



**THINK BIG** To take advantage of a hole in her local market — and to position herself competitively against other area florists - Sandy Nielsen Baumann oversaw a major renovation, in-store and online, starting in 2010.



BY MARY WESTBROOK

# THE LIFESTYLE GURU

Determined to be more to customers than *just* a flower shop, a 69-year-old florist reinvents itself in-store and online to become both a destination and lifestyle brand.

In early 2010, two years after the economic slowdown had shut down boutiques and gift shops around Darien, Conn., Sandy Nielsen Baumann began to notice small but significant changes in her bedroom-community hometown. Businesses were investing in flowers and gifts again. Brides were discovering wiggle room in previously ironclad budgets. Most important, at Nielsen's Florist and Garden Shop, the 69-year-old family business that Baumann manages, average sales were creeping up after a dramatic 20 percent drop in overall sales between 2008 and 2009. The little bursts of spending felt like that first unexpected cool breeze after an endless hot summer, and Baumann and her team were more than ready to open the windows and let the air (read: higher budgets and cash for discretionary items) in.



**DISPLAY DEVICES** Vivane Herde is Nielsen's not-so-secret weapon who, as visual marketing coordinator, is tasked with the challenge of keeping the young, affluent locals engaged and curious — and coming back for repeat visits. Changing displays on a daily basis is just one part of Herde's strategy.

### Reeling 'Em Back In

In 2009, as Darien recovered from the worst of the recession, Baumann — who, along with her three siblings, has deep roots in the community — began to realize at social and civic events around town that well-to-do women in their 30s, 40s and 50s were spending money on gifts and home accessories again, but because so many local boutiques had shut down, the women were looking for these items out of town or online. Baumann wanted these customers to come to her store instead. At the same time, Darien (population around 19,600) still had about a half-dozen retail florists and a Whole Foods just 100 yards from Nielsen's. So, having beautiful flowers and plants was no longer enough to be competitive in the market.

To reverse the shop's sales plunge and capture that coveted 35- to 50-year old, affluent shopper, "we knew things had to change," Baumann said. She asked herself and her staff two questions: "What do we have that the com-

petition doesn't? What can we offer that they don't?"

The answer that emerged was inspiring and daunting. They had to expand into home décor and gifts to become something more than a traditional florist/greenhouse. They had to find a way to fill the void that the former boutiques had left behind and stand apart from flower shops — becoming instead a destination, a lifestyle brand, the kind of company that becomes an adjective among its devoted following, as in, "That gorgeous centerpiece/necklace/event is soooo Nielsen's."

To get there, the team would need to rethink every aspect of the way the company had operated for decades — and create a new vision for what the company could become, with creativity, strategy and old-fashioned hard work. Their efforts to reinvent the business and market it helped Nielsen's build a larger client base and goodwill around Darien, while reducing costs and increasing sales —and they scored the venerable

shop Floral Management's coveted 2013 Marketer of the Year honors.

### From Garden Center to First-Rate Destination

When Baumann began to evaluate her business and create a new path, she made notes on what wasn't working: price points online were too low, the merchandise wasn't speaking to high-income customers, designs were outdated and the shop itself looked too greenhouse-y and late 1990s, among other issues. Fortunately, by 2010 Baumann had assembled one of the strongest, most forward-thinking staffs in the shop's history (see "The Gurus," right). The all-star lineup meant that Baumann could count on her team to take initiatives and run with them — making what was already good about the shop great, and editing out services and products that no longer served a core purpose — while also bringing in their own ideas, insight and expertise.



**SLEEK AND STREAMLINED** The Nielsen team had one over-arching goal when they set about a website redesign: Reduce the number of clicks and make transactions easier for customers. The shop's new site has helped raise the average transaction online from \$80 to \$135.

One of the first items on the team's collective agenda was a much-needed facelift for the outdated, 3,000-square-foot retail showroom. Its dark and heavy wooden paneling — albeit beautiful — was out of line with the lighter, airier aesthetic popular among the younger clients Nielsen's wanted to see more of. (The median income in Darien is \$146,000, and the average home price is \$711,000; many residents commute to Manhattan daily.) "It looked

too 'garden shop,'" Baumann explained. "We needed to be glammed up a bit."

A gray-white palette gave a modern feel while still providing a neutral background. Three years later, the look still feels fresh, said Tony Vitti, the flower shop manager, who recently heard an interior designer suggest gray as the "new neutral" to a room full of industry pros at the Independent Garden Center Show in Chicago — a recommendation that validated the Nielsen team's efforts in 2010.

Complementing the hues: new fixtures (scored on deep discount from consolidation companies), glass shelves (rather than wood) and new LED lighting fixtures. On top of that, the team decided to paint the interior of the cooler black, instead of white, to make flowers truly pop. With all of those factors working together, "it can feel like a high-end restaurant in here," Vitti said. "The lighting is intimate and the flowers look magnificent. I mean it: They look delicious. You want to eat them."

Speaking of eating, as the business transitioned from florist to lifestyle brand, Baumann realized she'd been under-promoting a resource nestled right in the back of the store's 2,000-square-foot conservatory. Since 2007, a local catering company, Michael Joseph's, had operated an on-site café at Nielsen's. The florist-caterer partnership always provided revenue, in the form of rent, to Nielsen's but as the shop evolved, Baumann and her team also promoted the café as an integral part of the Nielsen's experience. Instead of ducking in and out of the shop, customers now browse the showroom and then meet up with a girlfriend for lunch, all in the same location — sometimes spending hours at a time on the property. The conservatory is also the site of Nielsen's popular classes and workshops, including a complimentary course on container gardens and a \$65 Wine and Design workshop.

### New Look. New Goods.

Before 2010, Nielsen's sold gift items and non-floral goods, but most of the items connected directly back to flowers (vases, cards, etc.). Baumann wanted to give women who were heading to

New York or the web for hostess gifts or home décor items a reason to stay in Darien and shop at Nielsen's, so in 2010 Nielsen's also introduced a host of new refresh-your-nest products including pillows, frames, furniture and unique containers, along with trendy jewelry in the \$20 to \$100 range. While the shop still offers many gift options for under \$50, it also has showstoppers (think: \$1,000 table) that never were in the showroom before but have helped to attract customers looking for capital L luxury, including interior designers and decorators who have become regular customers since the shop's transformation.

### MEET THE GURUS

Nielsen's has a staff of 28, including 13 full-time employees, and everyone agrees that moving the shop forward has been a team effort, but here are four people who played key roles in the transformation that began in 2010:



General Manager Sandy Nielsen Baumann, third-generation family leader who committed herself to taking the business to new levels — and then empowered staff to run with their own ideas.



Office Manager and Marketing Coordinator Raya Ward left a career as a professional photographer to join the team. She oversees the web and all marketing efforts... and takes lush, beautiful photographs for products, events and people.



Visual Merchandising Coordinator Vivane Herde delivered a European sensibility in-store that appeals to Nielsen's metropolitan-minded customers



Flower Shop Manager Tony Vitti, a 15-year store veteran, helped shepherd Nielsen's through previous updates and has a keen ability to separate the simply trendy from the trendy and profitable.



**GLAM FACTOR** In 2010, Nielsen's began to move away from its traditional-flower-shop roots by introducing new lines of gifts and home décor items. Jewelry, priced from \$20 to \$100, and the Simon Pearce line of handcrafted pottery and glassware have been especially popular with affluent customers.

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One of the most successful introductions involved Simon Pearce, a gift and home line featuring handmade pottery, glassware and other decorative accessories — which has become a “huge hit,” according to Raya Ward, the office manager and marketing coordinator. To make room for new, higher-end options (furniture and home items but also fashion accessories such as pashminas), the store discontinued more utilitarian products, such as garden products and fertilizer, which clients could easily pick up for less money at hardware stores and supercenters, Baumann said.

To pull together the new look that would compel shoppers to buy, the store turns to a not-so-secret weapon in the form of Vivane Herde, the visual merchandising coordinator, who changes displays on a daily basis to keep customers engaged and curious — and to ensure that products are in the best location to sell. The dynamism of the showroom was another strategic decision. “It’s about constantly raising the bar,” Ward said. “Now that we’re attracting these young, affluent customers, we have to give them reasons to come back to the store, and

Viviane’s displays help us do that. Her vignettes create a sense of excitement and curiosity among our customers. They want to see what she’ll come up with next.”

### Marketing a Lifestyle Brand

Of course customers wouldn’t see the changes if Nielsen’s didn’t market them well. Together with Ward, Herde has started regularly posting a popular series of “Vivi’s Vignettes” to the shop’s Facebook page (an end-of-summer vignette encouraged clients to add some “zest” to their lives with pops of tanger-



ine bromeliads, striped orange purses and botanical candles, along with lime greenery). Each post includes a brilliant photo (thanks to Ward's professional photography background) and a brief summary of the display, courtesy of Herde. Through the posts, Nielsen's communicates its expertise and simultaneously entices customers into the shop. The new merchandise and Herde's diligence have led to a spike in gift sales, which tripled in 2010, increased by 70 percent in 2011 and have since continued a steady annual rise.

### The New Web Order: Sleek, Sophisticated, Fast

While the physical spaces were rehabbed and refreshed, the team also turned its attention online. This time, Ward took the lead. With her own design background and input from staff members, Ward realized that Nielsen's had some basic (potentially profit-sucking) flaws online. On one hand, it maintained a Teleflora template site, [www.nielsensflorist.net](http://www.nielsensflorist.net), with order processing capabilities but product offerings that were priced below the average transaction in Darien. Its independent website, [www.nielsensflorist.com](http://www.nielsensflorist.com), showcased work that was representative of the business, but it was simply that, a showcase, not a functioning e-commerce site.

Ward worked closely with a web design company to integrate the sites; now, everyone who wants to order flowers online through Nielsen's ends up on the .net site, which has been redesigned to feature an edited selection



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**HOUSE PARTY** In the past three years, Nielsen's has made strategic use of its 2,000-square-foot conservatory, hosting both charitable and private events for groups that often number in the hundreds. A holiday preview sale, co-hosted with a local magazine and benefiting an area food bank, led to \$5,500 in net sales and a donation of almost \$3,000 for the nonprofit.

of appropriately priced floral designs, specific to the business. From both sites, customers can access information about other services, including weddings and events, and gift and home décor items. In fact, very few customers realize they are flipping between the .com and .net sites as they browse and buy. "My goal throughout the entire process was to reduce the number of clicks," so that customers could quickly find what they wanted and order it, hassle free, Ward said. Proof that the streamlined process is working? The shop's Internet sales have increased 100 percent from 2009 to 2012; their average online order today is \$135, up from \$80 pre-web

overhaul. The sharp increase in transaction prices was the result of another strategic decision: In redesigning the site, Ward purposefully left prices off the home page, to force customers to look at the designs first. (Once they choose a design, price information appears.) While it's hard to prove her theory, Ward thinks the decision has also helped diversify their web orders, since customers aren't simply searching by price.

Online, no detail is too small to reconsider. Instead of generic names or product numbers, seasonal specials are named according to a theme. In Spring 2013, for instance, the team introduced a line of "famous women" designs for Mother's Day — The Coco Chanel (hyacinth, roses, callas, hypericum) and The Princess Grace (sweet pea, roses, ranunculus, peonies). "Customers had so much fun with it, calling in and saying, 'Well, I think my mom might be a Florence Nightingale (peonies, roses, jasmine) type,' or, 'My mom's definitely a Queen Elizabeth (astilbe, lilac, spray roses, sweet pea),' " Ward said.

Ward also made aesthetic changes, including a new logo (see the before and after, left) and a black background for the website that a few experts try to talk her out of — black backgrounds being a standard "no-no" in web design classes. "But I'm so glad I did it," she

**LOGO BEFORE AND AFTER** To coincide with the store and website renovations, the Nielsen's team, led by Marketing Coordinator Raya Ward, also updated its logo, transitioning from a one-color image that played up its greenhouse roots to a modern four-color logo that is sophisticated, even a little "corporate sleek," Ward said. "The old logo fitted us at the time it was created, in the mid '90s, but this new logo speaks to who we are now."




said. "It makes the flowers pop" online, just as much as they pop in the black cooler in-store. On a more functional level, Ward also ensured through the redesign that she has the ability to make updates and changes herself, rather than relying on a third-party, which was costly and time intensive. "Google likes fresh content in SEO (search engine optimization), and I like to be able to update pictures all of the time," said Ward.


With fresh sites online, Nielsen's also unveiled a new look for its email — and a new strategy for using email to connect with customers. From a tech standpoint, the revised emails were a giant step forward simply because they allowed for HTML/direct links to the site from the email (again, Ward said, it's all about reducing customer frustration. If a customer sees a beautiful photo in an email, she instinctively clicks on it and expects to be directed to the item online.) The team also has started using the email space to underscore its unique positioning in the community — as a destination, as a


## NIELSEN'S FLORIST RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Here's how Nielsen's marketing efforts have paid off, since beginning the campaign in 2010

 **Internet sales:** Doubled from 2009 to 2012

 **Average online order:** Increased from \$80 to \$135

 **Gift sales:** Tripled in 2010, up 70 percent in 2011, steadily increasing since that time

 **Marketing investment:** 2 percent of 2010 sales, including in store renovations

company filled with lifestyle experts. One of the first emails it sent out, post-tweaking, introduced clients to new staff members and gave background details on the in-store renovation.

"We send the emails out about once a week," Ward said, though the schedule is flexible. "If we really have something to say — if we're really excited about something — that tends

to lead directly to higher open rates. So, we don't force the issue. If we miss a week, that's okay." One of the more successful recent email campaigns included a holiday-themed buy-one-get-one-free promo, with an advanced preview for email customers (which gave the sale a VIP feel) and a tight detail shot of a gorgeously decorated Christmas tree.

## Party City

Around 2010, Baumann realized that the conservatory, like the café, was a treasure she'd been underutilizing. For years, she had been hosting low-key events (such as Chamber of Commerce meetings) in the conservatory, but the glammed up showroom allowed for swankier events — and entrée into higher-spending social circles. In short order, she began to put more effort into hosting charitable and private events in the conservatory as a way to market the business to socialites and deep-pocketed donors. Nielsen's hosted 6 "big" (75 people or more) private and charitable events in the last year, rais-

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ing their profile as a business that cares about the community and creating a sense of excitement around the space itself. The events — particularly those with a philanthropic angle — have also generated glowing press coverage for Nielsen's in both the Darien News and the Darien Times.

"Being able to host an event in-store is a huge resource for us," Baumann explained, because it gets people into the store. "Instead of offering to donate 40 centerpieces to an organization like the Red Cross, we can host them in our space," and introduce their donors and VIPs to the business. (Nielsen's has a sliding scale rental fee for the conservatory, including a nonprofit rate; catering services are handled entirely by Michael Joseph.)

In fact, on-site events have proven to be a goldmine when it comes to press coverage and media partnerships. Recently, Nielsen's built upon its relationship with Connecticut Cottages & Gardens, a beautifully produced regional lifestyle magazine, to co-host a Home for the Holidays event in. The partnership came about organically, Ward said, after the Nielsen's team approached the magazine about advertising in 2010 and 2011. (For the past few years, Ward said they've run print ads in local magazines four to six times a year...though this year she is focused more on TV than print.) "When they learned more about what we are doing," in terms of high-end design work and home décor merchandise and charity-focused events, "they were excited to work with us," said Ward, noting that they've also had successful event partnerships with Moffly Media, the publishers behind a number of regional publications.

At the November 2012 Connecticut Cottages & Gardens event, the Nielsen's team treated attendees to a

### WHAT MAKES A MARKETER OF THE YEAR?

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**DESIGN DIRECTIVES** Since 2009, Marketing Coordinator Raya Ward has used her graphic design expertise and professional photography background to help reinvent the look and feel of Nielsen's marketing materials and online presence. She created minimalist ads to complement the new aesthetic of Nielsen's. While Ward is transitioning away from print ads this year, the shop has run the ads in high-end lifestyle magazines and regional publications about five times a year for the past several years. Ward says team members are empowered to try ideas, analyze them and change course if necessary. For example, for two months in 2010, Nielsen's put trifold coupons on all of the arrangements with pictures of the shop's home décor items. But Ward hasn't returned to them since 2010, choosing instead to communicate sales, promos and shop expertise online and in email marketing, and do more general brand advertising through print and television advertising.

holiday shopping preview. Guests generated about \$5,500 in net sales in a three-hour period, a number that does not take into account repeat post-party visits or the value of word-of-mouth. About 200 people showed up for the party, which raised nearly \$3,000 for the Food Bank of Lower Fairfield County (ticket sales went directly to the Food Bank, along with a percentage of sales).

"Charity and community have always been a big part of our business," Baumann said. "We've really built upon that (tradition)." And while Connecticut Cottages & Gardens followed up with an extensive spread of candid photos in the magazine, the event also drew the attention of stylish influential bloggers, including Stacey

Bewkes of Quintessence Lifestyle, which has been featured in Elle Décor and House Beautiful. Bewkes wrote about Nielsen's "fabulous conservatory" and the "elegant winter wonderland" transformation of the showroom — the kind of stylized endorsement that is worth more than just about any paid advertisement Ward can think of. "Getting Darien's socialites into the new shop (has been) very important," she said. "They create a buzz. Word-of-mouth marketing is still one of our most important marketing tools." 🌿

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