Meet eight young innovators intent on contributing to — and changing — the floral industry.

BY RENEE HOUSTON ZEMANSKI

The floral industry is transforming, with young innovators set to lead the charge. They have novel ideas, original solutions and plenty of energy to make things happen. Through marketing, streamlining business operations and embracing social media, these forward-thinkers are pioneering initiatives to tackle the floral industry’s biggest challenges and create new opportunities for the future. And with industry-wide visionaries like these, that future looks bright.
Danny Sanchez  
Founder and CEO  
South Florals Group  
Miami, Florida

Who’s that guy?
Sanchez’s foray into the floral industry came when he purchased the 1-800-Flowers.com fulfillment center in Miami more than 12 years ago. Before that, Sanchez, 36, was working as a retail manager.

What’s the big idea?
A born entrepreneur, Sanchez has spent 12 years building companies’ infrastructure, implementing new technologies, conceiving marketing campaigns, increasing social media presence and improving existing business processes in multiple industries, including flowers, real estate, e-commerce and medicine. Since 2014, he’s purchased nine retail flower shop locations, turning around their operations and getting them on a path to profitability. He also founded the Miami Flower Market, a wholesale market, in 2016 and Dr. Planter, a plantscaping and plant maintenance division catering to corporate clients, in 2018.

Secret to success:
Pay attention. Sanchez has revitalized failing shops, in some cases doubling their revenues in as little as two years. He does that by scrutinizing what each operation does best, what they should let go of, and which opportunities they may be missing. “Some shops can turn around just by instilling new marketing procedures,” he said. “The way customers see your shop is not traditional — so you really have to tap into new marketing channels — social media, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram.” Other challenges aren’t so easy to fix, but Sanchez is working on solutions. For example, he is developing software to manage expenses such as costs of goods and fresh flowers to help retail florists become profitable.

Proud moment:
Sanchez saw a need in Miami for a wholesale floral supply and flower market that not only offers special classes and pricing to floral retailers, but also offers the public a place to shop and take classes. In 2016, he opened the Miami Flower Market to a crowd of 1,800 people, assuring him that his gut feeling was undeniably correct. “It really surprised us. I mean, that’s a lot of people for flowers,” he said. The Miami Flower Market not only offers a diverse floral supply and flower selection, it ships nationally, provides customizable products and offers floral design classes to the public. Another service it extends is guidance to DIY brides, offering classes and a free consultation.
presence where we tell a story and build a relationship with our followers,” said Palazzo, who even posts about her floral-related travels. To back up the excitement generated on social media, Palazzo said florists need to provide quality products and great customer service, too. “The industry is changing. Flowers are a luxury and there’s so much competition,” she said. “You have to develop a better connection with your customers by offering a service that competitors can’t. Stand behind your product so they can trust you.”

Proud moment:
Thanks to Palazzo, City Line is involved in community affairs and hosts its own events, like Friday Flower Happy Hour, during which customers can buy flowers at a 50 percent discount. It was a game-changer, said Palazzo. “It’s like Mother’s Day every Friday — a line out the door. It has grown our business tremendously; we have a whole new customer base.”

Who’s that gal?
While other kids were playing with their digital pets and trading Pokémon cards, Nicole Palazzo, 30, was filling up water tubes and breaking up cardettes at her family’s fourth-generation, 100-year-old business. She did this by choice, taking the school bus directly to her family’s flower shop. “I said my first words here. I grew up here,” she said. After college, Palazzo returned to the shop full-time, carving her niche in marketing, social media, product merchandising and sales. Palazzo recently moved to San Diego temporarily and is working remotely for City Line. “I am answering phone calls and selling bouquets as if I am sitting at my desk in Connecticut, still handling all the marketing and social media,” she said.

What’s the big idea?
“I am obsessed with flowers,” said Palazzo, who admits that she used to occasionally say goodnight to her flowers and plants when locking up the shop. “It’s easy to sell something you are passionate about.” Palazzo shares that passion by staying involved. Currently president of the Connecticut Florists Association, she’s also a board member of the Connecticut Unit of Teleflora Members, following in her grandfather’s footsteps. She also serves on the Society of American Florists’ Convention Task Force and cofounded the association’s Next Gen Floral Pros Group to encourage more young people to become active in SAF and share ideas.

Secret to success:
Embrace technology. Palazzo advocates having a polished, comprehensive website to take advantage of e-commerce growth, and using social media to follow trends and build brand loyalty by showing the personal side of a small business. “What’s worked for us is a social media
Those tools that I learned then, I was able to apply them to my work now.”

**What’s the big idea?**
Meskers has applied his knowledge to handle the industry’s challenges with amazing acuity, using technologies learned from Holland to help with the growing side of the business and studying other industries for sales techniques. “We are a very forward-thinking business, focusing on what the end consumer wants,” Meskers said. For instance, Oregon Flowers strives to be the first company to offer new varieties and to alert customers to what’s in season. To make shopping more convenient, Meskers brought in fiber internet and developed an app that indicates flower availability.

**Secret to success:**
Take it to the cloud. A new database program allows Oregon Flowers to track plantings and cuttings to help them determine when products will be for sale. Google Drive syncs with the company’s mobile app and website so when a variety is ready, it automatically updates and informs customers. The program also helps forecast sales earlier — advantageous info, because the company has to buy bulbs two years in advance. “Every year we are getting closer to understanding what people really want,” Meskers said.

**Proud moment:**
As business-minded as he is, Meskers is just as focused on his family. He lives with his wife, Megan, and two sons, Kase, 3, and Beckham, 15 months, in the farmhouse where he grew up. “It’s fun to combine work and pleasure at the same time. Seeing [my kids] daily, grabbing lunch with them, it’s just great,” he said. “My oldest knows everyone here at work by name. This is how I grew up. Raising kids around a business is a lot of fun.”

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**MOST likely to leverage tech**

**Tyler Meskers**
Vice President
Oregon Flowers
Aurora, Oregon

**Who’s that guy?**
As a second-generation grower, Meskers, 31, loves to talk about growing up on the family farm in Aurora, Oregon, and now raising his sons on that same homestead. But Meskers didn’t begin his career there. Taking the advice of his father, Martin Meskers, AAF, SAF’s chairman, he set out to find his own path. “Some of the best advice my dad gave me was to ‘Work elsewhere to understand what it’s like to work for somebody and understand other expectations,’” said Meskers, who worked for his uncle on a bulb farm in Holland, then for a vineyard supply company in his hometown, and a bulb company in Chile before settling down at Oregon Flowers. “[Those experiences] opened my eyes to seeing the world and understanding everything a little bit more,” he said. “Using

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**MOST likely to problem-solve**

**Brian Foster**
Assistant Operations Manager
Mayesh LA Flower Market
Los Angeles

**Who’s that guy?**
Growing up in Naples, Florida, Foster, 35, always thought he would end up in a creative field, and it wasn’t until he took a job in restaurant management that he realized he had a knack for solving operational challenges. “I love walking into a place that’s a little chaotic and needs to be improved in multiple ways, and then figuring out the puzzle of how we’re going to get it done,” he said. Foster has embraced that talent and changed the way Mayesh does business at the LA Flower Market, which caters to wedding and event professionals.

**What’s the big idea?**
When Foster arrived at the market three years ago, he saw frenzied employees, jumbled displays and one manager who managed sales — the rest of the operations were handled on the fly. Even though sales were steady, profit margins were low. That’s when he stepped back, analyzed the situation and started tweaking. First, he changed how product was received, and then implemented a new way to use the computer system to break down sold and available products.

“It was a free-for-all — salespeople grabbing what they need and nothing
accounted for — until we separated the salesforce from the back of house,” he said. “Now, instead of Monday mornings being a chaotic rush, we separate products on Sundays so the sales team can go to their individual shelves and collect their products.”

**Secret to success:**
Listen to your customers. When it comes to visual merchandising, “I’ll ask ‘What do you think of our floor?’ My point of view is totally different than theirs,” said Foster. Customer ideas included elevating product to eye level and above and changing the way the greens were displayed so customers could tell where the sales floor ends and where processing begins. Foster said that he will always be tweaking things. “There are a million projects that we completed and a million more that we still have, but I love the challenge.”

**Proud moment:**
Three years in, Foster’s satisfied with how things are working. “Sales are up, stress is down and margins have increased — a great combination,” he said. “We’re recouping money on delivery fees, making life better for our employees and delivering a good product at the same time — that’s what does it for me.”

**Most Likely to Dive into the Data**

Maya Sagastume  
**Director of Marketing**  
Equiflor-Rio Roses  
Miami, Florida

**Who’s that gal?**
Sagastume, 33, has always been a research-driven professional, working while attending college as she earned both her bachelor’s and master’s in business from Florida International University. Before joining Equiflor in 2016, she worked first as a project manager and then as director for Americas Market Intelligence, a premier market intelligence and research firm for Latin
Most Likely to Go Above & Beyond

Courtney Buckley, DPM
Head Grower–Trial Manager
Sakata Seed America
Salinas, California

Who’s that gal?
Courtney Buckley, 37, draws her creativity from her passion: quilting. Her hobby provides inspiration for her job at Sakata Seed America where she oversees the ornamental seed trials and manages the production of new floral material presented at the California Spring Trials. “Quilting lends itself to an amazing palette of colors. Seeing those colors come to life in my trials brings me joy,” said Buckley, who earned her doctorate in plant medicine from the University of Florida, working there and at two other positions before bringing her knowledge and talent to Sakata.

What’s the big idea?
Coworkers say Buckley has vision and creativity allowing her to go above and beyond her job, seeing the micro and macro views to any situation. This, they say, not only allows her to have the science-based knowledge to grow and produce a beautiful product but also the vision and creativity to know how to best accentuate and display that product. It was that creative mindset that led Sakata to select Buckley to develop a landscape plan for the highly visible front beds at its newest research and innovation facility in Woodland, California. The project’s challenge, Buckley said, was designing for a different climate. “I had to really consider what would work best for that area, while still being con-
Production and processing and logistics inbou...d and outbound. Her new role is making sure that the execution is a success, taking the concept into the market with consistency. “For a couple of years, we have been working on lean manufacturing — a system to eliminate non-value-added activities and waste. It was a challenge but also very interesting and we’ve made continuous improvement in production to reduce costs,” she said.

Secret to success: Focus online. “We have this tool that’s glued to people’s hands — the phone — and it gives us the opportunity to connect to people instantly. We should be using this tool to get people to incorporate flowers into their daily routine. Using these [social media] platforms to say, ‘How about buying flowers for your dinner table tonight?’ Be aware of that space in order to connect with your consumers in an

Secret to success: Science, baby. While Buckley’s creative talent is an advantage in her role, her scientific knowledge provides Sakata with the initiative the company needs to be competitive in the global market. Buckley is responsible for analyzing 10 to 15 plant trials simultaneously, either for forecasting sales or for technical purposes such as testing a new plant growth regulator to see how varieties react. “We spend a lot of time researching and collecting data. It’s not an easy process to predict what will sell since it takes five to seven years from breeding to market introduction,” she said.

Proud moment: Buckley recognizes the fruits of her labor when she sees consumers interact with flowers. “The happiness and joy you see when someone receives flowers is immensely rewarding,” she said. “In that moment, all the growing, data collection and time spent agonizingly deciding if there is really a difference between those two shades of pink, is all worth it.”

Grow the Next Gen

How do you help cultivate the next generation of leaders, for your business and the industry? The Society of American Florists has resources aimed directly at younger floral professionals, including our Next Gen Floral Pros Group on Facebook — email info@safnow.org or message us on Facebook for more info — and our regular webinar training and education series at safnow.org/webinars. Plus, be sure to check out the American Floral Endowment and its host of internship and scholarship opportunities. Find out more at endowment.org.
Ball Horticultural Company in Chicago. After working on different projects there, she returned to Colombia to work as the sales director for Ball SB. Her territories include Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Kenya and Ethiopia.

What’s the big idea?
What de la Torre, who previously worked in the hospitality industry, brings to Ball is enthusiasm, energy and expertise on marketing — specifically marketing to the new generation and capturing emerging trends. “With internet sales taking over and social media being so strong now, we are changing the way we market our products,” she said.

Secret to success:
Laser focus on demand. “Flowers are an impulse buy; we are researching how internet shopping is going to change that,” de la Torre said. “How do we capture that impulse buy on the internet? The new generations are not only changing the way they buy but also the products they buy,” she added, noting that younger generations continue to seek out a more natural, wildflower look in floral design and have helped return longtime industry staples (think: tweekedia, snapdragons and delphinium) to trendy selections.

Forward thinking:
De la Torre also closely watches trends outside the industry to project what colors and varieties may be popular. In particular, she tunes in to the fashion industry. “We always say, we’re in the fashion business, too. We look to it for inspiration to see the colors, the trends, the way they market, how quickly they work. I’ve been surprised how fast these trends change,” she said. The rapid changeover in trends is a real challenge for growers since coming up with a new color or variety can take five, 10 and even up to 15 years of work. “It’s a very slow process. We need to really think ahead when it comes to breeding. We need to project and add a little bit of guessing, too. There’s a lot of work behind it.”

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