





THE NEW RULES FOR SELLING FLOWERS

Floral industry members share insight from an unexpectedly strong — and anything but ordinary — Mother’s Day and how those lessons could translate to a longer-term strategy.

BY AMANDA LONG AND MARY WESTBROOK

For years, the run-up to Mother’s Day has proceeded like clockwork at Radebaugh Florist & Greenhouses in Towson, Maryland. Kaitlin Radebaugh, AAF, is a planner — so determining how much product to buy, how many people to staff, what to promote and when, etc., was a straightforward process: review previous years’ sales, make plans for this year, repeat.

This year, that playbook was out the window. “The biggest challenge was uncertainty,” Radebaugh said. “We had no idea what demand would look like. We weren’t sure what product we’d have to sell.” With their retail areas closed to the public and a reduced team practicing social distancing on site or working remotely, Radebaugh streamlined just about everything — production lines, website offerings, phone call routing — and charged forward into an anything but routine holiday. “I really had no idea what to expect, which was terrifying,” she said.

The holiday week that followed was “excruciating” — 16-hour days, stress and anxiety about new COVID-related processes such as high-volume curbside pickup — but it ended with a big dose of (welcome) good news: Sales were “significantly higher” than 2019 returns. “If we had more staff and more product, we could have done even more,” Radebaugh said.

Around the country, retail florists have been sharing similar stories. According to a post-holiday survey of Society of American Florists members, 70 percent of retail florists who could operate on Mother’s Day reported an increase in

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sales this year — with many, like Radebaugh, saying they could have sold more. The holiday was a bright spot in an extremely challenging spring — and an extraordinary event. With summer weddings on hold, corporate events canceled, and sympathy work dramatically different, florists face a summer and fall like no other.

But the holiday also offered some valuable lessons, and Floral Management writers and editors recently talked with industry members and dug into results from both SAF's member survey and a separate consumer poll (see below) to highlight some of the major takeaways from Mother's Day that could inform your future strategy as you move ahead and reimagine your operations.

Update your playbook.

Floral industry professionals faced myriad challenges ahead of Mother's Day week — including a patchwork of local, state and national regulations and labor and supply-side shortages.

SURVEY SAYS

In addition to SAF's member survey, the association commissioned an Ipsos consumer poll in May to help benchmark holiday returns. That poll found only a slight decrease in the number of American adults buying Mother's Day flowers and plants this year — and a slight increase in their median and average spending per gift.

"We're really encouraged to see that Mother's Day spending increased, despite the many potential obstacles — financial, logistical — that could have driven floral spending on gifts downward," said Kate Penn, SAF's CEO.

Read more about the poll and review full member survey results at safnow.org/moreonline.

-M.W.

In Chicago, Lenny Walker of Kennicott Brothers said that Mother's Day sales "exceeded expectations," in part because the longtime wholesaler saw a surge of late-in-the-week orders. And no wonder: Many florists in the Midwest weren't sure if they'd be able to operate even just 10 days before the holiday. Adapting to this new reality requires a significant shift in thinking — not to mention time and energy. "Our industry is based on patterns, and understanding those patterns helps guide us in making good decisions," Walker said. "Navigating the unknown is consuming."

But finding a new normal also means unearthing new opportunities.

Working with a third of her usual staff over Mother's Day, for example, Radebaugh saw how much her reduced team could accomplish. "We did more with less," she said. The pandemic has underscored the importance of cross training her team — a practice she was already prioritizing before the crisis began. "Everyone on my team can take a sales call, because everyone is trained to be a sales associate," she explained. Several members of her team now work remotely — the setup allowed the business to keep operating in compliance with COVID-related rules pertaining to crowd size — but now that the system and technology are in place, Radebaugh can see the utility of having remote workers manning the phones this winter, when snowstorms make commuting more hazardous.

Radebaugh's biggest holiday takeaway? The power of no. For years, the shop trained its staff to please customers with lots of options and a can-do attitude. (Sound familiar?) This year, they shifted their approach out of necessity on Mother's Day, turning down time-intensive custom work and limiting designs to the most profitable and efficient arrangements. They also made every single sale count with add-ons galore — chocolates, wine and gourmet goods customers were happy to include. The tactics worked and Radebaugh said she'll be carrying the approach forward, beyond the holiday.

"Mother's Day showed me that we have a much stronger ability to control the sale than I ever realized," she explained.

SAF President Chris Drummond, AAF, PFCI, of Penny's by Plaza Flowers



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-KAITLIN RADEBAUGH, AAF

outside of Philadelphia, said the heady combination of a blockbuster sales event like Mother's Day 2020 in the middle of a pandemic also clarified for him how much his team can do when they come together. "Many members of our staff have learned that they can be super-productive when they are pushed," he said. "They have learned how to work smarter, be more efficient, and ramp up productivity."

Like Radebaugh, Drummond said the strategic use of tech is helping. As soon as stay-at-home orders began, five of Drummond's salespeople began working remotely via VoIP (voice over internet protocol), taking calls from the comfort and safety of their living rooms, kitchens and offices. "We've really leaned into technology to make this work," said Drummond. From home, sales staff can respond to web chats, transfer calls between stores, handle the phones and answer delivery inquires. Because the

shop's point of sales system is integrated with the delivery, the sales associate can check whereabouts of the driver and tell the customer where he or she is on their route. (Read more about Drummond's system at safnow.org/moreonline.)

Rethink your space.

Based in part on their experiences on Mother's Day this year, some retailers also are reconsidering how much space they need — and even where they locate their businesses.

Rakini Chinery, AAF, AzMF, of Allan's Flowers in Prescott, Arizona, said she had planned for Mother's Day sales to be down by about 75 percent this year. Instead, they were up 46 percent. Like Radebaugh and Drummond, Chinery

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of florists who were open for Mother's Day reported an increase in sales.

Source: SAF's 2020 Mother's Day Member Survey. Response rate: 7 percent.

was struck by how efficiently her business ran. "I was surprised by the incredible number of orders we were able to take and fill and the fact that we did it with about 35 percent less staff," she said. "We will continue to work lean."

Chinery is also considering moving her business to a more industrial area. "The sales floor doesn't seem to make a big difference in our sales, and we loved not dealing with a constant stream of walk-in clients [for Mother's Day]," she said. Not having customers in the store "freed us up to fill more delivery orders," Chinery added.

In addition, retailers have made changes to their spaces to accommodate COVID-related restrictions and ensure staff and customer safety. With the future still uncertain, and a second or third wave of infections possible, many of these changes are likely to stay in place for months to come, so taking time to think through the updates is important.

In April, Drummond converted unused retail space into more square footage for his designers. He dismantled retail displays and wheeled design stations into the showroom. The change means more physical distance between employees, with designers working at every other station. He's also implemented other policies to limit team members' physical interactions. For example, at the start of their shift, designers grab pre-made bunches and product, then wheel the supplies to their station. The change means less foot traffic throughout the space: Drummond estimates designers make about three trips while producing 60 to 80 arrangements daily.

At Lake Forest Flowers outside of Chicago, Eileen Weber, AAF, turned her family business' showroom into a design room this spring. With a smaller staff of just three, they've been able to stick to

one person at each 8-foot table (which used to accommodate four designers). To avoid cross-contamination of phones, one person is assigned to the shop phone and spillover calls come to Weber's cell phone. Although she appreciates larger retailers, including her local grocery stores, establishing one-way hallways to manage the flow, Weber said her three employees have been able to safely navigate her 1,200-square-foot shop without implementing such measures.

Get real in your messaging.

One unexpected outcome of the pandemic: It may have deepened consumers' appreciation of flowers and plants. SAF's member survey found that 86 percent of florists who experienced a Mother's Day sales increase this year credited the uptick at least in part to customers' desire to bridge physical distance with flowers. That stat is in line with broader consumer trends: Homebound Americans took up gardening in record numbers this spring. Online searches for advice on plant selection and care spiked as shelter-in-place orders went into effect and people grew hungry for comfort and connection.

"The past two months have proven to many consumers that flowers make a real difference in the lives of people suffering from stress, isolation and illness," said Drummond. "We hear it every day. We need to repeat that message in conversation, on our websites, in our advertising, on social media — everywhere."

Like Drummond, Patrick Busch of Len Busch Roses in Plymouth, Minnesota, said those are messages that industry members need to play up more often. Busch played a lead role in advocating for his customers early in the pandemic, helping to ensure they could offer

contact-free services and engage in online sales. Nonetheless, as consumer demand evaporated in early April, Busch had to throw out tens of thousands of unsold Easter lilies. Looking to blunt the pain of those losses, he and his team dropped off as many plants as they could to local retirement homes as a gift to elderly citizens who couldn't leave their communities or have visitors on site. Months later, Busch is still receiving heartfelt thank-you letters.

"People wrote to tell us this was the first plant they'd had since childhood or about how happy the plant made them," he said. "It really drove the point home for me — the emotional connection people feel with flowers, and I think the pandemic has only increased those feelings. Now the question moving forward is, how do we continue to tap into those feelings? How do we build on them?"

That's exactly what Jackie Levine is doing in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Throughout the pandemic, the fourth-generation manager of Central Square Florist has made it a point to stay in touch with reporters, resulting in substantial media coverage even while her business was temporarily closed. Her message no matter the platform: Flowers make people feel good.

"The advertising payoff you get from the media is priceless," said Levine, who was featured on the front page of the Boston Herald and in a post-Mother's Day interview on CNBC, among other high-profile news stories. Her proactive approach has increased Central Square's name recognition, bolstered its credibility as a local florist and helped drive

more customers to the shop's website and more engagement on their social media pages.

Streamline delivery.

Long before DoorDash or Instacart, florists had perfected the art of delivery — a skill that's been invaluable in the industry as contact-free product transfers became imperative. In this time of anxiety and social distancing, taking the extra step to confirm delivery with senders and recipients (via automated technology or personal outreach) is an important special touch.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, Tipton & Hurst has trained its drivers to call ahead to recipients, but they also call the senders. (After Mother's Day, they made at least 3,500 calls.) "I'm concerned that our society is so accustomed to Amazon deliveries they're not answering the door, and things just sit," said Christopher Norwood, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, adding that he worried as much about weather as porch theft. "We have to be better than that."

When drivers' calls go to voicemail at Penny's by Plaza Flowers, the customer gets an email confirmation and a call to inform them of their gifts' arrival and location. Thanks to a moderate spring in Pennsylvania, flowers on porches have fared well, but Drummond said that high summer temperatures could require moving to "Plan B — calling ahead and scheduling."

At J. Miller Flowers in Oakland, California, sales staff ask what day (not time) customers want their flowers to arrive, giving them more flexibility to manage their routes and team. Most



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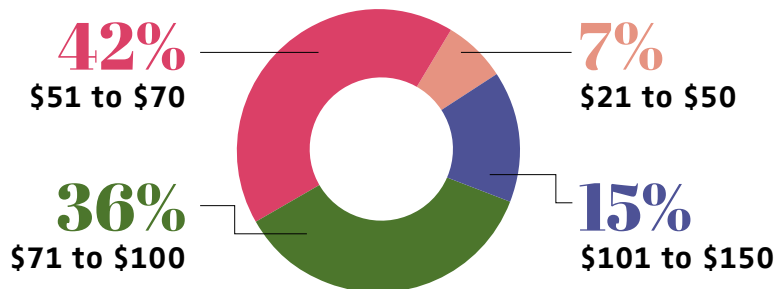
—LIZA ROESER

customers, particularly in hard-hit areas of the country, are understanding. To build on that goodwill, Valerie Ow added a flyer with each J. Miller delivery thanking customers for supporting a small local business and emphasizing the power of flowers to calm and connect.

Thanks to refrigerated buildings on the property at Penny's by Plaza Flowers, no driver entered the building for Mother's Day. Drummond has extended wireless service to buildings, so staff can scan packages as they go into vehicles. Inside, delivery packers know not to cross a bright yellow strip of duct tape on the floor that separates them from drivers' space. If drivers need to use the restroom inside, they have their own separate one. "It's strange, but it's working," Drummond said.

Many florists also turned their parking lots and sidewalks into floral pickup stations during the Mother's Day rush, blocking off six-foot spaces on the sidewalk in the lot to encourage customers to wait their turn to approach the product and/or pick up a pre-ordered package. And they got their first taste of their new role as hall monitor/high school dance chaperone, gently nudging customers to

AVERAGE TRANSACTION ON MOTHER'S DAY



Source: SAF's 2020 Mother's Day Member Survey. Response rate: 7 percent.

keep a safe distance. “I did have to tell some customers to put on their masks — and to go stand in their square,” Ow said. “It’s new for me, being this enforcer, but if you want to remain open and safe, we all need to follow the guidelines.”

Get serious about driving (and managing) sales.

The pandemic has shown how determined members of the industry’s floral supply chain are — and also just how complex the system is. Ahead of Mother’s Day, a steep dropoff in demand challenged growers, wholesalers and suppliers to keep flowers moving through the chain. Then it was impossible for companies to keep up with the late surge of orders for the holiday. (According to the SAF member survey, 60 percent of retailers suspended incoming Mother’s Day orders by Thursday, May 7, with an additional

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—VALERIE OW



30 percent suspending orders that Friday. About 32 percent cut off orders completely by Friday, May 8. Those numbers are higher than in years past.)

Tim Dewey of DVFlora in Sewell, New Jersey, recently shared that the challenge for floral distributors isn’t a lack of product, but that ongoing drop in demand (outside of Mother’s Day). “As we see social restrictions ease, I would really encourage florists to be aggressive about those opportunities to serve their communities” and sell more flowers, he said. “It’s really about opening up the pipeline.”

Drummond agrees, saying that now is the time “to market like you’ve never marketed before,” since many of the seasonal events florists would have depended on (weddings, corporate events, memorial celebrations and funerals) are canceled, postponed or dramatically different this year.

Your website should be a key area of focus as you work to drive sales. Radebaugh said the pandemic has emphasized the need to home in on best practices that might have previously been pushed down the to-do list. “On Mother’s Day, even though we streamlined products, we still had too many options turned on, too late in the week,” she said. A better approach: Highlight the products you want to sell and push customers toward designers’ choice or open-ended orders.

Drummond said now is also the time to experiment with website add-ons and special features you might have previously ignored — or those that companies have added in response to the pandemic. (Read more on p. 32.) Doing so has helped him improve customer service and manage volume and workflow.

“We utilized the custom pop-ups [on the] backend,” he said. “This helped us communicate to customers that mothers deserve to be celebrated all week. Early shoppers were encouraged to choose delivery Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday — successfully spreading out the volume.”

Another way to drive sales: Offer new products. Radebaugh has successfully created a series of themed crates for customers that have proven to be a hit. The series has allowed her to sell non-floral items such as bath bombs,

GO DEEPER

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candles and lotions that would have otherwise gone unsold in her retail showroom. (One top seller is the Home School Hero package, which includes a floral design and bottle of wine. The business had its liquor license even before the crisis began.) Florists also have been experimenting with virtual workshops and events. (Read more on p. 42.)

In Boise, Idaho, Liza Roeser of FiftyFlowers said she and her team are using lessons learned from their challenging spring to try and move forward and connect more deeply with customers. One insight: Customers seem to be responding more positively than ever to emails. To capitalize on that shift, the company has been experimenting with A/B testing, to see which emails and content resonate the most with their target audience — so that they can be more strategic about the new initiatives they plan.

“One thing this Mother’s Day taught is that you can’t use only data to plan for the future — we have to listen and adapt,” said Roeser, who has been meditating on a famous quote from Maya Angelou lately: “Hope and fear cannot occupy the same space. Invite one to stay.”

“We’re constantly shifting through these murky waters right now,” she added. “But we’re focusing on hope.” 🌿

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