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BY TIM HUCKABEE

wire orders: the smart way

Tips for selling outgoing wire orders that will boost customers' confidence and ensure their satisfaction.

When I worked at a flower shop in New York City, I would frequently get comments like this from customers over the course of the summer: "I just want to thank you again for your help with my Mother's Day order. You sent it through the shop I always use, but they *never* sent anything for me like the arrangement you coordinated. I don't know what you did or said to make that happen, but good job!"

Though I'd like to lay claim to some sort of superhero powers, the reality is that I was (am) simply both a good listener and communicator. And those two factors are the core of taking good wire orders at Mother's Day and year-round.

positive approaches

Mother's Day is a special holiday because so many of the orders you handle are sent to other shops across the country and don't get created in your store. Those orders can be far easier than most salespeople realize.

As is always my approach, I want to identify the problems and bad habits first, then give you a fresh perspective as well as new tools and approaches for dealing with Mother's Day wire orders.

Let's begin with how wire orders are sold to your customers. The standard opening salvo is a huge serving of negativity with a side dish of

uncertainty: "Well, we have a minimum of \$X for wire orders, and I will have to take a second choice since I am not really sure what that shop may or may not have."

Charming. Hearing that would make me want to enroll my mom in a book club, not send her flowers! Seriously, the customer just had such a bleak picture painted by the florist that he or she might feel that sending flowers is more a case of "potluck" rather than being confident that mom will receive something close to what was ordered.

Instead, start with an upbeat opening: "Of course I can have flowers delivered in [insert city]. I'll work closely with our favorite flower shop in that city."

If it happens to be a small town, the name of which you can barely pronounce, don't give the customer false expectations. Rather, truthfully offer that you'll "find the best shop in that town to handle the order."

The hundreds of stores I have visited either have a printed list of their preferred shops in most major urban markets or have those shops/towns flagged in their order-entry software. Barring that, I always pull out the directories and look for the shops with the highest minimum prices and/or more interesting names (i.e., European Flower Gallery versus Ted's Beer and Blossoms).

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handling with care

Listening to the customer is a vital part of this sale. Simply put, I hang on his or her every word and make sure to indicate those key points on the order so I can explain them to the filling shop. If the customer tells me that her mother has strong allergies, I will make a note specifying no fragrance. If she tells me that her grandmother is the president of the local garden club—or worse, is “artistic”—I will prod her a bit to find out if the recipient would appreciate a tight, more clustered style of design rather than a “light and fluffy” one. Those points will help the filling florist get that much closer to meeting the expectations of the customer.

The request for a “second choice” is by far the biggest source of problems. The usual approach, upon hearing that the customer wants to send a pink azalea, is to ask, “What’s your second choice in case they don’t have one?” Almost comically—from my perspective—I see orders that say “as close as possible.” Talk about planting the seeds of a potential problem! As close as possible how? To the type of plant? To the color of the plant? To the size?

While I have created a whole template on selling wire orders (call or e-mail me for further info), I do want to share a critical point: Don’t make the filling florist have to second-guess your order or spend time/money calling your shop or sending network messages. Just take a smarter second choice.

For example, in the case of the pink azalea, I would find out what the customer likes about the pink azalea, and that answer becomes the second choice. Here’s how I would phrase it with the customer: “I will request the pink azalea. On the outside chance that the shop does not have a pink azalea, or that their pink azaleas aren’t just perfect, shall we send another color azalea or perhaps another pink flowering plant?” By using

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that approach, I accomplish the following goals with the customer:

- I let the customer know that I am paying close attention to her special order.
- I instill confidence in her by letting her know that I understand my products (that azaleas are available in other colors and that there are other pink plants besides azaleas).
- Most importantly, I let her know that I am watching out for her best interests. I am saying that I would rather have the filling florist understand that another type of pink flowering plant can be sent if the azalea is not pristine. After all, that order might be filled on a day or at a time when I'm not reachable, and the filling florist would have to decide whether to interpret the order literally or make a judgment call and substitute another plant or color.

Coming full circle to my experience with that thankful summertime customer, I was able to make her so happy because I really heard what she wanted and told the filling florist how to fill that order—design style, colors, types of foliage, vase, etc. The result likely is quite different from if the customer had called the florist on her own and said she wanted to “get something really nice.”

So, this month's pearl of wisdom is to do some role playing with your staff—listening to customers, communicating important details and making realistic promises—all leading to a less stressful Mother's Day and properly filled outgoing wire orders year-round! ■

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