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THE RIGHT STUFF Rosana Cruz, senior designer at Park Florist, checks inventory for B2B work using the shop's customizable inventory chart.



BIANCA MADANAT

BETTER B2B

Corporate accounts can be more attractive than ever — if you keep up with changing demands.

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

How much would you love to grow your business in a direction that's less seasonal and more predictable? Business that can link to the glamour and bigger budgets associated with special events, but also to more everyday orders of the kind that have always been a traditional florist's bread and butter?

Corporate accounts can do all that and more. Standing orders for weekly deliveries offer consistent volume and cash flow. They can also lead to work providing floral décor for holidays and corporate events, along with gifts for clients and employees, and more.

How easy is it to get and keep those accounts? It varies from market to market — but, always, it requires staying ahead of changes in the business world that can make this particular niche a fast-moving target.

What has changed?

- Effective strategies for reaching corporate buyers
- The buyers themselves, often fresh-faced members of a younger generation who bring a different set of experiences and expectations to the job
- New, complicated requirements for corporate billing and budgets

Corporate work is worth the effort, though, say florists who have staked a claim in the B2B world.

"Once I started seeking out corporate accounts, it really helped to stabilize the business," said Jeanne Ha, AIFD, of Park Florist in Takoma Park, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. "It brings so many benefits — much more than weddings do. It's steady work in front of you."

Nic Faitos, senior partner of Starbright Floral Design in New York City, describes corporate work as an essential part of a retailer's business.

"I believe the successful florist of the future is going to have a strong base of corporate clients," he said. "That's what's going to provide the revenue to sustain the other aspects of the business — which, these days, are seeing competition from so many other types of outlets."

In fact, Faitos said, in many ways "the sustainability of the industry depends a great deal on presenting ourselves with a best foot forward to the corporate client."

Gaining a Foothold

To put your best foot forward, you first need to get a foot in the door.

When Faitos started targeting corporate accounts, back in 1994, he

opened up the phone book and cold called account managers at Fortune 500 companies. He'd follow up by sending a package with printed material and then another call.

"That was expensive," he said. "But at the end of the day, the math would work in your favor."

Technological changes, specifically sophisticated voicemail systems, have forced Faitos to change his techniques hunting down corporate work.

"If you don't know the person's last name and how to spell it, you aren't going to find them that way. Gatekeepers are gone except for very top level of executives," he explained. "Cold calling hasn't gone away entirely, but today I have to do a lot more data mining, with research on sites like LinkedIn, so I know who I want to talk to."

Now, when he does reach his target, it's more "warm calling," prospecting ahead of the sale, he said.

"The pitch is more, 'Try me one time. Let me be the one to get you out of a pinch.' And if one day they call me and say, 'It's 4:59 p.m., and I need something delivered today in the Bronx,' then at that point I have them. That's how you build it."

In D.C., Ha, likewise, approaches prospects gently. Instead of pushing them for a sale on the spot, she simply says, "When you need floral service, please remember me."

One way she finds prospects is by asking her delivery driver (often, her husband, Dennis) to be on the lookout for newly renovated apartment buildings.

"There are tons of them in D.C., even within one block," she reported. These properties have vacancies to fill and an attractive lobby helps expedite the process. (Enter Ha and her offer to install flowers and plants.) "Usually, those buildings are owned by a big corporation that has other buildings," Ha said. "So once I connect with them, I can have a chance to do others."

If a potential corporate client already has weekly fresh flowers, but the quality leaves something to be desired or the style simply doesn't match the environment, Ha sees an easy opening.

"I can go straight to them and show them what I do. I offer to send a sample arrangement — and no one ever says no to free flowers," she said. "Let them see the difference, and if they like my flowers, they will order from me. The sample is an investment, but it's a targeted investment, not blind."

Jeanne Ha, AIFD

Park Florist

Takoma Park, Maryland

Annual Sales: \$800,000 (35 percent B2B)

B2B Sales Trend: Up 20-35 percent in five years

ParkFlorist.us; @ParkFloristTakoma

“Once I started seeking out corporate accounts, it really helped to stabilize the business.”

— Jeanne Ha, AIFD,
Park Florist



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EASY, BREEZY

Jeanne Ha, AIFD, doesn't hesitate to send samples to prospective clients. "No one ever says no to free flowers," she said.

The Next Generation

Ha has noticed a demographic shift in the people tasked with corporate flower buying.

"It used to be owners or high-ranked employees who weren't interested in flowers but just had to buy them as part of their job," Ha said. "But lately, they are often young women. Sometimes I get corporate accounts from my brides."

Simply having a dedicated corporate services page on the Park Florist

website has landed her a few clients who spotted the tab while shopping for personal reasons.

During cold calls, Ha tells prospects to check out her corporate-specific Pinterest boards, which she's linked to her website.

"That's my portfolio," she said. "I think it's important, because your big corporate customers can come from any direction."

Her site's section includes photos Ha takes herself featuring weekly

reception-area flowers, office plants, holiday decorations, flowers for office parties, employee appreciation flowers and more. When customers click those pictures, they get routed to her Pinterest boards, where they can see more.

The younger generation of corporate flower buyers has had a lot more exposure to floral design than its predecessors, thanks in large part to social media, said Robbin Yelverton, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, co-owner of Blumz...by JR Designs in Detroit and Ferndale, Michigan.

"Sometimes they know just enough to be dangerous," he said. For instance: They want peonies or ranunculus in August. Yelverton and his team often have to provide some "re-education," complimenting the client's choice of flower but explaining why it won't work for the particular occasion (be it price, availability or vase life). The trick, Yelverton said, is to speak with authority.



**Robbin Yelverton, AAF, AIFD, PFCI
Blumz...by JR Designs**

Detroit and Ferndale, Michigan.

Annual Sales: \$1 million+

B2B Sales Trend: Undisclosed

Blumz.com; @BlumzByJRdesigns

[Millennials like] unique things, and nicer things. Even if they're buying for a corporate group, on a corporate budget, they're buying it because they personally like it."

—Robbin Yelverton, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, Blumz...by JR Designs

“Offering advice only adds to your credibility,” he said. He also recommends clients check out the shop’s Instagram account for more ideas.

Make It Personal

While corporate buyers will generally do research before calling you (which includes, of course, checking out your reputation and reviews on Yelp and Google, among other online sources), they place great importance on meeting face to face.

“It’s very much the classic thing with the millennials,” Yelverton said. “In the end, they’re all about the experience.”

They want to come into your shop, he explained, check out possible product and be personally involved in selecting materials and the overall look.

“The day of having the client who just picks up the phone and says, ‘I trust you, do whatever’ is over,” he said. “This age group likes unique things, and nicer things. Even if they’re buying for a corporate group, on a corporate budget, they’re buying it because they personally like it.”

Catering to this desire for personal engagement, Yelverton has pitched the

shop’s build-your-own-terrarium class to corporate clients as a team-building exercise.

Ha takes a similar tack. For corporate clients that host lots of events, she suggests holding a 30-minute flower arranging demonstration for planners.

“It’s a fun event for them, during their lunch hour maybe,” she said. “They get to have more knowledge about flowers. In turn, I get to know them better, they get to know me, and since we’re friends now, they’re not going to go anywhere else!”

Ha gives the audience her cell phone number, “so that on the morning of a corporate event, if they need to, they can call and say, ‘I counted the number of tables wrong,’ and I can easily make the change,” she said. “That’s how you build relationships.”

Price is not the biggest motivator with corporate clients; a personal touch also guides them.

“They want to make a connection with you,” Ha said. “When they want to say something about flowers, they want to talk with you directly. For the people in the office, the cubicle, they care about these flowers. This is their joy.”

The Price Is Right

That said, price isn’t inconsequential. After all, corporate clients *always* care about the bottom line. It’s true that corporate customers generally have a fixed budget and need to work within it. But they, more than other types of clients, may also appreciate the value of quick, reliable and consistent service — and will happily pay for it.

“Nowadays [corporate customers] expect a fast turnaround, just like everyone else in the age of the Internet,” said Charles Ingram, owner of Dr. Delphinium Designs in Dallas. “They have less staff for planning ahead, but they’re still doing many of the same things, so that burden falls on us.”

An upside to the increasing expectations? Corporate clients recognize and appreciate the value of customer service, Ingram said.

“In the past they would always pick the lowest price. Now I think it’s more and more obvious that’s not always the best choice for them,” he said. “They want to know that someone is going to be able to take care of them: answer the phone when there’s a problem and fix it.”

Nic Faitos

Starbright Floral Design

New York City

Annual Sales: \$6 million+ (60 percent B2B)

B2B Sales Trend: Up 25 percent in five years

Starbrightnyc.com; @StarbrightNYC

“[Corporate accounts are] going to provide the revenue to sustain the other aspects of the business — which, these days, are seeing competition from so many other types of outlets.”

—Nic Faitos,
Starbright Floral Design





Nowadays [corporate customers] expect a fast turnaround, just like everyone else in the age of the Internet. They have less staff for planning ahead.”

—Charles Ingram,
Dr. Delphinium Designs

Charles Ingram

Dr. Delphinium Designs

Dallas

Annual Sales: 1 million+ (17 percent B2B)

B2B Sales Trend: Up 36 percent in five years

DrDelphinium.com;@DrDelphinium

Previously, Ingram would discount corporate work to secure the steady income flow. “Now we hold our ground and charge what we’re supposed to charge, and we’re still winning the business.”

Helping clients maximize their budget is a key step in making them happy.

Faitos has helped companies develop flower policies, derivative of general gifting policies in terms of what they allocate based on occasion and rank of employee or client.

“So, if there’s a mid-level manager who’s had a baby, and the flower budget is \$75, it might be \$100 for the same occasion for an executive,” he said. “That kind of protocol is trickling down to smaller organizations as well. I always ask to find out if they have a flower policy. I might poke around by asking, ‘What are your standards, your range?’ If they don’t have a policy, I tell them I can help save them money — and I can help them write the policy.”

In setting her yearly goals for business growth, Ha noted that with corporate accounts, she cannot set a goal like, “I want to make the average sale larger” — because the average sale depends entirely on the client’s budget. Rather, she can set the goal of getting, say, three more corporate accounts.

Top Billing

Quick turnaround is a top priority, not only for floral services but for accounting as well, said Ingram.

“More and more house accounts are going to credit card, but many still prefer to pay by check, and you have to get your accounting correct and consistent when you send an invoice,” he said.

Some require standard invoices monthly, even though some months have more weeks than others.

“We have to average them out so the client gets 12 even bills,” he said. “These will be your bigger nationwide customers, who are on a specific strict budget.”

That’s just one of the twists, Ingram said: “Some invoices we mail, some we have to submit to online systems. It can get very complicated.”

Larger corporate accounts are going paperless, noted Yelverton, and often outsourcing accounts payable to a third party, which means you need to email the invoice to an address different from your company contact. If your point of sale system doesn’t have a field where you can enter that second email address, it means extra work for you and extra care to keep your records straight.

“Large accounts like hospitals may have a company that manages all their

purchasing,” said Yelverton. “And that means going through their purchase order system. It’s no longer, ‘The concierge at the hotel called and needs an arrangement, so we’ll run it over there right now.’ Now, they have to issue a purchase order based on an invoice that you are sending them.” What used to take 30 minutes now takes a whole day because it has to pass through so many chains — “and you don’t dare deliver it until you have a purchase order issued to you, or you will not be paid,” he said. “We learned that the hard way.”

While corporate billing can be a nuisance, making the extra effort puts you in the position to hold onto large, lucrative accounts.

Location, Location

You’ve read about urban renewal as a nationwide trend. City neighborhoods are getting gentrified, and millennials are choosing tiny city apartments rather than sprawling suburban homes. So, do you need to be downtown to do well with corporate accounts?

Not necessarily, said Ha. Her Takoma Park location, just six miles north of the U.S. Capitol, offers several advantages over downtown D.C. properties, where rents run very high. “We have more



COLLABORATE AND CREATE
 Manager Wynne Allen and owner Jeanne Ha, AIFD, work together to prep designs at Park Florist.



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space,” she said. “If you’re in downtown D.C., you can’t even afford a place to park your trucks.”

Blumz by JRDesigns has the best of both worlds, with a foothold in Detroit and a shop about 15 minutes away in Ferndale.

“All of our deliveries are made from Ferndale, and all of our phones ring there first,” said Yelverton. “But the Detroit storefront brings us a lot of visibility that coaxes the business community to use us. If we gave that up, we’d lose a lot of the interest in us, because then we would no longer be in Detroit.”

That urban address is especially critical at the moment. Downtown Detroit is a hotbed for investment, bouncing back from dramatic decay after the financial crisis of 2008, with money pouring in from Dan Gilbert, the billionaire founder of Quicken Loans, and others.

“Suddenly everybody wants a piece of the pie,” said Yelverton. As a result, the city is teeming with those aforementioned millennial employees. They tend to move quickly from one job to the next, making it more difficult to establish steady relationships.

“You talk to one person, they come in and place orders, then all of a sudden you notice, we haven’t seen So-and-So in a while — because they’ve moved on somewhere else, to another business or a new position,” Yelverton said. “They

may or may not tell the next person who their floral contact was or even meet that person. There’s not that continuity there was a few years ago, when things were more stable.”

The best strategy, he has found, is to stay as active in the community as possible — and being downtown helps tremendously. “Millennials don’t just work here, they live here too. How we get noticed is by participating in local events, usually gratis,” he said.

Those terrarium classes also help: “It’s part of the corporate culture in the new businesses that hire millennials that they promote team-building exercises. Anything that can turn into a little social gathering, they do. It’s another way to stay visible, current and relevant with these clients.”

Something to Celebrate

Corporate business has these three distinct areas of potential: weekly standing orders, gift orders for employees and clients and corporate events. A relationship with a client can bring all three in tandem — or not.

With more and more event specialists entering the floral market, corporate events, in particular, are vulnerable. If the company is an especially large one, events may be handled separately from other corporate business. “In a company with thousands of employees, the HR de-

partment may never even speak with the events department,” Yelverton said. “We try to make the pitch, ‘We can do it all for you.’ Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

In D.C., security clearance is a major issue, which offers seasoned vendors, like Ha, an edge. “Once you get the event work and know the ropes, it’s easy to keep that business, because it’s a hassle for the clients to find someone new and get them cleared,” she said.

Additionally, unlike weddings — which are fraught with emotions — corporate events are just about logistics, Ha said. Another bonus: They tend to be scheduled at slow times, when Park Florist isn’t busy with weddings or holiday business. Eager to get a good number of guests, corporate hosts avoid popular dates, preferring a mid-week event, she explained.

“It’s so convenient that I can spread things out, without everything getting clogged on the weekends,” Ha said.

Furthermore, working with the same event planners for the same companies over and over again makes the work pretty low stress.

“It’s as though I have consistent wedding business, but I don’t need to meet with individual brides every time,” she said. “I know this ‘bride’ already. The in-house event coordinator takes care of things, so you already

have a well-planned chart in front of you when you get the order.”

The feeling, she suspects, is reciprocal.

“They host at just a couple of specific locations, so we get familiar with all the vendors and venues and people, and they want to keep working with us because of that.”

Having It All

It’s easier to build on existing relationships when a client has a standing order for weekly flowers, but also needs to send flowers to customers or employees on a regular basis.

“When we do a standing order, like a weekly arrangement in the lobby, we find that’s usually about 50 percent of the overall spend for that business,” said Dr. Delphinium’s Ingram. “They’ll turn around and order for a birthday or other things. So if they were already going to spend \$200, they’ll end up spending \$400 for the month, because we have that relationship.”

You may miss that opportunity, however, unless you make the client aware of what you have.

“There are not many things more disappointing than one of your big customers saying, ‘Oh, I didn’t even know you did that,’ about a service you provide and probably have done for years,” said Ingram. To avoid this, he hires outside salespeople to specifically target the corporate market, adapting their tactics to each individual client.

Marketing to corporate clients is continual, he said.

“Even if a customer doesn’t need a service now, they probably will need it eventually. So, they should know that we sell a lot of gift baskets, and plants, and Christmas installations, and that we can handle social things,” he said. “There have been quite a few occasions when we start out with business owners or CEOs as corporate clients, but then all of a sudden their daughter gets married. If they don’t know we do weddings, then that’s a lost opportunity.”

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