

RAZZLE Dazzle THEM

BY KATIE HENDRICK VINCENT

How Botanica became the events experts — and why their secrets to delivering a phenomenal experience, start to finish, apply to your business, too.

JUSTIN DEMUTIS COURTESY OF THE SCOUT GUIDE TAMPA



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When you're an internationally known florist who's done countless high-profile events, including two presidential inaugurations, the 2012 Republican National Convention, celebrity functions, six-figure weddings and Society of American Florists "Stars of the Industry" galas, you don't mark major milestones with cake or a staff lunch and call it a day. You do what you do best: throw an elaborate, jaw-dropping party.

That's exactly what Botanica International Design & Decor Studio in Tampa, Florida, did for its 30th anniversary in January 2019. On an exceptionally blustery Sunday night, dozens of wedding vendors, longtime friends and a few past clients trekked to The Orlo, a historic home, to celebrate and marvel at the décor. Bistro lights and hundreds of votive candles led them down a custom carpet, printed with excerpts from client testimonials. Curtains of delphinium dripped down railings, setting a fairytale-like scene. Inside, a cascade of roses, hydrangeas, Phalaenopsis orchids and greenery tumbled down a staircase. In a corner, a woman dressed like a cross between Marie Antoinette and Princess Barbie sat perched on a platform, playing an electric violin. Bartenders mixed up signature cocktails, servers circulated with trays laden with hors d'oeuvres and special lighting gave the whole space a warm, rosy glow.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS Botanica International Design & Decor Studio, run by Ian Prosser, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, and his children, Jordan, and Zoë Gallina, AAF, has cornered the niche on high-end weddings in central and southwest Florida, thanks to their big-picture thinking, extensive inventory of furniture and accessories and top-notch communication skills.



TIFFANI JONES PHOTOGRAPHY

MARVELOUS NIGHT Botanica's comprehensive offerings allow the company to create memorable spaces of all kinds for event clients.

Shortly into the affair, Botanica founder Ian Prosser, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, surprised the crowd with his announcement that the cocktail hour was merely the preamble — the real party was just getting started. He guided them around back to a ballroom, where a live band waited on stage. The room was done up in Botanica's signature style, with massive displays of tropical and traditional flowers and greenery and designated lounge areas for guests to rest their feet.

Before the music started, Prosser and his children, Jordan, Botanica's flower buyer, and Zoë Gallina, AAF,

creative director, took a few minutes to share some memories — from those “sick days” that coincidentally *always* fell on February 14 so they could skip school and help with Valentine's Day orders, to the “enormous leap of faith” they took in 2007, when they eliminated their retail business. That crucial pivot helped Botanica find its true identity as a high-end, full-service event design company that offers customers a comprehensive and exceptional experience. “We have had quite the journey,” Prosser said.

Here is their story.

Assessing the Situation

In the early 2000s, after nearly two decades in business in Tampa, Botanica enjoyed good name recognition, but the pains of running a brick-and-mortar shop were becoming stronger and harder to ignore. Accessories and household items, longtime cash cows, leveled off as customers flocked to discount chain stores, like TJ Maxx or HomeGoods. Deliveries ate into profit margins and preoccupied Prosser and his team.

“We had four or five drivers, and they were not efficient *at all*,” Prosser remi-

nised, shaking his head. “They'd take an hour and a half for a trip two miles away!” He spent an inordinate amount of time in those pre-GPS days printing out directions on MapQuest and mapping out routes for drivers. Rising gas prices only heightened his frustration.

Around 2006, a young, ambitious architect built some condominiums across the street from Botanica. He approached the Prosser family about buying the building because he wanted to own and transform the entire block. “I initially turned him down but changed my mind when he offered to pay the full appraised value,” Prosser said. However, the economy turned south before they had a written contract and the deal fell apart.

Nonetheless, it turned out to be a watershed moment because it set in motion plans to upend Botanica's business model. When talking with the architect, Prosser came to the conclusion that event work was his future. “I saw the scales shift,” he said. “Weddings and events had become about 60 percent of our business.” If he narrowed his focus and ditched retail, he wouldn't need his 7,200-square-foot building with its

BOTANICA INTERNATIONAL DESIGN & DECOR

Tampa, Fla.

Founded: 1989

No. of events in 2019: 108

Price per event: \$10,000– 250,000

No. of employees: 9 full-time, 6 part-time

Career highlights: Presidential inaugurations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, 2012 Republican National Convention, Donna Summer's daughter's wedding, events for the British royal family

spacious showroom, nor would he have to keep delivery drivers and a string of salespeople on his payroll.

"I had the bug. I wanted a change," Prosser said. "So I put the building on the market and prayed someone would bite." In November 2007, he sold to a popular restaurateur and rented a 3,500-square-foot space across town. Prosser sent letters to longtime clients, put an ad in the local paper and threw a moving party to announce his rebranding as an event florist.

Putting in Face Time

The fresh start was exhilarating — and equally terrifying. "We knew, off the bat, we'd lose 40 percent of our income without retail sales," Prosser said.

To offset the loss, Gallina, a recent college graduate and addition to the staff, put her marketing degree to the test. With her weekly stipend, Gallina devoted every Wednesday to meeting with wedding vendors. In the morning, she treated old friends to coffee; unacquainted vendors she took to lunch.

"Word of mouth was everything back then," she said. "Facebook was still primarily a site for college kids — not a marketing tool for businesses. You had to do most things in person."

At the same time, there was a changing of the guard among local wedding planners, with several familiar faces retiring and a wave of women in their 20s and 30s joining the field. Gallina befriended these rookies early in their careers; now, a few of them specialize in six- and seven-figure events and routinely refer Botanica for décor.

"I cannot overstate the impact of Zoë's networking," Prosser said. "Within a year, she replaced 98 percent of the business we'd lost. And she continues to nurture relationships — with clients, with planners, with venue managers, with photographers, you name it — and that effort keeps the business coming."

PRECISION AND PERSONALITY Botanica designers (below) follow detailed recipes Ian Prosser (above right) created with his son and flower buyer, Jordan (above left) and daughter and creative director, Zoë Gallina (above center). The company goes the extra mile by preparing a show table weeks in advance and welcoming frequent communication throughout the planning process.



PHOTOS BY JUSTIN DEMUTHIS

Going Beyond the Blooms

As Prosser and Gallina sat in consultations, they quickly picked up on a common refrain. Brides were repeatedly asking for add-ons, such as linens, chargers, drapery and lounge furniture. Could they help? (Their answer: "Of course!")

Subcontracting from other companies was easy enough, but they saw potential for a lucrative new revenue stream. "We did the math and realized, we only had to sell most items twice to cover our costs, and then it would be pure profit," Gallina said. "It was a no-brainer to invest in pieces that people requested all the time."

Gradually, Botanica acquired furniture and accessories (which required four storage units) and began positioning the business as full-service event specialists.

Many clients appreciate the one-stop-shop option because it streamlines the number of invoices and emails they receive, plus it greatly reduces the chance for miscommunication, Gallina explained. "There's a lot less for them to keep track of, and they can trust they'll get a cohesive look because there aren't too many cooks in the kitchen," she said. "That's good for us too, because we have more control shaping the overall look and can make sure it's up to our standard." (It also helps with efficiency; Botanica workers don't have to wait around for another vendor to put out tables, chairs and linens before setting up.)

A typical Botanica bride spends between \$18,000 and \$25,000 for her big day, which includes a few pieces of furniture (almost always a bar and often sofas, end chairs and a coffee table) and at least one statement piece, such as a floral chandelier, wall or "table skirt" around the wedding cake. That said, each year, the company has a few clients who go "all out" on flowers and décor. "Our biggest wedding was \$240,000," Prosser said.

In a few short years, those four storage units were filled to the brim with sofas, tables, linens and various accessories. It was time to move again.



VISUAL MERCHANDISING Brides who want to browse before they buy are welcome to walk through Botanica and StyleHouse's warehouse, which is neatly organized by category and style.

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SPECIAL TOUCHES Prosser and Gallina have an encyclopedic knowledge of flowers, venues and their own vast inventory, which allows them to customize events.

Setting the Mood

In 2012, Botanica resettled in an 8,000-square-foot warehouse, which holds a majority of its inventory (duplicate pieces of furniture stay off campus in a 1,000-square-foot storage unit) and provides ample space for design, offices and dedicated client area (this includes a comfy waiting room, two consultation rooms and a back room to stage show tables).

Having two separate consultation rooms helps Botanica appeal to brides' different personalities. The first room has aubergine walls, a chocolate-colored sofa, white leather chair, mercury glass sideboard and photos of timeless, monobotanical bouquets; it's for traditional and businesslike brides. More eclectic brides go in the second room, painted teal, outfitted with an Oriental rug, a Lucite coffee table, modern gold shelving unit, tribal chandelier, white sofa and bright, geometric throw pillows.

"Meeting in a room they relate to immediately puts clients at ease," Prosser said. He and Gallina look for cues, such as the bride's attire, to decide where to hold a consultation. "If she arrives

wearing a pencil skirt, kitten heels and pearls, she's probably more comfortable in a more classic space," he said. "If she's wearing raw hem jeans and trendy accessories, we're more likely to wow her in the Boho room."

Additionally, Prosser and Gallina dress to impress. Prosser typically wears a dress shirt, sport coat and tailored jeans or slacks, while Gallina dons maxi dresses or cigarette pants with flowy blouses and, always, statement earrings. "You want to present the best version of yourself," Gallina said. "Clients want to see that you have style."

Selling the Fantasy

Clients considering Botanica for their weddings come to the consultation with some specific ideas of what they like (colors, flowers, themes); they leave with a concrete, big-picture vision that makes the big day feel oh so real.

Equipped with an encyclopedic knowledge of flowers, venues and their expansive inventory of hardgoods, Prosser and Gallina can conceptualize, describe and sketch a prospective event

on the spot. They walk the client through the whole experience, depicting sights, textures and smells. Their suggestions, offered without hesitation, convey enthusiasm and expertise, which relaxes clients and makes upselling a breeze.

Many brides are familiar with décor trends, such as floral chandeliers and flower walls, "but most don't think about things like having stage décor to cover up ugly cords, or putting decorations on the bar," Gallina explained. "The bar," Prosser added, "is where a lot of guests camp out. So, we tell them, it's really a smart place to invest in flowers, lighting and custom details."

Likewise, the duo makes a very convincing argument for including some plush seating with sofas or settees. "Lounge areas make such a difference," Gallina said. "Guests who want to take a break from dancing love them, as do the people who don't like to dance, but want to be close to the action. People want their events to feel like intimate gatherings and furniture helps achieve that." Having samples of said furniture on site allows clients to look up close and touch



WELCOMING ARRANGEMENT Botanica has two different consultation rooms to cater to brides' different personalities and styles.

various options — a definite advantage in closing the deal.

Botanica's success hinges on Prosser's and Gallina's ability to take a bride's loose ideas (accessed through an online questionnaire), amplify them with unique details and translate what they have in mind. "You can be the most talented, most creative florist in the world, but if you can't sell your vision to your client, it doesn't matter," Prosser said.

Botanica has a booking rate of 90 percent and, on average, clients spend about \$20,000 (though they've had many top \$100,000), with most exceeding their initial budget when they see the advantage of finishing touches.

Providing Peace of Mind

Catering to a high-end clientele requires a remarkable level of service.

"Brides expect to receive a proposal promptly and to see lots of details, including images, recipes and variety names with a breakdown of the prices," Gallina said. "It's a lot of work, but we make sure they get all this info within a week of the consultation."

Following the consultation, Botanica brides also return to see an example of their reception centerpieces and table setting. This service can cost hundreds of dollars, which Botanica eats, said Jordan Prosser, who joined the family business in late 2011. "An arrangement might only call for five or 10 'Romantic Antike' garden roses, but no one's going to sell them to me in that quantity, and we can't just sell the leftovers in a shop special," he said. "Plus, we have a lot of brides who love the 'everything but the kitchen sink' type designs with lots of different varieties, most of them premium flowers."

"Worth every penny," Ian replied. "It eliminates any questions or concerns so we're more likely to have a satisfied bride." Botanica uses the extra flowers in arrangements for bridal boutiques and hair salons to market the business.

Another expectation? Frequent communication. While the show table does reduce a lot of the back and forth, "We still have plenty of brides who reach out all the time with questions or changes up until the deadline," Gallina said. (Botanica's contract prohibits decreasing

items from the proposal within 21 days of the wedding; increases can be made up to five days ahead.)

There's no limit or additional fee for these exchanges. "We have clients spending anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000," Gallina said. "They deserve a little extra hand holding."

To make sure every client feels cared for, Gallina established a rule that no one goes home before answering any email that arrives during business hours, even if it is simply to say, "I have received your message and will give you a thorough answer soon!"

Thinking Outside the Box

In January 2017, Gallina had a 2 a.m. epiphany. Botanica could get even more mileage out of its hardgoods by marketing them as a standalone service.

"I figured, there are probably people who don't want or need our floral styling, but they have an event and might want some sofas or chaises or bars," she said.

The next day, she discussed the idea with her dad and brother, who enthusiastically agreed.



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Family TIES

During Botanica's 30th anniversary bash, founder Ian Prosser, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, surprised his children, Zoë Gallina, AAF, creative director, and Jordan Prosser, flower buyer, by naming them as business partners.

"They had been with the company a considerable length of time and had been steadily taking on more responsibility," he said. "As I started thinking about my succession plan, I realized it was very important to get them listed as partners. Should I die unexpectedly, it would make things so much easier." He's trying to gradually step back and let them do more. "Baby steps," he said.

Gallina earned her father's trust and respect by consistently being present and offering opinions. "Older generations take you seriously when they realize you know what you're talking about," she said. "That's not necessarily something that happens overnight, and I think that's ok. Once you have the opportunity to prove yourself, your relationship becomes collaborative — you bring new ideas to the table, they bring

experience, and those two things come together beautifully."

She and Jordan have also had to combat the perception of nepotism. "A lot of people don't understand how hard it is to run a business — all the things that go on behind the scenes beyond what you do day-to-day," Gallina said. "Some people might assume being a family member in a family business means you get a ton of perks and lax schedule. In reality, it comes with a ton of responsibility and no real downtime. You're constantly thinking about work." The solution, she said, is to avoid thinking about naysayers and to just do your job. "When people see how hard you work and how committed you are, no one will ever question why you're in a position of authority."

—K.H.V.

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“There weren’t many companies doing this, and their aesthetic was primarily ‘clubby’ or corporate,” Prosser said. “We could give them so many more options. There was definitely an opportunity to carve out a niche.” Plus, he added, an industry friend, Mandy Majerik, AIFD, PFCI, of HotHouse Design Studio in Birmingham, Alabama (see p. 14), had done something similar and could offer pointers.

Inspired, Gallina spent the next several months developing the idea, which launched as a sister brand, “StyleHouse,” in October 2017. The concept is simple:

Anyone — wedding planners, corporations, other florists, someone throwing a blowout birthday party — can rent décor to enhance their celebrations. Customers can pick up themselves (provided they have a fully enclosed vehicle and blankets or cushions to protect items) or pay StyleHouse to deliver and set up.

Prospective customers can peruse the StyleHouse inventory online, where it’s organized by categories including backdrops, stage fronts and partitions; bars; sofas; chairs; coffee tables; end tables; lamps; mirrors; ottomans, poufs and benches; pillows; rugs; shelves and

CUTTING EDGE DESIGN For Botanica’s more bold and daring clients, founder Ian Prosser, a former winner of the Sylvia Cup Design Competition, recommends something architectural and unexpected, like this hanging bouquet.

back bars; and tables. They can also view curated collections and past clients’ photos — and even select items and play with different layouts on a style board.

In 2019, StyleHouse doubled its sales. (This does not account for the many times Botanica used its inventory. “That would get us an inflated sense of its success,” Gallina said.) Within the first five days of 2020, it had already booked six events.

“It’s grown much faster than we anticipated,” Gallina said, adding that the business operates much differently than Botanica. “The requests are very last minute,” she said. “Clients aren’t coming to us nine or 10 months in advance like brides do.”

Those eleventh-hour tendencies made it hard for Gallina to juggle her Botanica and StyleHouse duties, prompting her to hire a dedicated StyleHouse salesperson. “It was tough to hand over the reins,” she said, “but I simply didn’t have the time to give it my full attention to help it reach its potential.”

Looking Ahead

It’s been a running joke among the Botanica staff that the company’s unofficial motto is “Here we grow again!” “There’s no telling what else we’ll be doing in five years,” Prosser said.

One idea on the horizon, though: interior design. A watch company that previously hired Botanica to create some temporary displays recently asked Prosser to completely style its showroom.

Beyond that, the goal is to work smarter, not harder. “Ideally, we would have one large wedding a weekend rather than several smaller ones,” Gallina said. “Each event has so many moving pieces to coordinate, which takes up a lot of time.” And, as the company definitely learned over the past few years, a narrowed focus can have a big payoff. 🌿

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