

"DON'T CLOSE
ANNA ROSE. GIVE
ME A SHOT."

GO GETTER

Alexa Maniaci has used some of her strongest skills as a young entrepreneur to step in and turn around her family's flower business.

BETTING ON EVENTS

Alexa Maniaci lands a Hail Mary pass (in the hands of the Super Bowl) and saves the family's flower business, making events the star player.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

Four years ago, things were not looking good at Anna Rose Floral.

The North Haledon, New Jersey shop had been started in 2007 by David Maniaci, the second-generation owner of Nicholas Markets Foodtown, four local supermarkets named for David's father. When a space opened next to one of those markets, David and his wife, Nancy, saw a hole in the market for quality sympathy work and high-end, creative design and opened Anna Rose, naming it after David's recently deceased mother.



HONEST AND TRUE In the consultation area of Anna Rose, designers talk candidly with brides about their substitution policies and carefully outline all costs, making changes on the computer screen alongside the bride. “Transparency is so important to millennials,” explains Alexa Maniaci.

At first, the shop seemed like a success, with Anna Rose feeding off the energy of the market next door and enjoying steady event work from local brides and grooms and area businesses. But then the recession hit, and sales growth became anemic. Energy was low. Customers seemed to disappear. The Maniacis considered writing off the Anna Rose failure to bad timing, selling the business and refocusing their attention on the family’s other, more successful enterprises.

But their 23-year-old daughter, Alexa, who’d spent breaks and weekends during high school and college working at the shop, had a different take.

When Alexa looked around North Haledon, she saw real potential for growth in the business, particularly in the wedding and event segment, which already accounted for 50 percent of the shop’s sales. About 25 miles outside of New York City,



North Haledon is a borough in Passaic County, a county composed of 16 municipalities, half a million people and home to some major corporations, including well-known national brands such as Toys R Us. It borders Bergen County, the state’s most populous county.

Alexa wondered whether she could grow that event business. And, more important, whether she could diversify the

segment to capture a broader swath of event work — not only weddings and small corporate parties, but larger events and parties the shop hadn’t aggressively pursued, such as bar and bat mitzvahs, with price tags that rival those of weddings.

A graduate of George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Alexa was working in territory management for a global baking company in Stamford, Connecticut, but she made a pitch to her parents: *Hey! Don’t close Anna Rose. Give me a shot.*

Four years later, Alexa has injected new life into Anna Rose, grown the wedding and event segment and put the business on the local and national map with high-profile events (ever hear of a little game called the Super Bowl?) — all while introducing a new approach to customers that she says capitalizes on her millennial values: radical transparency, excellent service and killer communication skills.

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"I COME FROM AN
ENTREPRENEURIAL
FAMILY, AND I'M PRETTY
ENTREPRENEURIAL
MYSELF."
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Making the Case

David and Nancy weren't exactly surprised when Alexa asked for the chance to turn around Anna Rose. In addition to working all those part-time hours in the business during her school years, Alexa had always been a go-getter, the kind of person who "figured out ways to make something happen if I wanted it badly enough," as Alexa puts it. Like many family business owners, David wanted to see his daughter succeed, but he also thought she needed experience outside the family's own operations to grow her skill set and prove her work ethic.

That's when Alexa took the job in Stanford. The position wasn't glamorous. In her role, Alexa oversaw 45 male union delivery drivers, working the graveyard every night.

"I went from being a city college student focusing on international economics and development to loading trucks in the middle of the night," she says. "It was a really tough and physically vigorous job."

But the experience, and Alexa's dedication to the job, impressed her parents and strengthened Alexa's ultimately successful pitch to take the lead at Anna Rose.

"The supermarket and floral industries are physically demanding industries, so the fact that I had the brains and brawn as a young female helped seal the deal," she says.

Thinking Like a Millennial

Once she'd convinced her parents to give her the opportunity, Alexa wasted little time putting her new vision into action.

Soon after becoming a majority partner at Anna Rose, she submitted a bid to be the official florist for Super Bowl XLVIII, which would be played in February 2014 at MetLife Stadium at the Meadowlands Sports Complex in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The job would entail providing floral arrangements for a number of high-pro-

ALEXA'S RAVES: TOOLS AND TRICKS A MILLENNIAL LOVES

One place you won't find Alexa Maniaci promoting her work? A bunch of wedding shows.

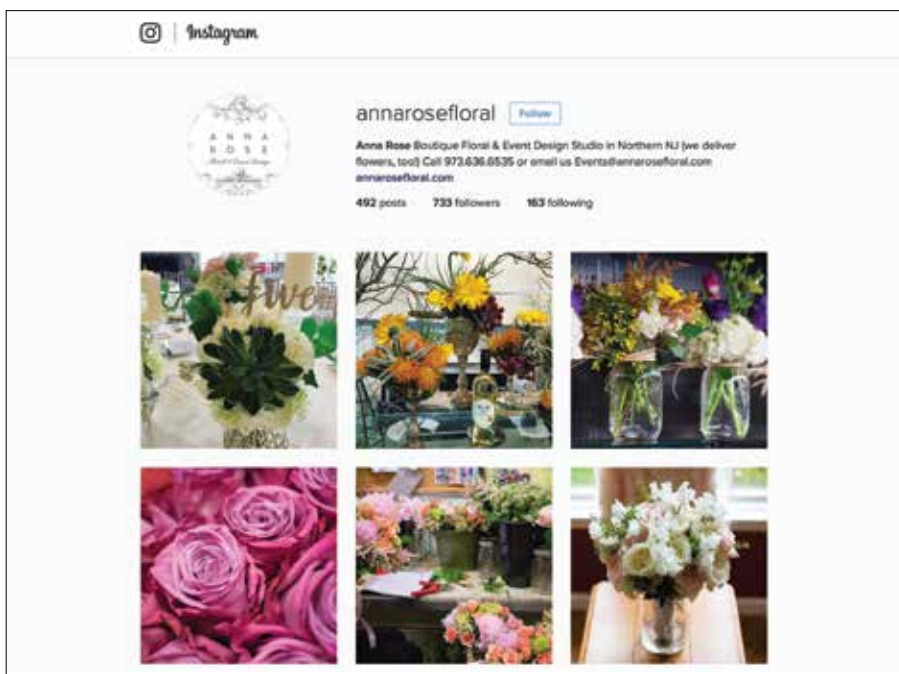
"To me, they are a waste of time and money," said Maniaci, who participates in one or two occasionally, mostly to help out fellow vendors. Instead, the 26-year-old majority partner of Anna Rose Floral in North Haledon, New Jersey, spends her marketing dollars online, through ads on Wedding Wire and The Knot and paid listings throughout the year on Facebook (usually about \$20 a pop).

Knowing that her wedding and event clients are busy — and often planning their events during quick snatches of time at work — Alexa also has strategically posted her event contact form throughout her website (rather than simply having it in the "wedding" or "events" section). Other tools she likes:

Social Media: As for an overall social media philosophy, Alexa's is refreshingly simple: Post regularly and go where your customers (and potential customers) congregate. For Anna Rose, that means maintaining a regular presence on Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest.

Girl Power. One of the first things Alexa did after becoming majority partner was to get the business certified as a WBE, or woman business enterprise, through the state of New Jersey. Since some government agencies and businesses prioritize WBE and MBE (minority business enterprise) certification in awarding contracts, Alexa had a hunch that certification could set the business apart. Today, she credits that status with keeping her in the running for a Super Bowl job in 2014. (The committee looked specifically for WBEs and MBEs.)

Google Calendar. The free tool keeps the whole store on track, Alexa says, and it helps the staff properly schedule wedding and event consultations, ensuring that enough time is allotted for each meeting. "You want people to feel special when you're meeting with them — that's just so important," she says. "People can tell when you are rushed or not really listening." Another free tool she likes for organization? **Dropbox**, the cloud hosting service, which makes sharing documents among staff easy. — **M.W.**



INSTA BRIDES Instead of investing in wedding shows, Anna Rose Floral posts often to popular social media sites, including Instagram, a platform that fits with the business' aesthetic and target market. Owner Alexa Maniaci also has invested in Facebook ads and boosted posts.

file events and VIP parties surrounding the big game. Alexa knew that shops with decades' more experience and more area brand recognition were in the running, but she didn't let that fact intimidate her. If anything, it fueled her competitive side.

"I come from an entrepreneurial family, and I'm pretty entrepreneurial myself," she said.

What's more, all the negative media portrayals of millennials as entitled kids who while away hours on Snap Chat posts and Pokémon hunts don't describe Alexa. And she doesn't believe they accurately describe her peers, either.

In fact, when she looks at her generation, Alexa sees a group of people with unique skills and abilities, including the ability to process and apply lots of information quickly (millennials aren't called "digital natives" for nothing) and a

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"WHEN I THINK
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keen interest in the issues and trends of the larger world (social media can make what's happening thousands of miles away feel like a local story).

In her proposal, Alexa put some of those qualities to work as she looked for ways to set Anna Rose apart.

For instance, the application made it clear to Alexa that the selection committee was looking for a shop that — rather than superimposing its own

aesthetic on the events — would work to capture the spirit of New York City in its designs. The game — the first outdoor Super Bowl to be played in a cold-weather city — had already inspired a great deal of regional pride, and so Alexa and her team brainstormed ideas for incorporating an NYC dash of style into even little details, including attaching small murals inspired by the city and created by local artists to vases.

"We got really creative in the use of our materials and came up with designs that were very reflective of [distinct areas] — Manhattan, SoHo, the Meatpacking District," Alexa says. "We showed our roots to the New York and New Jersey area and came in with very new, very fresh ideas."

Alexa also devoted space in the proposal to detailed info about some



SUSTAINABLY COOL Alexa Maniaci actively markets her shop's environmental standards, including the use of LED lights and repurposed or reusable materials, such as wooden boxes for deliveries. That ethos was part of the shop's DNA: Her parents' business has installed four rooftop honeybee hives and a natural gas generator that produces energy from wasted heat.

of the shop's environmental standards, including the use of LED lights and repurposed or reusable materials, such as wooden boxes for deliveries. That ethos was part of the shop's DNA: Nicholas Markets Foodtown has a history of selling locally sourced and organic foods and has been on the forefront of other environmental initiatives, including the installation of four rooftop honeybee hives and a natural gas generator that produces energy from wasted heat. Alexa had a hunch that the shop's environmental statements would help set Anna Rose apart from other shops that didn't have that focus or didn't think to highlight it in a job proposal for a major sporting event.

From a logistical standpoint, Alexa also strove to convince the selection team that she could accomplish the job, in part by expanding her staff temporarily from four to 15 (she relied on a combination of paid employees, volunteers and family members — David, Nancy and Alexa's brother all pitched in). In the end, the job went off without a hitch. (The biggest challenge? Surviving the tedium of never-ending security checks.)

Rave reviews and good press surrounding the Super Bowl job helped put Anna Rose on the radar of other groups and people looking for event flowers. Just 18 months into her new gig, Alexa had lit the spark she needed to ignite the shop's launch into broader event work.

BLOOM AND GROW In four years, Anna Rose Floral has gone from about 70 weddings to 100 by year's end. The average wedding sale has increased from \$3,500 to \$5,000.



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WEDDING AND SPECIAL EVENT EXPERTS TAKE THE STAGE

According to a report by the Convention Industry Council, about 225 million people attend more than 1.8 million events sponsored by companies and associations every year. Hosting, attending and exhibiting at events comprise 21 percent of corporate marketing budgets. American weddings, meanwhile, currently represent a \$51 billion industry.

Yet for all the promise of weddings and events, there's still plenty of woe, including the real challenge of getting a foot in the door and — once you land the job — managing details and client demands in a way that generates profit, not panic.

In response to members' request for granular insight on event work, the Society of American Florists is featuring two special event-focused educational sessions at SAF Maui 2016:

- Day-dreaming about brides with floral/décor budgets in the five or even six figures? At Botanica International Design & Decor Studio in Tampa, Florida, such brides are a reality. While the studio's weddings may be super

glamorous, the "secret" to their success is rooted in attention to detail and a fine-tuned planning process. In **"Work Smarter, Not Harder, on Events,"** Creative Director Zoë Prosser Gallina, of Botanica International, will show attendees how even the smallest staff can streamline processes, do more with less and exceed customer expectations time after time.

- The stress and scale of events can lead even the most financially savvy florist down a path of waste and loss. Don't let that happen, says Floral Management contributing writer and financial wizard Derrick Myers, CPA, CFP, PFCI. His program, **"Eventology: The Science of Profitable Events,"** will help attendees put profits in perspective and dish tips on how to protect yourself against profit-sucking unexpected costs.

Check out the rest of the program and make plans to attend today. Visit safnow.org for more information. — **M.W.**

“Differentiating ourselves through our design work and style got people talking,” she says. “The day we got the [Super Bowl] contract, we got a few thousand people looking at our website. That really put us out there.”

The next step? Turning those curious web browsers into actual customers.

A Pivot to Special Events

Shortly after taking over, Alexa did a survey of the business and studied where orders were coming from, and where they weren't. For daily work, she decided a shake-up was in order. Like most floral shops, Anna Rose benefits from a busy walk-in season around the holidays and in the springtime but also relies on a strong Internet presence to generate everyday work.

After analyzing the profitability of orders based on where they originated, Alexa decided to cut ties with the larger national wire services, but maintain her affiliation with the online florist networks B Brooks and BloomNation. In addition, she revamped the approach of her family's supermarkets to cut flowers and plants, bringing in higher quality products, rethinking displays and branding the section with the Anna Rose name



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FAMILY LOVE Anna Rose's supply of rental items has gone from a container to a garage filled with on-trend items and custom-designed goods. Alexa Maniaci, who has built up the collection with the help of her mother, Nancy, says having a unique inventory is critical to staying top-of-mind with millennials.

— changes that brought about a 20 per cent increase in sales.

Still, while everyday business is an important part of the shop's overall profile, the success of the Super Bowl work underscored Alexa's belief that the key to the shop's future profitability lay in event work — and not just weddings.

“When the economy is growing, there are continuous events throughout every season,” she says. Winning these opportunities would mean the shop wouldn't suffer the traditional slowdown periods between holidays and weddings.

The decision required some role re-shuffling and some much-needed tech upgrades. (One of the first items on Alexa's to-do list? Ditching an old-fashioned register for a POS system.)

Alexa herself immediately dove into buying, sales and executing events, along with managing the everyday tasks of a business owner, “so that I could understand the traditional ways of approaching all of these positions and see how I needed to adjust them.”

Two years in, feeling more confident in her own abilities and the direction of the business (and with that successful Super Bowl job under her belt), Alexa added a shop and events manager and an additional designer.

She soon started going after events of all kinds: winter galas for charities, corporate parties and, especially, bar and bat mitzvahs, which in the Northeast can be lucrative jobs with floral and décor budgets in the thousands (and long-term potential for additional sales, since the honoree could easily return to the shop as a bride or groom a decade or two later.)

The strategy paid off. In 2012, the shop did about 20 non-wedding events; this year, Anna Rose is on track to complete somewhere between 50 and 70 non-wedding events, with budgets from \$3,000 to \$25,000.

We know what you're thinking: How did Alexa reel in those corporate gigs? Her philosophy on attracting that new event work is decidedly time-tested — even old-fashioned: Do great work and benefit from excellent word-of-mouth. But Alexa's approach to driving that all-important reputation-building is decidedly 2016: Actively post and share across social media platforms, and encourage online

RENT TO OWN

Over the last few years, Anna Rose's supply of rental items has gone from a container to a garage filled with on-trend items and custom-designed goods. Alexa Maniaci, who has built up the collection with the help of her mother, Nancy, says having a unique inventory is critical to staying top-of-mind with millennials, who are so inundated by trend info through social media that even the coolest look can become dated fast.

“We started purchasing copper items two years ago, and they have become all the rage in the last few months,” Alexa said. “We also made a large investment in giant antique mirrors for escort card displays about three years ago, we're still using those items. It's something that has become immensely popular.”

Building up the rental items requires some risk and also a fair amount of confidence in your instinct, which is why it's helpful for Nancy and Alexa to bounce ideas off of each other. (Nancy represents another key demographic for the shop — slightly older and more affluent — and is astute in gauging the taste of this market.) Alexa also hired an in-house carpenter, who builds the shop's custom event rentals, delivers for the shop's retail and event work, and maintains the shop's inventory of rentals.

“Our overall aesthetic has been an organic, vintage and creative feel,” Alexa says. “This look was not as popular in northern New Jersey when I came onboard, and I was told that [customers] in the area did not want that kind of look. However, by offering this style, we have been able to set ourselves apart from everyone.”

Read more about another florist in Birmingham, Alabama, who built up her event rental business into an entirely new offshoot of her business, and get tips on how to grow that segment profitably at safnow.org/moreonline. — M.W.



“MILLENNIALS [ARE] WILLING TO BUDGET FOR THINGS THAT HAVE REAL VALUE.”



reviews and testimonials. (The shop is active on Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook. Read more on p. 25.)

Alexa is quick to stress that it isn't just marketing that sets her business apart, but the kind of service she offers both event and wedding clients, many of whom are millennials like Alexa herself. One thing the younger generation just can't abide, she argues, is the feeling that anything is being hidden or dragged out — and in particular, costs that aren't clearly delineated or proposals that take longer than expected to arrive in an inbox.

“Having transparent and pre-emptive communication with the client is the biggest marketing [advantage] for any business,” Alexa said. “When I think about event work, I think about how Apple approaches its customers. When you walk into an Apple store, they bring you into the system and make it easy to digest a lot of new information. Whatever you're selling, it's really about eliminating pain points and making the process more efficient.”

One-Stop Shopping

Another way Alexa distinguishes her business is to offer services event and party clients might not expect from a traditional florist, including event production, rentals and even catering packages (through a partnership with Nicholas Markets Foodtown).

Because customers are busy and can be overwhelmed by event details, Alexa's goal is to come across as “the least complicated vendor” — in other words, the person who can make the customer's life easy. That requires listening to the customer and thinking of the job not as a job but a journey — one that a florist can help expand upon and “trace out,” says Alexa.

That philosophy came into play last year when a customer approached Anna Rose about her son's bar mitzvah. The theme? “Club meets music festival.” (The guest of honor wants to be a DJ.)

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PAIN FREE Alexa Maniaci said she models much of her customer service philosophy on Apple’s model of eliminating “pain points.” When customers come into the store (or visit online), she wants them to feel immediately welcomed and informed, not overwhelmed.

Rather than focus only on the floral elements, the Anna Rose team thought bigger (and went after a bigger sale) by taking on the entire event production, overseeing details such as furniture, carpeting, drapes, lighting, printing, DJ equipment and entertainment — and, of course, making sure the flowers truly popped with custom stands.

Alexa said that her ability to offer these additional services increased the final budget significantly — and thrilled the customer with both the outcome and the ease of planning. (Hello, glowing reviews online for future customers to read.)

Of course, making the customer’s “journey” feel joyful and elegantly “tracing out” an event requires an awful lot of work behind the scenes. In addition to the key staff members noted above, Alexa now staffs at least two full-time designers in the shop at all times. In a nod to her own beginning, working at the shop on breaks and on weekends, she also makes a point to bring in one to two students to help out part-time throughout the year. (Her total staff count now stands at seven to eight

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**THE AVERAGE
 WEDDING SALE HAS
 INCREASED FROM
 \$3,500 TO \$5,000.**
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AT YOUR SERVICE The team at Anna Rose Floral posts its wedding and event contact form strategically throughout the website, not just on one page or in one area, to ensure that potential customers can find it easily.

members, though it can expand during a busy event or season.)

Since 2012, Alexa also has been carefully building up her inventory of rental items, from a small container to a garage filled with items today. This too, requires investments of time, money and staff. She also hired an in-house carpenter, who builds the shop’s custom event rentals, delivers for the shop’s retail and event work, and maintains the shop’s inventory of rentals. (Read more about the shop’s rentals on p. 28.)

‘Radically Transparent’ Weddings

Since taking over, Alexa has invested significant energy in growing the shop’s wedding business, increasing the shop’s load from about 70 weddings a year in 2012 to 100 by year’s end in 2016. The average wedding sale has increased from \$3,500 to average budgets of about \$5,000.

One area in the business’ wedding segment where Alexa immediately saw room for improvement was in the initial consultation process.

Four years ago, Anna Rose designers were still using pen and paper in their meetings with brides, a process that screamed “old school” at a time when Alexa wanted to project a brand that was hip and young.

Alexa revamped the system by introducing technology and new communication styles to her staff. Today, when brides sit down for their consultation, they see a large computer screen. The Anna Rose designer creates the draft proposal in real time, talking through the flower choices and granular details relating to sourcing, along with contingencies and substitution options, all the while tweaking and adjusting in ways that are obvious to the client.

As with event clients, Alexa says, wedding customers want transparency, and the new consultation process doesn’t merely pay lip service to the concept.

“Throughout the consultation, we’re saying, ‘Here are the flowers we plan on using. Here are the flowers that might be available depending on availability,’” she explained. “But we’re very honest and up front about costs and the fact that we may have to make substitutions. One thing about millennials that people frequently misunderstand: We do understand value. And we’re willing to budget



for things that have real value. But, even more than other generations, we hate hidden costs or surprises."

To better account for costs, Alexa has also collected and loaded pricing data on pricing, seasonality/availability, product origin, color and more from the past four years into a Microsoft Excel document. (Previously, shop designers used a more haphazard system of estimating.) For each draft proposal, the shop also now generates "recipes" specific to the job.


The Next Big Thing?

The evolution of Anna Rose from an offshoot of her parents' business to her own fully realized enterprise is still ongoing, as Alexa is the first to admit. Still, as the business continues to grow and attract new attention (and customers), she's found her own role shifting again — from owner, deep in the everyday trenches, to owner tasked with more of the big-picture thinking.

About a year ago, Alexa hired Nicole Contessa on the recommendation of a previous employee. The two clicked immediately, and Alexa has transitioned Contessa into the role of event sales and shop manager, a change that frees her own time to focus on bigger projects, including creation of a new software template called "aflutter" (currently in testing at tryaflutter.com) that Alexa hopes will address some of the technical inefficiencies she's faced in her business and provide a platform for wedding vendors to connect directly with brides and grooms.

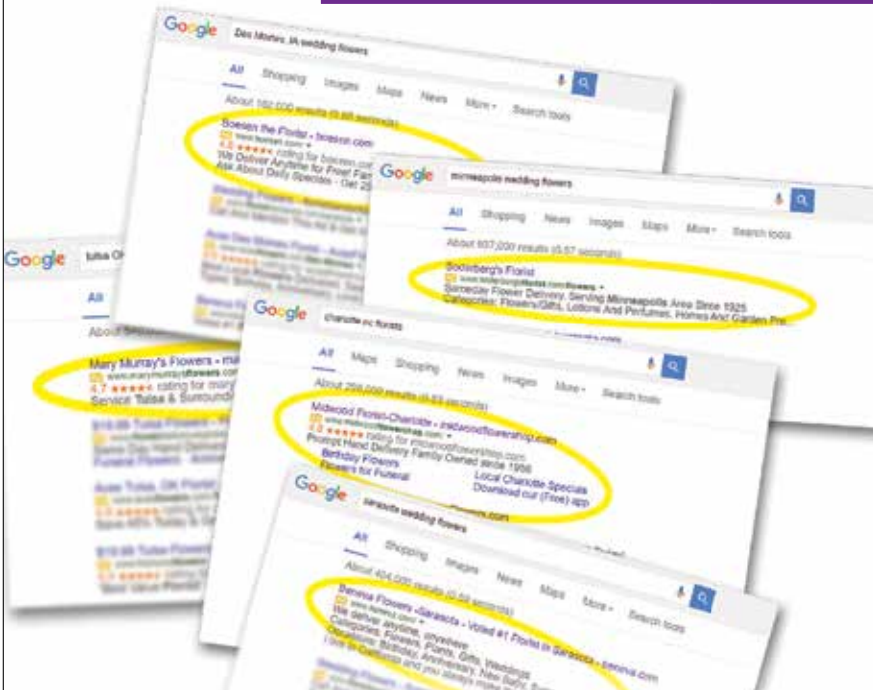
She hopes to launch that new venture this fall. 🌸

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