



# Smooth OPERATORS

*With more Americans shopping online, we've got digital strategies to help you adapt.*

BY MARY WESTBROOK

The COVID-19 pandemic turned millions of consumers into more regular online shoppers almost overnight. Most experts say that, even as restrictions ease and retailers reopen physical spaces, the new habits shoppers have learned over the past few months (picking out groceries via an app, grabbing dinner curbside, ordering birthday gifts with a quick tap on their laptop or phone) likely are here to stay. What does that mean for florists looking to attract more people online, improve user experience and convert more sales? We asked some of the industry's top website providers to review lessons learned from the crisis to create a list of strategies florists can implement this summer.

## Prioritize SEO.

To be successful online, first you have to be found.

"Search engine optimization has always been an important factor in helping florists market their websites," said Katherine Kerr, Teleflora's chief financial officer. "It drives [florists'] ranking in search and is a great way to acquire new customers." A factor that

affects search ranking: **florists' business listings**. "Providing consistent information in terms of **shop location, categories the business operates in**, and even **operating hours**, creates a positive signal for search engines," Kerr explained. "For both the customer experience reviewing these listings as well as search engines, it's important to make sure that information is accurate across the board."

## Leverage higher traffic.

More customers finding your site is a good thing. The next task to tackle: What are your techniques for engaging people effectively once they are there?

"In looking at our florist website traffic and sales data over the last few months, it's obvious that **there is a large influx of online buyers**," said Heath Mielke, FTD's senior vice president of member solutions. "We're seeing **higher traffic and conversion** to our sites, and even **better open rates** in our florist email marketing campaigns. Florists need to **keep on top of their website to manage it appropriately** to take advantage of the increased traffic and ultimately convert as much as possible to sales. **Mobile-first sites are also more important than ever** as more consumers are shopping from their phones or tablets."



## RESOURCES TO HELP YOU GROW

Read more about the new services the providers interviewed are offering in the wake of the pandemic at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

### Try a new feature.

Florists almost never have a substantial amount of downtime, so it's easy to understand why taking time to experiment and play around with anything but nuts-and-bolts features is a job you've constantly pushed down your to-do list; however, there's never been a better time to expand your toolkit.

"It's a great time to use some of the features on florist websites that florists may not [have used in the past], like **photo galleries**," said Marc Grzeskowiak, BloomNet's vice president of technology. "We also suggest **starting a blog**. This doesn't have to be long but should include a photo of the cooler or special arrangement. Provide customers with a **brief two-three sentence description** of the flowers, colors, trends, occasion of the arrangements. **Google algorithms are placing more emphasis on this type of content** in ranks and it's a great strategy to **consistently add new keywords** to the site that are relevant with customers."

### Stay nimble.

The standard operating procedures you embraced in January already feel like old news. Guess what? The approaches that worked in April and May could start to feel outdated in July and August. That's why it's important to be on top of analytics, receptive to changes in consumer behavior and ready to tweak your model.

Early in the pandemic, "less choice and limited service did not seem to upset customers, but this is likely to change," said Scott Heaps, the owner of GravityFree. "**The quickest adapters will win**. For example, when we realized how eager consumers were to send flowers as their preferred gift this Mother's Day, it became clear shops had an opportunity to **expand offerings and meet demand for customization and purchasing style**. We created the ability for consumers to purchase

**multiple products for delivery to one location** so that florists could sell more of their inventory to one customer versus checking out by setting up an order one product at a time. This level of **enhanced choice and customization will increase average order value** for shops who **carefully curate gifts and gourmet selections**."

### Keep visuals on brand.

The name of the game online: Look good and be strategic. Make sure your site reflects your brand, the designs you want to (and can) sell, and sends a positive message to your customers. (After all, your site could be their first and only impression of your business.)

"**The shift to online ordering has been happening for years** — this crisis has just accelerated that movement," said Farbod Shoraka, BloomNation's co-founder and CEO. "Florists must realize that their **new storefront is their website**. **The biggest mistake is not putting enough energy and attention to your online brand**: [Customers often see a] mix of photos with different angles, different backgrounds, different lighting and inconsistent pricing. **Online, you are not selling flowers, you are selling an image**. Often, florists don't put enough love into the images they display."

### Flaunt your expertise.

This summer is no time to be bashful about just how much your shop can offer, and how well equipped florists are to meet new safety and sanitation requirements. Instead, shout your qualifications from the rooftop (or at least Instagram and Facebook).

"**Florists are in a unique position, as they are the original 'no-contact delivery' business**," said Loranne Atwill, vice president and co-owner of The Flower Shop Network. "Florists can become the **go-to retailer for gifts in their local markets**. And offering a pickup-only option when delivery capacity is maxed out can allow a florist to keep their online storefront open throughout a holiday or busy time. Florists should focus on **email marketing and social media** to connect with customers and position themselves to be the best choice for **same-day delivery of gifts and flowers**."

### Stand out from the crowd.

Revving up feels good after the standstill many experienced in the spring. Show how ready you are to serve existing customers and to earn the business of new people with offerings that are tailored to consumer needs.

"**Showcase your design expertise**, stay away from cookie-cutter designs that are susceptible to price erosion and dilution of value by competitors that offer the same product," said Sundaram Natarajan, CEO of GotFlowers. "If the availability of fresh flowers is unpredictable, **promote a 'Designer's Choice' at multiple price levels** and suspend the sale of other designs/products. **Offer subscription services to generate repeat business** while making it convenient for the customer... The new normal for retail florists is to **focus more on their delivery business and less on retail and walk-in**. Customers are accustomed to the convenience of food delivery services and are receptive to fees for the right convenience. **Expand your delivery hours and stay in frequent communication with your customers**."

### Fast-track checkout.

No matter how beautiful your work or friendly your staff, if a customer has a bad experience online or grows frustrated, they aren't likely to come back. So be on the lookout for pain points and stay open to processes that could be streamlined.

"Gifting someone flowers is an emotive experience, but **the actual process of purchasing an arrangement is typically twice as long as any other online purchase**," said Joe Vega, co-founder of Lovingly. "The user must know not only their own personal information, but also the recipient's information in order to complete the transaction. **A major headache in the checkout process is simply the amount of information required**. Most floral websites have over 40 points of decision making, like form fields, checkboxes, radio buttons, information tooltips, and CTA buttons for customers to complete. An efficient website provider will require only half of that." ♣

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