

NO TIPSY, UNEXPECTED BLOOMS ALLOWED

> What should only add beauty to a funeral or memorial service — the flowers — can become a headache for funeral directors: flowers that shatter their blooms all over the carpet, arrangements that don't hold up, a tribute that wasn't what the family expected. We asked three florists with thriving sympathy sales to share what's in their care and handling repertoire for tackling these challenges — and ensuring their shop's flowers stay in fine form from the delivery van to the gravesite.

Pick Better Flowers

Flower-shattering tops the list of floral related “annoyances” at the funeral home, said Clay Atchison III, based on his conversations with funeral directors during the 2009 National Funeral Directors Association convention held in Boston. “It's a real bug-a-boo with these folks,” said the president of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas.

PHONE SERVICE

The telephone might just be a florist's most important tool in maintaining a smoothly operating sympathy business. “With all of our family-funeral orders, we will call the funeral director after delivery to make sure everything arrived OK and if anything else is required,” said Paul Raimondi, owner of Raimondi's Florist in Baltimore. The florist services 134 funeral homes — a task that gets “a little tricky” he admits. But that one follow-up call is key to staying on top of problems, he said.

Clay Atchison III of McAdams Floral gives his cell and home numbers to his funeral director clients and considers it a critical step in ensuring quality. “Sometimes, things can go wrong,” he said. A family member bumps into a standing spray during the visitation, a cross piece is tipping. “I want to know if there's a problem and (I want) to fix it. I don't want everyone else at the funeral looking at a problem arrangement.”

Following the full regimen of care and handling processes — from hydration, to food, to refrigerated storage — is the first step in preventing shedding, said Atchison, whose shop does about 26 percent in sympathy sales. And don't use flowers past their prime, a practice that is “standard procedure” for some florists.

“I wouldn't suggest that you'd use flowers that just arrived from your wholesaler, just like you wouldn't use those for a wedding, either,” Atchison said. “But you shouldn't use an iris that's been in the cooler five days already.”

And don't choose flowers naturally prone to shattering, such as spider mums.

Do Overdo It

Funeral pieces are put through a battery of exercises by the time they make it to the gravesite: They're moved from the flower room to the parlor, and then several times again within the parlor as additional arrangements arrive, where they sit for a day or two without water. Then, they're stacked in a vehicle and brought to the cemetery or the house.

“It has to hold up,” said Manny Gonzales, whose Charleston, S.C., shop, Tiger Lily, does about 10 percent annually in sympathy work. His strategy: Over-build the mechanics. “We often use the wood support sticks that come in floral boxes as support trusses,” he said. “Plus glue, heavy duty wire, heavy duty stands, whatever it takes. Anything that leaves our shop crooked, wobbly or not tight will be a mess by the time the family sees it set up in the parlor. What's the point of making a beautiful arrangement if it won't hold up?”

It's also good to know which funeral homes transport casket arrangements on top of the casket, Gonzales said. If they do, keep in mind the arrangement cannot be more than 10 inches off the saddle, otherwise, it will get smashed.

Don't Be a Drip

Petal-covered carpets are annoying, but soaked, squishy ones are dangerous and potentially costly for funeral

directors. Arrangements that drip are not the lasting impression you want to leave. Atchison's team make pieces prone to dripping, such as cross tributes, the day before, “so it has plenty of time to sit in the cooler so the excess water can drip out.”

If an arrangement doesn't have time to drip, he also places a small plastic pot liner under the arrangement and on the carpet. He lets the funeral director know why it's there and that he can remove it in a few hours. (The John Henry Company's cross tributes have a built-in cup that's made for this purpose).

Take Control

Atchison also ensures quality by being involved in as much as the transport as possible. His delivery team offers to take each arrangement directly to the room in which it will be displayed, “so it doesn't sit out in a waiting room for hours,” he said. “It's one less place that a funeral director has to handle it, and that could make a difference.”

If the flowers have the potential to look a bit worse for wear by the end of the service, Atchison said, then they look downright exhausted by the time they reach the graveside. “Our designers have watched how the flowers get loaded into the vans en route to the graveside,” he said. “They're stacked up condo-style; it's like a pitch and toss game.”

The net effect of that game can damage your shop's reputation. “To me, the graveside is the ultimate part of the service,” he said. “It's when the family is closest the flowers, just staring at them. I don't want our flowers looking like crud.”

So Atchison offers to drive all the flowers to the cemetery, both his and those from other shops. “(Funeral directors) really appreciate it, and it's better for our flowers and for getting referrals,” he said. 🌿

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