

LIVE ACTION FLORISTS

How to stay in front of customers, virtually

BY AMANDA LONG



SHUTTERSTOCK/KRISTINA VYKHOR

When Jackie Levine learned early Tuesday March 24 that she'd have to close her flower shop before noon that day, she did what many quick-thinking Millennials do: got on Instagram.

This was no anxiety-fed scroll to distract her from the reality of closing up Central Square Florist on orders from the state. Nope, Levine was going live to clear out the coolers. She had to move product fast and needed a way to show it off to as many people as possible. With more than 21,000 followers, Central Square Florist's Instagram page offered the perfect venue. And Instagram Live, with its raw, unedited, "straight from the front lines" content proved the perfect way to capture the sense of urgency.

"I could not believe the response," said Levine, manager of the family business in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "We had many people stop by the shop who all mentioned they saw the IG live. It was unbelievable. It totally helped us clear a huge chunk of our inventory."

The sales didn't stop when the broadcast did. When customers called to see what was in stock for delivery, Levine could point them to the saved live footage, which stays in your Instagram Stories for 24 hours. The viewers grew to 600, as the product dwindled. Levine directly credits the video for 16 orders.

No More Excuses

So, yeah — selling flowers in a pandemic takes a lot more creativity and a lot more technology. You already know how to host an innovative design class, now you have to figure out how to host it virtually. You may have even already been doing the job of social media manager — in addition to your other duties — but now it's your main duty. To be a florist now is to be a florist at a distance — a fact that could hold true for months as local communities come to terms with the duration and aftermath of the crisis. There are two ways to do that: Deliver good product contact-free and deliver good content online. If you've been punting on video posting or just haven't

had the time to figure out Zoom, now is the time. We spoke to three florists who pushed themselves out of their comfort zones to go live for the first time and to one communications major-turned-florist who has had plenty of experience in front of and behind the camera.

Keep It Real — and Online

Levine had never done an Instagram Live before the day of the order to close shop. But she knew she had to act fast, and the learning curve, technically speaking, was slight. Just press Live in your IG Stories, wait a few seconds as Instagram alerts your followers that you're going live, and boom: You are beaming out live from



LIVE, FROM CAMBRIDGE... Levine's first live video worked wonders.

your living room (or flower cooler). Levine chose Instagram because the shop has more followers there than on Facebook.

TIP If you're going to be taking customers on a tour, as Levine did, be sure your Wifi is secure in every part of your shop or home. After losing connection in the coolers, Levine is switching to cellular data for her future short films.

Technology, in other words, isn't the biggest hurdle here. The bigger challenge is getting over the very understandable jitters and camera shyness.

"I was so nervous... no need to be! It's a casual outlet, so just be yourself," Levine said. "After this is all over, I look forward to using Instagram Live more. It's such a powerful tool. Once you do it once, you'll realize you can do it a million more times."

TIP Part of the charm and power of IG Live is the rawness of it. You don't want to look like a heavily made-up news anchor. Be yourself. Look like you do when you're at the shop, not filming a commercial for the shop. If you're working in your garden, that's what viewers are tuning in for. Your followers want to see behind the scenes, even if that's your back yard.



Central Sq Florist @csflorist · Mar 19

We gave away 3,000 flowers that would otherwise be trashed due to lack of business. We set up flower outposts around the city to support fellow local businesses & gave away flowers to lift people's spirits. Science proves flowers make people happy! 🌸 We wish everyone the best 💜



4 comments, 32 shares, 109 likes

PRICELESS PR Instagram helped Central Square Florist flaunt its goodwill activities.

Keep It Natural

The back yard is where Carly Anechiarico, a florist from Yonkers, New York, filmed her first Instagram content: an IGTV video. IGTV is where Instagram puts videos longer than 60 seconds. It shows up in followers' feeds, but to view the entire clip, they have to click the "continue to IGTV" prompt. When she left her business, Blossom Flower Shop, on a Monday in late March — leaving one designer in the shop to handle deliveries — Anechiarico grabbed a couple buckets of flowers, determined to keep her hands in the business she loves and to interact with customers, however she could. As she was leaving, she posted on Instagram to stay tuned for what's next for those buds — and her.

TIP Sometimes you just go live when the spirit hits you — and that's great — but if you can pick a time and day, you'll be able to promote it and gain a steady audience. Consider a weekly event like "Happy Hour with Buds" on Friday or Wildflower Wednesdays, where you challenge viewers to use found flowers and objects to arrange.



E-LEARNING Virtual design classes help Carly Anechiarico connect with customers restless at home.

Next for Anechiarico came a backyard design class. She picked her backyard patio because that's where the sunlight was good, and the sound — well, it *had* been pretty good, until the leaf blower started up nearby. She tried waiting him out but gave in to a waning sun. She apologized in the video's description for the noise. Her followers clearly weren't distracted. Anechiarico was so encouraged by the positive feedback that she launched an Instagram poll to gauge interest in a virtual design class via Zoom and was so encouraged by that feedback that she planned her first session for April, charging between \$60 and \$75 for the product, delivery and instruction.

TIP Anechiarico used VideoShop, an app for editing, and swears by it. She was able to add filters and colors to complement her brand.

Anechiarico echoed Levine's encouragement to be yourself — and cut yourself some slack, as you're in good company. Plenty of first-timers are hosting virtual dance parties, concerts, art classes. Just be sure to check in other



activity at your home studio (ahem, your neighbor's outdoor yard plans) before you go live.

TIP Get creative with finding (or creating) a studio. Look for good light and a neutral background. Keep the clutter down so students can concentrate on your demonstration. No matter where you choose to record, ask your fellow studio mates (family, room-mates) what's on their virtual schedules. You don't want the exhortations of your daughter's Peleton instructor to drown out your clever commentary. Nor do you want to be fighting over bandwidth with a PowerPoint on your partner's conference calls. And then find your place to shine for now, even if that's in the sunlight on Instagram.

Keep in Touch

Like all of us, your customers are craving routine in this new world. Fans of City Line Florist in Trumbull, Connecticut, know that for the past five years, Fridays have been for Happy Hour, during which all the shop's cut flowers are 50 percent off. Nicole Palazzo, the shop's manager who has worked remotely for the business from San Diego for almost a year, didn't let a pandemic stand in her way of making it the weekly success it has become — even after her mom, who works at the shop, called to say that customer traffic had been slow. Palazzo studied communications in college and knew what she needed to grab: her phone. She posted a live video of the Happy Hour, assuring everyone it was still going on, just with different rules: call in advance for curbside pickup, instead of coming in. "We went from slow to very busy — we had to even stay two hours later because the phones wouldn't stop ringing once the video went live," Palazzo said.

Since Connecticut has instituted shelter-in-place rules, Palazzo has hosted three live videos on Facebook, tweaking her performance as she goes. She bought an inexpensive light ring online so she can record hands-free, and handle product in a better light. Even though she's "no stranger to video," she said she's learned to practice beforehand and hone a few key messages she wants to get across. She doesn't write a script (too formal!) but does prepare bullet



CUE CARDS Nicole Palazzo skips a formal script, but writes out bullet points to avoid rambling.

notes of topics to hit, to avoid, as she said, “rambling for days.” The one thing she is sure to repeat is the name of the shop, City Line Florist. “When you constantly say your shop’s name, it sticks with the viewer and is in the back of their minds,” she said.

She’s keeping the flowers front of mind and was planning to host a design class via Zoom, selling and delivering the ingredients with a vase and a recipe before the Friday of the event. “We’ll have a Zoom party and design together as I instruct — fun and engaging,” she said.

Go on Location

We’re all looking for a change of scenery. If you’re still allowed in the shop, film there and take the show on the road to your home to show how your product

comes to life there. Give the people a glimpse into your world and that of other small local businesses. In Wichita, Kansas, Jennifer Barnard of Tillie’s Flower Shop reached out to a local bakery for a creative partnership that allows customers to order bakery items through the shop (with 24 hours’ notice) for delivery — a special treat especially for parents scrambling to adapt to canceled birthday celebrations. She gave viewers a taste of those party favors in one of her first Facebook Live videos, unboxing a bundt cake and showing off bouquets. Tillie’s Flower Shop has about 8,000 followers on Facebook, compared to 1,000 on Instagram.

Barnard said shyness and a bit of vanity had kept her from getting in front of the camera, but she’s unstoppable

now. “I’ve been scared, but hard times call us outside our comfort zone,” she said. “I just realized what a great response I get each time, so I’m trying to do one every couple days.”

She also did a virtual plant tour before the shop closed, as a large plant shipment had just arrived. (Her husband is an ICU nurse, so she knew the stay-at-home order was imminent.) She emphasized the environmental and emotional benefits of having plants in the home and encouraged viewers — and their kids — to become “plant parents” as the perfect in-home projects. That video had more than 2,200 views.

She shot another video from her front yard to feature two bows hanging on a tree. The shop is selling a red bow to symbolize prayers for the community, and the red, white and blue is a patriotic gesture in our unified effort. The video is the perfect example of showing that you’re a part of the community while also promoting a product.

TIP Barnard uses Facebook Business App to do Facebook Live. Before posting, she hits the Save button and posts the video to Instagram to get more viewers. “My focus a little bit right now is promoting benefits of flowers and helping parents with projects for kids,” she said in late March about the free advice she was sharing. The shop offers a Kids Design Kit for \$16.95, which comes with a recorded demonstration.

Barnard encouraged florists to stay inspired by what has always inspired them: their product and the emotional connection and resonance it has with customers. Show off every bud, explain care and handling in detail, empower those stuck at home to think creatively and get their hands on nature — especially if that piece of nature is colorful, mood-boosting and proven to calm and relax.

“Just do it,” Barnard said. “This is a perfect time and it humanizes our business.”

Amanda Long is a writer and editor in Falls Church, Virginia, and a former managing editor of *Floral Management* magazine.



BEHIND THE SCENES Jennifer Barnard offered viewers a look behind shop operations.

