





New Event Economics

Amid rising prices and other challenges, experienced event florists are finding new strategies to keep profit margins strong.

BY JULIE MARTENS FORNEY

A record-breaking wedding season and supply chain disruptions combined to create an unforgettable 2021 for event florists. Challenges piled up fast, but business owners faced them with finesse — and learned new ways to thrive and maintain healthy profit margins.

“In business, it is very tempting and very easy to get in a rut of ‘this is the way I do things’ because you see success,” says Carolyn Butera, who with her husband, Vince Butera, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, owns Butera The Florist in Sedgwick, Maine. “The point is that the world is changing. The world will keep changing. And business changes.”

The Buteras began rethinking their business model during the 2020 shutdowns. Ultimately, they decided to get back to their roots as a wedding-only florist. In 2021 they permanently closed their 42-year-old, full-service retail business in York, Pennsylvania, and relocated to a small, coastal town in Maine that’s popular for destination weddings. Along the way, the Buteras refined the way they handle weddings to meet the challenges of today’s market.

RISING TO NEW HEIGHTS

Mountain High Flowers in Sedona, Arizona, saw an increase in destination weddings and had to adjust business practices to meet demand and keep costs in check.

They remind themselves frequently to be ready for change, and they challenge other florists to do the same. “How can you remain poised with a readiness to respond to opportunity with the changes that occur?” Carolyn asks. “Because they are going to occur. So much of this is out of our control.”

Like the Buteras, Martha Aaron, AIFD, owner of Mountain High Flowers in Sedona, Arizona, designs florals for many destination weddings. Last year, Aaron’s elopement and micro wedding business “skyrocketed,” she says. She, too, moved swiftly to implement new practices that offered her and her clients flexibility — and kept costs in check.

With their new strategies against rising costs and supply issues, these florists are ready to take on what is expected to be a blockbuster year for weddings. Aaron has a full schedule of weddings, and the Buteras experienced immediate bookings after their business moved to Maine. Other florists are also reporting record amounts of weddings and events.

“We can see how many events are being produced by our clients, and they’re breaking numbers every month,” says Corrine Heck, PFCI, a former wedding florist who founded Details Flowers Software, which helps florists manage ordering for events.

With the right strategies in place, it could be a record year for profits, too.

Charge for Everything

“In this market, florists have to be keen and astute on their margins,” Heck says. “We suggest to our clients to add an administrative fee, a blanket 5 to 10 percent.” This fee covers all the time a florist spends doing the administrative parts of the job, such as proposal writing, consultations, phone calls and even credit card charges.

Also consider charging for tasks that are normally done for free, such as boutonniere pinning. “I remember running around resorts trying to locate groomsmen to pin bouts,” Heck shares of her days as a wedding florist. “I started charging a fee to pin them. I’d arrange to be at a certain spot at a specific time to help pin bouts. By setting that fee, I set a boundary with my clients.” She suggests framing a boutonniere pinning fee by asking the client if they’d like to use your





COST SAVERS, MONEY MAKERS Butera The Florist lowered operating costs by limiting their rental inventory to basics, such as candles. Corrine Heck of Details Flowers Software says that wedding florists need to charge for everything, including services to pin boutonnieres.

pinning service for \$75. “If the client declines, respond by saying, ‘Then I’ll deliver the bouts to your room with your bouquet.’ At that point, they’ll always buy the extra service.”

Aaron has honed in on tracking supplies better as a way to curtail loss. “I’m more conscientious about set-up now. For instance, I didn’t always charge for back-end stuff like cages or foam for centerpieces. Now I’m making sure I’m charging for all the hardgoods that I didn’t account for in my recipes,” she says.

Vince adds that it’s important to charge for labor. “You need to be paid for what you’re doing. The way I price out labor, the charge is sometimes greater than the flowers themselves. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Change Pricing and Payment Structure

Because everything in the event business is presold, there’s always a chance — especially in today’s inflationary market — that prices will increase after

you’ve been paid. Vince tries to stay ahead by setting prices high enough to cover unforeseen price increases, and by keeping cost of goods low. “I’ve been told many times I’m more expensive than so-and-so, but I work very hard to achieve in the neighborhood of 18 percent cost of goods sold in fresh flowers simply because weddings take so much time.”

Aaron has also increased prices for flowers and supplies. She’s also changed her payment deadlines to give her clients flexibility and avoid going over budget due to price increases. “The major thing we have changed with events is that we used to utilize 30 days out for final payment,” she says. “We changed that to finalization and full payment no later than 18 days out. We cut it to the least amount of time we could have to get flowers ordered and still have wiggle room for the bride and groom if people couldn’t come.”

She does order specific, high-value items 30 days out and includes any large purchases for new rental items in the

nonrefundable deposit. “I’m a smaller business and keeping that final payment 18 days out has helped us with not having to give anything back to clients who had to cancel last minute. That really saved us when COVID-19 first hit. Now we’ve kept that 18-day mark as a procedure.”

Aaron pre-books flowers with her wholesalers but doesn’t place the order until the 18-day mark. “At that point, when I get approvals back from the wholesaler, if I’m overbudget, I’ll adjust and make sure I stay profitable on our end. I might think the market price is at one place, but with the changing market, it’s not. This procedure has really helped us out with cost of goods in 2020 and 2021.”

Ryan O’Neil, PFCI, founder and CEO of Curate, an event software, emphasizes that however a florist is creating proposals, they should be using the high average price of a flower to account for price fluctuations. “You don’t know what that pricing is going to look like in six to 12 months,” he says.

Evaluate Delivery Fees

Rising gas prices necessitate evaluating delivery fees. "I realized that I can't really increase my sales in bouquets, but am I making money on delivery and installation?" Vince says. "I realized I was not. I was just charging a nominal fee to get it there. In the past year or two I've honed in on charging a fair amount for installation and delivery. In most cases I base it on what I project for installation and travel time. I have a basic rate that I use to estimate that includes a designer (me), an assistant (Carolyn, my wife) and our vehicle."

Aaron is also rethinking delivery. "I've always used a standard delivery fee for micro weddings, which is usually a simple dropoff, but I charge more for that now," she says. "Sometimes my drivers need to make sure the bride is happy or show her how to hold the bouquet. I now charge \$25 for a wedding delivery versus \$10 for an in-town retail flower delivery. It just made sense with the increase of having so many weddings at one time."

Examine Purchasing Practices

"One of the biggest ways florists lose money is not maximizing design recipes to use full bunch counts," Heck says. "Maybe you need five garden roses for a bride's bouquet, so you buy a bunch of 12. What are you going to do with the other seven? That's money you're losing. It's great to have a plan and maximize the sale on each design."

O'Neil also cautions against having too many leftover flowers, noting it can be hard to sell premium flowers in the store and that what may seem like a small cost adds up over time. "If flower costs are going up, you have to clean up expenses," he says. "There is no room for slacking there."

For Butera The Florist, not having a retail store through which they can sell extra stems has forced Vince to adjust purchasing. "I look for different ways to lower stem costs. I'm not committed, for example, to having 12 roses in a bridal bouquet. If I map out my buying list and need 27 roses of one variety, that means I can't afford to buy 50 roses to get two more. I have to adjust the menu and get rid of two roses



DESIGN DETAILS Butera The Florist carefully maps out design recipes to avoid buying more flowers than needed. They also buy certain flowers in cases because it is less expensive than buying bunches and allows them to embellish bouquets.

somewhere. That's one way I've done it," he says.

Over the last 18 months, he's also started to buy fillers that store well, such as eucalyptus, in greater quantities. "There were plenty of times I only needed half a case but knew I needed half a case the next week, too," Vince says. "So, I buy two weeks of foliage and get a quantity discount."

He has also found at times that it was cheaper to buy a case of ranunculus rather than just the five bunches he needed. "At that point, I'm able to embellish bouquets," he says. Vince also has a few standard flowers that he buys in case quantities, which lowers costs. He suggests using the same strategy when buying basic supplies.

Manage Inventory

Tracking inventory is crucial to avoid double-booking rentals and scrambling to order more items, that are often expensive, O'Neil says. He recalled a time when he and his wife owned a flower shop and each of them promised a different couple their one set of white pillars for the same day. "There's too much opportunity for error," he says. He recommends using inventory software to prevent overbookings.

Heck ties inventory management to branding and setting boundaries. "Having too many options in terms of product lines is not a great way to do things," she says.

The other thing that can whittle margins is leaving product or rentals

behind. "Misplacing inventory can be a huge loss for event florists. It's vital for florists to collect all of their inventory at the end of the event," Heck says.

The Buteras have lowered their operating costs by drastically limiting rental inventory. "I have a few basics — glass flutes, metal stands — things I've used for years in various ways and are pricey for a client to buy," Vince says. "However, I assist my clients in procuring containers they want. For example, if they find something on Etsy as a container, they'll share the info with me and I make sure it's useable from my standpoint."

Carolyn adds, "During consultations, Vince doesn't promote excessive rentals that we can't carry ourselves. That comes back to knowing what our brand is and what we do well. We don't feel bad about referring our clients to another professional for rentals or other things they may want."

The Buteras have eliminated every product line except candles for weddings and events. "Extracting and limiting has been very important to our brand," Carolyn says.

Build Alternate Revenue

Aaron has developed a new revenue stream in the last year with dried flowers. "It's so trendy, and it's not humid here, so we dry our own flowers. I sell a lot of them," she says. In the store, if any flowers are about to turn or there's extra, they get bunched and hung to dry. (Check out her dried floral display in Hands On on page 12.)

Because Sedona is a destination city, not every bridal party takes their flowers with them. Left-behind flowers typically get processed in one of three ways: donated to local nursing homes, used again if stems are fresh, or hung to dry. "Our retail customers like buying the dried bunches. They often use them in bridal bouquets."

Dried materials also include locally harvested grasses, greenery and curly willow. The cost? Aaron's labor to cut and the storage fees. "I have five buckets of pampas grass stashed in a storage unit that I just cut from one of the resorts we work with. It's like gold," she says. The shop uses the grasses in holiday decorations and as part of the boho wedding look many Sedona brides want.

Find Value in Design Skills

Thoughtful arranging, backed by knowledge of design techniques and experience with mechanics, can also lead to cost savings. "There are tried and true design techniques that really have been lost in translation over the last 50 to 75 years," Heck says. "If you can learn to create beautiful designs with less product, that's another skill that will serve your business well. You could use less quantity of flowers but get paid more for them."

Vince cautions florists not to confuse creativity with freewheeling. "Real

creativity comes from a knowledge base that you've acquired over the years. If you have knowledge, it opens your mind to improvise and do something different — that's innovation.

"If you learn to design well, learn the elements and principles of design and mechanics, you have a toolbox of ideas that on the spot you can pull out something that's never been done before, and it will be a, wow, moment. But you've got to plan and work ahead for that." 🌿

Julie Martens Forney is a contributing writer to *Floral Management*.

A Brand with Boundaries

Recipient of the Society of American Florists' 2015 Marketer of the Year Award, Butera The Florist stays keenly focused on their brand.

One of the greatest lessons owners Vince and Carolyn Butera have learned is to "find your brand, define your brand in writing, and refine your brand over time. For us, that meant extracting from our brand what we're really good at and limiting our product line to only that," Carolyn says. "We're good at fresh floral botanical artistry. We can only do a few things well. That sounds counter to the trend of being all things to all people, but our more, narrow product line makes it easier to set boundaries. We know what we're doing — and what we're not going to do. We focus and work to our strengths."



What does that look like in application over the last two years? "One example is that we only deliver within a one-hour radius. Because of our presence on Wedding Wire and The Knot, this means we turn away clients daily," Carolyn says. "It's tempting to take them on, but a wedding in Kennebunkport [Maine] means an eight-hour day for us. We're not doing that."

The Buteras focus on catering to destination weddings because they believe those types of events are the best fit for their brand.

Setting boundaries is also a part of the business model at Mountain High Flowers in Sedona, Arizona.

"Events are a huge part of our business, but even last year, with weddings being so big, it only accounted for about half of our total business. The other half is full retail," says owner Martha Aaron. "I've always had a passion for the retail side and servicing our community, so I never take weddings on Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. That's when I focus on my community repeat customers." —Julie Martens Forney