

WHOLESALE UNDERCOVER



Learn to shop smarter.

BY TIM HUCKABEE, AIFSE

I know florists. Since 1997, I have trained staff in more than 5,000 retail flower shops across the planet, and while I am there, the shops typically get calls, emails and faxes from their various wholesalers. I often hear similar comments from the owners or buyers: “It’s always the same conversation, ‘Hi. It’s Joe from XYZ Wholesale. Do you need anything?’ He never shakes it up!”

Sound familiar? I bet. But there’s another side to that story that you need to hear.

In 2013, I began training wholesale florists, like retailers, to focus on selling and serving in a new, more dynamic fashion. To date, I have worked with dozens of wholesale houses across North America, and the experience has been incredibly enlightening. In a nutshell, just like you, they don’t want to offend customers or scare them away with high prices. But that’s a terrible, expensive trap to be caught in.

I want to give you, dear retail florist reader, some interesting insight so you can better understand how your wholesaler really operates and learn to shop smarter—to your mutual benefit. Are you ready to radically change the relationship with your wholesaler? Read on.

wholesalers don’t have a crystal ball

The first point is that both retail florists and wholesalers make the same mistakes: profiling customers and predetermining what they will and won’t buy. That’s not fair to customers, it hurts the company’s bottom line and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“I won’t ever offer Sally’s Flowers peonies,” says wholesale rep Joe, “because she’s never bought any, and they cost too much” Guess what, Joe, Sally cannot buy what’s not offered to her. Furthermore, why are we so afraid of hearing “no” from customers?

What about this approach, “Hi Sally. It’s Joe from XYZ Wholesale. We just got in some beautiful, ruby-red peonies with great foliage, and I thought of your shop. I know it’s not a flower you usually buy from me, but other shops have been asking for new and different items, and I thought you might want to try some, too. They’re only \$\$\$ per bunch.”

What’s the worst thing Sally can say? Whether she buys it or not, at least she’s having a different conversation with Joe instead of the tired, old, “Do you need anything?” (I have labeled that the DYNA call, and I am working to strike it from the wholesalers’ vocabulary.)

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Now let’s flip that around. The next time you get a DYNA call, respond by saying, “I think I’m all set, but tell me about what’s new / what you love in your cooler / what are other shops buying from you that I’m not.” In other words, shake it up, and engage your rep in a new way. Doing so will open you to lots of interesting new options on every call. Even if you don’t buy anything new today, you will have sent a subtle message that you’re tired of getting the same old bunches and you want new options for your store and customers.

retailers: think more about profits

Now I want to turn the tables and point out a retail florist weakness: not taking advantage of the great bulk-purchase and farm-direct programs offered by most wholesalers. It’s costing you thousands in lost profits every month.

Here’s a typical scenario, “Hi Sally. It’s Joe from XYZ Wholesale, and I’m calling to tell you about our new Farm-To-You program. The [flower] that you typically pay 75¢ per stem for is only 55¢ when you take 150 stems every Tuesday.” Sally says, “I’ll never use that many stems and will just end up throwing them out.”

Then Sally orders her regular three bunches of 25 stems at 75¢ each on Monday. Then, on Thursday, she’s back to “top up” and orders three more bunches at the same price. Get it? Sally ended up needing and using 150 stems anyway, but she paid \$30 more than had she been on the program. If she does that every week, that’s more than \$1,500 in pure profit lost—from just one item

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—because of her somewhat overblown “excess flower paranoia.”

Not only would Sally have saved money but she also would have saved time (not having to repeat the ordering process, cleaning a new shipment and maybe paying an additional delivery fee).

Back to Sally’s concern about ending up with extra flowers: My advice is get proactive. If you find yourself heavy on stock as the week moves on, create arrangements with those flowers, and take them to nearby businesses (hair salons, dry cleaners, dentist offices, etc.) to introduce your shop and design style, with the hopes of supplying them with weekly flowers in the future. Or use the flowers to create a “Thursday Special” —perhaps half off loose flowers after 4 p.m. —and publicize it free to your customers via email and social media. This should create some extra foot traffic for your store.

Follow either of these paths, and you won’t throw away flowers; you will pay less for them; and you will make more profit and, hopefully, land a few new standing orders and/or customers.

more to come

I have lots more to share on what I have been learning at wholesalers, so watch for a follow-up article in an upcoming issue. In the meantime, I hope you will take my advice to really engage your wholesale sales rep and not just place orders. Start to take advantage of their discount programs on bulk buying.

I also would love to hear your feedback and experiences. Drop me a line at tim@floralstrategies.com. ■



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