



MAKE AN OFFER SHE CAN'T REFUSE

Getting the bride to say yes begins with the very first encounter and doesn't end until she's signed on the dotted line. Here's how to make it happen.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

SEAL THE DEAL

Bloomtastic Flowers & Events is on track to close on 180 weddings this year, a feat co-owner Heather Waits and Beth Campbell, wedding and special events director, credit to strategic tweaks to their wedding sales approach.

When Heather Waits purchased Bloomtastic Flowers & Events 11 years ago, she had one overarching goal: Be different.

For the recent college grad, who bought the Columbus, Ohio, shop with her husband, Jayson, that meant tossing outdated baskets and replacing them with interesting containers — the kind she found on scouting trips in New York. “I changed our style from baskets of daisies and leatherleaf to cubes of lilies and roses,” she said. “My generation, Gen X, took notice and things took off.”

One area of her business, however, didn't take off immediately: weddings.

Part of the trouble was that Waits, then 24, seemed young — too young — to many of the brides and grooms. (“I looked like I was 18,” Waits admitted, which didn't exactly inspire confidence, particularly among mothers.) A bigger issue, though, was that Waits hadn't yet learned how to close a wedding. In fact, that was an art that would take her years to truly master.

“In the beginning I didn't understand to ‘ask’ for the sale,” she explained. “I would meet with the bride, get all the info, then tell her I'd send a proposal within two weeks. That was what all the other florists were doing.”

Then, she'd wait. Her first year in business, Waits inherited 10 booked weddings from the previous owner. Her second year, she met with about 70 to 80 brides and booked 34 weddings. She was hungry to do more and to improve her success rate.

Sound familiar? American weddings represent a \$51 billion industry. Current events, including a stronger economy and the recent Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriages, could help increase spending even more. Yet for all the promise of weddings, there's still plenty of woe, including, for florists, the real challenge of sealing the deal while keeping costs in line. (All the hand-holding that goes into winning over an on-the-fence bride — emails, phone calls, extra meetings — can quickly eat away at profits.)

That's why, to grow her wedding business, Waits returned to her initial impulse — be different — and started to rethink every process and procedure involved in weddings, from how she connected with brides to how she talked with them. Over the next decade, she

fast-tracked timelines, streamlined marketing efforts, and taught herself, often through trial and error, exactly how to ask for and get the business she wanted.

Turns out she was onto something big. In 2015, Bloomtastic will complete about 180 weddings by year's end, booking roughly 90 percent of the brides who contact the shop. (Her success and passion for the bridal business inspired her to launch a consulting service, Profitable Weddings, that provides guidance to wedding professionals.)

This month, Floral Management asked Waits to open her playbook and share tips in key areas — including consultations, marketing materials and wedding shows — on how florists can move brides and grooms from “we'll let you know” to “sign me up.”

ROCK THE WEDDING SHOW

Deal Breaker: Pay hundreds — maybe thousands — of dollars to set up a booth and compete against other vendors for a few seconds of face time with overwhelmed brides.

Deal Maker: Be selective about shows. Create a can't-miss booth. Train your staff to truly engage attendees. Give every good prospect something to take home. Follow up.

We know what you want to know first: How do I lock in brides who come into my shop? But to Waits, all of the groundwork and resources that go into attracting couples to your shop in the first place are just as important as the final handshake. With the right approach, a good wedding show can be just one of those important resources.

For her part, when Waits took over Bloomtastic, she knew there was one go-to bridal show in the area, Columbus Bride: The Show, held each January. That's exactly why she skipped it her first year.

“I had attended the show as a bride and knew how overwhelming it was,” she said, adding that the cost, \$2,200 for a 10-foot by 10-foot booth and a print ad in the event magazine, also dissuaded her.

In 2006, as her wedding business grew, Waits decided to try out the show, which has since been rebranded as Columbus Weddings. Still, to make the investment pay off, she decided she'd have to be strategic about how she presented her business and how she interacted with brides.

“To catch the attention of a bride who's seeing 150 vendors, I needed to set myself apart,” said Waits, who credits 52 weddings in 2014, and \$78,000 in sales, to leads generated from Columbus Weddings. In practice, that meant she had to:

Create a Standout Look

Instead of relying on the same-old, same-old rectangular tables most vendors use, Waits and her team now create an “inviting layout” with a mix of round and rectangular tables, along with a bookcase that adds height, visual interest and even more display space to **show off flowers and design samples direct from the design room.**

Waits also shies away from the expensive displays other florists favor — e.g., six-foot-tall high heels made of cushion mums — and instead **highlights work brides will actually buy for their big day**, including at least six bridal bouquets, ranging from \$75 to \$300 (retail value); six centerpieces, ranging from \$35 to \$200; one showcase altar arrangement, usually around \$150; along with trendier items such as flower girl pomander or wands. Waits **offsets the costs of the booth**, including product on display, by partnering with other businesses.

The effort to stand out also extends to the employees manning the booth. Instead of wearing uniforms or branded T-shirts, **Waits and her team “dress trendy biz casual”** (think: dress, scarf, tights and boots) so that they look like the brides, or her best friends.

“Our target market for weddings is 20- to 30-year-olds, so we want to look the part but not out of place, or like we are trying too hard,” said Waits, now 36.

Engage the Bride

The combination of the open layout and shared sartorial sensibility help the Bloomtastic staff chat naturally with brides, which Waits says is critical to the success of any show. “You have to engage the bride,” she said. “We **ask questions,**



JUST US GALS To better engage clients, Heather Waits and Beth McCampbell approach brides in-store and at events using a conversational and genuinely interested tone. The Bloomtastic booth (right) is just as approachable and inviting, with samples of work, photos and browsing space.



encourage her to hold the bouquets and take pictures for Facebook. We make [visiting our booth] an experience." (Not so great at small talk? Check out a list of questions and conversation ideas from Waits on p. 26.)

Before the bride leaves the booth, the Bloomtastic staff share a **brochure and a certificate promising 50 percent off delivery and setup**, good for any wedding booked by March 31. (Much more on those materials — and why that expiration date matters — later.)

Focus on Follow-Through

Still, for Waits and her team, the real work of the bridal show **happens outside of the actual event**. Upon receiving the list of attendees from the show's producer — usually about a week after the event — the shop **emails a 12-month timeline for wedding planning** to every bride who shared an email. (In 2015, that meant about 1,550 brides, in addition to the mothers, sisters, best friends and other assorted entourage members who registered at the event.)

Apart from a brief plug for Bloomtastic in the flower-planning section, the email is entirely educational,

positioned as a **friendly and useful tool** and one that tends to generate immediate goodwill. ("We get countless emails thanking us for the useful email," Waits said.)

A month later, Waits follows up with another email, this time with more tips about wedding planning — from picking a venue to a florist. That email includes an offer for a **complimentary consultation**. Pulling again from the data supplied by the wedding show, **Waits follows up one final time with brides**, sending an email about six months before their wedding date — the average lead time of a Bloomtastic bride.

Be Selective

A final tip from Waits: **Don't waste time and money on shows that don't generate solid leads** or that have significant overlap in terms of attendance. (Some brides become wedding show groupies.) And look beyond the traditional show; more intimate affairs can produce impressive results. "We also participate in **venue tastings**, which are very successful for us," said Waits, who credits one 2014 tasting with three

BLOOMTASTIC FLOWERS & EVENTS

- Number of employees: 7, in addition to co-owners, Heather and Jayson Waits
- Average wedding budget: \$1,500
- Average profit margin on weddings: 50 percent
- Number of weddings:
 - 2013: 110
 - 2014: 151
 - 2015: 180 (projected at press time)
- Total annual sales up 35 percent in 2014; "healthy" increase predicted for 2015.
- Percentage of annual sales generated from weddings: about 50 percent



JOYCE PHOTOGRAPHY

DITCH THE PITCH

When was the last time you and your staff practiced talking to brides at a wedding event? Making a memorable impression is harder work than many florists may realize, said Waits, who sees many vendors burning up precious time talking about themselves: their awards, their experience, their connections.

"I was recently asked what my bridal show elevator pitch is — I don't have one," she said. "This isn't about me. It's about the bride; it's her day. She cares less how many awards Bloomtastic has won or that we buy sustainable flowers and abide by the cold chain ... she just cares about what I can do for her. So we make it all about her."

Feel intimidated by the prospect of all that small talk? Don't be, said Waits. Instead, train yourself and your staff to embrace the following techniques for shows:

1. **Make yourself available.** Stow the book and make eye contact with brides.
2. **Offer a cheerful greeting.** When a group approaches, ask who the lucky lady is and then offer enthusiastic congratulations.
3. **Ask qualifying questions in a conversational tone:** Where are you getting married? When is the big day? What are your colors?
4. **Show off your goods.** Invite the bride to try on or hold some flowers. Show her a brochure or website for more ideas.
5. **Suggest next steps.** Invite the bride to view your online portfolio. Make sure your site is updated with basic information on weddings and contact information.

-M.W.

events that totaled \$6,000 in sales. At those events, Bloomtastic is listed as a preferred vendor and creates centerpieces for the tasting tables. Part of the attraction here is exclusivity, so be sure you are **meeting regularly with popular venues and caterers** in your city to build strong relationships.

RETOOL YOUR MARKETING MATERIALS

Deal Breaker: Generic brochures and handouts that don't tell brides what they want to know (ahem: How much do these flowers cost?) and don't help your business stand out.

Deal Maker: Customized brochures that provide targeted info and tell a story. Certificates and well-considered discounts that create a sense of urgency.

Because brides and grooms receive so much swag at the average wedding show, Waits has gone out of her way to make her materials shine. To do that she's learned to:

Tell a Story

In 2014, Waits decided to update her standard handout, shifting from an oversized postcard with images on one side and short testimonials on the reverse to a **custom-made, four-page brochure** that showcases the shop's design work and provides memorable storytelling details, including information about Waits and Beth McCampbell, the shop's wedding and events director, along with longer testimonials from happy brides. In addition — because price is the No. 1 question she fields — Waits includes **average prices**.

"We can create stunning florals for \$300 or \$30,000," said Waits, who updates her handouts every few years and already has plans for a 2016 redesign. "Too many brides are afraid of the floral consultation for this very reason and often make hiring a florist the last thing on their list. By providing average pricing, I can help put her at ease on the costs and also help her figure out a budget prior to meeting with us."

The brochure is a way to “educate and ensure my name is in the bride’s hands,” Waits said. It’s also one more way to stand out in a crowded field. “Every bride walks around in the show with a large bag and fills it up,” she said. “Then she goes home, dumps out her big old bag of goodies on the floor like it’s Halloween, and sorts through. I want my piece to be what she keeps: the Three Musketeers candy bar of florists.”

Use Discounts Strategically

Along with the brochure, from 2013 to 2015, **wedding show prospects also received a certificate for 50 percent off delivery and setup fees** on all weddings booked by March 31. The idea proved popular — about 22 of the 300 certificates distributed in 2014 were redeemed — even though Waits was initially wary about implementing it.

“[In general], I don’t really believe in discounting weddings,” she said. “It can cheapen the overall glamour and appeal of what we do,” and risks reinforcing a popular misconception that wedding flowers are overpriced.

Still, competition for brides is stiff in Columbus, and Waits wanted an “edge” — something that would compel brides to set up a consultation. In the end, the discount made financial sense. “[In 2014], the average wedding from the redemption of these certificates was \$1,100, so it netted us \$24,200 in sales that we may not have otherwise had,” Waits said.

The March 31 **deadline** also gave brides an important and timely nudge, encouraging them to book early, which helped Waits plan her calendar more effectively for the year. “The expiration date created a **sense of urgency** on the bride’s end and filled up our calendar quickly in the first quarter,” she said. “This allowed us to plan better and forecast which months and weekends were going to be busy.”

While pleased with the results of the certificate, Waits plans to phase out the program next year, in part because only 12 brides redeemed the offer in 2015. (Why? Waits speculates it could be a positive sign of the larger economy and the fact that brides are becoming less “cost conscious.”)

The most important part of putting together an incentive or discount program, according to Waits: **“Know your margins.”** (Her average profit margin on weddings is currently 50 percent.) Even then, be prepared to dig deeper and evaluate, or re-evaluate, regularly. “You have to know [all of your costs],” Waits said. “If your labor and COGS are outrageous, and your profit is small, you cannot afford to give that away.”

Outshine Everyone Online

According to a 2013 survey, conducted by The Knot and Pinterest, 91 percent of engaged women go online for wedding planning inspiration. (The most searched category: reception décor.) That’s why Waits and her team give special attention to the shop’s wedding site.

“We update the website with **new images at the end of December** so it’s fresh and on trend with current looks in time for the bridal show,” Waits explained. “Plus, most engagements happen at Christmastime,” and so a new batch of brides will likely be looking for ideas come January. **“Halfway through the summer she adds new pictures”** to freshen things up,” she said.

By regularly updating content, Bloomtastic treats its **website as a portfolio** of its best work “in a variety

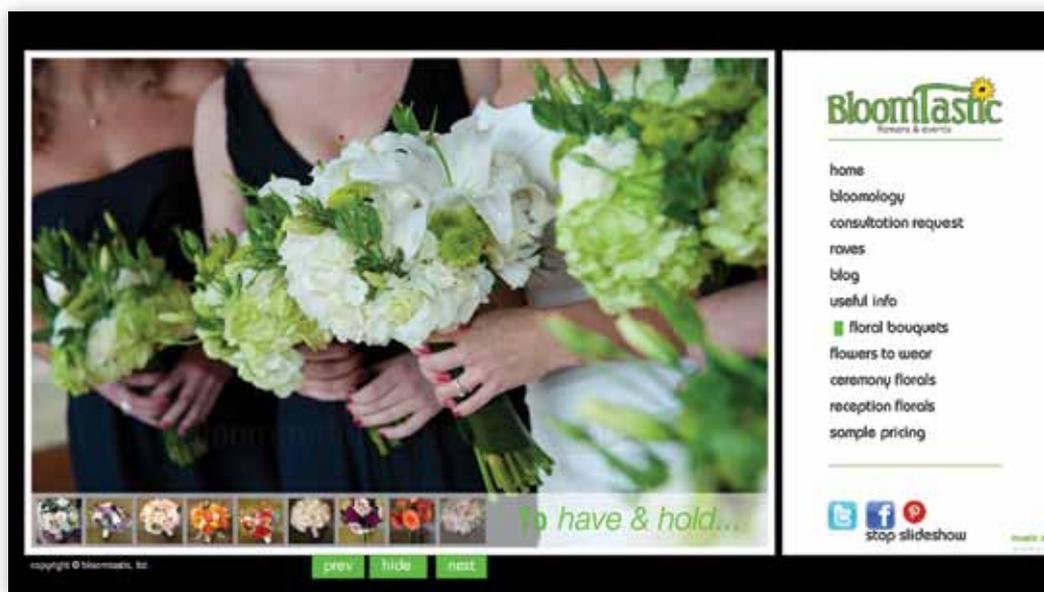


PAPER PUSHER Bloomtastic uses its printed materials, including a new brochure, to share storytelling details about the business, including testimonials from customers.

of looks to showcase what we are capable of,” Waits said. In the last year, she’s also added **examples of different price ranges**. “I’ve [already] been told by brides that this visual is very helpful,” she said.

Waits is also active on Facebook, Pinterest and, as of this year, Instagram. Facebook remains her go-to social media outlet; as with other marketing efforts, Waits said it’s important to analyze and track results.

“I see great interaction [on Facebook] on the weekends as we post pictures from weddings as we set them up, and later in the week as we design them,” said Waits, who credits five leads so far in 2015 directly to the social media site. **“We promote posts and target engaged females** between 20 to 40 years old.”



SCHEDULED POST Heather Waits updates new wedding content in December, when many couples are getting engaged, and again halfway through the summer, when the shop has loads of new wedding images to share.

CLOSE AT THE CONSULTATION

Deal Breaker: Unfocused consultations that end ambiguously. Proposals that take days to generate.

Deal Maker: Targeted meetings with clear agendas, clear pricing and specific asks. On-the-spot proposals and tweaks. The occasional carrot when necessary.

Initially, when Waits met with brides about their upcoming nuptials, she didn't have a dedicated consultation area or much of her own work to show to brides. In fact, "my first consult left before I was even halfway through and wrote a terrible review of me online," she said. "I quickly learned I needed a new approach."

Today, her revamped approach builds on all of the hard work she's put into her online materials and outreach efforts and allows her to:

Set the Right Tone

Bloomtastic now has a **private consultation area** in the store, situated behind the design room so that the bride, her family and friends get a "behind the scenes" tour on their way back to their meeting. "They also **see our coolers**, which is an important selling point [for us] over home-based florists who do not have proper storage and refrigeration," Waits said. "We are sure to point that out."

The consultation area itself includes some strategic décor, in the form of a bookcase to **display rental items, "try-on" silk designs and thank you notes from brides**. "On the opposing wall are large dry erase round stickers that have **testimonials handwritten** on them so the bride is surrounded by lots of love for Bloomtastic," Waits said.

During the consultation, Waits or McCampbell follow a basic outline. First, "[we] review the info from her questionnaire," Waits said. (Insider tip: store the questionnaires on Dropbox so everyone on your team can access them, Waits said.) From there, they "open the floor up to her to share her vision with us, then we talk about each floral piece, starting with the bouquet."



JOYCE PHOTOGRAPHY

GOOD LISTENER Key to a great consultation? Good listening skills, said Heather Waits. "[We] let the bride talk more than we do."

While the bride talks, Waits or McCampbell takes notes on flowers, colors and design style. "The **key is to let the bride talk more than we do**," Waits said. During the conversation, the Bloomtastic team will help guide the bride by showing **images of their own work** — never stock or generic pictures. "Brides want to see what we can do, not what someone else did," Waits said.

Produce On-the-Spot Proposals

Transparent, easy-to-understand pricing also has made brides happy and the one-hour consultation process much smoother. "I came up with a **small, medium and large formula for quoting everything**," she said, "bouquets, centerpieces, corsages, altar arrangements. This allowed me to provide an accurate price and **proposal on the spot**."

To expedite the process, Waits and her team engage in **some advance legwork**. For instance, the Bloomtastic rep goes into each consultation with a proposal form already partly completed, with info pulled from the bride's questionnaire. In addition, either Waits or McCampbell will have **preselected images** they think the bride might like.

As the bride talks through her big-day plans, the Bloomtastic team can stay engaged in the conversation but also work up an accurate proposal, thanks to a **basic formula** Waits first implemented about five years ago. For example, Waits said, regardless of size, most bouquets include a base focal flower, a secondary focal flower and one or two accents. Once she's identified those flowers, she starts assigning quantities to each area. From there, she uses a cost sheet, developed alongside her wholesaler, for specific flowers and adds 35 percent to 50



GO DEEPER:

Check out more tips from Waits on how to use different social media platforms more effectively and get insight from Waits and Floral Management contributor Paul Goodman, CPA, PFCI, on pricing weddings for profit at safnow.org/moreonline.

WALL OF FAME

Brides are surrounded by lots of Bloomtastic love in the consultation area, including handwritten testimonials.



percent for labor, depending on the bouquet style.

“At the end [of the consultation], we review the total,” Waits said. “If it’s not in budget we look at where we can **trim or change things** so she leaves with a proposal that is in budget.” The proposal is valid for seven days, and to secure Bloomtastic, the bride must supply a **\$250 retainer and sign an agreement.**

Ask for the Sale...

With the proposal in the bride’s hand, Waits then does the thing she worked so hard to learn: **She asks for the sale.** Her advice for those who want to follow suit: Speak clearly. Be firm. Don’t ask questions or doubt yourself — and keep it simple.

“I’ve learned to say, ‘Sarah, I’m so glad you are happy with the proposal and it’s in budget,’” she said. “I really enjoyed chatting with you today and would be so honored to design for you!! Let’s go ahead and secure the date while you are here today!”

... And, If You Need to, Dangle That Carrot.

Even then, some brides need a final push, which Waits is happy to provide. Starting in August, brides with weddings being planned for the following year are offered another deal, in the form of a **waived service fee if they book by 5 p.m. the day after the consultation.**

(That fee amounts to 15 percent of the subtotal, which includes delivery and setup for two locations). Waits and McCampbell present the discount as a wedding gift to the couple saying, “I really like you and would love to design for your wedding,” Waits said. From there, “Most brides booked on the spot, some would take the day or two that we offered but came back and booked.”

Once January rolls around, the **discount shrinks to 50 percent of the service charge** (or if the wedding is less than \$1,500, it disappears completely — at that price point, Waits has calculated, she doesn’t have enough profit to offer any cuts.) The **timeline is important**, Waits said, because it’s one more way to get that calendar set early.

“The largest spike in consultation requests happens in the first quarter of our year,” she said. “It works well because our delivery of the offer is genuine and it’s an incentive to book now. **It creates urgency** and it has increased the number of brides who book on the spot, thus cutting down on labor via post consultation follow-ups.”

As with the discount offered to wedding show attendees, Waits said it’s very important to **review any special offers or incentives.** As the economy changes, brides and grooms alter their spending habits; even your most dependable carrot can become unappealing.

In fact, at press time, Waits was in the process of rethinking her own approach to consultation deals. While the scaled 100 percent to 50 percent discount delivered strong results in years past, she is now thinking about changing even that approach, after reviewing her most recent numbers.

“Just last week we compared bookings of those we offered 100 percent off the service charge and those we offered 50 percent off the service charge,” she said. “There was no difference in the rate of bookings; however, I was giving up all the money instead of just half. So from here out, we will only offer 50 percent as the highest amount off.”

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MEET AND GREET

Meet Heather Waits in person during “How to Be a (Profitable) Bride Magnet,” at SAF Amelia Island 2015, where she will go into more detail about how she fetches a 50 percent profit margin on each and every wedding. safnow.org/annual-convention