

# T ALL Together NOW

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PHOTOS BY JUSTIN GALLOWAY

## A family business makes room to grow.



In 2016, the Levy family — husband and wife Max and Marilyn and son, Brad — were taking stock of their family's longtime business, Allen's Flowers & Plants in San Diego.

Business was booming at Allen's three metro area locations — and that was part of their challenge. Three years earlier, an illness had largely removed Max and also Marilyn, who needed to help care for him, leaving Brad to shoulder the burden of a multishop enterprise.

The Levys had big plans — they wanted to grow the business and try out new ideas — but they knew they needed to make strategic changes to take their already successful business to the next level, changes that involved technology, staffing, their physical spaces, and how they trained and communicated with staff. That's a lot for any family business to take on.



And yet, two years later, many of the changes the family identified have been implemented, giving their business renewed energy, a bigger footprint — and even more room to grow.

### Wanted: A Right-Hand Man

One of the first challenges the Levys took on: finding some senior-level help.

Hiring a general manager represented a significant financial investment and a profound shift in operations for Allen's, a staple in San Diego since 1981. The Levys had long depended on store managers — most of whom remain on staff today — but since Max's illness, Brad had acted as general manager while also juggling his responsibilities as an owner — not to mention IT director, floral buyer, and untold other roles. That setup left little time to devote to new projects.

"I realized I was working *in* the business not *on* the business," Brad said.

As it turns out, the family didn't have to look far to find the right candidate.

In the spring of 2016, they hired Floral Strategies LLC for on-site customer service training. Sam Bowles, the trainer, quickly developed a rapport with the Allen's team. Toward the end of the week, Sam made a joke: "Why don't you hire me?" Brad didn't laugh. Instead, he and his parents began to discuss the possibility of bringing Sam on as general manager, troubleshooting and brainstorming ideas. By August, he was in his new position.

"Max and I saw that Brad was trying to wear a lot of hats while trying to expand the business, so we knew we were ready for a change," Marilyn said. "We knew that hiring Sam would give Brad the opportunity to try new things and evolve the business."

In Sam, now 32, the 46-year-old Brad saw an "energetic millennial" — a person who was smart, talented, full of energy and new ideas. In the Levys, Sam saw something that he knew from

**TIES THAT BIND** To grow their longtime business, Brad, Marilyn and Max Levy have made significant changes in recent years, including hiring a general manager, Sam Bowles, pictured with Brad on p. 22



his extensive training experience was exceedingly rare: owners willing to take big risks, make serious investments and welcome advice from an experienced outsider. Indeed, the last thing the Levys wanted to do was let their family business stagnate.

“As our industry has evolved, it’s become a survival of the fittest among flower shops,” Brad said. “We want to be the best, which in my mind means breaking the mold and distinguishing ourselves.”

### Work It Out

With a general manager in place, the Levys crafted a new division of labor, with Sam taking over some of Brad’s responsibilities in key areas, including human resources, training and technology. While Max and Marilyn’s day-to-day responsibilities are now smaller than before,

**BIG SMILES** Allen’s engages in year-round training to enhance customer service and support staff. At ACDC (right), Allen’s design center, six to 10 team members work together in an open space. The design team expands to about 20 around the holidays.



they remain very active in the business, with Sam and Brad consulting daily with Marilyn and everyone benefiting from Max's background in accounting.

"We're very good about dividing responsibilities and playing off of each other's strengths," Sam said. "Luckily, among the four of us, we seem to have the major areas covered."

Throughout the day, Brad and Sam work closely together figuratively and literally: They often lunch side by side and for the past two years had nearly adjoining offices.

"We sit down together often to target potential areas for growth and look for ways to implement new programs," Brad said.

Part of the reason the partnership works? Shared goals and work styles.

"We're all wired as people who enjoy business," Sam said.

## The Move to Centralized Design

Another major project the Levys tackled in recent years: creating a centralized design center to address the issue of space shortage at the florist's three established locations and to improve overall efficiency.

In 2017, after scouring local real estate in the expensive San Diego market for years, the Levys acquired a 12,000-square-foot building in an industrial area in the center of the city and named it Allen's Central Design Center — ACDC for short.

Today, production and delivery for all of the retail stores occurs at ACDC, where six to 10 designers staff a 2,500-square-foot open design area for daily work. (The team expands to about 15 to 20 designers and design helpers for holiday periods — although there's

been a "learning curve" to staffing, Sam admitted. More on that later.)

"Before, we were maxed out on space on a heavy day," Brad explained.

ACDC has created cost and space efficiencies. Design and delivery are centralized, and Allen's can buy in larger quantities and take advantage of bulk pricing.

The shift also required some technology upgrades, something Sam, a self-proclaimed techie, was especially excited about. A key change: installing a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone system, which allowed any of Allen's locations to cover for each other. Previously, the three shops shared resources, with each catering to its own clientele. If a customer called the downtown store, the phone rang only there. The order was taken, designed and delivered out of that shop.





# ALLEN'S

## FLOWERS & PLANTS

### APPROACHABLY HIP

Several years ago, when Brad Levy decided to update his family's brand, including its logo, he looked to the sports and active lifestyle industry. He reached out to a designer who had worked for major companies, including Quicksilver, Reef and GoPro. They brainstormed ideas on how to update the logo, which for years had been more staid and traditional.

"We wanted a new logo that incorporates that surf and action sports effect," Brad said, something that gave out a youthful energy without alienating older and longtime customers.

That can be a fine balance: "When I showed the new design to my folks, they were unsure of it, but they let me run with it," Brad said. "Now, they love it."

—J.M.F.

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS** A redesigned logo, green chairs, concrete floors and white ceilings give ACDC an "urban industrial" appeal that customers love.

"The gift of VoIP is that the phones can be answered wherever we direct them," Sam said. "Someone at the design studio can take a call for the El Cajon store, design the arrangement and deliver it — all out of ACDC."

Using the VoIP system effectively has required a "good deal of training," Sam acknowledged, but the advantages far outweigh that time and energy. (Thinking of following suit? Check out more advice from florists who have embraced VoIP at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).)

The family's goal is to have a call center at ACDC to handle all phone orders. In that scenario, the three stores would still cater to their local customer base and handle walk-ins, a given every day of the week since Allen's retail locations are located along some of San Diego's most popular intersections.

### You Can Grow Your Own Way

The Levys always conceived of ACDC not only as their backroom operations but also as a place where they'd be interacting face to face with customers. Other businesses in ACDC's industrial location already generated foot traffic, which ACDC benefited from.

To leverage those potential walk-ins, the Levys created a roughly 1,200-square-foot retail space in ACDC. Accented with green chairs and white shiplap, along with concrete floors, a green turf wall and a floral-themed Banksy print, the space has an "urban industrial" appeal.

"The space makes an impression and has a cool, hip feel," Brad said. "All the production is going on — it's not your typical mom and pop flower shop. It's an entirely different experience when they walk through the design area and see coolers full of flowers. It's impressive."

The new design space has also created challenges, especially around the holidays. Initially, the Levys were tempted to fill the massive production area with additional help — they've since learned to better manage those labor costs and to communicate with staff about goals and expectations related to service and productivity.

Here, Sam's customer service training background has been an asset. In the lead-up to Valentine's Day 2018, the Levys committed to total staff training — they worked schedules so that each location could participate as a group in



a day that was part process review, part goal setting and part pep rally.

The approach allowed them to reinforce to every team member the shop's approach to service and logistics (including role-playing on how to increase average transactions and move deliveries to a non-Feb. 14 date). Valentine's Day sales were up "significantly" this year across Allen's locations, a happy result Sam credits at least in part to that holistic approach to team training.

"To be able to have everyone from each shop together at once, talking about the same concepts, I think, really made a difference," he said.

Experimentation is part of what the team at Allen's enjoys, and that extends to sales targets. Brad said he sets sales targets "very high."

"Sometimes we hit them, sometimes we're just shy of them," he said. "We've had great growth and we want to continue to see significant growth, month over month, year over year. That means we think outside the box and take calculated risks."

## Power to the People

Indeed, bringing staff training and human resource issues to the forefront has been a high priority for the Levys in the past two years — and, given Sam's background and passion for the topics, these are places he was more than ready to dig in.

Among the first projects: formalize an employee handbook so that roles, processes and rules were clear and consistent. Before Sam was hired, the business employed more informal policies. The team also reconfigured scheduling across stores, moving from disparate systems completed by hand or using Microsoft Excel, to a web-based platform that streamlines the process, allowing managers to staff more effectively and more profitably.

"We recognized that, for many reasons, if we wanted to be a bigger business, we needed to start acting like one on some of these procedural levels and formalize policies," Sam said.

The Levys also introduced a "pretty aggressive" incentive program to encourage sales team members to move average transactions higher.



### BEYOND MOM AND POP

Through open, bright layouts and personalized service, the team at Allen's works to separate the business from competitors, said Sam Bowles, general manager and creative director.

## BUY FRESH, BUY LOCAL

Located minutes from some of California's major flower growers, Allen's Flowers and Plants in San Diego aims for — and delivers — “a unique experience for customers that they don't get anywhere else in the city,” said co-owner Brad Levy.

“We're selling Day 1 fresh flowers that, in some cases, were on the plant in the morning and in a customer's hands in that same afternoon,” he added.

The shop uses its proximity to America's flower basket to its advantage. During this year's Administrative Professionals Week, Allen's developed a new product that capitalizes on their strong relationships with local growers: Farm-To-You flowers. The product featured Dramm & Echter gerbera daisies at a “really, really good value,” said Sam Bowles, general manager and creative director.

“We offered Farm-To-You gerberas that whole month, promoting it heavily on social media, sharing information about the flower farm,” Brad said, adding that the shop always has local product and has strong, long-standing partnerships with many growers, including Mellano & Co. “I really believe in supporting our local farmers.”

Sam has also strategically pursued partnerships for Allen's gift lines that reflect their local roots.

“We shifted from several national partnerships with companies like Godiva Chocolates and Papyrus Cards to a local chocolatier and letterpress cards made in San Diego,” Sam explained. “Anything we can offer that's made locally, that's our first choice. For us, it's about differentiating ourselves from other outlets and supporting other local companies like us.”

-J.M.F.

### FILL THE FRAME

The Allen's team created a small photo studio at ACDC to shoot images of their custom designs.



## ALLEN'S FLOWERS & PLANTS

Metro San Diego

**Subsidiary:** [FloralPics.com](http://FloralPics.com)

**Annual sales:** \$1 million+

**Sales trend:** “Consistent annual growth”

**Locations:** 3 retail shops & 1 central design studio with retail outlet

**No. of employees:** Around 50 full-time equivalents

The program, which was introduced fairly recently and still is in the stage of fine-tuning, offers incentives to staff for a range of desired outcomes, from increased add-on sales to more early delivery orders around the holidays. A key component of the effort? Incentives regularly change — sometimes they are calculated per sale on set items (balloons, for instance) and sometimes by monthly volume — to keep staff on their toes and engaged.

“The staff loves the incentives,” said Sam, who since being hired has added “creative director” to his title. “It gives them the opportunity to earn more money, and because we change the program constantly, it generates excitement and interest.”

Sales training has also become a year-round, nonstop affair at Allen's, with the Levys constantly reinforcing policies and introducing new ideas.

One thing that hasn't changed: Allen's reputation as a business that rewards employees with loyalty and room to grow. In fact, some staff members have been at Allen's for decades, and enterprising team members who started in entry-level roles often have moved up to some of the highest levels in sales and design.

“It's not unusual for someone to grow from retail sales, to a hybrid position on the floor where they're doing sales and simple bouquets, to full-on designer,” Sam said.

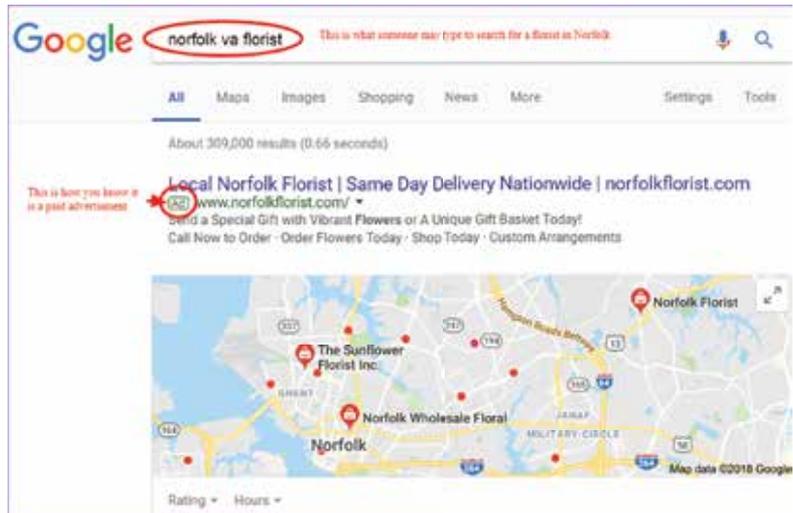
### Beyond Brick and Mortar

With so much additional space at ACDC, the Levys also created a small photo studio area, so that they can shoot images easily of the shop's custom designs.

“The beauty of our central design studio is that we can photograph arrangements at any point in time,” Sam said. “On a day-to-day basis, when we are walking through the design studio, if we see a special order, I can shoot it before it goes out for delivery. We're creating a pretty substantial photo library with a very strong catalog of original images.”



## Attention: Local Retail Florists... IS THIS YOU?



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The photo studio has turned into another revenue stream for the business in the form of a new venture, **FloralPics.com**, where Allen's now sells high-quality images to other shops that don't have the benefit of an in-house photo area. That venture, started this year, is still in its early days — and the Allen's team has done nothing to promote it yet — but they have big plans.

"We're kicking some ideas around on what to do with the site," Sam promised. "Around here, we always have something new." 🌸

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### GO DEEPER

Bringing a nonfamily senior-level team member into a family business can be a challenge — one that requires flexibility and communication on both sides. In Sam Bowles, the Levy family found their ideal candidate, in part because his experience in the industry was deep. Read more about Sam's path to Allen's at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).



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