Plugged In BY RENATO CRUZ SOGUECO

IT IN THE HOUSE

> Like most floral business owners, you probably need technology help. Now. Regardless of the issue — crashing computers, balky network, old phones, finicky POS terminals or insight on how to do a mail merge — technical expertise probably is not available on-hand at your shop. But maybe it's time to change that.

We've all heard of a florist's brother's cousin who saved Valentine's Day by plugging in the right cable, or that part-time driver just out of high school who happened to know HTML and fixed the website, but realistically, can you rely on that kind of mythical luck to find your own tech guru?

This month, we identify and flesh out the core competencies an information technology (IT) guy or gal needs to support a typical medium- to large-size flower shop and other intangibles this person should have to be an effective staff member at your shop. How much IT help do you need? A general rule of thumb is one fulltime IT person per 10 employees. Small shops have two options: Contract with a firm that sends help as needed, or — my recommendation, so help is there as soon as you need it — train one or two existing employees to take this on as part of their existing position.

Core Competencies

The technology industry takes certification to another level. As you may guess, the more certifications professionals amass, the more expensive they become. Fortunately, flower shops only need the basics, and the following entry-level IT certifications will probably satisfy 90 percent of your needs. We're not saying anyone you hire absolutely needs to be certified, but these explanations can serve as a guide as you go about your search.

CompTIA A+. This is the most basic certification that anyone with IT aspirations needs to kick off a technology career. An A+ certification ensures the technician can disassemble and assemble a PC, identify parts and their roles and troubleshoot problems on PCs and laptops. To earn the certification, they also must be able to install operating systems such as Microsoft Windows and be familiar with Mac and Linux. In addition, they're able to manage and install printers on these computers and they know how to create a basic network of these devices. The certification also covers basic mobile device management and operational procedures for maintaining a computer network to prevent problems before they happen.So already with just an A+ certification, this person should help you keep the machines humming and the network running, while maybe doing other jobs at the shop.

CompTIA Network+. This is a complementary certification to A+. CompTIA Network+ should indicate expanded knowledge on the network side of your infrastructure, to the point that the technician will know how to design, install and configure, maintain and troubleshoot more complex network setups, and will know all about how to wire this network to wiring standards. This certification would be much more useful to a larger shop with lots of terminals, printers and a dedicated server or two.

Remember that while an A+ technician will be familiar with Mac and Linux, these certifications are geared toward shops running a Microsoft Windows environment. In fact, the Network+ and A+ certifications can be applied toward getting the Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator (MCSA) certification. If you have a Linux- or Unix-based network, much of the knowledge — on hardware, networking and troubleshooting the physical installation — still applies, but don't expect this person to have knowledge of how to troubleshoot a Linux/Unix operating system on either a server or a terminal.

Once you have a handle on what the IT person should know and how he or she could help your business, these certifications offer two paths to land your IT guru. You can look for folks who already have these skills (the best method is to advertise at your local technical school or include the certification qualifications in your ad) or identify someone on staff who may have an interest in acquiring these certifications — a long-term project in which the shop will serve as a test lab (usually six to nine months of studying plus on the job experience, depending on the program).

IT Service with a Smile

You may have a candidate who checks out fine and is armed with these certifications or on his or her way to getting them, or at least a person whose experience matches your requirements ... But what else should you be looking for in your IT person?

Let's start with a nice bedside manner. A common generalization of computer people is they've lived in a cave and lack many social skills. The stereotype isn't true (and if you do run across someone with those qualities, don't hire them!). Instead, think of technology support as a service position where shop employees are customers of the IT person, and clearly gauge this attribute in prospective employees during interviews.

Also, you may have noticed that skills such as social media savvy or knowledge with websites were not included or highlighted in this discussion. Although both are indeed considered technology, we recommend that you view social media as a marketing component of your business and do the same with your website.

If you happen to get an A+/Network+ capable employee who is familiar with either social media or the web, consider it gravy, but don't necessarily expect him or her to know this aspect of business. What you should expect is that he or she is able support whatever technical requirements these positions need to perform optimally, such as troubleshooting a server issue. ❧

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TOP 20 Perks of Your SAF Membership

Vital Industry Knowledge

1. Floral Management magazine
2. Wednesday E-Brief
3. Washington Week in Review
4. Saturday Sales Wake-Up

Sales Builders

5. Listing in NationalFloristDirectory.com
6. Web graphics and floral photography
7. Wedding Flower Calculator
8. Customizable press releases and talking points for media interviews
9. Discounts on SAF products from statement stuffers to skill-building DVDs
10. SAF Fund for Nationwide Public Relations raises floral awareness

Bottom Line Improvement

11. Retail Pricing Worksheet
12. Customizable employee handbook
13. Discounts on FedEx shipping, Paychex payroll management services, Ford Fleet Vehicles and more, and access to Association Health Care Insurance Plans administered by Hortica Insurance & Employee Benefits

Education & Networking

14. 1-Day Profit Blast
15. Retail Growth Solutions
16. Annual Convention

Expert Consultations

17. Contact SAF staff for advice on technology, marketing and more
18. Free 15-minute legal consultation with attorney Paula A. Calimafde with law firm Paley Rothman

Industry Watchdog

19. Negative floral publicity response
20. Government advocacy

This is just scratching the surface!