



A California cut flower shipper bucks convention and puts the Internet at the center of its marketing strategy.

# Virtual Abundance

By Kate F. Penn

## April Jackson wants to create a place where people will linger.

Browse. Be compelled to buy. What retailer paying big bucks for retail showroom space doesn't? Thing is, Jackson's not in retail — she works for a cut flower shipper. And this “place” upon which she wants to bestow her vision doesn't even physically exist — it's a Web site.

It's the irony of a warehouse-bound flower shipper creating such an impressive visual online “space” that caught the attention of the judges. But it is the customer-focused approach to attaining a profitable 14 percent increase in sales that makes Florabundance, based in Carpinteria, Calif., Floral Management's 10th Annual Marketer of the Year. Here's their story:

## A GM on a Mission

Florabundance launched in 1996 when a group of cut flower growers based in Carpinteria, Calif., wanted to start a direct shipping floral company supplying florists with high-quality cut flowers with a focus on hard-to-find varieties. Scott Carlson, fresh off an anthurium farm in Hawaii and “anxious to get back

to the mainland,” gladly took on the role as general manager to make it happen.

Beyond an initial sales boost from an acquisition, growth was steady, but slow for the first few years, based mostly on cold calling. By 1999, Carlson knew they could do more. “We knew we were putting out a list of products that were unique, and that this and our highly per-

sonalized service were our strengths,” Carlson says. He had a story to tell, but no one to tell it. A busy GM wearing multiple hats, Carlson needed a marketing guru to build the Florabundance brand. The more conventional voice in his head asked, “Why does a flower shipper need a full time marketer?” But, Carlson knew the only way to build a brand for Florabundance was to invest in someone who would live and breath it.

## April Showers

April Jackson's ears must have been ringing. With a background in both marketing and Web development, she was looking for a challenge to put her marketing moxie to the test. Jackson had cut her marketing teeth in the cosmetics industry, introducing business-to-business marketing to a manufacturer that supplied big players, such as Lancôme, Avon and Estée Lauder. She followed that with a three-year stint in information technology, doing marketing and Web development, “during the high-flying late-90s Internet days.” Anticipating the shakeout, Jackson says she was looking for “an industry where



Photo by Jon Whittle

Scott Carlson took a gamble on hiring a full-time marketer, April Jackson, both pictured above. And it has paid off to the tune of a 14 percent (and still growing) increase in gross sales for Florabundance.

I could stay for a while.” She researched floral industry sites. “There weren’t too many up-to-date sites (in 1999),” she recalls, but the Florabundance Web site, although fairly basic, showed an openness to Web-based marketing. “The timing was perfect,” Jackson recalls. A few e-mails and conversations later, and Jackson joined Florabundance to do both sales and marketing.

Jackson came on board talking brand awareness and Internet optimization — music to Carlson’s ears. “Our challenge was to build brand awareness amidst market fluctuations, with limited dollars and in a slowing economy — and deliver qualified leads to the sales force,” Carlson says.

### Operation Internet

By 2001, Jackson focused her marketing efforts on the Internet: “It’s low cost, immediate and you can track results,” she says. Carlson was game. A 2000-2001 partnership fulfilling California orders for an online flower shipper confirmed that “more and more florists were utilizing the Internet as a means of finding new sources for cut flowers,”

Carlson says. When that company folded, Carlson recalls, “we were left to our own devices and needed to figure out what we’d do with our own resources.”

A completely revamped Web site, Jackson says, would become the thrust of the new marketing effort. “A site that would convey Florabundance’s niche as a place for high quality basics, unusual varieties and over-the-top personal service.”

Jackson had a vision for the site, but its inspiration was anything but virtual. “I envisioned not a Web site, but a place,” she says. “A place where someone would be able to come and browse — like when you have that favorite boutique you love to go to and browse. I wanted to create a place for florists to come and browse through for ideas and learn about the products.”

In a market driven primarily by faxed



price sheets and daily sales calls, Jackson knew that plenty of suppliers had figured out how to sell product without the visual smorgasboard she envisioned. All the more reason to give it a try, she rationalized. "I want to do what's not being done," she says, "to see where the weaknesses are and capitalize on those."

## More Than Just A Pretty Site

After her 10 years of marketing cosmetics to the trade, Jackson learned that you can't just put product in front of a company and expect them to buy it: "They need to be inspired to buy it,

to see how it's used." She applies that show-me approach to the Florabundance Web site — which she has sole responsibility for developing, designing, writing and updating. When designers click on "fun stuff" they see listings and photos of unusual cultivars, like kumquats, pumpkin trees — and, most importantly, design ideas. A page showing garden rose vine suggests using it to "add romantic touches like flowered tie-backs for seat covers and decorative kissing benches." Each week, the "featured designer" page showcases the work and profile of a Florabundance customer.

Jackson's sales experience at Florabundance (a role she had to aban-

don to develop the Web site) opened her eyes to typical customer concerns — such as ordering the right color flower over the phone. Throughout the Web site, she anticipates those concerns before they even surface, with statements like: "Chocolate Cosmos are as rich as your favorite sweet, but rather than being chocolate brown, it is more of an oxblood red, neither too orange or purple." Jackson builds excitement for more unusual products, like Eucalyptus Silverbells. "Eucalyptus in all varieties are an excellent and economical filler year-round. However, during the holiday season we anxiously await the arrival of this ornamental variety ... the pods appear to be dusted or frosted with the

# What Makes a Marketer of the Year?

When Floral Management launched the Marketer of the Year Award in 1994, we hoped to draw attention to some of the industry's outstanding marketing efforts — and inspire the rest of the industry with their ideas. Floral Management invites, retailers, wholesalers and growers to take part in the contest, luring them with the prospect of a \$5,000 cash prize. For the tenth year in a row, that cash prize is sponsored by Design Master color tool, inc.

## The Criteria

What constitutes an outstanding marketing effort? The judges are charged with reviewing the entries and rating each entrant in the following four categories: effectiveness of campaign, originality, professionalism and overall excellence.

## The Judges

We know that only experienced marketers with a track record of success are qualified to judge other marketing efforts. So, each year we choose a panel of seasoned professionals within and outside the floral industry.

**J. Sten Crissey, AAF**, retailer, Crissey Flowers & Gifts, Seattle, and past president of the Society of American Florists (SAF).

**Steve Dahlloff**, marketing director for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, the agency that handles the consumer relations campaign for the Society of American Florists (SAF).

**Sylvia P. Nichols, AIFD**, owner of The Window Box, Cheshire, Conn., and 1996 Marketer of the Year.

**Janet Silva Kister**, owner of Sunlet Nursery, Inc.,

Fallbrook, Calif., and part of the group of growers designated 2000 Marketer of the Year.

**Holly Money-Collins, AIFD**, department of retail floristry, San Francisco City College.

## How to Enter

Want to be an entrant in Floral Management's 2004 Marketer of the Year? Get an entry form on the Floral Management section online, [www.safnow.org](http://www.safnow.org) or call, fax or e-mail a request to Cheryl M. Burke, at Floral Management, (800) 336-4743; fax (800) 208-0078; E-mail [cburke@safnow.org](mailto:cburke@safnow.org).

## Past Winners

**2002** BJ Dyer, AIFD, and Guether Vogt, Bouquets, Denver

**2001** Andrew Manton-Zamora and Rutger Borst, Apisis Group, Miami

**2000** Southern California Plant Tour Days

**1999** Greg and Heather Katz, Al Manning Florist, Kansas City, Mo.

**1998** Bill Cutting, Kuhn Flowers, Jacksonville, Fla.

**1997** Brooks Jacobs, Greenbrook Flowers, Jackson, Miss.

**1996** Sylvia Nichols, AIFD, The Window Box, Cheshire, Conn. United Floral Exchange, Carlsbad, Calif., and Denver

**1995** Mary Dark, Broadmoor Florist, Shreveport, La Greg Royer, Royer's, Lebanon, Pa.

**1994** Mary Lore, McFarland Florist & Greenhouses, Inc., Detroit Tom Aykens, AAF, Memorial Florist & Greenhouses, Appleton, Wis. ☘

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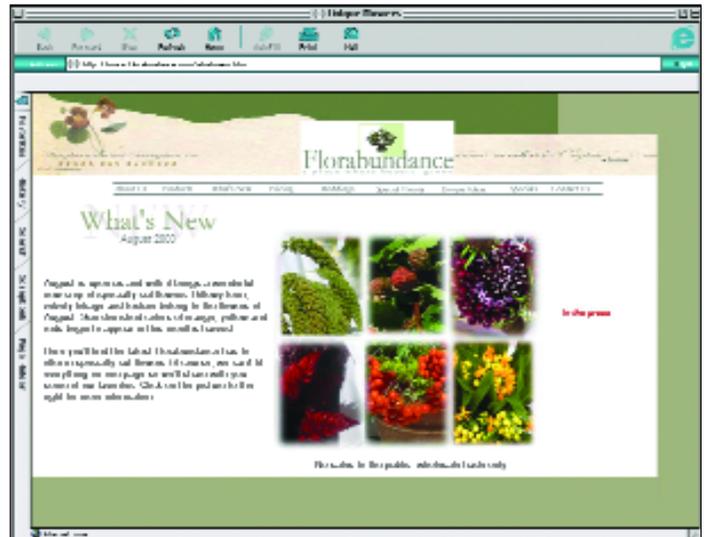
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season's first powder," reads the description. And not a page on the site ends without a call to action, like "contact us today for a full list of fruited branches," always encouraging visitors to call a Florabundance sales representative.



The "What's New" page on the Florabundance Web site changes weekly, with vivid descriptions of unusual cultivars and inspiration on how to use them in designs.

## Building a Fan Base

Rather than crossing her fingers and hoping florists will flock to the site, Jackson keeps Florabundance top of mind with a weekly e-mail called "Unique Ideas in Floral Design" sent to about 400 customers and prospects. True to Jackson's highly informative and visual approach, it's not just any e-mail — it's more like a magazine. "It's in HTML," Jackson says, "which allows florists to see pictures, graphs, graphics, colors and styled fonts." Each week, a flower is featured and shown in a design. A spring newsletter, reminding readers about Administrative Professionals Week, featured a whimsical spring arrangement as inspiration to buy the product in it. "We give tips from other designers on floral arrangements, trends [and] holiday ideas," says Jackson, "so it's not considered intrusive" like a sales promotion.

Florabundance complements the Internet marketing with print advertising in trade magazines, a redesigned direct-mail packet for potential customers and thank-you packets for new customers.

## Driving Traffic to the Site

To drive even more traffic to the site, Florabundance began an e-marketing campaign in 2001 that included paid listings on Yahoo, MSN, Google and other leading search engines. Jackson's ace in the hole for maximizing trade and minimizing consumer traffic is in knowing keywords used by florists searching online for flowers. "It's only by knowing your customer that you can determine which key word search will drive traffic to



your Web site," she says. "The same strategy works for [online retail florists], who pay for keywords that consumers

search by, such as 'flower,' 'wedding flowers' or 'florists.'" Just don't ask Jackson to reveal the key words used by the trade, or how she figured them out. "That's one thing I can't share," Jackson says. She offers a hint: "I know how designers think ... You have to put yourself in the place of the customer and know what their needs are."

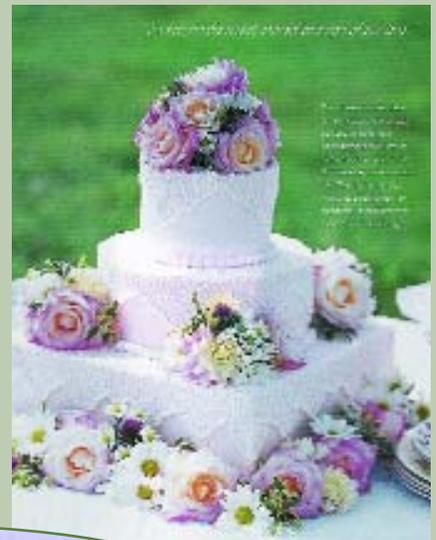
## Creating Consumer Demand

With the Internet-based marketing underway, Jackson wanted to influence consumer demand through home or "shelter" magazines. Too tall an order for an individual company with a nominal marketing budget to take on? Not to



Florabundance, Inc., specialty flowers for trade designers, 48001 201-3597, www.florabundance.com

The best way to get brides asking their florists for Florabundance flowers, reasoned April Jackson, is to get Florabundance flowers in magazines the brides are reading. A special Better Homes and Gardens weddings edition was Florabundance's first major PR coup.



Jackson, who frequents wedding chat sites to get a sense for what brides are looking for and talking about. "They're

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Jackson says.  
Carlson  
admits he didn't  
have high hopes for  
the results. "The con-

sumer program was a bit of a leap of  
faith," Carlson says. "I didn't see how one  
company could create a brand nationally  
through consumer relationships."

Every single editor responded. "Better  
Homes and Gardens was the first. They  
used us in several smaller projects at  
first," Jackson says. Then, a new editor  
at BHG was assigned a special weddings  
magazine. "She had seen our flowers  
and, liking the idea of using one vendor,  
decided to give it a try." Florabundance  
became the single supplier for the flow-  
ers for an extensive spread in a special  
BHG issue called "Simply Creative  
Weddings," in which flowers were *the*  
focal point. Florabundance will be the  
exclusive floral supplier for the 2004 edi-  
tion as well. The shipper received credit,  
including a phone number and Web site  
address. Other editors took note and  
soon Florabundance flowers were select-  
ed for more photo spreads, including  
Romantic Homes and Country Living,  
which use flowers in every day interior  
design and holiday decorations.

## Playing Matchmaker

Carlson and Jackson ventured into con-  
sumer PR territory knowing that if they  
weren't careful, it could backfire. "We  
did not want to give our customers the  
impression that we were selling to the  
public," says Jackson. The message they  
emphasize to customers about the con-  
sumer coverage, says Jackson, is that "the  
quality of our flowers rated best overall  
with editors for specific magazines."

Despite the designation as a supplier of  
"specialty flowers for the trade" in the  
BHG Weddings edition, consumers called  
and came to the Web site by the thou-  
sands. "At first, we were overwhelmed,"  
Jackson says. "That 'wholesale only' de-  
signation on our Web site didn't (deter  
consumers)." She added a contact form



with questions designed specifically to filter out consumers.

The form asks visitors to supply a retail identification license number and to “tell us more about your business.” “Based on what’s volunteered, it’s pretty easy to tell whether it’s a legitimate buyer,” Jackson says.

But they don’t simply shoo consumers away with a “good luck,” they send them to the Florabundance customer in their area — a gesture that the consumer and the florist appreciate.

### Abundant Increases

One year after Florabundance launched its revamped Web site, traffic to the site

has doubled. “We’ve experienced a 50 percent increase in the amount of leads received via the Internet — 75 percent — since the beginning of the marketing campaign in May 2002.” About 88 percent of leads are converted into customers. Gross sales from May 2002 through May 2003 increased 14 percent, new customers have increased by 25 percent and the company recorded its highest Mother’s Day sales in history this year.

### Offline Efforts

But the fanciest, smartest, most intuitive Web site in the world won’t make a business. “The Internet is just a tool for creating interest, like the phone and fax. It’s not the be-all, end-all that people once thought it would be,” says Carlson. “It’s the relationships that you develop that will make or break you.”

By some customer accounts, Florabundance is “bending over backwards” to develop them. “I tried out Florabundance because they came

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## The Big Payoff

Florabundance’s 14 percent sales increase is impressive, especially when factored against what they spent on the campaign (see below). Marketer of the Year judge Sylvia Nichols, AIFD, who was Floral Management’s 1996 Marketer of the Year, was particularly impressed with the return on investment. “They spent just 1.4 percent of what they gained in sales — that’s impressive,” she says.

### The Investment (May 2002 –May 2003)

Trade print advertising	\$4,000
Search engine advertising	\$1,800
Direct-mail thank you kit	\$904
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,704</b>

### The Payoff **\$473,325**

A 14% gross sales increase, from May 2002 to May 2003

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recommended, but I stay with them because their customer service is phenomenal," says Diana Dolan, of Floral

and Event Design in Santa Barbara, Calif. She recounts a situation when a shipment of curly willow she needed for a 20-foot long arbor at an event got held up at the airport. "Any other sup-



Photo by Jon Whittle

Florabundance's eight sales associates provide highly customized "pampering" service to customers. As general manager Scott Carlson puts it, "It's the relationships that you develop that will make you or break you."

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plier would have said, 'Sorry,' but [Florabundance] actually sent someone to the airport and had it released."

For Kimberly Nelson, of Wedding Designs by Kim in Columbus, Ga., Florabundance is the "first supplier in California to manage to send premium quality flowers ... and pack the product in a way they are delivered in good condition ... and is just as I ordered it."

With accolades like that, even Jackson, who lives and breathes Florabundance's Internet presence, admits that the Web plays a relatively minor role in Florabundance's long-term success. "Marketing is not just about the ads and the Internet," she says. "It's about the customer's experience beginning with the first initial contact with us, to our delivery of a quality product that will satisfy the end user. Our success is due to the personal relationships established with our customers." 🍀

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## Info To Go



**Where Are They Now?**  
Want to see what some of the past recipients of Floral Management's Marketer of the Year are doing? Get a recap by clicking on the Info to Go logo on the home page of SAF's member Web site, [www.safnow.org](http://www.safnow.org). Or get it via SAF's Fast Fax, by calling 1-888-723-2000 and requesting document #586.