

# Places, EV



Matching staff to their strengths bulked up the bridal strategy and doubled sales for a florist in metro Washington, D.C.

BY CHRISTY O'FARRELL

# everyone

> Marriages often fall apart because two otherwise good people just aren't right for one another. The same "off" chemistry can also dilute the strength of a business — just ask Maris Angolia, AAF. While she's no marriage counselor, the president of Karin's Florist knows that when you get the right people matched up with the right duties, you can do what's necessary to create fireworks — to the tune of doubling, and, some months, tripling — your wedding business over the previous year. But like most hopeless romantics, Angolia had to learn the hard way about finding those perfect matches.

A few years ago, some employees at Karin's were in the wrong jobs, or stretched too thin to perform at their best. No one was heading up the bridal business. The staff waited for brides to come to the shop, rather than seeking them as clients. Angolia worried about whether the 20 to 25 employees worked to their potential — and, therefore, the shop's growth potential. Heading into a recession, she realized they had to change things on both fronts to weather the downturn.

Angolia knew the potential was there: An estimated 36,000 weddings will occur in 2011 in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, according to TheWeddingReport.com. Couples spent an estimated \$86.7 million on wedding flowers and decorations in the area in 2010, or on average about \$2,440 each. In 2010, weddings comprised 5 to 10 percent of Karin's sales. Angolia wanted to see that number go up. But with fierce competition — about 500 other florists in the area — Angolia also knew she needed a more streamlined, aggressive team to go out and make it happen.

"One thing in the past, we maybe put some people in the wrong positions," Angolia said. Here's how she and her team reshuffled and redirected their energies — and have seen wedding sales double over 2010 and grow to comprise 15 to 20 percent of total sales.

### Switch It, Change It, Rearrange It

The first step was getting the right people in "the right seats on the bus," as business educator Jim Collins refers to the supreme importance of strategic staffing in his best-selling book, "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap." Karin's plodded along well enough, Angolia said, but not having all team members in the right positions held it back. What Collins makes clear,

Angolia said, is that when people's skills and aptitudes align with their responsibilities, they are self-motivated to advance the company.

"What is each person's real strength?" Angolia said. "This is really where they excel. It's taking each person and putting them into the right spot, which makes it easier for every person in the store to do their jobs." A realignment would also free Angolia to concentrate on business development.

Surveying who was sitting where on her "bus," Angolia said she sometimes purposely shifted people, but "for some, it was by accident, or trial and error."

### Swann's Song

After the rush of the 2010 winter holidays, which, like all previous holidays, had Karin's' then design room manager, Bryan Swann, juggling both wedding and holiday work, Angolia wanted to rethink his position.

"It was just too much for one person," Angolia said.

Making weddings and events Swann's primary responsibility would help him provide a high level of service, so in January 2011, she named him special events director.

Swann's new role allowed him to focus on what he does best: develop rapport with brides and put them at ease, while at the same time staying on top of

**THEY KNOW THEIR PLACE** The combined efforts and talents of the team at Karin's Florist have contributed to the doubling of the shop's event sales in 2011. **FRONT ROW:** Marla Grandolph (turquoise shirt), executive assistant; Maris Angolia, AAF, president; Marianne Artherholt, design. **MIDDLE ROW:** Ricardo Contreras, flower prep and design assistance; Jonathan Bascope, sales; Mandy Murphy, design; Maria Ticas de Contreras, design; Connie Habte-Mariam, sales. **BACK ROW:** Liane Berens Jones, accounting; Kevin Shay, VIP customer service and sales; Derek Halvorsen, delivery manager; Bryan Swann, director of weddings and special events; Jim Tully, director of operations; Christian Lund, design; Jeff Major, driver; Andres Zuleta, driver and maintenance.



wedding trends and executing designs that exceed their expectations.

"Bryan loves seeing the process through from initial contact to execution," Angolia said. "He is exhilarated when he can take an empty room and create such beauty."

Since becoming special events director, Swann has helped build the wedding business. With Angolia's help, he has developed partnerships with wedding planners and venues, and participated in a contest that got the shop exposure on the influential weddings blog, Elizabeth Anne Designs, raising its search engine rankings.

### A Match Made in (Business) Heaven

It helps that Swann and Angolia have good chemistry. The Angolia-Swann dynamic works because they trust each other, share the same goals to grow the wedding business and defer to the other's strengths. (And like a married couple, they sometimes finish each other's sentences, and gently interrupt each other.)

From the get-go, Angolia wanted to remain involved with wedding sales, but knew she needed someone to complement her strengths and weaknesses. Swann admits that Angolia knows more about technology than he does. She worked for 10 years in public relations and marketing at information technology firms before returning to the family business 16 years ago. (The shop, started by Angolia's grandfather and father, is named for older sister Karin.) Angolia is the first to say that Swann is a master at putting brides at ease.

Gone are the days, in most cases, when communicating with the bride starts and ends at the consultation table, save for a few phone calls and drop-bys in between. Now, brides require a lot more time responding to emailed questions, looking at photos they send and revising the proposal. Swann's realigned position affords him time dedicated to this level of communication.

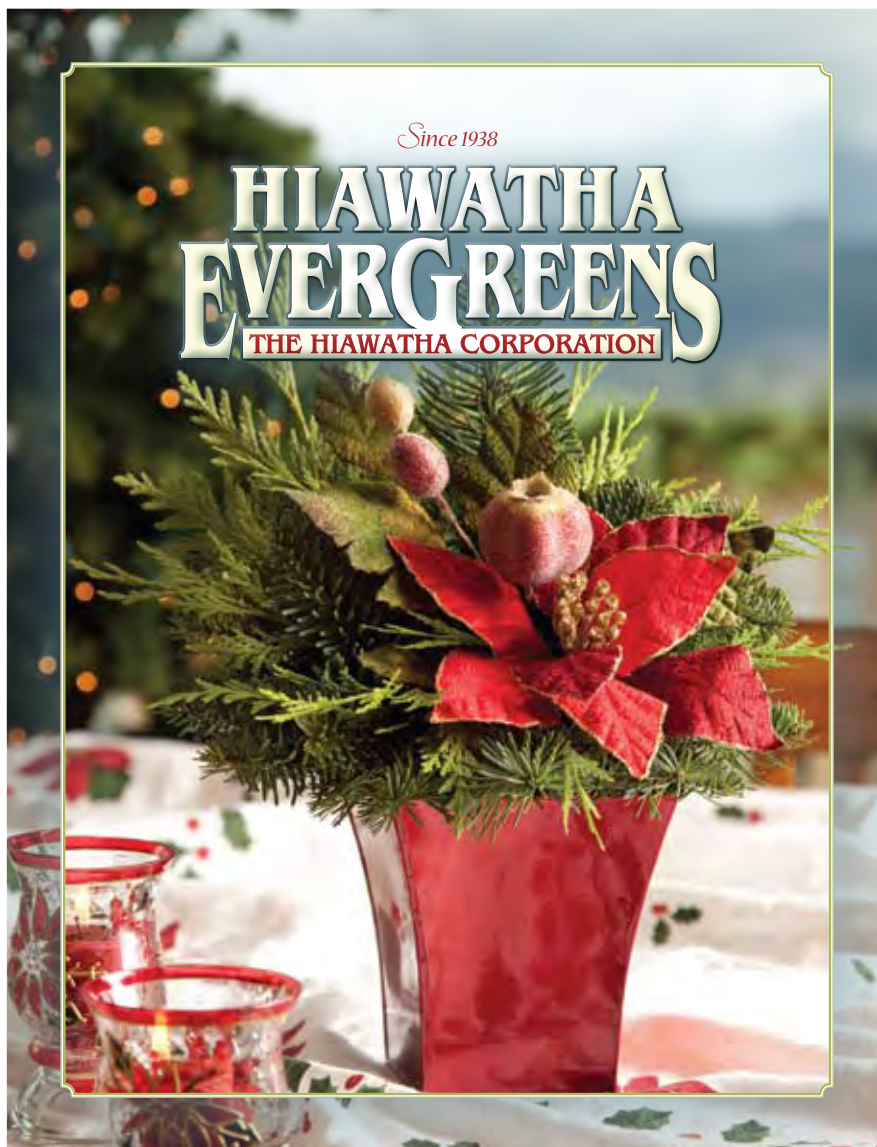
"You've got to get back to the bride quickly," Angolia said, adding that the shop tries to send proposals within two to three days. "Even if their wedding is two years from now, it's important to them right now." Swann usually emails

proposals, reducing the chances a bride will choose a competitor while waiting.

Swann's new focus on the "care and handling" of brides has had a positive impact on the bottom line. He's a stickler for pricing accurately, so each wedding is profitable. And his ability to make brides feel comfortable and cared for — whether it's a wedding with eight bridesmaids and 225 guests or a more simple affair that requires only one bouquet and boutonniere — leads to bookings, referrals and repeat business.

### Streamlining Day-to-Day Sales, Logistics

Another staff change had a similar course-correcting effect on Karin's. Kevin Shay, on staff for 14 years, had done just about every job in the shop, but now works in the area where he's strongest, catering to the shop's top tier of customers, as head of VIP customer service and sales. These clients, chosen on a case-by-case basis, deserve special service either because they're long-time customers (some as long as 40 years) or



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a brand-new account where nothing can fall through the cracks.

Shay's expertise and credibility go a long way toward that goal, Angolia said. "His customer interaction and follow-up are amazing," she said.

When she reprinted Shay's business cards, she added "VIP Sales" to his title. When he asked with a smile what that meant, Maris "told him to just keep doing what he's (been) doing."

### A Well-Oiled Machine

The bride's mood (or the mother of the bride's) can turn on a dime if you show up to the church without the throw-away bouquet. And venue managers are none too pleased with florists who forget to pick up rental vases after the event, not to mention the costs to you in lost rental fees. Karin's delivery manager, Derek Halvorsen, anticipates logistical bumps in the road, preventing staff from repeating such mistakes of the past.

Halvorsen started as a part-time driver, but when the delivery manager job opened, Halvorsen asked for it. "The team already loved him so it was a natural fit," Angolia said of the "extremely organized" Halvorsen. An added bonus: A self-taught techie, he's the go-to guy when the shop's system crashes.

Halvorsen somehow makes it so that "we can be in two places at one time," Swann said. Angolia agreed: "[Swann and team] can create absolute stunning beauty, but if you don't have a delivery manager" who knows what he's doing, it doesn't matter. "Our delivery team makes sure it gets to the church on time," Angolia said.

To ensure all employees involved in the wedding stay on top of the schedule, employees use Microsoft Outlook's shared events calendar, Angolia said. "It's saved us so much time and energy," she said. For each wedding, executive assistant Marla Grandolph enters key details such as date, time and venue

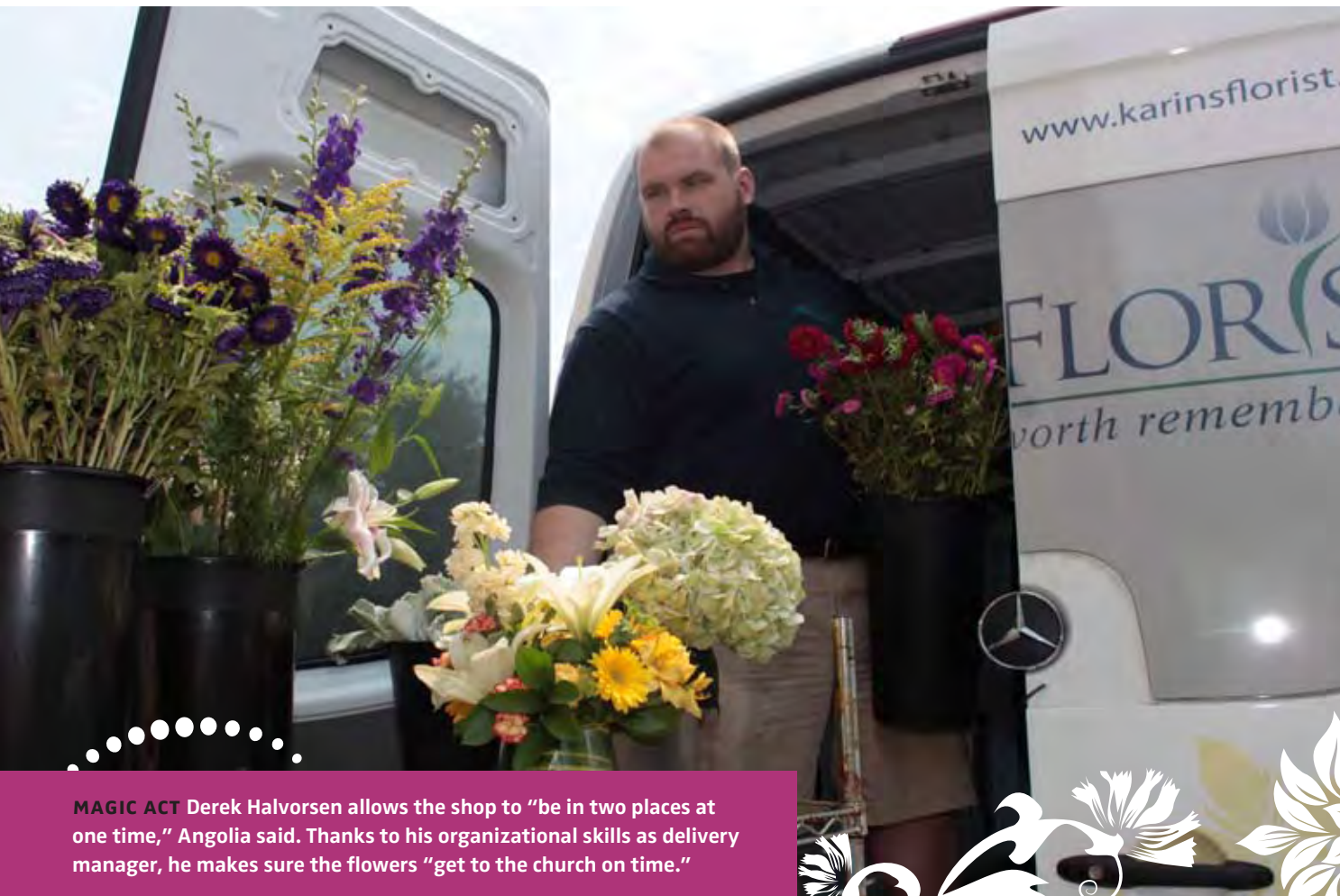
address. Then Halvorsen and Swann can cross check the number of stops, vehicles required and other logistics to ensure nothing is forgotten.

Design manager John Williams ensures day-to-day orders, the core business, get out the door looking good. "We couldn't survive on just our wedding business alone," Angolia said. To oversee the everyday sales process, she made the shop's buyer, Jim Tully, who loves numbers and "behind the scenes" details, director of operations.

"Leaving each person to focus makes everything run a lot smoother," Angolia said, adding that any one employee will wear another's hat whenever necessary. "You want to make sure you're presenting a very smooth persona to the customer."

### Ready to Reel 'Em In

No longer spending her days putting out fires set by mismatched staffing, Angolia can hone in on marketing.



**MAGIC ACT** Derek Halvorsen allows the shop to "be in two places at one time," Angolia said. Thanks to his organizational skills as delivery manager, he makes sure the flowers "get to the church on time."



**CORE STRENGTHS** With Bryan Swann (above) able to focus on what he does best — servicing brides — Maris Angolia can devote more time to creating partnerships with event professionals in the area, through social media and networking.

"Before we were kind of passive about having brides come to us," Swann said. "I think [...] a lot of the business has come from [...] being more proactive about finding the brides."

Angolia's additional time invested and effort has paid off. Over the last three years, she's developed several new partnerships with wedding planners and venue managers who've made Karin's a preferred vendor. The partnerships have resulted in regular sharing of qualified leads which — in addition to the shop's 55-year-old reputation — have played a key role in doubling the shop's wedding business in 2011.

"You have to give to get," Angolia said. "It has to be beneficial to both parties."

The length of time it takes to develop a partnership varies depending on the chemistry between the parties involved, Swann and Angolia agreed.

Knowing brides will often ask venue managers for a florist recommendation, Swann and Angolia do what they can to make sure Karin's Florist is the first business to roll off venue manager's tongues. They make a point to get to know the staff at the popular bridal venues, which proves easier if you're frequently delivering flowers to their site for weddings you've booked.

"I was there every weekend in May and June," Swann said of one venue.

Karin's invested three years ago in customized brochures for several venues, so customers can just point to a picture of flowers and say, "I want that." Venue sales managers include the brochures in the information packets given to brides and other event customers. The brochures are especially handy when time is short, taking the guesswork out of the equation. "A picture's worth a thousand words," Angolia said of the "not inexpensive" but worth-it brochures.

She's equally tenacious about pulling more wedding vendors into her network.

To court wedding and event planners, Karin's hosted a luncheon last fall that about 15 planners (of 25 invited) attended at a restaurant with a private room often used for rehearsal dinners. The restaurant wanted to show off its room to planners who could recommend

## TWEETING THEIR WAY TO EVENT VENDORS' HEARTS

You can never underestimate the value of relationships built the old-fashioned way, Angolia said. But these days, partnerships also evolve another way: through social media.

An April 2011 report on a survey of more than 3,300 marketers showed that those who invest the most time in social media marketing gain the most business partnerships. The self-employed and small business owners were significantly more likely to benefit from partnerships, with 59 percent reporting an improvement, according to the "2011 Social Media Marketing Industry Report: How Marketers Are Using Social Media to Grow Their Businesses."

Angolia resolved to get started on Twitter after SAF Phoenix 2009, where she heard SAF Chief Information Officer Renato Sogueco and florists talk about using social media marketing to increase exposure, improve sales and gain clients. Her staff realignment has opened up more time for her to make it happen.

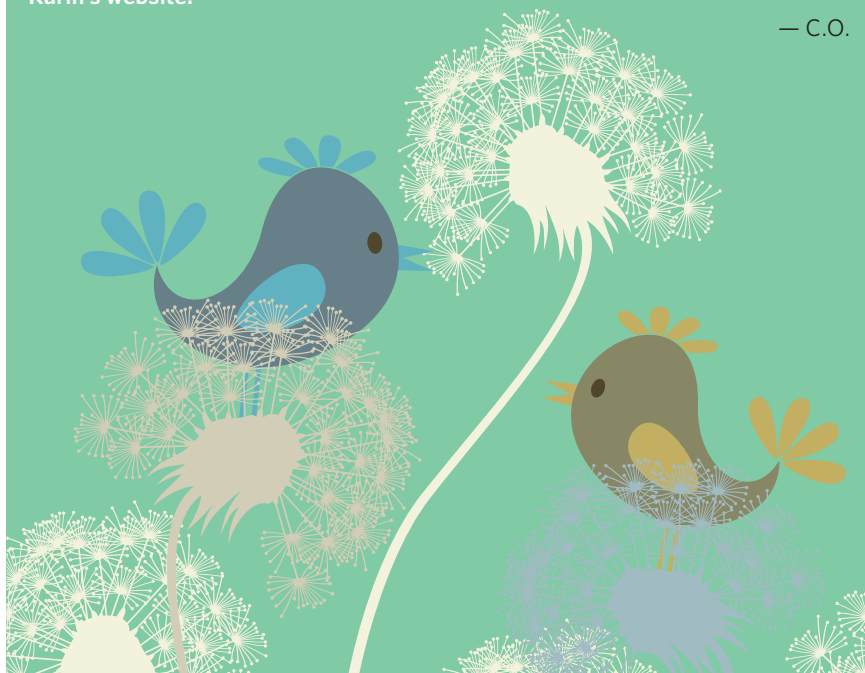
After about four months, along with some help from a social media consultant, Angolia said she got the gist of tweeting (@karinsflorist), balancing self-promotional messages, such as a day's special on roses, alongside fun tweets ("free ice cream day at Baskin Robbins"). As a result, Karin's shows up in other businesses' feeds.

She follows planners she's met through the International Special Events Society's greater Washington, D.C., chapter, as well as charitable organizations, hotels and her own customers.

"We made a conscious effort to go after planners and different people in the wedding market to follow them and have them follow us," Angolia said.

Following multiple wedding planners, including A Sweet Soiree, eventually resulted in bookings, because the planners would send brides to the shop for a consultation. The Twitter connection prompted A Sweet Soiree to invite Swann to participate in an "Inspired Creations" contest by providing florals for an Art Deco table setting that was featured in May on Elizabeth Anne Designs, a wedding website and blog. Though Karin's did not win the contest, it provided good exposure, helped with all-important search engine rankings and cemented their relationship with the planner. The blog mention included a link to Karin's website.

— C.O.



it to brides, so it provided the food for free. Angolia also invited a limo company and an invitation provider, and gave out “swag bags” with sticky notes in a leather case, notepads, gift cards and other promotional items.

“We told [planners] about our organization, and we’ve gotten business out of them,” she said. “It’s a way to be top-of-mind.”

Karin’s also made a lasting impression on a corporate planning staff after providing flowers for their employer’s big charity event. Since then, the planning

staff and other corporation employees “would have nobody but us do their flowers,” Angolia said. They liked the arrangements and service so much they continued to use Karin’s for corporate events, and also for their own weddings. The shop is now working with its fifth client that sprung from that one event.

Angolia is quick to add that regardless of how many brides and event planners show up at the shop (or in an email) looking for a proposal, your efforts to get them there will be for naught if they ultimately choose another shop. And this

is where Swann’s ability to truly focus on each bride has helped. He charms brides, from his very first contact with them to their eventual ‘I do.’ Swann creates an environment that makes brides feel confident in the shop’s interest in their business and lets the flowers speak for themselves. “Your work should speak louder than you do,” he said. (See More Online, p. 6, for more on the shop’s environment.)

### All Hands on Deck

The increase in wedding business has required the shop to be ever-vigilant about the way it services each wedding. When the shop has more weddings booked than its staff can handle (15 in one weekend is the record), Swann calls in trusted contract designers to assist in-house designers, including Christian Lund, whose history with the shop goes back 35 years, so brides don’t have to worry they will be lost in the shuffle. “I give them all individual attention, so that they feel like they’re the one and only,” he said.

Logistics must be invisible to the bride, so all employees jump in to assist on extra busy weekends. “If the bride’s not thinking about you that day, you’ve done your job,” Angolia said.

The overall increase in wedding and event business demands an increased focus from the entire staff, on each of their areas of responsibility and beyond. On a busy wedding weekend, any of the staff on hand may be called upon to do prep work such as wrapping vases in organza and checking container inventory so schedules stay on track. Jim Tully checks and double checks that all supplies have been ordered — to avoid a Friday night discovery of a missing item. And each and every staff member knows that, no matter how busy they are, always treat brides, as well as any customer walking in the store or calling, in a friendly, respectful manner.

“Every person is so important to the success of the business,” Angolia said. 🌿

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**BIRD’S EYE VIEW OF OPERATIONS** Jim Tully’s role as buyer for Karin’s expanded to director of operations as the shop’s wedding and event sales grew. The new role ensures that everyday sales get just as much attention as special events.