

Weddings 2.0007

How the Web is driving wedding business to local florists.

By Mary Westbrook

Brides who don't price shop. Wedding sales that are profitable and growing, but in a way that's controlled, manageable. Hundreds of people logging onto your Web sites (yes, *sites*) every day to research, buy and... well, just soak up your advice.

Does that sound like heaven? For Rich and Kathy Dudley of The Bloomery in Butler, Pa., the situation is their reality. Really. The couple, owners of The Bloomery since 1998, has seen wedding sales increase over the last five years, without sacrificing profitability. How? It may seem counterintuitive in the age of national floral companies and online order-gatherers, but the Dudleys swear by the Web, saying that, far from casting them under the shadows of bigger players, the Internet has helped The Bloomery create tight bonds with local brides... and their sisters... and their maids of honors... and the eagle-

eyed engaged couples at their wedding receptions who are scoping out the centerpieces. In short, the Web, and specifically the couple's wedding Web site and Web log (blog), have established them as local experts on weddings, and brides are responding.

"Today's brides are more educated and sophisticated," Kathy says. "They have more schooling, education and resources available. Florists need to step up their game, get out of their comfort zone and learn what they need to do to connect with brides. Technology is one great way to do this."

A Site of One's Own

Way back in '98, when Kathy purchased the shop, she told Rich that she wanted a fully functional, e-commerce Web site. Money was tight, so Rich, a former molecular biologist with an itch to learn more about Web programming, offered to help. That was the birth of the shop's main Web site, **www.bloomery.com**. Updated frequently and completely renovated several times since it launched nearly a decade ago, the site is the main portal to The Bloomery's cyber space. For a while, that was all that The Bloomery needed; however, the shop was changing. Wedding sales were on the rise, growing by about 20 percent to 25 percent a year, and, by the end of 2002, the Dudleys had decided to sell

Photo by White Ribbon Design



STAND ON CEREMONY Wedding sales represent about 24 percent of overall sales at the Bloomery in Butler, Pa. In 2006, owners Rich and Kathy Dudley had 78 weddings.

more wedding accessories (unity candles, flower girl baskets, etc.), in place of gift items, which they felt a competitor had cornered the market on. In 2003, they decided they needed another site, this time specifically for weddings.

“I didn’t want Bloomery.com to be overwhelmed by weddings,” Dudley says. “When growth in the wedding (segment) happened, we decided we needed a separate wedding site, mostly because of our accessories, which took up a lot of space,” cluttering the site’s otherwise streamlined design.

For the wedding site, **www.bloomeryweddings.com**, the Dudleys hired an outside graphic designer to create a customized site, which they host online through a third

party. The designer’s services plus the shopping cart feature on the site, which allows shoppers to buy items online, cost \$3,000, but Kathy says the investment paid off within the first 12 months with customers constantly referencing the site to the sales team.

“If you can make a positive first impression, that’s very important,” Dudley says. “You can’t (do that) with a standard Web site that looks like everybody else’s. Customers are smarter than that.”

Cathy Hillen-Rulloda, AIFD, PFCI, of Avante Gardens in Anaheim, Calif., agrees. About five years ago, she launched a wedding site, **www.floralsunique.com**, believing that the goals of a general shop Web site and

that of a wedding page are “completely different.”

“An e-commerce site should be clean, simple; the need is immediate,” she says. “Custom wedding sites need to be more about the look and feel, instilling a sense of confidence, engaging the bride and establishing your credibility.”

The Bloomery site, which is set for a routine update soon, had more than 71,000 visitors in January, including out-of-town brides drawn to the site for the shop’s extensive collection of accessories from top-selling lines such as Beverly Clark and Cathy’s Concepts. In fact, accessory sales at the shop over the last five years have risen by 14 percent per year, with Dudley shipping orders to out-of-town brides every day. (Read

The Bloomery

Butler, Pa.

Kathy and Rich Dudley

Web sites: www.bloomery.com; www.bloomeryweddings.com and a blog through <http://floristblogs.com>

Number of Employees: Two full time; four part time and three to four seasonal hires.

Annual Sales: Undisclosed; Since 2001, sales have doubled.

Wedding Wow: Wedding sales represent about 24 percent of overall sales. In 2006, the shop had 78 weddings.



WEDDINGS BLOOM Kathy and Rich Dudley of The Bloomery in Butler, Pa., launched their wedding Web site to accommodate a growing market and accessory business.

profitable. If I sell \$200 in invitations, \$100 of that is profit.”

Research Assistant

Most importantly, perhaps, the wedding Web sites have become a valuable wedding sales tool for the shops. For

instance, when a bride calls to schedule a consultation with The Bloomery, she is immediately directed to the site, which is filled with images of bouquets, centerpieces and arrangements, including price ranges. (For tips on creating eye-catching photos, see “Photo Finish,” p. 25.) Far from giving away free information, by outlining detailed shop services, Dudley says the site helps weed out potential price shoppers, allowing her more time to meet with valuable customers who are likely to book a wedding, not just waste time chatting.

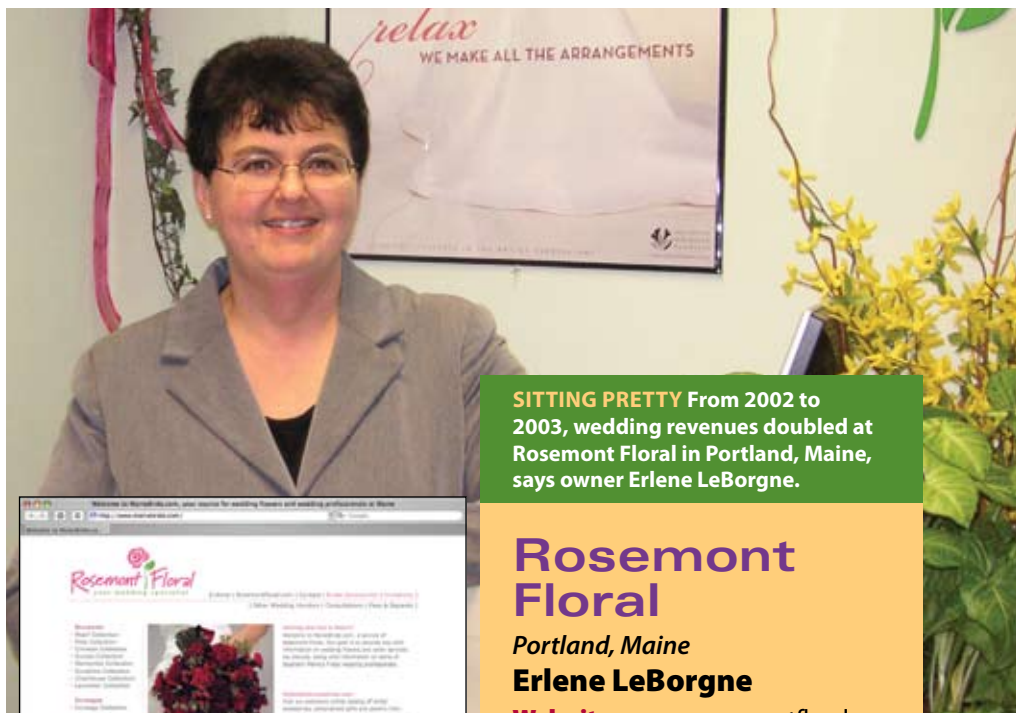
“People really use our Web site for research,” she says. “So when brides come in, they have a pretty good idea of what it will cost and what we will offer. There’s not a lot of price shopping. In fact, most brides have down a deposit before they come in.”

more about Dudley’s take on the accessory business in “For the Few?” p. 27.)

“We wanted to create a separate space so that brides across the country could see that we are a wedding store, not just a flower shop,” Dudley says. “(Updating) is no more difficult than entering something into the POS system. I do most of that from my laptop on the couch at 9 p.m.”

That’s a story that Erlene LeBorgne of Rosemont Floral in Portland, Maine, can relate to. About four years ago, LeBorgne, who credits wedding sales with about 25 percent of the shop’s revenue, set up her current wedding Web site after she purchased the domain **www.mainebride.com** for \$300. Like the Dudleys and Hillenrulloda, LeBorgne wanted to keep her wedding business separate from the comings and goings of her main site, **www.rosemontfloral.com**, and she too had gotten into wedding accessories, so much so that she added another site, **www.mybridalaccessories.com**.

“More or less it’s a subdivision of what we do,” she says. “We’ve had a couple of brides who have ordered invitations, flowers and accessories — all from us. And, the invitations are highly



SITTING PRETTY From 2002 to 2003, wedding revenues doubled at Rosemont Floral in Portland, Maine, says owner Erlene LeBorgne.

Rosemont Floral

Portland, Maine

Erlene LeBorgne

Web sites: www.rosemontfloral.com, www.mainebride.com, www.mybridalaccessories.com and a blog through <http://floristblogs.com>

Number of Employees: Three to four, plus Erlene

Annual Sales: \$250,000

Wedding Wow: From 2002 to 2003, the shop’s wedding revenue doubled. In 2006, the shop had 62 weddings.



MADE FOR BRIDES Wedding sales at Rosemont Floral make up about 25 percent of annual sales.

Photo Finish

It doesn't take more than a quick visit to The Bloomery's wedding Web site to realize that owners Rich and Kathy Dudley place a high premium on photography. But if you think they blew the bank on professional photographs, think again.

"It's all our own," Kathy admits, laughing. "We invested in a good digital camera and then fiddled around to learn about lighting on our own."

Because flowers are such a visual medium, the idea that photographs belong on a florist's Web site isn't new, but the Dudleys and Cathy Hillen-Rulloda, AIFD, PFCI, of Avante Gardens in Anaheim, Calif., say high-quality pictures are especially important on a wedding site.

"Many florists have on their Web sites, 'We specialize in weddings,' yet there is nary a picture," says Hillen-Rulloda, who, like the Dudleys takes her own photos. "Without photos you're not in the game."

Here are some tips from The Bloomery and Avante Gardens on how to get Web-worthy shots:

Go Au Natural. Skip harsh flashes and fluorescent lights and take

photos outside, Dudley says. "I have found that to get really true colors, we need to take our bouquets outside, out of direct sunlight," she says.

Invest in Tech. Choose a high-quality camera and the right photo-finishing software to touch up pictures before you post them. The Dudleys recommend Adobe Element. Hillen-Rulloda likes Adobe Photoshop.

Use What You Have. The perfect backdrop for your next photo shoot could be right around the corner, literally. "A lot of times, we just lay bouquets on a bench," Kathy Dudley says. Hillen-Rulloda sends a camera off-site with employees to get shots of receptions and ceremonies.

Have a Sense of Humor. You're not Annie Leibovitz, and that's OK. "Not every photo is going to be good," Hillen-Rulloda says. "We did a big party where Donna Karan was the guest speaker and not a single image turned out." Just remember, save the blurry petals and lopsided bouquets for your own amusement, not your Web site. 🌸

— M.W.

Similarly, Hillen-Rulloda posts mounds of photos and specific, pre-priced "collections" (a more appealing word than package) categorized by season on her site, complete with price estimates, although the majority of the shop's wedding work is highly customized.

On the other hand, LeBorgne does not post price estimates on her wedding site — it's more of a guide for color, style and flower type since prices and availability change frequently, she says — but she does direct brides to Mainebride.com, advising them to visit the site prior to their consultation.

"When a bride makes contact, I set up an initial appointment with her," she says. "I'll talk to them about the wedding, asking questions, and then I refer people to the Web site as homework, if you will."

That homework will pay off — for the florist and the client, says Hillen-Rulloda, who says weddings and events make up about 25 percent of annual sales.

"The Web has absolutely grown our wedding and event business," she says. "If you don't have a site dedicated to weddings, it's much tougher for today's bride to find your shop. I can't tell you

how many times we've booked events in excess of \$20,000 or \$30,000, directly from a client's exposure to us on the Web."



DEAR KATHY Kathy and Rich Dudley of the Bloomery in Butler, Pa., tackle myriad topics on their wedding blog — from etiquette advice to updates on signature bouquets.

Blogging for Brides

With the wedding Web site thriving, the Dudleys launched a wedding-specific blog, www.bloomeryweddings.com/blog, in March 2005. Still a fairly new technology outside of the world of politics and news, blogs are essentially online diaries. The Dudleys update their blog once or twice a week with information they think will interest brides. Recent postings included photos of featured bouquets from The Bloomery as well as links to free online mapping devices (to help couples direct family members and friends to reception, rehearsal and ceremony sites) and etiquette tips (how do you address an invitation to a widow?).

"It was very new technology when we started using it, but we knew the blog would be a great communication tool, and it integrated extremely well with a Web site," Kathy says. "We wanted to be ahead of the curve. We didn't want people to think they could only call 9 to 5."

Blogging technology is inexpensive and intuitive — you can download free programs such as Microsoft's Windows Live Writer. But, Rich also realized, quickly, that the blog had another, technological advantage over traditional Web sites.



DIFFERENT STROKES Cathy Hillen-Rulloda (right) launched her wedding-specific Web site because she says the purposes of an e-commerce site (immediate purchases) are totally different from those of a wedding site (day-dreaming, research and inspiration).

“Search engines such as Yahoo and Google index blogs very quickly,” Kathy says. “If we do a search on Google for something we’ve posted, within 24 hours, we’re often the No.1 or No. 2 search result. With Web sites, that indexing takes a lot more time.”

“Big, national companies spend so much on keywords and pay per click, but a blog is the small florists’ solution,” Kathy continues. “It’s the same thing with regular flower shop Web sites. If you have a blog and you talk about the Mother’s Day specials and the flowers you are offering you will come up higher in the rankings naturally, without paying anything.”

At press time, the blog was attracting 300 to 500 visitors a day, and generating more than just goodwill.

“We have a large wedding in Pittsburgh because the girl saw a picture of work we’d done at her reception site



CUSTOM NICHE Avante Gardens in Anaheim, Calif., specializes in custom weddings, but offers brides priced, seasonal collections to peruse online, says owner Cathy Hillen-Rulloda, AIFD, PFCI.

Avante Gardens Florals Unique

Anaheim, Calif.

Cathy Hillen-Rulloda,
AIFD, PFCI

Web sites: www.avantegardens.com, www.floralsunique.com and a blog through <http://floristblogs.com>
Number of Employees: Varies by need, from 8 to 40.

Annual Sales: Undisclosed
Wedding Wow: Weddings and events are roughly 25 percent of annual sales. The shop specializes in custom weddings.

on our blog,” Dudley says. “It does work. It’s not an overnight, instant, deluge of sales but it’s a tool.”

The Dudleys, however, feel so strongly about the potential of blogs that about a year ago they launched <http://floristblogs.com>, a Web site that plays host to 12 different florists, including LeBorgne and Hillen-Rulloda, who pay \$60 a year to blog about myriad topics. In January, the site received 45,000 visitors and 340,000 page views. (Find out more about the Dudley’s efforts to get more florists blogging, see Hands On, p. 15.)

“Blogging is an opportunity to be heard,” says Hillen-Rulloda, who occasionally writes about wedding trends and news on her blog, http://floristblogs.com/blogs/avant_gardens/default.aspx. “We

keep it more informational than promotional but we can track significant sales dollars that originated from the blog.”

(Find out more about blogging technology in Info to Go.)

Catch and Release?

For all of its Web prowess, The Bloomery is still a brick and mortar flower shop, and what goes on in the shop, in the end, determines the bottom line, Dudley says. To that end, the physical shop, like the Web sites, is in a constant state of reinvention. The Dudleys remodeled in 2004, adding recessed lighting, crown molding and ceramic tile floors. With the renovation, they included designs for a consultation area, a wedding corner, to house their wedding accessory inventory, portfolios and bridal books. A long table, flanked by chairs, anchors the consultation area, encouraging brides to dive right into the planning process. (For more insight on consultation best practices, see “My Two Cents,” p. 42.)

“We want them to know that we’re professional and ready to get to business,” Dudley says.

Erlene LeBorgne of Rosemont Floral, who recently invested nearly \$4,000 in stationery, signage and business cards to update her existing logo and to create



Info To Go

Find out more about what blogs are and how florists are using them, by clicking on the Info to Go logo on SAF’s member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or, get it via Fast Fax by calling (888) 723-2000 and request document #909.

For the Few?

When Suzie Kostick, AIFD, led a seminar on capturing more corporate and decorating work at the Holiday and Home Expo at the Dallas Market in January she advised florists to ask themselves two questions before they invested any time, energy or money: Do you really want to be in the decorating business? Can you afford to take on corporate accounts?

She wasn't trying to be a pessimist, but the reality is that certain segments of business take more work than others. Weddings fall into that category.

"It's not for everybody," says Kathy Dudley of The Bloomery in Butler, Pa. "You have to look at your market and see what your competition is not doing, or not doing well."

In fact, Dudley made a push to invest more in wedding accessories only after she realized a competitor had a stronghold on gift items, effectively barring her from entering that market. Accessory sales at the shop over the last five years have risen by 14 percent per year, in part because they are featured prominently on the shop's wedding Web site. Success, however, comes with a cost.

"It truly is like having a second store," says Dudley, who works late into the evening to update the shop's two Web sites and two blogs.

And, while Dudley and her husband, Rich, can boast impressive growth numbers in wedding sales — averaging 20 percent to 25 percent a year — they're not gunning for more, right now.

"At this point we are focusing on overall profitability," Dudley says. "We're at a good point and can handle the volume. If we had more weddings, we'd have to hire more people and buy additional vehicles. You have to look at your profitability point."

Time also is an issue. Brides who spend their days at work sending and responding to e-mails may expect the same instant response they get on the job from a florist.

"I recently had a bride ask me, 'Do you sleep?'" admits Erlene LeBorgne of Rosemont Floral in Portland, Maine, who frequently (and happily) communicates with brides in the wee small hours of the morning and night. "It's a lot of hand-holding, but the trade-off is that I've done the weddings of multiple siblings from the same family. I cultivate weddings as much as I can." 🌸

— M.W.

a new logo specifically for her wedding business, agrees consultations — that short window of face time with a bride — should be a high priority.

"I always handle wedding consultations myself because I'm the constant in the shop," LeBorgne says. "Even the best employees sometimes make other employment choices, occasionally leaving the industry altogether, and if (someone) moves on, I don't want the bride panicking."

Beyond the consultation, LeBorgne

makes herself personally available to brides, who, more often than not, prefer to communicate via e-mail, frequently early in the morning or late at night.

"I think it's awesome customer service when a bride emails at 10 p.m. and gets a response 30 minutes later," LeBorgne says. "Brides have free time at night. I work on their schedules." 🌸

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