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Something New

Weddings are back — but the business is not quite the same. Here's how to thrive in the post-COVID wedding world.

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BY BRUCE WRIGHT

Maybe you are one of those wedding florists for whom, once COVID vaccines became widely available, new leads began to flood in almost faster than you could respond to them. It's a good problem to have, right?

But, like everything else in a world that is not quite post-pandemic, wedding business is not simply picking up where it left off 15 months ago. Some couples have been waiting until they can invite the full guest list for the wedding they always wanted — but smaller weddings may also have found a new niche in the market. Zoom consultations are here to stay. The flower supply chain will likely remain, for some time, less reliable than in the past, particularly with regard to wedding specialties. And all the new leads created by pent-up demand can pose their own challenges. So how do you assess — and prepare for — the new normal of weddings?

Here Come the Brides

It's not a new problem, but there's a new word for it: "ghosted." Brides come to you fishing for prices. If you send them what they ask for, "You might hear back from them — but you probably never hear from them again," sighs Betty Walton, AIFD, at Daisy & Wish in greater Seattle, a boutique firm providing flowers for weddings, events and corporate clients.

That was the case for Walton, at least, until she began to follow advice from wedding business consultant Alan Berg, CSP. Walton has an ad on The Knot (the wedding website where she also discovered Berg's webinars and podcasts). A typical inquiry generated by that ad or any other on a similar website, like WeddingWire, might be, "How much do you charge for wedding flowers?"

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BOLD AND BRIGHT Betty Walton of Daisy & Wish in Seattle is seeing requests for vibrant colors for events.

To respond, many florists send a template email with an attached brochure, maybe a form to fill out, and ask the prospective customer to get back in touch to arrange a phone call or meeting.

It's easy and quick — and indeed, timing is important. A WeddingWire survey showed that 50% of the time, couples chose the first vendor who responded. But what's wrong with the approach? Picture your prospective client — who is probably a millennial — on her mobile phone. You have sent your brochure as a PDF, awkward to read on a cell phone.

"You're sending the message, 'Read this before we can go further,'" says Berg. "It adds friction to the process. Plus, you are trying to get her on the phone or in for a meeting ASAP — because that is what you want. But she is not ready for that yet, or she would have called you, asking to set up a meeting."

The best response is to ask her a few questions that are easy to answer; for example, the number of her attendants, the number of guests, and whether she is having the ceremony and reception at the same location. This way, you draw her in with a level of commitment that is easy for you both. You keep that conversation going, and you ask for a phone call or meeting only after you have earned a little trust.

Next, the proposal — which can also be a point at which florists get ghosted. Once you reach the point of writing the proposal, rather than simply sending it and waiting for the prospect to get back to you, Berg suggests that you ask to schedule a Zoom call with the client, saying, "I have your proposal, and I want to go through it with you. I want to make sure I haven't left out anything that's important to you, and I certainly don't want you to pay for anything you don't need. This way, if anything is missing or needs to be changed, we can do it together."

If the client is ready to go forward after discussing the proposal, great. If not, you can revise the proposal and schedule another meeting. But there is no need, says Berg, to send the proposal as a document before the client has agreed to it: "What too many florists do is give away a piece of their creativity and expertise before it has been paid for."

To get more leads but make sure they are prequalified in terms of budget, Berg also has a number of suggestions for the wedding pages on your website (see “Site Specific”). “At the beginning of the pandemic,” says Walton, “one of the first things I did was to change my website. It was the best thing I could have done.”

(Almost) Everything Happens Online

Stacy Edwards, at Edwards Floral Design in McKinney, Texas, was already doing some wedding consultations online (using the FaceTime app) before the pandemic began. Then, for a long while, online was the only option. Weddings in her area did not completely go away, but as often as not, she did not even get to meet the bride face to face until the wedding itself.

Today, in-person consultations are back, but the ratio has flipped: Most brides prefer to meet online, and Edwards doesn't see that changing. It helps that the wedding page on her website has a feature that a bride can use any time, 24 hours a day, to book an appointment, via the scheduling platform Calendly. The bride can click on either of two options, for an in-person or a virtual wedding consultation.

“There's an image of our wedding consultant on that page, and her name as well,” which adds a personal touch to the automated scheduling option, says Edwards.

Now the meetings are mostly via Zoom. It's convenient, especially for working brides. And after a year of using it, Zoom has become a familiar and comfortable way of doing business. “Before the pandemic, brides thought they needed to look at rental props, touch and feel them,” notes Edwards. “Now they're very happy with us sending them images of props, with measurements, and of flowers.”

Does having a consultation online change the character of it, the tone? Edwards notices that the online consultations are quicker than those conducted in person. It could be one of several Zoom meetings the bride is having that day, whether for her wedding or for work. “We try to let her dictate the cadence of the meeting,” says Edwards,

SITE SPECIFIC

With wedding work coming on strong (and competitors jostling for position in the new marketplace), your website needs to be working as hard as you do. Wedding business consultant Alan Berg (<https://alanberg.com>) has tips on how to make sure it's doing just that — “including some that florists seem to be unaware of the importance of.”

First, put a realistic dollar range on your website that lets customers know what ballpark you are in. Won't that scare some customers away? Possibly, but those are the customers who might otherwise take up your time in a consultation and then back out when they realize they can't afford you.

It could be a very wide range, says Berg, such as: “Our weddings typically range between \$3,500 and \$10,000 plus. Most couples end up between \$4,500 and \$5,500.” That type of range doesn't really limit you. You can also use that range to respond to initial inquiries about price.

Worried about sharing that information with your competitors? Be assured, they already know. “Brides have been coming to them with your proposals for a long time now,” says Berg. You are probably familiar with your competitors' prices as well.

Remember that people (especially millennial brides) are looking at your website on their phones. “If something is not easy to find or read or use on the mobile version of your site, it's not doing anything for you,” says Berg. That's doubly true, because it's the mobile version of your site that Google uses for indexing for SEO.

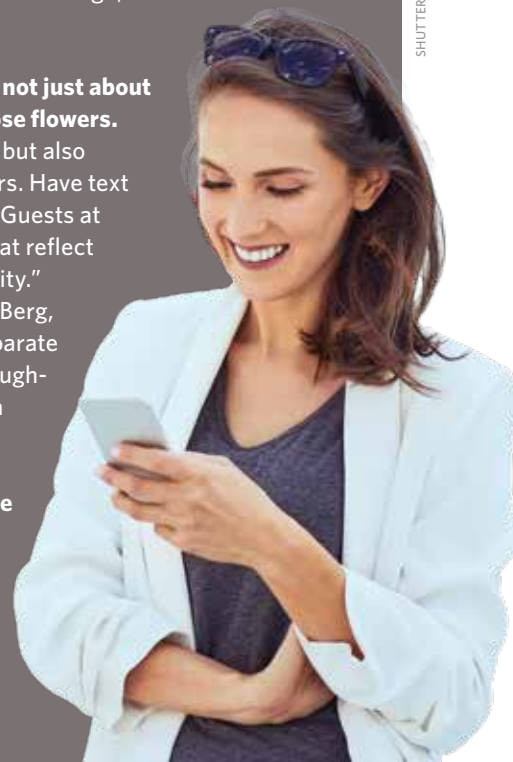
Get a business buddy and help each other out by reviewing each other's websites on your phones, Berg advised. You can't be objective about what's working and what's not on your own site. Pretend you're a prospective customer, make searches, scroll through, and click on every link.

Make sure your website tells customers, not just about your flowers, but about the impact of those flowers.

Have pictures that show, not just flowers, but also happy, smiling people next to those flowers. Have text (next to the relevant pictures) that says, “Guests at your wedding will be wowed by flowers that reflect your style, your theme, and your personality.” Include plenty of short testimonials, says Berg, but don't group them all together on a separate page that no one sees. Sprinkle them throughout your website as quotes that relate to a photo on the same page.

Make sure that calls to action are likewise sprinkled throughout the site.

On a mobile site, if a call to action (“If this is how you want to feel about your wedding flowers, call or email us today”) appears only at the bottom of the page, no one will see it.



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“so she doesn’t feel rushed or like she’s spending too much time.”

A bonus to conducting consultations via Zoom is that it’s easy for the bride to invite anyone else to attend, from any location: her mother, her fiancé, her wedding planner, says Jeanne Ha, AIFD, at Park Florist in Takoma Park, Maryland.

Nonetheless, when meeting in person is still an option, Ha takes it. “Meeting in person, they are less focused on making decisions,” she notes. “They talk more about their life, their families, and I get to know them better” — and that helps later, when it comes to making last-minute decisions about flower pricing or substitutions, for example. “At that point, they trust me to understand what is important to them, and everything goes more smoothly,” says Ha.

Making Payment Up to Date

Millennials, of course, are used to doing everything online. That includes financial transactions. Wedding customers ask her, “Can you send me a link so I can pay the deposit online?” says Ha.

But the POS systems employed by most florists are not well equipped to deal with this kind of custom transaction, she explains: “With those systems, you can only collect money for products on the website. But for a wedding or event, I need to create my own order sheet and create my own invoice to collect the money. Traditionally, they pay with a check or credit cards, which I need to run through my credit card machine. There is no way they can simply go online to pay.”

The desire to meet that demand started Ha using the Square app, not just as a cash register and for credit card processing, but also as a POS system. “It does customer record keeping and all those things,” says Ha. She has found it to be user-friendly both for her and for her customers. Square also offers payment options for in the store like Apple Pay and Google Pay — popular with customers since the pandemic since a transaction can be completed without touching any surfaces.

Small Is Beautiful

Smaller weddings have been, in many cases, the only option during the pandemic. The number of guests has been

limited in many states. No doubt whenever and wherever regulations ease, bigger weddings will return. But in the meantime, some florists have discovered that so-called “micro weddings” can be a profitable niche — one that carries with it benefits in terms of lowered stress and creative control.

At Daisy & Wish, Walton says she has been taking “the little weddings that nobody else wants — usually not more than \$8,000, some \$4,000, sometimes as low as \$500, \$600. But when you stack five or six of those on top of each other, you’ve got a nice chunk of change.”

Key to that strategy, of course, is keeping costs down, especially in terms of labor and service. With long experience in the industry, Walton is an efficient designer who can knock out a \$500 wedding in about three hours. For weddings on the more expensive side of her range, she is also well connected to a local pool of freelancers who have the expertise to set them up and troubleshoot on site.

But so far, she is a one-woman show, hiring only contract employees to help her, and her plan is to keep it that way. “I end every proposal with how much the customer can save if they pick it up,” says Walton. She has a contract employee to babysit the pickups: “Everything is labeled. She’ll pack it in their car for them. They go put it together, and it’s like a dream, because there’s no labor on the day of, so I can take something else that’s a little bit bigger and install it myself.”

To be clear, small and cheap are not the same thing, at least where visual impact is concerned. “It’s not like I’m doing \$50 bouquets,” says Walton. “These girls are wanting bouquets at \$250, \$350.” The popularity of outdoor weddings has made opportunity for arches, banked flowers, and other décor that feeds Walton’s Instagram account with an impressive bounty of floral beauty.

For this summer, Walton had some weddings booked that were large enough she needed to rent space from a florist friend with capacious floral coolers. She is the first to say that she has been fortunate in her support network, a critical factor for an operation with low budgets and high standards.

But she has no regrets about targeting what might be called the low end of the market: “This is perfect for me. I’ve done big weddings, and I don’t care about doing them anymore. The small ones are super easy. I love working with them. It’s not so stressful, and I don’t get any complaints.”

Fair Warning

Naturally, brides also need to be informed in the proposal, and give consent in the contract, that they are responsible for flower costs after a certain date in advance of the wedding, even if the wedding is canceled or postponed. In the Seattle area, says Walton, her wholesalers say, “If you order it, you pay for it.” So, the day the order is finalized should really be the day after which a bride cannot expect a refund.

That can be tricky. In Texas, Edwards has moved that date from two weeks before the wedding to three weeks before, to give the supply chain a little more breathing room. In Washington, Walton finds that certain flower orders — for 300 Quicksand roses, for example — need to be placed further out than three weeks. Even then, her flower purchases usually stray from the order in one way or another.

At the end of each proposal, Walton states simply that if there is a problem with flower procurement, she will call the bride and have a conversation with her about it. Then, the day before the wedding, she sends text messages with pictures of all the designs.

“My friends think I’m crazy to do that,” Walton says. “But they love it, their moms love it, and the grooms love it.” While she occasionally has to make minor adjustments, the tactic avoids any complaints or drama on the day of.

Another strategy Walton has adopted, partly out of concern for the short and uncertain supply of fresh flowers, is to start using high-quality silk flowers in combination with fresh foliage for décor items like arches. She has them made up as samples in her consultation room.

The first thing that brides who come to meet with her in person do is to walk up to the arches and touch them to see if they are real fresh flowers. The arches are easily picked up and returned as



MAKE A STATEMENT Holly Chapple of Holly Heider Chapple Flowers and Hope Flower Farm creates statement arrangements for couples on their wedding day.

rental items. So, they serve the double purpose of preventing headaches about labor and about fresh-flower supply.

Networking All Over Again

A lot can change with event venues over the course of a pandemic year. Some (high-end restaurants, in particular) may have shut down; if they are still there, personnel may have changed. And if you knew someone at a restaurant or hotel, a catering or wedding manager, that person may formerly have sent referrals your way.

"You want to keep those referrals coming," says Berg. "Even if nothing has changed, it's important to renew old contacts. And if everything has changed, it's all the more important to reach out. Take a meeting, walk the space, and ask what you can do to be helpful in exchange for referrals."

Networking events may also have shut down over the past year, but that's

not necessarily a bad thing, says Ha. She has been making a point of making contact with appropriate personnel at event venues on her own, but she doesn't plan on attending any wedding expos, even though she sees them starting up again: "Brides can now find vendors without going to an expo, so I don't feel the need."

"In the wedding industry, we know what the food chain looks like," says Berg. Wedding couples choose a venue early on, and other vendors follow. "I can tell you that my venue clients are slammed with leads, and that is a great sign for our industry, because it's going to trickle down to everyone else."

Be Your Best, Not Your Most

Here's one way to approach the wedding business bonanza: Don't overdo. Pick and choose. And take the opportunity to refine your brand. "We cannot make up an entire year's worth of income in

one year," says Holly Heider Chapple, of Holly Heider Chapple Flowers and Hope Flower Farm in Waterford, Virginia. "We know it's going to be hard to get our stamina back, and to get all the help we would need to take on everything that we might be offered."

And so, she says, she is being careful to limit her commitments, keeping an eye on which weddings and events will reward her and her team, not just financially, but with a view to producing the work that can make her the proudest.

"My hope is that the impact of the pandemic year will be to put the focus on the symbolism of the wedding and what the marriage means for all the people present," says Chapple. "I think we've all learned that life is very precious. That's good energy. Let's make use of it!" 🌿

Bruce Wright is a contributing writer to *Floral Management*.