



**SERVICE FIRST** Florists need to remember that "funeral homes are [also] in the service industry," said Jerome Raska, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, CAFA of Blumz ... by JR Designs in Detroit. When things work smoothly, "families go back to the same funeral home time and again."

SCOTT STEWART PHOTO

# Take Back the Tributes

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**New research from funeral directors — and fresh insight from florists — reveals how local florists can start to take back sympathy sales.**

BY MARY WESTBROOK

**> W**hen his phone rang early on a Sunday a year ago, Manny Gonzales knew something was wrong. Mark Smith, the owner of McAlister-Smith Funeral Homes, was on the other line, getting ready for a memorial service — and he sounded panicked.

“Where’s the casket spray?” Smith asked.

Gonzales, who owns Tiger Lily Florist in Charleston, S.C., with his wife, Clara, had no idea what Smith was talking about, but he promised to find out, fast. Tiger Lily had a long, productive history with Smith and his four area homes, and Gonzales and Smith had forged their own friendship, too. If Tiger Lily made a mistake — if a team member somehow misplaced the important order — Gonzales was determined to make it right.

What Gonzales discovered, however, was a situation far more complicated than a misplaced order. Because, while Tiger Lily had in fact received a casket spray order for that memorial service, it hadn’t come from the McAlister-Smith home 15 minutes from the shop, but FloristOne, an order-gatherer headquartered hundreds of miles away.

By the time that order reached Tiger Lily, it was about 30 percent under value — too low for the shop to fill profitably. Tiger Lily rejected it. Where the order ended up next remains a mystery, but the casket spray certainly didn’t arrive in time for the memorial service, to the disappointment of the family and the chagrin of McAlister-Smith.

Here's something that isn't a mystery: In the last five years, sympathy work — once the undisputed territory of independent shops — has become an obstacle course of challenges from the funeral industry (corporatization, in-house florists, etc.), the floral industry (the rise of order-gatherers) and societal changes (shifting demographics, preferences for shorter services, cremation and calls for donations in lieu of flowers, among other factors).

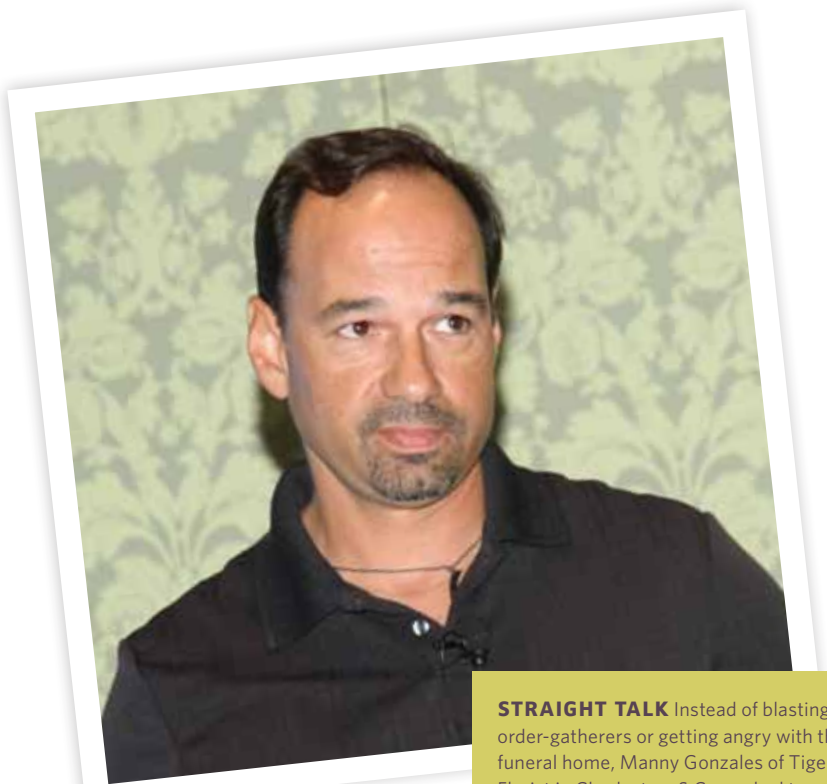
It's enough to make some florists throw up their hands and turn their attention instead to brides or B2B work. Sympathy sales? Good luck (and maybe good riddance).

And yet ... other florists aren't ready to give up on this potentially lucrative and important business. Gonzales is one of them. So is Baxter Phillip.

"We see our business as a three-legged stool," said Phillip, a third-generation co-owner of the 91-year-old Phillip's Flowers & Gifts in Chicago. "Everyday business, weddings and event, plus sympathy. We can't survive with just one or two legs. The challenge is getting the balance right."

For florists eager to stay competitive in sympathy, new research from the American Floral Endowment (AFE) on what funeral directors want and need from florists won't eliminate order-gatherers — they are a legitimate (even if unwanted) addition to the competitive landscape. But it might help florists begin to take back profitable orders, build better relationships with homes and ensure that, during some of the most emotional moments in customers' lives, flowers are a vivid part of the picture.

This month, we'll look at some of the key findings from that research and the practical, replicable actions some florists are taking in the ongoing fight for sympathy sales.



**STRAIGHT TALK** Instead of blasting order-gatherers or getting angry with the funeral home, Manny Gonzales of Tiger Lily Florist in Charleston, S.C., worked to get a direct link to his shop on the home's website.

## The Hurdle: Losing Out to Order-Gatherers

When Gonzales solved the riddle of the casket spray to McAlister-Smith, he called the home and explained the situation.

The funeral home was taken aback. Several months before, McAlister-Smith had launched a new website with FrontRunner Professional, a company that provides technology solutions, including websites, to the funeral industry. The new site looked terrific and had vastly improved functionality — including state-of-the-art video and tribute capabilities for grieving friends and families, advances that were no small feat. It also included an automatic "order flowers" button (and a 20 percent commission for the home on orders placed there, a common practice among such providers).

The McAlister-Smith team was under the impression that Tiger Lily would still be its preferred local florist, which turned out to be technically true, but only after the order-gatherer had taken the order and associated commission and fees. (Gonzales, for his part, had noticed a slight drop-off in sales in the weeks leading up to the missing casket spray but hadn't realized the cause.)

"When we set up the website we were encouraged to use the services provided to offset the cost of the site," explained Kathy Sweeney, a funeral planner who oversaw the site launch. "At the time we thought, 'Why not give it a try?'"

After the situation became clear, Gonzales, instead of blasting the order-gatherer or getting angry with the funeral home, asked his friends at McAlister-Smith a simple question: If a customer places a flower order on the local funeral home's website, and a local florist fills that order, why is a third party hundreds of miles away getting a big cut of the sale?

McAlister-Smith didn't need much convincing. Since launching the site, the home had experienced a small number of similar complications, most of them stemming from weekend floral orders. The family assumed the order would be filled in time for a weekend service — but if the required turnaround was too fast, or the value too low, it was instead rejected by Tiger Lily and other local florists. The sending florist was responsive to Sweeney's concerns, she said, but, from so far away, there was only so

much they could do. Plus, once the memorial service was over, and the flowers weren't there, the damage was done.

Gonzales and the McAlister staff put their heads together. Within 48 hours, the funeral home site had been updated with a new link to a Tiger Lily page, created specifically for McAlister-Smith (with a 15 percent commission to the home).

Sweeney made the site adjustments herself — and, today, she says she regrets not asking Tiger Lily about a direct link in the first place.

"Part of the fun of working with Tiger Lily is coming up with out-of-the-box solutions, and we know that if there's a problem, they'll fix it right away," she said. "The long and short of it is that, we realized we'd be better served coming up with a solution with someone who was already invested in our homes and our communities."

Tiger Lily is now on the receiving end of direct orders from McAlister-Smith —unfortunately, that's a happy ending not many florists experience in these situations, says Jerome Raska, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, CAFA of Blumz ... by JR Designs in Detroit.

Not long ago, Raska watched as one of his longtime funeral home partners switched to a site, through funeralOne, with a link to an order-gatherer. Since then, his sales from that home have dropped by about 75 percent. (Like Gonzales, Raska rejects orders he can't fill profitably, including orders from The Sympathy Store, an out-of-state order-gatherer specializing in sympathy work.)

"Customers are paying \$70 or more, but I'm being asked to fill an order for \$50, including delivery," he said. "I can't do that and stay in business. Plus, if I do fill it, there's no way it will meet the customers' expectations. They're ready to see \$70 worth of flowers and design work. I don't want my name attached to work I know will disappoint them."

Still Raska is careful to not blame his local funeral home, in part, he says, because he understands the nature of that business and industry.

"Funeral homes are a lot like florists," he explained. "You have a lot of family-run businesses and a lot of older owners who aren't necessarily tech-savvy but need an online presence. So if someone comes along and offers

them a nice website, and on top of that a commission [on floral orders sent through the site]. ... What's not to like?"

The trouble comes, Raska said, when an order "disappears," as it did for Smith in Charleston, or friends and family feel rightfully disappointed by flowers that don't seem to match their order. In those situations, both florist and funeral home look bad.

"It's a real problem at the moment," Raska said, "and I think it's getting worse."

In Chicago, Phillip points out that, although he doesn't fill undervalued orders, for order-gatherers, sympathy "is part of their business," he said. "We respect their right to go after it, but it's difficult for them to provide the kind of local service required by most funeral homes."

Like Raska and Gonzales, however, he'd like to see more transparency and better communication, so that funeral directors and funeral home owners understand where an order goes, and how that order changes, when it isn't sent directly to a local florist.

"I don't think [all order-gatherers] are purposefully misleading funeral directors," he said, "but I do think they are over-simplifying how the order-transmitting process works. That leads to misunderstandings."

(Read more about the wire service's position, and how they see sympathy sales fitting in with their larger business model on p. 26.)

**Winning Techniques:** Play an active role in **educating your funeral directors and funeral home owners** about how those on-site orders are transmitted. Getting a **direct link** to your site may not be easy: Along with competition from order-gatherers, many florists face the challenge of entrenched loyalties or rotating funeral home staffs. Still, as Gonzales points out, if you don't offer to provide the option for a link to your page, and make a compelling case for why it makes sense (which may include a commission on sales), you'll never know if it can be done.

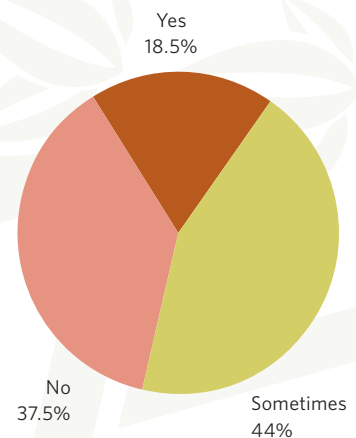
## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The AFE Funeral Directors and Flowers study was conducted in August 2014 and administered via email to members of the National Funeral Directors Association. A total of 192 directors participated in the study. Forty-one continental states were represented plus participants from Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Most businesses (64 percent) employed fewer than six people and were independent/single location enterprises.

Find out more about the research methodology and download the full report at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

— M.W.

### Do you as a funeral director think flowers are a hassle?



SOURCE: AFE 2014 FUNERAL DIRECTORS AND FLOWERS REPORT

## 'A CRITICALLY IMPORTANT PART' OF THE BUSINESS

The rise of order-gatherers in sympathy sales made us wonder about how the segment fits into the long-term business plans of national companies, including 1-800-Flowers.com, FTD and Teleflora.

FTD, which has formalized partnerships with Service Corporation International (SCI), a provider of funeral goods and services as well as cemetery property and services headquartered in Houston, and Batesville Casket Company, in Batesville, Ind., called sympathy "critically important and a top occasion for the overall business which includes both florists and consumer." FTD also noted that, because of these partnerships "and enhanced marketing, we are keeping orders within the network for FTD florists to fill. Sympathy orders are very important for florists because the average order value is higher than an everyday order."

Yanique Woodall, a vice president at 1-800-Flowers.com, called sympathy a "significant part" of the company's business and, while she did not specify particular partnerships, she noted that 1-800-Flowers.com is "delighted to have partnerships within the sympathy space, which allows us to reach customers on a broader scale."



**GO-GETTER** Clay Atchison of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas, says florists need to play a more active role in networking with funeral home staff and learning more about the challenges they face. See the brochure he developed for funeral directors, at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

## The Hurdle: Building a Meaningful Relationship – with the Right Person

About a decade ago, Clay Atchison of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas, was at a convention for funeral home directors (not an unusual networking activity for Atchison, who has diligently fought the use of "in lieu of" in obituaries — see p. 27.) While talking to a director, Atchison realized that the home was close to a florist he knew, a florist who had recently complained about the difficulty of growing sympathy sales. When Atchison mentioned the florist's name, the director's eyes lit up.

"He knew exactly where that shop was," Atchison explained. "In fact, it was just down the road from him."

The part that came next made Atchison scratch his head. According to the director, the florist had never stopped by to introduce herself. The anecdote captures some of the unnecessary dysfunction that can exist between florists and funeral homes, gaps in the relation-

ship that could be cleared up by a little old-fashioned networking.

"[The florist] was complaining to me about sympathy sales, but she'd never taken the time to go out and meet her local directors," Atchison said. "That's a problem."

The AFE research provides a broader context for Atchison's experience. According to the study, while more than 63 percent of respondents had been visited by a florist in the past three to four months, 19 percent had not been visited by a florist in at least a year – or ever. In addition, while 80 percent of funeral directors have relationships with at least one florist, 7 percent have a local florist but not a "real working relationship with them." (Two percent of surveyed directors reported having in-house florists.)

Atchison goes above and beyond to stay in front of and connected with his local homes. In fact, he currently sub-

scribes to a handful of funeral industry publications, including *The Director*, published by the National Funeral Directors Association, so that he can better understand the challenges and issues his partners in the business face. He also makes a point to be on-hand regularly for deliveries, set-up and transportation.

“That says something important to the funeral directors,” he said, “that the owner is there, making sure things are right.”

In Ogden, Utah, Mike Kusuda of Jimmy’s Flowers also schedules regular check-ins with his local homes, to stay on their radar, thank them for the business and ensure that the relationship is still strong. He also delivers poinsettias at Christmas, to thank them for their business. In addition to those kinds of regular check-ins, Gonzales, in Charleston, invites local homes to his shop at least once a year, to show them new floral designs and hear their feedback in a relaxed environment with light refreshments.

Raska said it’s important to “go where the directors are,” including civic events, such as Chamber of Commerce meetings, which provide opportunities for informal networking.

“If they aren’t going to those events, go directly to the funeral homes,” he said. And be persistent. “Sympathy work is not about becoming an overnight sensation,” Raska explained.

Another tip from Raska: Learn the structure of your local homes. Understanding who is responsible for which area (direct contact with the family versus administrative oversight) will save you time and frustration — a funeral director can be very different from the owner. Some homes are more akin to car dealerships than typical small family businesses, with an owner overseeing many different funeral directors, who move in and out of jobs fairly quickly.

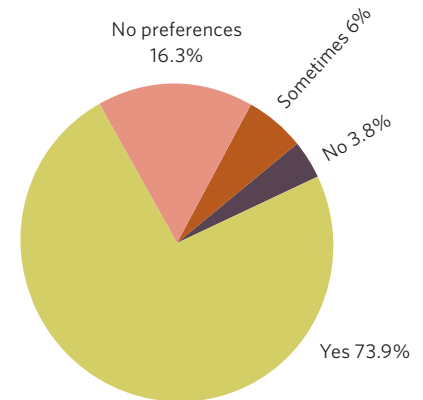
That turnover can be a challenge to relationship-building, but it’s also an opportunity, Raska said. “If you’re new in the area, don’t feel like you can’t get in the game,” he said. “Some funeral homes are a lot like venues; the staff changes all the time,” making it important to put networking on your calendar regularly.

Finally, on the topic of commissions, the AFE research found that a financial incentive is not necessarily the fastest track to business: Sixty-three percent of sur-

veyed funeral directors said that receiving such compensation would not encourage them to promote flowers at a service; 20 percent said it just might. (81 percent said they do not receive referral compensation from floral retailers.) Anecdotally, many florists report providing a referral fee to funeral homes.

**Winning Techniques:** Schedule a regular **meeting** with your local homes and provide consistent opportunities for feedback. Acknowledge homes for their business with referrals and the **occasional thank you**. (Raska suggests “booze, flowers or food” as his go-to forms of thanks.) Make sure you’ve **trained your staff** to represent your business in the best possible light while on site at funeral homes or memorials (and be sure to show up sometimes yourself, particularly for bigger jobs.)

## 74 percent of funeral directors encourage families to have flowers at services.



SOURCE: AFE 2014 FUNERAL DIRECTORS AND FLOWERS REPORT

## GETTING RID OF ‘IN LIEU OF’

While scanning the obituaries, you come across those three words ... again: “In lieu of.” The well-intended phrase has become default language in certain parts of the country, something families and friends use without thinking much about the consequences. (Ever been to a flower-free memorial?)

In Victoria, Texas, Clay Atchison has worked hard to educate funeral home directors about the phrase, and how it hurts the floral industry and diminishes the experience of memorials for families and friends. Atchison even gives directors a business card-size printout of alternative phrasing, for directors to share with families if the topic comes up. (For a list of his suggestions, go to [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).)

New research from the American Floral Endowment proves that, in the fight to erase the phrase, funeral directors can be a trusted ally, but it also provides florists with a better under-

standing of why the irksome phrase is still around. Consider:

- 20 percent of funeral directors indicate families always request donations instead of flowers, 70 percent said clients sometimes did and 10 percent said clients rarely or never did.
  - 61 percent of funeral directors say they have been contacted by charities requesting recommendations to families.
  - 34 percent say families request donations because the deceased was active in the charity or cause; 27 percent because the client didn’t see the need/value of flowers or automatically used the phrase to save on cost or because the funeral director suggested it.
  - 64 percent of funeral directors do not use the phrase “in lieu of” in obituaries.
- **M.W.**



DOUGLAS BARNES PHOTOGRAPHY

**GIVE THANKS** In Ogden, Utah, Mike Kusuda of Jimmy's Flowers schedules regular check-ins with his local homes, to stay on their radar, thank them for the business and ensure that the relationship is still strong. See his shop's sympathy book, at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

## The Hurdle: Making Flowers a Priority for Families and Friends

No question: Memorial services and funerals have changed significantly in recent years. Ceremonies are shorter. Cremation has become more popular, and younger generations are less in tune with the traditions (and benefits) of flowers and plants in the grieving process.

The good news from the AFE research is that funeral directors are "team flower" on this point, and convincing them of the importance of flowers shouldn't be a hard sell. According to the research:

- 72 percent of directors would choose to have both floral and donation tributes for their own family members;
- 73 percent of funeral directors believe their clients recall flowers and plants as a comfort; and
- 74 percent of directors encourage flowers at services.

Among survey respondents, flowers and plants were considered to be the most important physical element on the day, followed by photos, videos and music. The study also found that many funeral home clients talk about, touch and smell flowers and plants at the service, which means they are important to the grieving, according to the directors.

Arming funeral homes with the best possible resources can ensure those good feelings are shared during the planning process. That's part of the reason Jimmy's Flowers started creating its own sympathy book about three years ago, said Kusuda. The custom book, updated yearly, helps the shop ensure that product featured in designs, including hard goods, is readily available.

"We gather our designers together in our design center, get feedback from our store managers [on what's selling well] and talk about flowers, colors, styles," he said. "Basically, we come up with things that we can do well consistently. I think it's really helped our local mortuaries, because now they can call in and know we can do exactly what they see, or they can ask for specific, easy adjustments."

Back in the design room, each design has a recipe attached to it, helping to keep costs in check (more on how sympathy

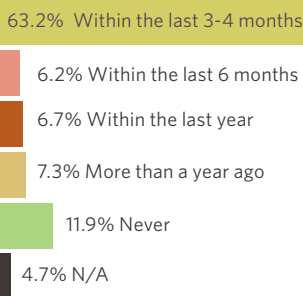
sales can throw your labor and product costs out of whack later.)

Atchison, who like many florists has a dedicated web page for sympathy sales, recently created a new brochure for homes that features designs that could appeal to younger demographics, too — Gen Xers and millennials who may not want to buy a casket spray but will be interested in easel sprays, baskets or smaller, complementary arrangements.

Atchison also educates directors on additions he can make to "standard designs" (e.g. wrapping easel legs in foliage or flowers), upgrades that not only increase his average transaction (a key goal for Atchison this year) but add more perceived value and customization to the gift.

That sense of personalization is extremely important in sympathy work, said Raska. "The key to creating memorable design work is to embrace the life of the deceased," he said. "Find out what they loved, gardening, crocheting, golf ... [We find] the themed designs always get the best reaction because they're different. They'll set you apart."

**Winning Techniques:** Have **product books, brochures or web pages** with updated pricing information, and be sure to develop strategies for **different price points**. Personalize designs with **mementos from the deceased's life**, including photos. Remember that, according to the AFE research, most clients do not know or only sometimes know the names of flowers and plants they want. **Make available information about the meanings of flowers**. Enhance perceived value with personal design touches including **keepsakes** (which can also address concerns related to flower longevity.) At [safnow.org](http://safnow.org), you can also access **research on the emotional benefits of flowers**, to share with funeral homes.



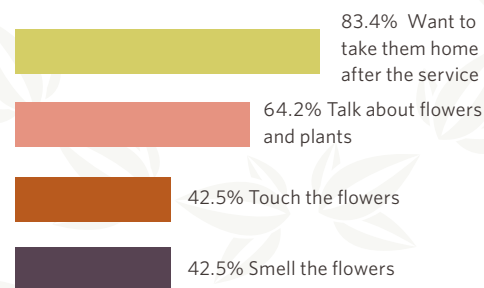
SOURCE: AFE 2014 FUNERAL DIRECTORS AND FLOWERS REPORT

### When was the last time you personally were visited by a florist?



**SMOOTH OPERATIONS** Phillip's Flowers & Gifts in Chicago is open seven days a week and has a wholesale arm, allowing the florist to take even last-minute orders while keeping costs in line. "That's the kind of service funeral homes require," said Baxter Phillip.

**About 50 percent of clients mention floral tributes to funeral directors immediately after the service.**



SOURCE: AFE 2014 FUNERAL DIRECTORS AND FLOWERS REPORT

## The Hurdle: Standing Apart from Other Florists

How do you become the preferred local florist for a funeral home? Most florists agree that, here, there are no short cuts; instead, it's about quality, service, consistency — and, often, the ability (and desire) to go that extra mile.

Not long ago, Phillip, in Chicago, received a call from a local home in the evening, after his last designer had gone home. The order was for a service the next morning; it needed to be delivered by 9 a.m., before the business opened. Impossible? Not at all, said Phillip. They got the job done.

Phillip is quick to acknowledge that his business is well situated to accommodate such requests: The business has centralized sympathy design out of its main store and is open seven days a week with a staff of six sympathy designers at the ready. It also has its own wholesale arm, which means staff members aren't shopping for flowers at premium prices at the last minute. (Phillip has a total of 50 designers among his 10 locations.)

"The cost of maintaining a large inventory of fresh flowers, bringing in a designer early, bringing a delivery driver in at 7 a.m.,

of making multiple deliveries to different sites, these are things florists probably should consider," he said. "That's the kind of service funeral homes [and sympathy work] require. It's a lot like hospitals or B2B work in that respect — but, generally, a lot less hand-holding than brides."

In Detroit, Raska said follow-through is important. Recently, Blumz delivered designs to a home that was unusually warm. Knowing the heat would hurt the designs, they returned at 8 a.m. the next day for a quick refresh, plucking out wilted lilies.

"We wanted the flowers to be beautiful, of course, but we also wanted to provide great service to the funeral home," he said. "Those efforts go a long way. One thing we all need to remember is that, just like florists, funeral homes are in the service industry. Families go back to the same funeral home time and again."

The lesson? Details matter, even minute ones: Confusion over cards (whether they were illegible or too easily detached from a floral tribute) ranked high among funeral directors' frustrations. Indeed, 44 percent of respondents said flowers and

plants are "sometimes" a hassle; 18 percent took it a step farther saying the tributes were a hassle. Those results indicate room for improvement.

**Winning Techniques:** Make sure homes know you can provide **set-up, teardown and moving assistance** and pay attention to those important service details: **on-time delivery, replacement of wilted product.** Remember that the funeral business is a 24/7 business; directors AFE surveyed suggested having **call forwarding.** Be cognizant of practical details in design: AFE found that 83 percent of families take flowers home, so when possible make them a **manageable size, lightweight and easy to transfer.** Make **cards clear and identifiable,** and be sure they are firmly attached. 🌿

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