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BY TIM HUCKABEE, AIFSE

become a gift basket pro

Tips for designing and selling baskets that will make you the go-to source for these items.

“How many oranges will be in that fruit basket?” That is just one of the questions that salespeople fear hearing when they take orders for fruit or gourmet baskets. But why has selling such a simple item become a major production, and why is it based just on price?

“Oh, you want to send a fruit basket? They start at \$35.”

Because many flower shops do more basket business during the holiday season, this is a good time to re-evaluate—and, perhaps, improve—how you design and sell gift baskets.

design to win

When was the last time you took a critical look at the baskets you design? As I hear more florists complain about competition from grocery stores, I wonder how they differentiate their baskets from those of the supermarkets.

I see shops that create simple pyramids of fruit with green paper between the pieces, shrink-wrap the finished products and attach bows. OK, it works, but how exciting is it? Here’s a thought: Focus on fruit baskets more as “designed” items and less as bulk goods. In other words, anyone can go to the store, buy four pounds of fruit and stack it in a basket. A florist, however, can add creative flair.

Try using fewer pieces of fruit and arranging them by color and size or even nested in the basket. Worry less about the weight and more about mak-

ing the recipient say “Wow!” When using a basket with a handle, snip a long piece of ivy from a hanging plant in the store, put the stem in a water tube and nestle the tube inside the basket at the base of one side of the handle. Wind the ivy around the handle until you reach the other side, and tuck the end into the weave of the basket. Now you have added a florist’s design touch that your customers probably won’t get at a grocery store.

While you are thinking about baskets on a basic level, when was the last time you evaluated and/or raised your prices? Some chronic complaints are, “I’m barely making any money filling incoming basket orders,” and “I have to send someone out to shop for a \$35 basket, and we are so busy today.” You need to charge enough to cover your costs and make a healthy profit. Update your price lists now, before the holiday season starts.

sell with confidence

Now let’s talk about how you sell baskets. Does your staff revert to prices and, even worse, automatically start at the minimum price?

First, here’s some phrasing to help make taking an out-of-town order easier. What customers frequently hear are frightening statements like this: “Oh, you want to send the basket out of town? Well, I’m not really sure what another florist will have since it proba-

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success strategies

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bly won't be the same as ours. And since it's going to a big city, you're probably gonna have to spend more."

If you've been reading my column all year, you know that I cringe whenever I hear that type of "apology sale" being made. Simply put, any florist in the country is going to do what you do: fill the basket, to budget, with fruit and gourmet items in stock or shop for the best ones. So put a positive twist on the scenario and tell your customers, "We'll work closely with the flower shop in that town. Just like us, they'll use their best fresh fruit and gourmet foods to create a wonderful basket for you." Just a little spin on the same idea makes all the difference!

Second, how do you determine how much customers should spend? If you sell in the old-fashioned way, saying, "Our baskets start at ...," you open yourself to a barrage of questions including, "What's in it?" and "How many pieces of this and that?"

As is always my doctrine, *sell by size*. Ask each customer, "How many people would you like this basket to serve?" Whoa! You just put that customer on a totally different path, forcing him now to think about how many people are going to share this basket. He probably is going to spend more because he knows he needs to, not because you have oversold him. (See the ad on Page 42 about my new SuperSales Program, which includes a "Sell Basket by Size" chart customized for your shop.)

Don't wait for the customer to ask what is going to be in the basket; instead, make a preemptive strike that will answer most questions. I say, "We will use a wonderful assortment of fresh fruit, cheese and crackers, jams and jellies, cookies and candies, presented in a handmade basket." That makes most customers say, "That sounds great!" Only when a customer tells me that he wants to send a basket to his kosher, diabetic, lactose-intoler-

ant grandmother with nut allergies do I tell him that I will have to do some checking on ingredients.

check in with recipients

In the July column, I talked about making follow-up calls. They are important for basket sales, too. For example, if you shrink-wrap your

designs, the recipients will benefit from calls on the days after delivery reminding them to open and enjoy their baskets as soon as possible. Yes, that may sound like common sense, but I actually have heard recipients complaining that their unopened fruit baskets turned into a mold farm the following week.

Also, baskets can be more difficult to deliver than flowers. So, a quick follow-up call the next day may flush out a recipient who tells you that the basket looked like it had rolled around and come apart in the truck and then been put back together. A little quality control with your delivery drivers can go a long way.

Finally, you will sell more baskets if you remind your customers that you offer them. Design a beautiful fruit and gourmet basket using empty packages and faux fruit, and place it out on the counter with a sign that reads, "Ask about our Fruit and Gourmet Basket Collection." Good luck! ■

Tim Huckabee, AIFSE, is president of Floral Strategies, an on-site training organization for retail florists based in New York, N.Y. For help with improving your customer service, contact him by phone at (800) 983-6184 or by e-mail at contact@floralstrategies.com, or visit www.floralstrategies.com.



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