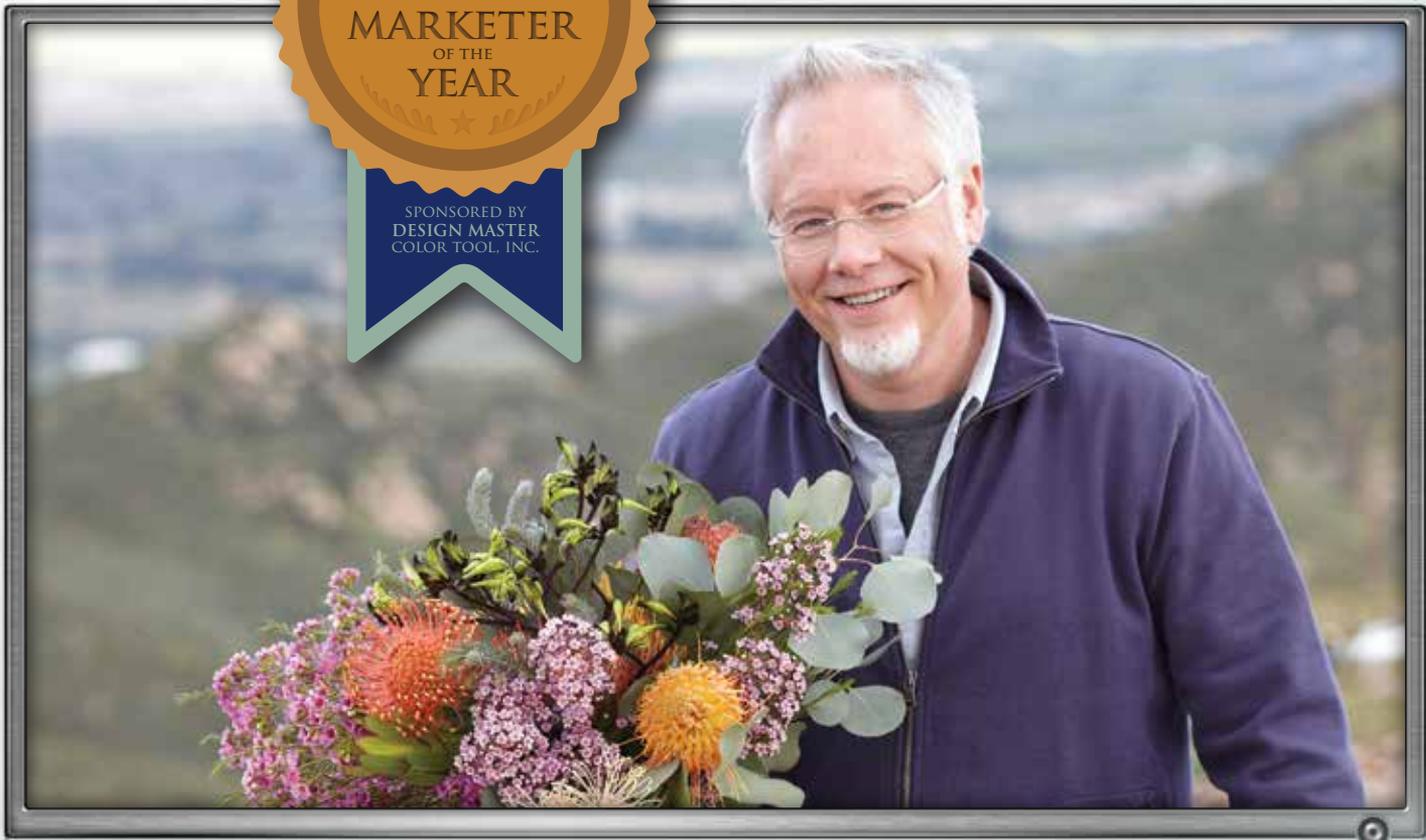




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Prime (Bloom) Time

How J Schwanke leveraged a lifelong passion for the floral industry to create a national TV show dedicated to promoting flowers — winning new fans and Floral Management’s 2019 Marketer of the Year award in the process.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

Jn early 2016, J Schwanke, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, was looking for a new challenge — which, truth be told, is not an unusual state for the fourth-generation florist.

The son of former Society of American Florists president Mel Schwanke, AAF, and his beloved wife, Joey, AAF, PFCI, J was born into the floral industry. (No kidding: Joey actually went into labor during an event at the Nebraska Florist Society Growers School.) Growing up, J worked in his family's flower shop in Fremont, Nebraska, tagged along with his parents to industry events, listened to the buzz of industry news daily, and learned design techniques and best practices in the business from some of the industry's top professionals.

After earning a bachelor's degree in marketing and public relations, Schwanke forged his own career, becoming one of the industry's most sought-after design educators and presenters, a person who can break

"This project as a whole creates an inspired awareness that educates individuals as well as motivates them to seek out and use flowers in the many ways that their unique style allows."

—Diana Roy, Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers

down complicated concepts and engage just about any audience. The founder of uBloom.com and the web broadcast series "Fun with Flowers and J" (and its predecessor "JTV"), Schwanke is the author of two highly regarded floral design and arrangement books — among many (many) other projects.

The thing about Schwanke that everybody who meets him immediately recognizes: The man is passionate (with a capital "P!") about the floral industry. The cut flowers, plants and design, yes, but also the people behind these beautiful products — growers in California, Florida, Colombia or Kenya; importers; wholesalers; truck drivers; brick-and-

mortar shop owners; event designers; the man in a bodega selling carnations at 3 a.m. to the sheepish twentysomething guy who needs to get out of the doghouse.

Following in the footsteps of his father, who was known to urge, "As an industry, we need to sell more flowers to more people more often," Schwanke's goal has always been straightforward: He wants more people to share in his deep, deep flower love, because it's good for the industry (of course!) but also because, at the end of the day, Schwanke believes with all of his heart that daily encounters with blooms are just really, really good for the soul — everybody's soul.



MAN WITH A PLAN J Schwanke, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, on location filming at Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, California (left) and on location at Greens Greenhouses in Nebraska with his sister, Cindy McKown (above).



SHOW AND TELL “This has been such a team effort,” said Schwanke, of his new television show. The show features site visits to industry businesses.

For all of Schwanke’s success sharing that message, in 2016, he was ready to take his storytelling skills to a larger platform. He might not have realized it at the time, but a serendipitous encounter at the Dallas Market Center was about to help him build that bigger stage through “J Schwanke’s Life in Bloom,” a public television series that has helped Schwanke not only find and create a wider audience of flower fans, but, in the process, win Floral Management’s 2019 Marketer of the Year honors. The award, sponsored by Design Master color tool, inc., comes with a \$5,000 prize.

A Chance Encounter, a Spark of Inspiration

While building his own brand and creative enterprises, Schwanke also has become a trusted partner for a plethora of likeminded, design-oriented businesses, including the Dallas Market Center, where, for more than a decade, he’s served as a design expert.

It was that role that brought him into contact in January 2016 with P. Allen Smith — the garden designer, lifestyle

expert and host of several TV shows distributed by American Public Television.

Smith was scheduled to be a guest of the Market at that time, and organizers asked Schwanke to serve as a liaison, giving Smith a tour, introducing him to customers, vendors and other VIPs and making sure he was prepped for his appearances. The pair found they had plenty in common — “We were even born just five days apart,” Schwanke said with a laugh — and became fast friends. Schwanke soon was appearing as a frequent guest on Smith’s shows, bringing with him not only his own knowledge of flowers, plants and design but also his industry connections, including growers and wholesalers who were happy to help supply beautiful blooms for the broadcasts.

“At a certain point, P. Allen looked at me and said, ‘You know, you’ve done so much for me, what can I do for you? How can I help you?’” Schwanke said. His response? “I’d really like my own TV show.”

Indeed, Schwanke had long dreamed of a TV opportunity and,

throughout his career, has been an adopter of new technology and new business ideas — he’s not exactly the type of person to wait for an opportunity to come his way. Instead, he creates them. He started hosting his web series in 2006 and founded his own production company, J Schwanke Productions.

In fact, several networks had approached Schwanke in the past about a reality show centered on turning around failing floral businesses — premises that revolved around Schwanke giving tough love to flaky owners and disgruntled staff. Another network suggested a wedding-themed reality program, in which Schwanke would present a bride with three proposals from three different florists.

Each option felt problematic or mean-spirited to Schwanke.

“Because we in this industry are passionate and creative, we can come off as a little crazy on our own. We don’t need any help with that,” Schwanke said. “I love this industry. I want to lift people up, not tear them down.”

A Dream Takes Flight

That sentiment helps explain why Smith's model may have been so appealing. Public television offered a path to an educated audience, a path already made clear by luminaries such as Smith, Martha Stewart, and the painter Bob Ross, not to mention legends such as Julia Child (an influencer and lifestyle guru in her own right, before such terms existed).

"I also liked that, through public television, the storytelling and information we shared would be available to everyone," Schwanke said.

Stats on public television supported Schwanke's instincts. Industry research shows that PBS reaches 94 percent of all U.S. households and 41 percent of viewers hold a postgraduate degree.

The timing was right for other reasons, too. Schwanke's deep ties to industry businesses made for a lengthy list of potential collaborators. Plus, he had a strong, educated instinct (and experience) about the kind of programming he wanted to do, and the kind that he thought would do well.

Through uBloom.com, for instance, Schwanke already had produced popular video projects, including "The California Grown Experience," a 40-episode series that brought viewers to fields and greenhouses of Golden State growers, and "The Florida Fresh Foliage and Flower Tour," which provided a look behind the operations at eight grower operations in the Sunshine State.

Schwanke huddled with his crew of nine people — including his longtime partner and chief collaborator, Kelly Blank, who serves as executive producer and art director; director of photography and camera one, Keith Golinski; and director and editor, Chris Randall — to brainstorm how to show the general public the work that goes into growing, transporting and designing with cut flowers, through visits to farms and shops, along with the many uses of flowers in everyday life and the health benefits flowers and plants provide.

More than anything, the uBloom team wanted to create a show that revealed the joy and good feelings flowers can add to anybody's life. And that's when "J Schwanke's Life in Bloom" began to really take shape.



Campaign Breakdown

Concept: A new public television show, "J Schwanke's Life in Bloom," focused on the power of flowers and encouraging more people to buy more flowers more often.

Audience: Public television offered Schwanke an educated, affluent audience — and a big footprint: According to Nielsen, PBS reaches 94 percent of U.S. households and an IPSOS survey found that 41 percent of PBS viewers hold postgraduate degrees.

Reach: By September 2019, the show was appearing on broadcast schedules in 158 markets and 325 channels, covering 49 states — reaching an estimated 87 percent of the country — with a potential market of more than 242 million viewers.



BOTANICAL BUDDS Schwanke and Chef Jenna, of Amore Trattoria, toast a rose-infused vodka while filming. Schwanke has taken viewers on a tour of the many uses of flowers, including health benefits and culinary creations.



CRAFTED WITH LOVE Schwanke collaborated with guest Jennifer Ackerman-Haywood of CraftSanity.com during season one.

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Flowers to the People

Still, talking about starting a television show is one thing. Starting a show from scratch? That's another (pull-your-hair-out-oh-my-gosh-what-did-I-get-myself-into) thing. Schwanke soon realized just how challenging his new project would be.

The group's first task: Understand how public television works. All local stations are autonomous, meaning they schedule programs independently of each other — meaning the path to a national audience can seem pretty convoluted.

To get their show off the ground, Schwanke and his team would have to first create something interesting and engaging and then pitch it to a local station willing to act as a presenting station. That task at least was strictly in Schwanke's wheelhouse, and to a certain degree, already in his archive. For a pilot episode, created in 2016 and 2017 to share with producers, the team repurposed footage from their uBloom.com documentaries on growers in California and Florida, supplementing the videos with additional footage filmed in recent years. (Schwanke self-funded the project to create two

versions of the pilot; ultimately, both were included in the show's first season.)

Schwanke showed the episode to two stations in Michigan, his home state, before WKAR in Lansing agreed to present the show. From there, the team could pitch the show to American Public Television, the largest syndicator of programming for public television stations in the United States, in the hopes of gaining access to a national audience.

Pitching the show required Schwanke to draw on his storytelling experience, and to stick to his vision.

"In the public television space, I think people are very familiar with gardening and the idea of a gardening show," explained Schwanke, who also played a lead role in finding underwriters for the show. "I had to keep saying, 'No. This is something different. This is cut flowers.' And once I was able to explain to them all the things that we would cover, they got really interested."

After months of hard work, "J Schwanke's Life in Bloom" was featured during American Public Television's Fall Marketplace in November 2018. During

the event, PBS station programmers see previews of new shows and then make decisions on which programs to include in their coming schedules. When it came to “Life in Bloom,” programmers liked what they saw, and in April 2019, the show debuted with 13 episodes offered on 120 channels in 63 markets, reaching an estimated 44 percent of the country.

And interest is growing. By September 2019, the show was appearing on broadcast schedules in 158 markets and 325 channels, covering 49 states — reaching an estimated 87 percent of the country — with a potential market of more than 242 million viewers.

Programmers are continuing to put their support behind Schwanke’s efforts, too. American Public Television has already agreed to present seasons two and three, and in August 2019, Create, a network that broadcasts how-to, DIY and other lifestyle-oriented instructional programming 24 hours a day, also picked up the show, ensuring even more people will see the program — and all the flowers, inspiration and floral pros featured in it.

Bloom Time

When you watch the entirety of the first season of “J Schwanke’s Life in Bloom” — available at pbs.org/show/j-schwanke-life-bloom — you get a strong sense for the world Schwanke has been working so hard to create.

Episodes open with a flower-themed quote, and the music is meditative and peaceful. Schwanke, for all his extensive knowledge and success in the floral industry, welcomes viewers (and guests) warmly — like the friends they are — and he clearly delights in the subject matter at hand. Among the topics he’s covered so far: the health benefits of flowers and plants; the connections between flowers and cooking; design trends and the rising popularity of succulents; how to create centerpieces with found objects. The list goes on, and Schwanke says the potential for future storylines is endless, because his own fascination with the content has no bounds.

There’s something else that’s special about the series, too. In a time when it can feel rather daunting to tune in to the news, Schwanke has created a refuge — one that celebrates flowers and the unique, personal connections they help

create. That’s a great story for the entire industry, say floral professionals who support the program.

“The show, and especially J as the host, presents flowers in a simple and accessible way,” said Michael T. LoBue, CAE, CEO of the California Association of Flower Growers & Shippers, an underwriter of the series. “It also reaches new audiences the industry may not be able to easily reach. His presentation of flowers and how to make them part of everyday décor is educational, and helps consumers connect emotionally with flowers on their own terms.”

Diana Roy, of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, California, and last year’s Marketer of the Year winner, said she and owner Mel Resendiz admire the “thoroughness of the series,” which featured a visit to the Resendiz farm in episode three.

“J takes viewers from the field where the flowers are grown, to the many types of designs that can be created with them and even how they can be used after they’ve dried,” said Roy, adding that Schwanke’s goals often complement her own.

“We’re in the business of helping people express feelings with flowers, and this show is an example of how we can promote the use of our products in consumers’ everyday lives.”

—Gabriel Becerra, Golden Flowers

“This series highlights one of the core missions of our farm: to create awareness and inspiration for this beautiful and varied family of Proteaceae,” she said. “This project as a whole creates an inspired awareness that educates individuals as well as motivates them to seek out and use flowers in the many ways that their unique style allows.”

Mimi Martinez Pacheco, marketing manager for Chrysal, said the company signed on as the program’s closed caption funder because of Schwanke’s approach and reputation and because PBS shows are “synonymous with credibility.”

“I love that through the show, J introduces farms, facts and history to such a

widespread audience,” she said. “‘Life in Bloom’ brings intrigue and history to our industry. It reminds us to embrace the flowers that surround us and search for ways to have them in our lives.”

For Pacheco, the effect was deeply personal: “After watching an episode, I immediately logged onto Etsy and bought a vintage flower frog and started a new collection,” she said.

Debora Steier, a vice president of floral at Albertsons Companies, another underwriter of the series, said she too admires the show’s ambition.

“This has not been done in our industry before or at this level, and J is a great face for the industry,” she said. “We as an industry need to do all we can to promote flowers to the American public to help increase consumption. Imagine if we can just get everyone to buy one more time per year, what that would do for the industry and the customer’s experience with flowers.”

Gabriel Becerra, president of Golden Flowers, which represents dozens of farms in Colombia, also supports the program as an underwriter; he sees it as a project that offers broad benefits.

“We are firm believers that collaborating on projects such as this one will make us stronger as an industry,” he said. “After all, we’re in the business of helping people express feelings with flowers, and this show is an example of how we can promote the use of our products in consumers’ everyday lives.”

As for Schwanke, this summer he was already busily at work on filming new episodes for the coming seasons. For him, the good work — and his life in bloom — continues. 🌸

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