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MARY WESTBROOK EDITOR IN CHIEF
MWESTBROOK@SAFNOW.ORG

SHEILA S. SANTIAGO DIRECTOR OF PUBLISHING
SSANTIAGO@SAFNOW.ORG

KATIE HENDRICK VINCENT SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
KVINCENT@SAFNOW.ORG

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION
CONTENT WORX

PUBLISHING ADVISERS
KATE F. PENN, SAF CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
DREW GRUENBURG, SAF CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

EDITORIAL OFFICES
SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FLORISTS
1001 NORTH FAIRFAX, SUITE 201, ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314-3406
(800) 336-4743; (703) 836-8700; FAX (703) 836-8705
WWW.SAFNOW.ORG

ADVERTISING SALES
HEATHER MACALUSO
HEATHER@SAFNOW.ORG
(717) 430-2224

LAURA GAENZLE
LAURA@SAFNOW.ORG
(717) 430.2351

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ON LESSONS (AND SUPPLIES) WORTH SHARING

> If there were ever a strange metaphor for a long career, a red stapler might be it.

On December 8, 1981, I was welcomed to SAF, introduced to staff members, steered to my office and given a red stapler. No pens. No pencils. No paper. No typewriter. No tools for an aspiring writer and editor. Just a red stapler.

I wondered about it, but really, it didn't much matter. I had a job I wanted because, well, I *needed* a job after finishing graduate school. It wasn't because of a burning passion I had for the floral industry — something I was fully ignorant of. I had a job and life was good.

Thirty-eight years later (that's 36 years longer than I planned), I still have the job, although it bears little resemblance to the one I started with. And that's due in large part to an industry that has changed dramatically in that time for many reasons, but three factors rise to the top: competition, technology and the consumer.

The competition looks very different today. While it's never been easy running a small business, 38 years ago business owners were not besieged and barraged from all sides by competition from the internet, nontraditional sales outlets, disruptors, big box stores, supermarkets, freelance designers, event florists, locally grown flowers, farmers' markets and direct-to-consumer companies. On top of that, today more than ever there is fierce competition for employees.

Technology has forever altered the industry landscape. The year 1981 does not seem that long ago to me, but back then telephone and the U.S. Postal Service were the prominent and essentially the *only* communications tools — except when the fax machine entered the picture. No websites, email, mobile phones, personal computers, Facetime, Instagram, Amazon, apps, Uber or Lyft. The list of new technology tools used every day by business owners in the industry to sell, market and communicate can go on and on, and none of it existed 38 years ago. None of it.

With so many new competitive forces and the advent of so much new

technology, it's no wonder that consumer buying behavior has evolved dramatically as well since 1981.

Long gone are the days of waiting for the phone to ring. From the "just in time" mentality, to mobile buying, to consumers wanting memories and experiences and demanding excellent customer service — the consumer is very much in charge and business owners have to evolve and adapt to keep pace with savvy customers.

Working in an industry that regularly evolves and changes is one reason I've been engaged and energized in my career for so long. But also, there are those unchanging and enduring things that have kept me here. The first is witnessing every day the focus, commitment and drive of the business owners I have interacted with for so many years. Whether part of a family-owned business or an entrepreneur starting out with a vision and not much more, it's been a wonder to work with so many generous people for whom I have the utmost admiration.

The other constant is the commitment to a strong and vital SAF. SAF has reinvented itself several times during my career and is about to embark on some dramatic new changes. I've been involved and active with many volunteer leaders helping to guide and implement those reinventions. But what has never wavered in my time here is SAF's commitment and mission to both serve and advance the floral industry.

I still have the red stapler. It's in my desk drawer. I use it often. It's constructed well. It's not flashy but it connects, fastens, holds true. It's there when you need it, and it has stood the test of time. I'm glad someone gave it to me my first day. It will be here for someone else to use when I leave. 📎

Drew Gruenburg is the chief operating officer of the Society of American Florists. He will retire in December. dgruenburg@safnow.org

