions.

Danehy's online customers, for instance, can create personal accounts and customize their experience. The accounts enable customers to record into their settings special dates when they will likely want to send flowers, such as a loved one's birthday, and to request email reminders from Currans as the date approaches.

Delgorio said building relationships through a website is "vital."

"It can start with basic respect, like not allowing automated point-of-sale gift add-on suggestions for sympathy purchases or offering helpful card message suggestions," Delgorio said. "Add these elements to a super simple ordering process and the consumer's experience becomes fast, easy and efficient."

Sons said too often florists offer an unwieldy, frustrating process for finding arrangements on their site.

"They put up products and never touch them again, assuming that the customer will go through four or five pages of products to find out what they want. They won't," Sons said. "Move your bestsellers to the top. Filter out products that are unavailable or take down products that aren't selling."

In that vein, Natarajan said websites can be automated with schedule-driven content so that occasion-specific products can be hidden when appropriate. (For instance, all Valentine's Day designs disappear on Feb. 15.)

Shoraka said florists also tend to overlook the management of their pricing online.

"I see it all the time on websites where two arrangements can be priced drastically different even though the consumer might consider them similar in value," Shoraka said. "Florists need to think like a consumer and make arrangements that consumers find valuable. More importantly, they need to price everything based on a model, where the costs are marked up properly and consistently and the labor is accounted for."

Similarly, the delivery experience can play a major role in a customer's experience ordering online — especially

**"I can't tell you how many times people have told me that they picked me because I have such good reviews and pictures online."**

—Zsuzsana Hutchinson, *Flowers by Zsuzsana*

ness from which to make a purchase,” Sogueco said.

To convey professionalism and competence, Natarajan said businesses cannot overlook the details of their entire online presence, such as failing to use the same business name on their website and social media accounts or by providing an email address not associated with their web domain. Customers notice these apparently minor miscues. (Another “minor” miscue that can turn off customers? Unbranded emails. Read more on p. 42.)

Delgorio recommends using Google AdWords as “low-risk advertising with no contracts and the power of Google to help make you competitive against the big players.” That’s a strategy Hutchinson has adopted. In the past year, in addition to regular posts on Instagram and Facebook, she’s increased her advertising budget with Google AdWords from \$250 to \$500 and also advertises on Yelp for \$300 a month.

“Plain and simple, if you want to attract more business you need to play the ‘Google game,’” she said. “Advertise on AdWords, set a realistic budget and watch the business grow.”

Also, make it part of your policy to respond promptly to negative reviews online and to use positive reviews to drive business, Delgorio said. Those online voices add up: 85 percent of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, according to a BrightLocal survey.

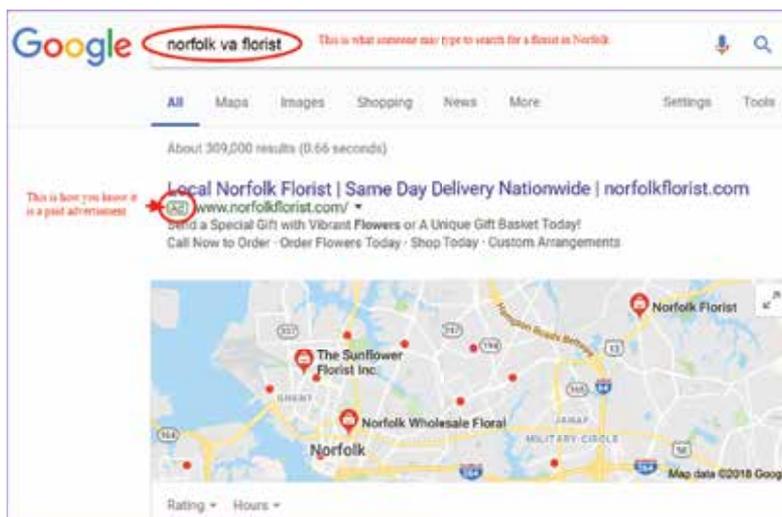
“Good reviews are the key to getting new customers,” said Hutchinson, who monitors her reviews daily. “I can’t tell you how many times people have told me that they picked me because I have such good reviews and pictures online.”

Danehy said “a complete strategy” also includes managing a cohesive experience between a shop’s physical and online locations. His shop uses some of the same marketing and branding design elements in the brick-and-mortar and cyber worlds.

“That way our brand is consistent no matter where our customers are finding us,” he explained. 🌸

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## Attention: Local Retail Florists... IS THIS YOU?



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in a world where “free” delivery through Amazon often feels like the norm.

“Same-day delivery is no longer enough — now florists must make it easy to select delivery by a certain time,” Sons said. “Additionally, once flowers are ordered, giving a customer updates on delivery helps keep him or her from becoming anxious.”

As an added touch of customer service, Hutchinson takes a photograph of each arrangement after it is complete and sends it to the person who ordered it.

“They will get a picture from the recipient at some point,” Hutchinson said. “Most of the time, not a very good one [with bad lighting or awkward composition]. I’d rather send them one that I took.”

### Is This Thing Working?

One of the advantages of having a robust online presence is the information it provides. A website produces steady streams of data that offer insight into the preferences and habits of customers.

Florists should strive to “understand a few key metrics about your website and take action,” McIntyre said.

“What should you be charging? Where should you be marketing? What

## UP YOUR ONLINE GAME

SEO, digital marketing and social media strategies will be key topics this year during SAF Palm Springs 2018, the Society of American Florists’ 134th annual convention, Sept. 12-15 in Rancho Mirage, California. You’ll enjoy programs such as:

- Defending Your Brand Online
- How to Stand Out on Social Media
- Sales Jolt: Photos that Sell
- Oh Shoot: Using Video to Boost Engagement

Make plans now to attend and soak up the education and networking opportunities. Find out more at [safnow.org/events](http://safnow.org/events).



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should you be offering?” he said. “Use what you learned from your web metrics in your brick-and-mortar business. This is especially true when it comes to product selection, pricing and delivery areas.”

Danehy said data helps him determine effective pay-per-click advertising and SEO strategies, efforts GravityFree manages through its 360 service.

“A couple of words makes a big difference,” he said. (For example, “florist in Danvers” vs. “flower delivery in Danvers”.)

In addition, Danehy said sales reports help determine product placement.

“Top sellers or top-selling styles get moved to the front of the line,” he said. “We reworked our Mother’s Day items to be visually similar to our Valentine’s Day items because they were so successful.”

### A Strategic Approach

A well-designed website does not equal an effective online presence on its own. Florists should integrate elements such as social media, advertising and reviews into their online plans — creating what Sogueco calls “a complete strategy.”

“When a consumer sees a florist’s advertisement at the top of the search results page, confirms they have a business listing with Google, and sees their website at the top of the organic listings, this all confirms in the customer’s mind that this is a legitimate local busi-



**EASY DOES IT** Paul Danehy of Currans Flowers said his business emphasizes product placement on its site. That means positioning products online with purpose, ensuring the first products a customer sees are the most relevant for the season.