

By Kate F. Penn

Vow for Profits

If you honor and cherish your wedding business, solemnly swear to run it like one.

“Florists are the nicest people I know, and consequently the poorest people I know,”

says veteran retail florist Carol Caggiano, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, explaining why so many florists say they lose money on weddings. A recent ex-pat of flower shop ownership, Caggiano admits to doing many weddings without making money. “The bride asks for this or that to be added and we say, ‘Oh, she’s so nice, don’t charge her for that’ or we forget to charge for delivery.” But at some point in her 36 years of co-owning (with husband, Neil) Glen Head Flower Shop in Glen Head, N.Y., Caggiano realized that happy brides and a healthy bottom line are not mutually exclusive. “You realize [undercharging is a problem] when your staff gets bigger and you have to make that payroll every Friday and you’re paying everyone and don’t have anything left for yourself.” A self-described graduate of the “school of hard knocks” and an ongoing student of florists around the country, Caggiano learned and applied systems and philosophies to her wedding work to make it profitable.

Good systems are the key to profitable weddings, agrees Sam Viviano, of SV consulting based in Toledo, Ohio. “I know

many florists do not like to put up with the hassle and put down wedding business as a non money maker,” says Viviano, who ran his family’s business for about 50 years before selling it to his son five years ago. “But the facts are that many florists don’t handle them properly, they lack organizational skills and spend more time on a wedding than is really necessary.”

Florists who’ve figured out how to profit from weddings are only too eager to share their secrets to wedded bliss. They’ve vowed to be the profitable partner when pairing up with bridal customers.

Words to Live By

I will not work for free.

Florists often justify bargain pricing, low-balling or matching a competitor’s pricing as a way to get their name out. “Don’t do it,” Caggiano says. “You’ll get known alright, known for being the cheapest. And then you’ll try to increase your prices and the bride will say, ‘You’ve become so expensive.’”

It’s a losing battle, and one that happens even after a proposal has been accepted, agrees Sharon McGukin, AIFD, PFCI, of Designer’s Touch, Carrollton, Ga., and a floral commentator. A typical scenario: The bride and the florist have envisioned an abundance of flowers. Then the budget gets cut. The designer can’t let go of that vision and inadver-

tently begins to add “just a few” flowers to each design because “it needs a little something,” and “so many people will view their work.” The result, McGukin says: The florist is giving flowers to someone who will never know they received them. The bride thinks she has fully paid for the product. McGukin says stop right there and remember an obvious but oft-ignored rule of thumb, especially in wedding sales: “The customer must only receive what they are willing to pay for,” she says.

I will be confident in my work and what I’m charging for it.

Make this your mantra, say florists who’ve figured out how to make money on weddings. “Fearless pricing” is what J Schwanke, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of J.M.H. Enterprises, preaches to students of his one-day intensive wedding boot camp, The Art, Science and Future of Weddings. “Everyone else in the wedding arena – jewelers, fashion designers, invitation printers, caterers, liquor distributors, even churches — has developed a fearless charging schedule. So many florists . . . are their own worse enemy when it comes to charging,” he says.

Confidence comes from knowing the exact price that yields a profit. Caggiano and her accountant figured out an average cost per hour for each

labor category, from drivers to designers. The final number for each category included additional costs like Social Security, Workman's Comp, state disability, benefits and other expenses. Once they had a real cost per hour for each labor category, they applied the mark-up (higher for wedding and party work), so Caggiano knew what she needed to generate per hour from her staff. "If you're comfortable with your prices," she says, "then you can speak to the bride with confidence, you're not pulling numbers out of the air."

I will not give away my ideas for free.

Few florists have been spared this situation: After spending a few hours talking with a bride, viewing dress swatches, reception photos, and then coming up with a proposal for the wedding flowers, the bride takes the proposal to another florist.

Florists have various ways of either avoiding this or getting compensated for time on the front end. Some charge for the consultation (\$50 to \$100 typically), and apply that amount to the job once the contract is signed. Marlin Hargrove, AIFD, PFCI, a freelance designer and design consultant to the Pete Garcia Company in Atlanta, uses a contract for the bride — which lists flowers by type only and the price for each item — and a contract for in-house use that elaborates on each item (flower variety, color, etc.) "If the bride requests the [longer, more detailed] version, I will give it to her, only after half of the total is paid," he says.

Lisa Greene, PFCI, of Nunan Florist & Greenhouses in Georgetown, Mass., doesn't charge for a one-hour consultation, provided the bride has chosen her dresses and can provide fabric swatches. The bride can take notes but does not

get a written quote until she has made a deposit to Greene. Greene charges \$50 for consultations where the bride cannot provide a dress swatch, refundable once the bride books the wedding.

Greene attempts to close the deal by saying, "You have made some beautiful choices and your wedding will be lovely. Do you have any further questions? How would you like to secure your date on the calendar? We take credit cards, debit cards and checks." If the bride doesn't want to leave a deposit, Greene says, the bride is "in the hot seat" to explain why she is hesitant. "This can be an opportunity to address any concerns she may have." If the bride doesn't book a date, Greene keeps her folder in the "in process" file and checks in with her in a few days. "Make the follow-up call, but don't be a pest. One call is enough unless she tells you to check back again," she says.

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More wedding resources:

“Essential Wedding Forms” CD, \$29.95 by Cathy Hillen Rulloda, AIFD, PFCI, helps you organize your wedding with worksheets, etc. E-mail her at chrullo-da@avantegardns.com.

The Art, Science and Future of Weddings, a class offered at local wholesalers and floral associations around the country, by the Floral University Network, a division of JMHS Enterprises, Inc., (616) 785-3766; e-mail: jmhs@wmis.net.

The “handbook” in the new John Henry Wedding Flowers Collection, from the John Henry Company, \$99.95. It’s a five-book set with 400 color photographs of wedding flowers, plus a handbook that outlines how to pull off profitable weddings, which J Schwanke, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, says alone is worth the cost. www.jhc.com.

Did we miss something? If you know of a product that helps florists run more profitable and effective weddings, please let us know, so we can add it to our online resource guide. Contact Kate Penn, (800) 336-4743, e-mail: kpenn@safnow.org. 🌿

— K.P.

I will honor service and delivery as the profit centers they deserve to be.

Charge for delivery and installation — basically, any time spent outside of the shop — up front or build it into the price of the design pieces. “So many shops

absorb these expenses in their regular markup, and all that does is eat up profit,” Caggiano says. If your designer needs to generate \$40 an hour and your driver, \$30 an hour, then you need to charge \$70 an hour for them to go to the

site, set up the product and get back to the shop. “The concept is that labor is a saleable product just like flowers,” says Caggiano, “so it needs to generate income, not just replace cost.”

I will increase the perceived value of my services by being prepared and knowledgeable.

It is the challenge of every florist: reduce bridal flower sticker shock. Confidence in pricing and knowledge of what you charge and why you charge it are only part of the equation. Perception is just as important, and the bride must perceive you to be worth the price tag. From the minute you meet, your job is to make her realize how important flowers are to her wedding, Caggiano says. Have photos of weddings you’ve worked on, as well as pictures from magazines, ready for the consultation. For florists who work with a lot of out-of-town brides, put a presentation on CD-Rom and on your Web site. Stay current on wedding trends by reading the bridal magazines, Martha Stewart Living, InStyle and whatever brides flip through for ideas.

“What we are really selling to the bride in the consultation is ourselves — our ability to provide excellent products/services,” says McGukin. “Establishing this trust factor allows the bride to follow the suggestions of the florist,” says McGukin. As Viviano assures his florist clients, that trust translates into profits. “I knew I had succeeded when we would get to some controversy about the flowers when the bride would say to me ‘Mr Viviano, you do what you think is best.’”

If you’re not online, get there (see suggested Web sites, p. 31). “The average florist who’s interested in weddings should be on the Web regularly to see what the brides are saying to each other,” says Caggiano, who recently spotted orchids as the popular flower for brides, according to their online chats. Florists should be ready to talk about availability and accessibility of hot items.

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Show photos of alters at local churches, so when the bride describes her church you can look at it together and specifically talk about how many pews and how to decorate the alter, Caggiano says. Having photos on hand not only impresses the bride, but also lets you know immediately if the budget for an alter piece or some other aspect needs to be higher.

I will be faithful to my recipes when buying fresh product.

“Ordering wedding flowers can mean the difference in profit or loss for your shop,” says Greene, of Nunan’s Florist & Greenhouses. In addition to knowing the exact stem count and prices for each, Greene adds extra to cover damage, short counts, wrong colors and bud maturity. “You may need 20 percent or more flowers than what you think,” she says. “Plan for this and figure it into [what you’re charging the bride] . . . any leftovers will be gravy for the shop.”

I will take extra steps to honor and adhere to my set profit margin.

Before placing the flower order, McGukin says to back all the costs out of the total wedding price to come up with the flower budget. Take the total price of the wedding, subtract the cost of labor, overhead, hardgoods, plant material, linens, etc., and profit margin — whatever is left is the flower budget. “Only flowers ordered for the wedding should be used for the wedding,” McGukin says. “These are the ones whose costs have been calculated. If you use already-purchased cooler flowers, it is too easy to consider those as free flowers and add them in as giveaways.”

I will make a profit on modest budget weddings.

“If the bride has a low budget, don’t knock yourself out with a two-hour consultation,” says Caggiano, who suggests using the first encounter with the bride-to-be to listen for cues that indicate her

budget. If you’re getting the message that she’s budget-sensitive (based on where she bought her dress, the reception site, etc.), Caggiano suggests giving her your wedding package brochure and saying, “Most of what we do is custom, but you’re telling me that budget might be an issue, and we do some really wonderful packages. With our packages you can save even more money by picking up the bouquets at our shop.” A typical package will include the bouquets for the bride and maid of honor and the mother’s flowers, done in a simple combination of flowers. The bride only has to select the color — you do the rest, says Caggiano.

I will streamline communication with the bride.

At the initial consultation, McGukin schedules an update meeting and a payment meeting and encourages brides to

keep an ongoing list of questions on their copy of the bridal form for McGukin to address at the two subsequent meetings. “This diminishes phone calls and unexpected visits in the interim,” she says. And she offers to hold meetings on the phone if it’s more convenient for the bride. For payment, the bride can sign a copy of her form with changes made and mail it with her check for the final balance due. “This lets her know that you are both available and flexible, but cuts down on the number of time-consuming contacts.” (See Info to Go, p. 44 for more on bridal policies).

I will sell color and style, not specific flowers.

This is how some florists safeguard against getting locked into a flower that becomes unavailable. “The florist is free to substitute without disappointing the



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bride,” says McGukin. Hargrove, of the Pete Garcia Company, includes the following disclaimer in his contracts: “If for any reason the choices you have made are not of the highest quality, or due to market demands are unavailable, I am given the authority to make substitutions for this product.” A self-described “stickler” when it comes to having perfect blooms, Hargrove says the policy has never scared off a bride. “When presented in a positive and caring tone of voice, it seems more like I am promising my very best to produce the exact plans we discussed,” he says.

I will give delivery drivers the tools they need.

“Delivery drivers can be the weakest link in the wedding process,” Greene says. “The good ones are worth their weight in gold and the careless ones can just ruin your day.” She arms drivers with a

wedding delivery schedule and driver’s sheet (see Info to Go), which lists contacts for drivers, reinforces the timeline established in the team meeting and includes a copy of the designer’s worksheet to clear up any on-the-spot misunderstandings. All Greene’s drivers have a

cell phone and a wedding kit with extra flowers, ribbon and tape in case of an emergency repair. 🌿

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Info To Go



Paper, Processes and Policies

Planning profitable weddings involves plenty of paper contracts, staff policies, bride policies, confirmation letters for the bride, whatever it takes to eliminate misunderstandings and miscommunications (which often mean lost profits). We rode the paper trail of a handful of florists and have gathered their documents for you to check out. Click on the Info to Go logo on the home page of SAF’s member Web site, www.safnow.org. and look under “Bridal Paper, Processes and Policies” for the following: Initial Consultation Worksheet, Appointment Confirmation Letter, Letter to Prospective Brides, Wedding Consultation and Procedure Information (for the bride), In-house Wedding Procedures (for designers), Rental Agreement and more.

Because of the length of these documents, they are not available via Fast Fax, but contact Cheryl M. Burke to request the complete packet via mail, for \$5 (payable via check or credit card), (800) 336-4743, e-mail: cburke@safnow.org. 🌿

—K.P.

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