



# TOP OF ★ THE ★ CLASS

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Meet eight young innovators intent on contributing to — and changing — the floral industry.

BY RENEE HOUSTON ZEMANSKI

**T**he floral industry is transforming, with young innovators set to lead the charge. They have novel ideas, original solutions and plenty of energy to make things happen. Through marketing, streamlining business operations and embracing social media, these forward-thinkers are pioneering initiatives to tackle the floral industry's biggest challenges and create new opportunities for the future. And with industry-wide visionaries like these, that future looks bright.

# MOST LIKELY TO TAKE CHARGE

**Danny Sanchez**  
Founder and CEO  
South Florals Group  
Miami, Florida

## Who's that guy?

Sanchez's foray into the floral industry came when he purchased the 1-800-Flowers.com fulfillment center in Miami more than 12 years ago. Before that, Sanchez, 36, was working as a retail manager.

## What's the big idea?

A born entrepreneur, Sanchez has spent 12 years building companies' infrastructure, implementing new technologies, conceiving marketing campaigns, increasing social media presence and improving existing business processes in multiple industries, including flowers, real estate, e-commerce and medicine. Since 2014, he's purchased nine retail flower shop locations, turning around their operations and getting them on a path to profitability. He also founded the Miami Flower Market, a wholesale market, in 2016 and Dr. Planter, a plantscaping and plant maintenance division catering to corporate clients, in 2018.

## Secret to success:

Pay attention. Sanchez has revitalized failing shops, in some cases doubling their revenues in as little as two years. He does that by scrutinizing what each operation does best, what they should let go of, and which opportunities they may be missing. "Some shops can turn around just by instilling new marketing procedures," he said. "The way customers see your shop is not traditional — so you really have to tap into new marketing channels — social media, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram." Other challenges aren't so easy to fix, but Sanchez is working on solutions. For example, he is developing software to manage expenses such as costs of goods and fresh flowers to help retail florists become profitable.



## Proud moment:

Sanchez saw a need in Miami for a wholesale floral supply and flower market that not only offers special classes and pricing to floral retailers, but also offers the public a place to shop and take classes. In 2016, he opened the Miami Flower Market to a crowd of 1,800 people, assuring him that his gut feeling was undeniably

correct. "It really surprised us. I mean, that's a lot of people for flowers," he said. The Miami Flower Market not only offers a diverse floral supply and flower selection, it ships nationally, provides customizable products and offers floral design classes to the public. Another service it extends is guidance to DIY brides, offering classes and a free consultation.

## MOST LIKELY TO MAKE CONNECTIONS

**Nicole Palazzo**  
Marketing and Sales Manager  
City Line Florist  
Trumbull, Connecticut

### Who's that gal?

While other kids were playing with their digital pets and trading Pokémon cards, Nicole Palazzo, 30, was filling up water tubes and breaking up cardettes at her family's fourth-generation, 100-year-old business. She did this by choice, taking the school bus directly to her family's flower shop. "I said my first words here. I grew up here," she said. After college, Palazzo returned to the shop full-time, carving her niche in marketing, social media, product merchandising and sales. Palazzo recently moved to San Diego temporarily and is working remotely for City Line. "I am answering phone calls and selling bouquets as if I am sitting at my desk in Connecticut, still handling all the marketing and social media," she said.

### What's the big idea?

"I am obsessed with flowers," said Palazzo, who admits that she used to occasionally say goodnight to her flowers and plants when locking up the shop. "It's easy to sell something you are passionate about." Palazzo shares that passion by staying involved. Currently president of the Connecticut Florists Association, she's also a board member of the Connecticut Unit of Teleflora Members, following in her grandfather's footsteps. She also serves on the Society of American Florists' Convention Task Force and cofounded the association's Next Gen Floral Pros Group to encourage more young people to become active in SAF and share ideas.

### Secret to success:

Embrace technology. Palazzo advocates having a polished, comprehensive website to take advantage of e-commerce growth, and using social media to follow trends and build brand loyalty by showing the personal side of a small business. "What's worked for us is a social media



presence where we tell a story and build a relationship with our followers," said Palazzo, who even posts about her floral-related travels. To back up the excitement generated on social media, Palazzo said florists need to provide quality products and great customer service, too. "The industry is changing. Flowers are a luxury and there's so much competition," she said. "You have to develop a better connection with your customers by offering a service that competitors can't. Stand behind your product so they can trust you."

### Proud moment:

Thanks to Palazzo, City Line is involved in community affairs and hosts its own events, like Friday Flower Happy Hour, during which customers can buy flowers at a 50 percent discount. It was a game-changer, said Palazzo. "It's like Mother's Day every Friday — a line out the door. It has grown our business tremendously; we have a whole new customer base."



DAN KINNEY

# MOST LIKELY TO LEVERAGE TECH

**Tyler Meskers**  
Vice President  
Oregon Flowers  
Aurora, Oregon

## Who's that guy?

As a second-generation grower, Meskers, 31, loves to talk about growing up on the family farm in Aurora, Oregon, and now raising his sons on that same homestead. But Meskers didn't begin his career there. Taking the advice of his father, Martin Meskers, AAF, SAF's chairman, he set out to find his own path. "Some of the best advice my dad gave me was to 'Work elsewhere to understand what it's like to work for somebody and understand other expectations,'" said Meskers, who worked for his uncle on a bulb farm in Holland, then for a vineyard supply company in his hometown, and a bulb company in Chile before settling down at Oregon Flowers. "[Those experiences] opened my eyes to seeing the world and understanding everything a little bit more," he said. "Using

those tools that I learned then, I was able to apply them to my work now."

## What's the big idea?

Meskers has applied his knowledge to handle the industry's challenges with amazing acuity, using technologies learned from Holland to help with the growing side of the business and studying other industries for sales techniques. "We are a very forward-thinking business, focusing on what the end consumer wants," Meskers said. For instance, Oregon Flowers strives to be the first company to offer new varieties and to alert customers to what's in season. To make shopping more convenient, Meskers brought in fiber internet and developed an app that indicates flower availability.

## Secret to success:

Take it to the cloud. A new database program allows Oregon Flowers to track plantings and cuttings to help them determine when products will be for sale. Google Drive syncs with the company's mobile app and website so when a variety is ready, it automatically updates and informs customers. The program also helps forecast sales earlier — advantageous info, because the company has to buy bulbs two years in advance. "Every year

we are getting closer to understanding what people really want," Meskers said.

## Proud moment:

As business-minded as he is, Meskers is just as focused on his family. He lives with his wife, Megan, and two sons, Kase, 3, and Beckham, 15 months, in the farmhouse where he grew up. "It's fun to combine work and pleasure at the same time. Seeing [my kids] daily, grabbing lunch with them, it's just great," he said. "My oldest knows everyone here at work by name. This is how I grew up. Raising kids around a business is a lot of fun."

# MOST LIKELY TO PROBLEM-SOLVE

**Brian Foster**  
Assistant Operations Manager  
Mayesh LA Flower Market  
Los Angeles

## Who's that guy?

Growing up in Naples, Florida, Foster, 35, always thought he would end up in a creative field, and it wasn't until he took a job in restaurant management that he realized he had a knack for solving operational challenges. "I love walking into a place that's a little chaotic and needs to be improved in multiple ways, and then figuring out the puzzle of how we're going to get it done," he said. Foster has embraced that talent and changed the way Mayesh does business at the LA Flower Market, which caters to wedding and event professionals.

## What's the big idea?

When Foster arrived at the market three years ago, he saw frenzied employees, jumbled displays and one manager who managed sales — the rest of the operations were handled on the fly. Even though sales were steady, profit margins were low. That's when he stepped back, analyzed the situation and started tweaking. First, he changed how product was received, and then implemented a new way to use the computer system to break down sold and available products.

"It was a free-for-all — salespeople grabbing what they need and nothing



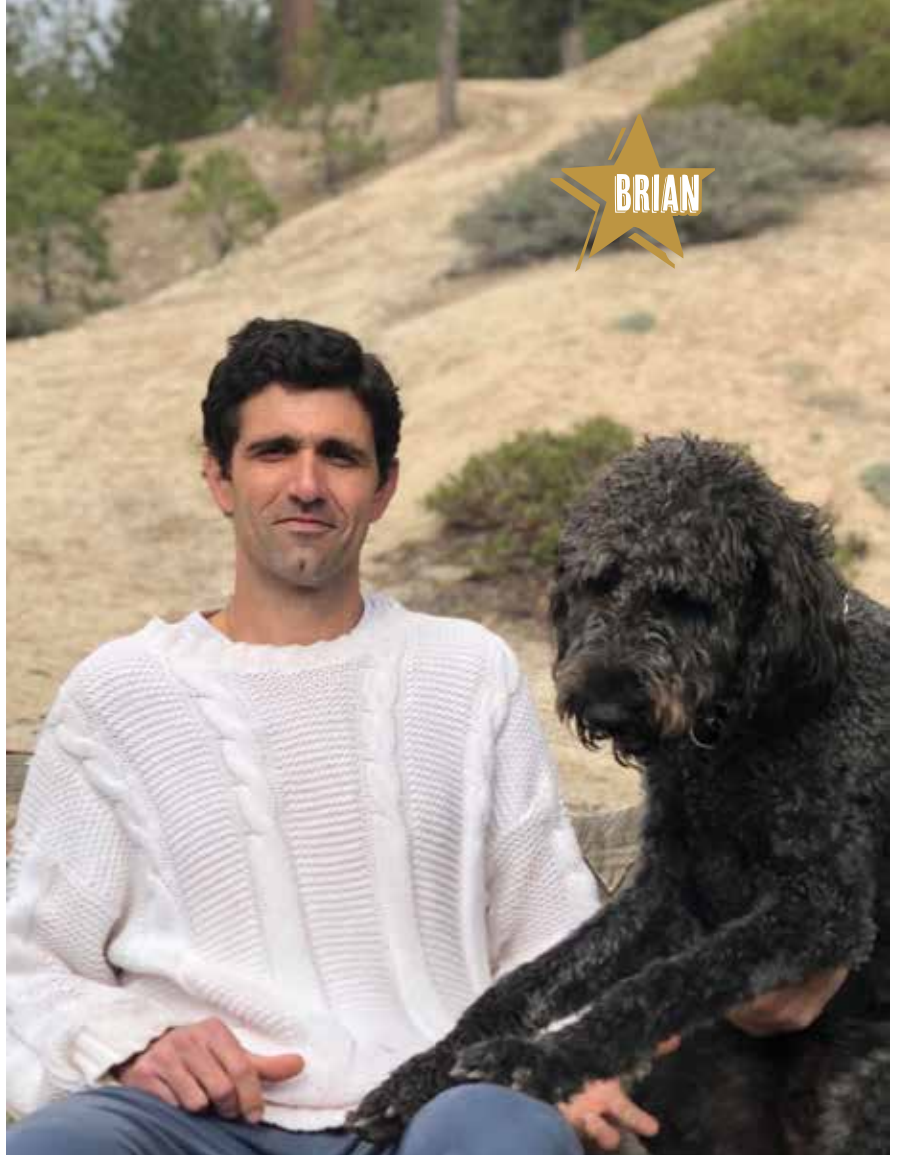
accounted for — until we separated the salesforce from the back of house,” he said. “Now, instead of Monday mornings being a chaotic rush, we separate products on Sundays so the sales team can go to their individual shelves and collect their products.”

**Secret to success:**

Listen to your customers. When it comes to visual merchandising, “I’ll ask ‘What do you think of our floor?’ My point of view is totally different than theirs,” said Foster. Customer ideas included elevating product to eye level and above and changing the way the greens were displayed so customers could tell where the sales floor ends and where processing begins. Foster said that he will always be tweaking things. “There are a million projects that we completed and a million more that we still have, but I love the challenge.”

**Proud moment:**

Three years in, Foster’s satisfied with how things are working. “Sales are up, stress is down and margins have increased — a great combination,” he said. “We’re recouping money on delivery fees, making life better for our employees and delivering a good product at the same time — that’s what does it for me.”



**BRIAN**



**MAYA**

**MOST LIKELY TO  
DIVE INTO  
THE DATA**

**Maya Sagastume**  
Director of Marketing  
Equiflor-Rio Roses  
Miami, Florida

**Who’s that gal?**

Sagastume, 33, has always been a research-driven professional, working while attending college as she earned both her bachelor’s and master’s in business from Florida International University. Before joining Equiflor in 2016, she worked first as a project manager and then as director for Americas Market Intelligence, a premier market intelligence and research firm for Latin

and North American markets, leading multiple market research projects for Fortune 500 clients from conception to completion.

### What's the big idea?

The first thing Sagastume did when she joined Equiflor was to conduct a full market study, interviewing more than 80 wholesalers, retailers and industry players. Through it, she found key emerging trends in the industry. One trend — the shifting share of distribution channels — stood out. "Today, 80 percent of wholesalers have a direct relationship with the farms, using the importers and brokers as a secondary sourcing option, while 90 percent of mass market is sourcing directly from farms, using wholesalers as a secondary sourcing option," she said. "Farms that sell directly to the mass market eliminate a link in the distribution channel."

### Secret to success:

Education. Sagastume also discovered that younger consumers are purchasing fewer flowers, seeing price as the major barrier, and perceiving local florists as the most expensive channel. To address these industry trends, challenges and changes, Sagastume decided to use marketing to educate customers. In January 2017, she launched LivRio, an online monthly magazine that provides business and marketing educational information for wholesalers and flower retailers. Later that summer, she launched the new company website.

### Forward thinking:

One of the things that excites Sagastume, lately, is the implementation of artificial intelligence to inventory management software. "This is going to dramatically change how we work in this industry, across the entire distribution supply chain," she said. "Right now, there is a huge volume of data from many different datastreams that can't easily be gathered, so distributors have to make educated guesses as to product demand. Through AI, we'll be able to merge all these different data sets so we can make accurate predictions about the future," she said. "It's a huge breakthrough."



## MOST LIKELY TO GO ABOVE & BEYOND

**Courtney Buckley, DPM**  
Head Grower-Trial Manager  
Sakata Seed America  
Salinas, California

### Who's that gal?

Courtney Buckley, 37, draws her creativity from her passion: quilting. Her hobby provides inspiration for her job at Sakata Seed America where she oversees the ornamental seed trials and manages the production of new floral material presented at the California Spring Trials. "Quilting lends itself to an amazing palette of colors. Seeing those colors come to life in my trials brings me joy,"

said Buckley, who earned her doctorate in plant medicine from the University of Florida, working there and at two other positions before bringing her knowledge and talent to Sakata.

### What's the big idea?

Coworkers say Buckley has vision and creativity allowing her to go above and beyond her job, seeing the micro and macro views to any situation. This, they say, not only allows her to have the science-based knowledge to grow and produce a beautiful product but also the vision and creativity to know how to best accentuate and display that product. It was that creative mindset that led Sakata to select Buckley to develop a landscape plan for the highly visible front beds at its newest research and innovation facility in Woodland, California. The project's challenge, Buckley said, was designing for a different climate. "I had to really consider what would work best for that area, while still being con-

scious of environmental considerations such as water usage and disease issues," she explained.

**Secret to success:**

Science, baby. While Buckley's creative talent is an advantage in her role, her scientific knowledge provides Sakata with the initiative the company needs to be competitive in the global market. Buckley is responsible for analyzing 10 to 15 plant trials simultaneously, either for forecasting sales or for technical purposes such as testing a new plant growth regulator to see how varieties react. "We spend a lot of time researching and collecting data. It's not an easy process to predict what will sell since it takes five to seven years from breeding to market introduction," she said.

**Proud moment:**

Buckley recognizes the fruits of her labor when she sees consumers interact with flowers. "The happiness and joy you see when someone receives flowers is immensely rewarding," she said. "In that moment, all the growing, data collection and time spent agonizingly deciding if there is really a difference between those two shades of pink, is all worth it."



## MOST LIKELY TO BUILD A FOLLOWING

**Paula Melo**  
Senior Product Leader  
Gems Group  
Miami, Florida

**Who's that gal?**

Paula Melo, 38, wants to transform flowers from special occasion to everyday purchases. For the past 11 years, she's worked toward that goal at Gems Group, the floral marketing group specializing in the supermarket channel and partnering with North American retail florists. "We have to find a way to make that connection," said Melo.

**What's the big idea?**

Her former role as senior leader of fulfillment included planting forecasts, order execution, protocol compliance,

production and processing and logistics inbound and outbound. Her new role is making sure that the execution is a success, taking the concept into the market with consistency. "For a couple of years, we have been working on lean manufacturing — a system to eliminate non-value-added activities and waste. It was a challenge but also very interesting and we've made continuous improvement in production to reduce costs," she said.

**Secret to success:**

Focus online. "We have this tool that's glued to people's hands — the phone — and it gives us the opportunity to connect to people instantly. We should be using this tool to get people to incorporate flowers into their daily routine. Using these [social media] platforms to say, 'How about buying flowers for your dinner table tonight?' Be aware of that space in order to connect with your consumers in an

## Grow the Next Gen

How do you help cultivate the next generation of leaders, for your business and the industry? The Society of American Florists has resources aimed directly at younger floral professionals, including our Next Gen Floral Pros Group on Facebook — email [info@safnow.org](mailto:info@safnow.org) or message us on Facebook for more info — and our regular webinar training and education series at [safnow.org/webinars](http://safnow.org/webinars). Plus, be sure to check out the American Floral Endowment and its host of internship and scholarship opportunities. Find out more at [endowment.org](http://endowment.org).

instant way. Look for ways to create more demand," she said.

### Forward thinking:

While creating demand is important, offering customers quality and diversity is equally paramount, she said. "Going online means convenience but we also need quality," said Melo. "The industry is evolving; companies need to offer more diversity [in terms of products] to their consumers. We all want different things faster." Melo also believes online platforms should be used to educate consumers about flowers and the industry. "There is so much planning and preparation in the industry. I would never imagine in a million years that there is so much execution to bring those flowers to market. We have the opportunity to teach consumers what goes on behind the scenes," she said.

## MOST LIKELY TO SET TRENDS

### Juana de la Torre

Sales Director

Ball SB

Bogotá, Colombia

### Who's that gal?

A few years back, Juana de la Torre, 29, saw an opportunity and took it. And she's never looked back. Born and raised in Bogotá, to a family of floral industry professionals — her father, Joaquin, is a managing partner at Ball SB; her grandfather, Pepe, was inducted into SAF's Floriculture Hall of Fame in 2001 — de la Torre started her own journey into the industry in 2016 when she joined

Ball Horticultural Company in Chicago. After working on different projects there, she returned to Colombia to work as the sales director for Ball SB. Her territories include Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Kenya and Ethiopia.

### What's the big idea?

What de la Torre, who previously worked in the hospitality industry, brings to Ball is enthusiasm, energy and expertise on marketing — specifically marketing to the new generation and capturing emerging trends. "With internet sales taking over and social media being so strong now, we are changing the way we market our products," she said.

### Secret to success:

Laser focus on demand. "Flowers are an impulse buy; we are researching how internet shopping is going to change that," de la Torre said. "How do we capture that impulse buy on the internet? The new generations are not only changing the way they buy but also the products they buy," she added, noting that younger generations continue to seek out a more natural, wildflower look in floral design and have helped return longtime industry staples (think: tweedia, snapdragons and delphinium) to trendy selections.

### Forward thinking:

De la Torre also closely watches trends outside the industry to project what colors and varieties may be popular. In particular, she tunes in to the fashion industry. "We always say, we're in the fashion business, too. We look to it for inspiration to see the colors, the trends, the way they market, how quickly they work. I've been surprised how fast these trends change," she said. The rapid changeover in trends is a real challenge for growers since coming up with a new color or variety can take five, 10 and even up to 15 years of work. "It's a very slow process. We need to really think ahead when it comes to breeding. We need to project and add a little bit of guessing, too. There's a lot of work behind it." 🌱

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