



DIVIDE AND CONQUER Starbright Floral Design breaks New York City down into zones then disperses roughly 60 holiday hires to carry Valentine arrangements by foot. Center, with large bouquet: Stephen Faitos, senior vice president and partner. Meet the rest of the team at safnow.org/moreonline.



No figure is quite as menacing for a florist as a weatherman standing in front of a white mass during the second week of February.

Nic Faitos recalled some of the meteorologist's most unnerving phrases: "significant snowfall," "power outages," "road closures." With each utterance, it seemed, the senior partner at Starbright Floral Design in New York City felt his stomach sink a little lower. Spooked, he holed himself up in the office and, on Feb. 13, fell asleep at his desk. He woke up to the sound of an ambulance — and an epiphany: he needed a plan.

BY KATIE HENDRICK

How to Succeed in Holiday Business *(without really crying)*

Survivors of snow-ridden Valentine's Day 2014 show that the worst of circumstances can become the best practice session for staging a profitable holiday

PHOTO: DONNELLY MARKS

That was back in 1997. To Faitos' relief, the prognosticator's prediction proved false — the city got only a dusting — but that didn't negate the need for better preparation. After all, his busiest day of the year would *always* fall in the winter, which meant the potential for snow.

So he came up with a Valentine's Day playbook to get every delivery out, come hell or highwater-snow pile. Among its many plays: dividing New York City into zones and dispatching a flower-filled truck and an employee to each. Instead of hiring holiday "drivers," Starbright recruits delivery walkers, who carry flowers from the truck to recipients. The employee alerts the shop if he or she needs more flowers or walkers.

Because of this setup, "inclement weather really isn't an issue," Faitos said.

In fact, despite the 9.5 inches of snow that blanketed Manhattan on February 13 in a storm that affected florists from Maine to Georgia, Starbright had a Valentine's Day for the record books, with sales up 12 percent over

2013. "Volume, money, number of orders — this was our best year ever," Faitos said.

While it's extremely unlikely* that another polar vortex will occur in May, Mother's Day is not unlike Valentine's Day. The weather may be nicer, but there are proms, weddings and charity events to juggle on top of a busy holiday that calls into play your most important delivery skills.

Do deliveries with prowess — hire efficient drivers in the right quantities, charge appropriately for your services and draw up smart routes — and you can "easily drop the cost per delivery by \$2 or \$3," said Paul Goodman, CPA, PFCI, author of "The Profit Minded Florist." The smoother your delivery system, the more volume you can handle and the bigger your sales numbers.

"Holidays are productions," said Lori Wheat, AAF, marketing director of Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center, in Lafayette, Colo. "There are many touch points from the order takers

to the delivery drivers." If everyone pays attention, she said, "you can take and make every order."

We talked to four florists who abide by the belief that you're never too swamped (with volume — or weather) to take an order. Whether you're in a hailstorm or just have a huge headache, the show must go on.

Here are their hiring, training and troubleshooting tips to deliver satisfaction to every single holiday customer.

* *Who knows? Washington, D.C., got 7 inches of snow on St. Patrick's Day!*

Start with a Solid Script

It is possible to deliver every order with a smile, not a headache, if you have good guidelines in place with trained professionals ready to execute them. "Surprises" — i.e., those calls that trickle in at 2 or 3 p.m. on Valentine's or Mother's Day — aren't so bewildering if you study numbers from recent years. "There will always be procrastinators," said Sandy Nielsen, general manager of Nielsen's Florist in Darien, Conn., and Floral Management's 2013 Marketer of the Year. "But from year to year, the number of those last-minute calls remains fairly consistent."

When Nielsen predicts how many orders she'll get, by comparing the previous two years' records (and, for Valentine's Day, the year it last fell on the corresponding day of the week), she al-



'S NO PROBLEM Road closures don't disrupt business for Starbright Floral Design in New York City. Stephen (left) and Nic Faitos have an army of allies who physically deliver Valentine's Day flowers.

PHOTO: DONNELLY MARKS

***"Family. Friends.
Family friends.
Friends of friends.
They know you
and won't want
to let you down."***

—NIC FAITOS

ways factors in her expected number of stragglers so she's not caught off guard at the end of the day. With a good estimate of how many orders she'll get and how quickly her employees can work, she knows how many drivers to contract to manage the volume.

Records also provide great casting notes. Faitos keeps an Excel sheet of every person who has ever worked a holiday for Starbright Floral to identify the very best workers. Next to every name: a number, up to 5, indicative of their performance. Immediately after the holiday, all full-time employees are encouraged to leave feedback on part-timers' demeanor, work ethic and skills to come up with a score. What does a top score look like? "Someone who's clean cut and presentable, somewhat invisible and gets the job done," Faitos said. Every year, around December, he sifts through the list to get back all the 4s and 5s he can.

Wheat doesn't have the numeric rating system, but her notes scrutinize qualities such as attitude, hygiene and efficiency to guide future hiring decisions. "If I see that a customer called saying her flowers smelled like cigarette smoke, for instance, or that her driver asked for a tip, I know to not invite back the person who delivered to her," she said.

Assemble an Enviable Cast

When the shop gets busy, it can be tempting to accept help from any willing soul. But hectic times call for skilled hands, not just warm bodies. If you give your flowers over to any Joe Schmo with a driver's license, how do you know they'll arrive fresh, to the right recipient or in a remotely timely manner? You need drivers who respect that time equals profit and won't take a lengthy break with a van full of flowers or head out without first studying a map (read what can happen at safnow.org/moreonline). They also need to understand that they're carrying precious, emotionally packed cargo that warrants a warmer presentation than "sign here."

Over the years, shops acquire a lengthy list of helpers (see previous section) they can trust to deliver flowers with



Nic Faitos, Senior Partner

Starbright Floral — New York, N.Y.

Mother's Day 2013: 414 deliveries

Valentine's Day 2014: 1,372 deliveries (all-time record)

Delivery fee: \$15 (every day), \$45 (time-specific on a holiday holiday)

Success Secret: Break big goals into small, manageable tasks. You can get every order to every recipient in the nation's largest metropolis if you start early (think: 5 a.m.) and divide the city into zones.



Sandy Nielsen, President

Nielsen's Florist — Darien, Conn.

Mother's Day 2013: 400 deliveries

Valentine's Day 2014: 300 deliveries

Delivery fee: \$10.95

Success Secret: Prepare for procrastinators and pay attention to past years' sales numbers to staff accordingly.



Lori Wheat, AAF, Marketing Director

Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center — Lafayette, Colo.

Mother's Day 2013: 350 deliveries

Valentine's Day 2014: 460 deliveries

Delivery fee: \$12; \$15 to \$20 for time-specific deliveries

Success Secret: Give holiday hires very concrete directions of what to wear, say and do. Fact check addresses multiple times and look them up on a map before driving to eliminate errors and wasted time.



Wayne Pollack, President

Peoples Flowers — Albuquerque, N.M.

Mother's Day 2013: 2,255 deliveries

Valentine's Day 2014: 2,005 deliveries

One-day record: 1,200 — Feb. 14, 2007 (when it last fell on a Wednesday)

Delivery fee: \$12.95 for holidays, \$8.95 regularly

Success Secret: Don't put complete trust in your drivers. Send them on small, frequent runs so you can easily gauge their performance throughout the day to decide if they should be replaced.



PHOTO: DOUGLAS MERRIAM

“I’d rather reward my salespeople than the customer for scheduling a delivery for the 12th or 13th.”

— WAYNE POLLACK

HOLIDAY BLOOPERS

Even with smart policies in place, a nightmare delivery experience occasionally surfaces. This Valentine’s Day, the strongest ever at Starbright Floral Design in New York City, gave senior partner Nic Faitos one of those face palm moments.

“We found out that one of our delivery guys was selling our flowers on the subway and forging the signatures of the correct recipient,” he said. (Said hire scored a zero in Faitos’ performance review.) In that situation, “which you only learn about if the customer tells you,” it’s crucial to immediately make it up to them, he said. (Hint: Discover flubs quickly and proactively by emailing every client an evaluation form.) “They’ll need an apology plus a new arrangement that’s an upgrade from what they originally ordered.”

We figured Faitos was not alone in the cringe-worthy anecdote department, so we tossed the topic of holiday delivery horror stories out to “the florists of Facebook.” The responses poured in, ranging from the embarrassing (locking the keys in the delivery van) to the comical (more naked recipients than we’d ever imagined!) to the tragic (fatal car accidents). Check them out, at www.safnow.org/moreonline. **K.H.**

INTERNAL INCENTIVES Wayne Pollack (right) wants Peoples Flowers to hit its maximum volume, which only occurs if holiday deliveries go out over several days. Salespeople who schedule them early receive a bonus.

a smile and move product as efficiently as possible. But where do you find them when you’re building your delivery network?

“Family. Friends. Family friends. Friends of friends,” Faitos said.

He favors pre-existing relationships because there’s already some accountability in place. Holiday hires are not unlike blind dates; people tend to be on better behavior for people connected to their circles than they are for a stranger whose online ad they answered.

Some of Starbright’s holiday helpers require no recruiting efforts (ahem, employees’ spouses — for Valentine’s Day 2014 he had three of them in-store). Others need a little persuasion. One trick Faitos employs to entice his buddies into spending Valentine’s Day carrying flowers around the Big Apple: selling it as a “double payday.”

“I tell them, use one of your sick days, then come work for us,” he said. (Out of courtesy, of course, he never asks them to make deliveries anywhere in the vicinity of their offices.)

Other dependable drivers: charities, service organizations and nonprofits. For Nielsen, the go-to group is the Darien Lion’s Club, whose members deliver her flowers while wearing their club uniform. Nielsen appreciates that the group offers to work rather than just asking for a check. She also relaxes knowing that the Lion’s Club’s reputation is as much at stake as her own shop’s when they’re out and about.

“You can trust they will deliver product on time and in good shape, plus it’s good PR for the shop” to align with a group with a good cause, she said. “You’re going to pay somebody to make deliveries anyway, so why not choose a nonprofit?”

Mail carriers are her other top pick. “They know the streets better than anyone, so you know they’ll be efficient,” she said. “And Mother’s Day always falls on their day off.”

If you do solicit workers through ads online or the local newspaper (which can have results not befitting a Lifetime-network-worthy horror story), be sure to probe deeper than the obvious (valid license, insurance and a clean driving record). Wheat always gives potential candidates a car inspection.

"I'm not looking to see that it's a luxury vehicle, but rather, how do they maintain it?" she said. "If I see a lot of fast food wrappers strewn on the floor, I might assume they won't be especially careful with my flowers."

Embrace Your Inner Spielberg

A seamless production — every order taken and delivered — can be tricky on Valentine's or Mother's Day, when you're likely working with at least a few amateurs. If just one person is off, whether it's dallying or speaking to customers in a manner not in line with your standards, it can have a negative ripple effect, both in terms of productivity and attitude.

HOLIDAY CASTING SECRETS

Veteran retail florists share some of their most helpful forms, including cheat sheets for drivers, and processes for training new hires. Check it out, at www.safnow.org/moreonline.

On holidays, when you need to handle a lot of volume and there's so much interaction with the public, this can mean monumental trouble.

The solution: good direction.

Every new holiday hire should receive a thorough rundown of what the job entails, be it during a formal orientation session or a ride along with an experienced driver.

Delivering flowers requires more delicacy than, you know, delivering pizza or newspapers. But just what this involves — keeping flowers away from ethylene, presenting an arrangement so it faces forward, offering care and handling advice — "might not be intuiti-

tive for people who don't usually work in the industry," Wheat said.

In conjunction with a training session, her drivers receive a sheet outlining every step of the process from what to wear (layers, to handle temperature jumps moving from a heated vehicle to the outside air) to what to do if the recipient's not home (first, ask a neighbor to hold the arrangement; if that fails, call the recipient to schedule another delivery attempt).

Think: Ensemble

Even if you've hired and trained the friendliest drivers who've memorized your town's layout and traffic patterns, they can only do so much without the support of your sales staff. Drivers will never reach your delivery potential if your order takers schedule every delivery in the same time window.

If (ha!) you want to reduce delivery stress, improve your shop's volume and improve profitability, you need your sales

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“The success of the delivery is doing it once,” Wheat said. “Your profit drops every time you drive out, so it’s essential you don’t leave with bad information and end up on a wild goose chase.”

— LORI WHEAT, AAF

staff to spread orders out over several days — not hours.

There are myriad ways to persuade people to accept their Mother’s Day flowers on a Thursday or Friday, or their roses on Feb. 12 or 13. Many of them involve gratis add-ons, discounts or waived delivery fees. You can also incentivize your staff with bonuses, as Wayne Pollack does at Peoples Flowers in Albuquerque, N.M.

“I’d rather reward my salespeople than the customer,” he said of deliveries that occur before the actual holiday. “I know I can sell the plush, chocolate and balloons.” A trick he’s found to have a high success rate: Just say “we’ll get you a lovely arrangement on ‘X’ date” and see if anyone protests.

At Starbright Floral, where a lot of deliveries happen on foot, it’s not just *when* salespeople schedule deliveries but *what* they sell that matters too.

“A luxury of working in an urban environment is that we can, and do, physically carry most of our arrangements,” Faitos said. In times of inclement weather and high gas prices, this can be a godsend. But if his staff sells lots of tall, heavy vases? Well, his walkers will have impressive biceps — but not oodles of delivery receipts for their efforts.

The Starbright staff uses positive selling to guide customers to low, compact arrangements. At Valentine’s Day, they’ll talk up how women want to bring their flowers home after work; at Mother’s Day, they’ll point out how short arrangements on a dining table

LEAVE NO ADDRESS UNCHECKED

Lori Wheat, AAF, left, makes fact checking a top priority for holidays at Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center. Every recipient’s address is physically checked by everyone from the sales clerk to the designer (shown: Shelly McLeod) to the driver and mapped out before the flowers even get in the van.

make for easier conversation when loved ones gather for a meal with Mom. Faitos is quick to point out that just because these designs are diminutive, it doesn’t mean they’re low budget.

“This Valentine’s Day, one guy bought two 15-inch vases for \$1,000,” he said. “They were tight nosegays with about 10 dozen roses and no greenery — extremely impressive and very easy to carry.”

Make the Critics Swoon

Anyone who’s ever had a delivery go to the wrong recipient, or a driver searching aimlessly for a nonexistent address accidentally labeled “street” instead of “road,” knows what excruciating blunders those are, particularly on a holiday, when time and product are in limited quantities.

Double (or quadruple!) checking can make or break your holiday. “The success of the delivery is doing it once,” Wheat said. “Your profit drops every time you drive out, so it’s essential you don’t leave with bad information and end up on a wild goose chase.”

At Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center, accuracy is a team effort. Addresses and phone numbers (in case a recipient is MIA) get checked at every step of the process, from the person who takes the order to the one responsible for loading the van.

The staff also doesn’t leave direction to the technology gods, and instead physically plots out their own routes. The shop maintains a book of neighborhood maps, which are laid out over a grid with letters and numbers. Every page has been copied and laminated for drivers, who use highlighters to draw their route. Because of the lamination, the sheets can be wiped down and used over and over again, Wheat said.

“GPS is great, but not 100 percent reliable — and it doesn’t always do the smartest route,” Wheat said. “We like it as a backup.”

Following up after the delivery is equally important, Pollack said. Peoples' drivers take small, frequent trips so the team can troubleshoot throughout the day.

"If I give a driver 30 arrangements, I might not see him for three or four hours," Pollack said. "I don't like the flowers sitting in a vehicle that long and I don't like not knowing if he's doing a good job."

This year, for instance, Pollack noticed a driver taking longer than expected, so he rang him up. The driver answered that he "wasn't feeling it

DEPENDABLE DRIVERS Sandy Nielsen contracts the Darien Lion's Club for Nielsen's Florist's holiday deliveries, knowing the club's reputation has as much at stake as her own.

anymore." Pollack's response: "Fine by me! But bring back our flowers!" If he hadn't caught that early, "it could have really hurt us," he said. (See safnow.org/moreonline for anecdotes from florists who learned this lesson the hard way.)

Minimize Butterflies with Tactical Deliveries

Even if you've been prepping and practicing for Valentine's and Mother's Day for months, stress will rear its ugly head on the big day. While some people thrive on adrenaline, it's likely your employees are most pleasant and least prone to errors when they're not rushed and feeling nervous.

How do you allay their stage fright? Get product out the door before chaos catches up.

Faitos capitalizes on working in The City That Never Sleeps by starting holiday deliveries before the sun rises. "My goal is to have 20 percent of our orders out before 7 a.m.," he said.

Where he starts: hotels and buildings with bellmen. "They have someone who can accept deliveries at any hour of the day," he said. And guess what? They tend to be bored at 5 a.m.

"This is mostly for our psyche," Faitos said. "It gives us a sense of control and satisfaction that we're ahead of the game."

Pollack takes a similar approach, starting holidays with deliveries to Sandia National Laboratories and other government offices, where workers come in early, and far-flung bedroom communities (Peoples, which has five locations, services 24 ZIP codes).

"The government offices tend to be a little trickier than other deliveries due to extra security, and waiting until 8 or later for the farthest away orders can get your driver stuck in traffic," he said. He delegates these challenges to his veteran drivers, who tackle them right away.

Take a Bow — and Their Money

A general rule for getting through a holiday with your sanity intact is to never guarantee a timed delivery, especially for those orders that come in at the eleventh hour.

But if the customer is *at all* insistent about receiving flowers at a certain time, our sources said, by all means acquiesce — and charge a premium price for doing so. Goodman recommends tripling your delivery fee. That will compensate for your effort, plus the demanding customer will remember you as the florist who came through and saved the day.

"We'll do aerial stunts to make the delivery," said Faitos, who follows Goodman's advice. On top of the shop's standard delivery fee (\$15), he'll add a \$30 surcharge. "That's how we deal with exceedingly high expectations."

Katie Hendrick is a contributing writer and editor for *Floral Management*.



PHOTO: SUSAN FARLEY

"You're going to pay somebody to make deliveries anyway, so why not make it a nonprofit?"

—SANDY NIELSEN