

Stay Connected



How an underused social media platform is helping florists develop new connections during the pandemic

BY KATIE HENDRICK VINCENT

For months, the numerous office parks surrounding Monday Morning Flowers and Balloon Co. have been virtually empty. Nonetheless, their tenants have sent steady orders to the Princeton, New Jersey shop.

"They've been sending flowers to employees who've been working at home, most of them under hard conditions," said Georgianne Vinicombe, who co-owns Monday Morning Flowers with her husband, Kevin. "Our corporate clients have been very loyal to their people and to us throughout this crisis. I don't know what we would have done without them."

Vinicombe attributes her robust corporate business largely to LinkedIn, a professional social media site she has actively used since its inception in the early 2000s. "A lot of florists don't think it's worth their time, but I couldn't disagree more," she said, noting many digital connections who generated substantial revenue over the years. "At the very least, having a presence improves your reputation. The public thinks florists are flighty artists who play with flowers all day. But when people see us on LinkedIn, they realize that we're actually sophisticated, educated business owners."

Here, Vinicombe and fellow LinkedIn advocates share why they love the site and how you can build a network and foster relationships for future success.



PICTURES SELL

Georgianne Vinicombe always includes photos in her LinkedIn posts for Monday Morning Flowers and Balloon Co. in Princeton, New Jersey. "The images stand out in people's feeds," she said.

An Untapped Resource

While Facebook and Instagram are fairly saturated with florists (both professionals and enthusiastic hobbyists alike), LinkedIn is not. “It’s widely underappreciated for our industry,” said Nic Faitos, senior partner of Starbright Floral Design in New York City. “LinkedIn has more than 500 million users — many of which have a lot of spending power — and I’ve only seen a handful of other florists on there. I absolutely take advantage of the lack of competition.”

Faitos looks up every new Starbright customer on LinkedIn. If he finds them, he sends a request from his personal account with a quick note of thanks for choosing Starbright — a tactic that has a 70 percent success rate. Whenever he gets an acceptance notification, he sends

a second message asking the contact to follow Starbright’s business page.

“LinkedIn is the one platform where I feel comfortable connecting with customers,” said Jackie Levine, vice president of Central Square Florist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who led a webinar for the Society of American Florists on leveraging the site (watch it at safnow.org/moreonline). “It’s not as intrusive as Facebook or Instagram. No one’s posting photos of their children or vacation there.”

Like Faitos, Levine regularly reaches out to customers, particularly former brides and grooms, as well as any vendors she’s collaborated with on event work. She also makes a big effort to connect with as many local journalists as possible. “I want to be the florist they think of when they have a story about flowers, holidays, retail trends, small business stories, you name it,” she said. Rounding out her network: anyone she knows really well (family, friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, etc.). “You should link with all kinds of people in your life,” she said. “You can actually get to 500 or more connections [a key benchmark for LinkedIn influence] pretty quickly.”

FRIENDS WITH INFLUENCE Jackie Levine makes a point of connecting with journalists, so Central Square Florist is the shop that comes to mind anytime they are working on a story about flowers, holidays, retail trends, gift giving ideas and more.

The screenshot shows a LinkedIn post from Alicia Syrett, a Board Member, Investor, TV Regular, Speaker, and Author. She has 3rd+ connections and posted the content 1 month ago. The post text reads: "I joined CNBC's The Path Forward with Sara Eisen again on Friday to talk to Jackie Levine, a fourth-generation florist at Central Square Florist in Cambridge, MA. Her resilience has kept the business afloat during ...see more". Below the text is a video thumbnail for Jackie Levine, a fourth-generation florist at Central Square Florist in Cambridge, MA. The video title is "Fourth-generation florist on keeping business afloat during a pandemic" and it is from youtube.com. The video description includes: "CENTRAL SQUARE FLORIST CAMBRIDGE, MA", "EST. 1929", "FOURTH GENERATION FLORIST", "EMPLOYEES: 20", and "SHUT DOWN FOR 6 WEEKS LOSING HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS IN SALES". The post has 5 likes and 1 comment. At the bottom are icons for Like, Comment, Share, and Send.

Content That Clicks

Following Levine’s suggestion will yield a very assorted network, which calls for variety with your messages. “My LinkedIn posts cover so much ground because my followers are so diverse,” Levine said. Among her recent posts: wedding snapshots, customer reviews, a Father’s Day shout-out to her dad and business partner, news coverage of Central Square Florist, a graphic depicting the mental challenges of life during a pandemic, praise for her state’s retail association, and teasers for her SAF webinars.

Faitos posts on his personal page four to five times a week and coordinates with a marketing professional, who updates Starbright’s business page with similar frequency. “We always share any media coverage we get — that’s instant credibility,” he said. (As a member of the Forbes Business Council, Faitos authors and is quoted in many articles throughout the year.) Other favorite topics: educational tips (how to order flowers,



improve vase life, etc.), goodwill initiatives (Petal It Forward, floral donations to nursing homes, free meals for health care workers), and solidarity with social movements, including #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.

Vinicombe's posts include many "thank yous" to her clients and her employees (an approach that humanizes her business), examples of Monday Morning Flowers' different services and snippets from university research studies touting the mental health benefits of flowers (a message that clearly resonated with her following during the shutdown). Featured in every post? An image. "People love looking at pretty flowers," she said. "Floral photography definitely stands out in users' feeds and draws them in."

Levine agrees wholeheartedly on the advantages of photos. She reuses her favorite images from Instagram. ("The trick is to not post them to different sites at the exact same time," she said.) She also tweaks the captions. Instagram, for instance, rewards long, breezy messages. On LinkedIn, Levine favors a succinct sentence or two — with subtle differences between her own page and her shop's page. "The verbiage on my page is more casual and personal," she said.

Follow the Leaders

In addition to posting your own content on LinkedIn, you can — and should — follow what others promote on the site. Some of the world's top influencers, such as Bill and Melinda Gates, Richard Branson and Ariana Huffington, are prolific advice givers, along with scores of marketing, customer service and HR experts, from companies big and small.

A key opportunity to make friends and stay top of mind is to like and comment on posts from leaders in your geographical area. "It shows that you are an interested, caring member of your business community," said Vinicombe, who allots roughly 80 percent of her time on the site to interacting with others' posts. One of her strongest business allies is a funeral director she met on LinkedIn five years ago. "Death is such a sensitive subject — I know it's hard for him to post things," she said. "Whenever he did, I made sure to put some kind of positive comment." Vinicombe's constant encouragement earned her a referral, which has since snowballed. "That relationship has brought in tens of thousands of dollars," she said.



SERIOUS CRED Nic Faitos always shares any media coverage he or his business, Starbright Floral Design, receives. "That's instant credibility," he said.

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—Nic Faitos



BREVITY RULES Succinct captions perform best on LinkedIn, said Jackie Levine of Central Square Florist.

Levine takes the same approach with Boston's tech companies, universities and medical centers. "People reply to my comments," she said, surmising that her profession makes her stand out. "I don't think anyone expects to hear from a florist." Additionally, these companies' vast followings help expose her to exponentially more people with every comment. "To make your name really stick, though, you have to comment a lot," she said.

Faitos especially likes to follow some of the world's most recognizable brands (American Express, Delta Air Lines, Marriott), as well as Adweek. "They provide a wealth of inspiration," he said. "So many of my marketing campaigns came from an idea I got from one of the big guys."

A Marathon, Not a Sprint

All three florists contend that, while the rewards of LinkedIn can be tremendous, they require consistent, long-term efforts. "You get out of it what you put into it," Faitos said. "You have to log in regularly and be devoted to growing your network and nurturing relationships. It might take six months to one year before you feel a return in your time investment. But don't give up." 🌱

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