

CANADIAN Florist



Boosting Flower Selling Power

One shop tries out Tim Huckabee's sales tips

Written by [Brandi Cowen](#)

Most customers don't know what they want, so they rely on you, a trusted expert, to guide them through their purchases. From flower varieties and colours to containers and gift items, customers put their faith in the advice you and your staff give them. It's a powerful position to be in, but unfortunately many florists don't effectively leverage this expert status to ring up higher sales.



Manager Teresa Rock (left) hired Tim Huckabee (right) to teach her staff at Fascination & Rosery Florist new techniques to ramp up sales.

That was the premise Tim Huckabee, AIFSE, presented during a sales training session at Fascination & Rosery Florist in Hamilton, Ont., on Jan. 24. Huckabee, the president of FloralStrategies, was in town for a mini-training tour, making stops at five shops across southern Ontario.

Teresa Rock, store manager with Fascination & Rosery Florist, was no stranger to Huckabee's approach. She attended his seminar at the 2012 Canadian Florist Business Forum and found that his selling by listening sales strategy made sense. The challenge as she saw it would be to take those ideas and apply them in the day-to-day business. That's why Rock invited Huckabee to her shop: to train staff up for a new way of thinking about making a sale.



Most customers can't tell one flower variety from the next.

"Hopefully this will retrain the girls and get us back into the 21st century of selling flowers... Habits are hard to break," said Rock. She has been with Fascination since her mother started the business in 1989, so her habits have had ample opportunity to take root.

During the two and a half hour session, Huckabee coached Rock and her three-person staff on ways to improve communication when taking walk-in and telephone orders, and to make the most out of the trust customers place in their expertise.

"Most customers – about 90 per cent of them – don't know what they want. Some have looked online, but most are starting from zero," said Huckabee. "People make a beeline for the counter because they assume you are an expert."

"Customers will do what you tell them to do," he added. The trick is to capitalize on this by identifying opportunities to increase sales – something he believes the florist industry tends to do poorly. "The food industry does a good job of selling its products; the florist industry, not so much."

He cited the restaurant waiter as a case in point: offering customers a selection of specials to choose from and highlighting how each dish is prepared. A good waiter will mention price last. The idea is that a special may cost more than the customer was planning to spend, but if it sounds enticing, he or she may decide to splurge.

Like restaurants, flower shops sell perishable products that customers evaluate based on subjective criteria (visual appeal, arrangement size and scent instead of visual appeal, serving size and flavour). That, Huckabee said, is why flower shops need to approach sales more like restaurants do. If staff give the customer the opportunity to spend more money by presenting them with an attractive arrangement, the customer will often opt to spend at a higher price point.

Five forbidden questions

At the core of Huckabee's approach are five "forbidden questions" that he believes underserve and undersell customers.

What's the occasion?

This question limits the potential sales total that can be earned from a customer. When staff ask about the occasion, the customer expects a suggestion in return. Their final purchase is likely going to line up with what your staff – the experts – recommend, even if that final purchase totals less than what the customer originally planned on spending. Instead of asking each customer "what's the occasion," staff should use their listening skills to collect clues about the occasion. This is especially easy to do when taking a phone order – just ask the customer for the card message first. The information staff pick out by listening will also help them make appropriate suggestions about the size and type of arrangement while hitting the right price point.

Do you want that to include delivery and tax?

In most retail environments, consumers encounter two prices: one on the product, and a slightly higher amount at the checkout, after taxes and other fees have been factored in. There's no reason why flower shops should be any different. Besides, Huckabee said, a customer who is ready to spend

on taxes and delivery in addition to the budget he's given you will opt for the lesser spend if given the choice. That doesn't mean you should spring surprise charges on your customers though. Make a point of telling the customer the price of their arrangement, as well as the total charge once taxes and delivery fees have been factored in.

What do you want to send?

What a wonderful world it would be if every customer shared your passion for flowers! Unfortunately reality isn't quite so rosy. This question creates far too much work for customers, many of whom can't tell a carnation from a chrysanthemum. A better question to ask is: "Do you have a design in mind or would you like a suggestion?" This phrasing takes the pressure off the majority of customers who don't know what they want, and invites those rare few who do to share their ideas with your staff.

What kind of container do you want?

Rather than asking what type of container the customer wants, staff should tell him what type of container he will get. If he wants something else, he will say so; most of the time, he will go along with whatever staff suggest. After all, your staff are the experts!

How much do you want to spend?

Customers may have a budget in mind, but like the hungry diner swayed by a savvywaiter, they can often be convinced to spend at a higher price point – if staff give them the opportunity to do so. Huckabee said that in his experience, customers often surprise you by rejecting a lower spend and instead opting for a higher price point. Remember that many of your customers are choosing flowers to celebrate or commemorate an occasion that stirs strong feelings. Price is a key consideration for many, but it's not the only consideration.

Huckabee said that weeding these questions out of your shop will streamline the ordering process.

The staff at Fascination Rosery & Florist were open to the idea of improving their order taking efficiency, but a little leery of changing the habits that have served them well enough so far during their careers. To help them make the switch, Rock said she planned to revisit Huckabee's training with them on an ongoing basis. She also planned to drill her staff on the new sales strategies and monitor their progress. To that end, she said her staff would use Huckabee's self-monitoring form to evaluate how well they are implementing their new sales tools.

Rock also hoped to bring Huckabee back in a few months time to review how the shop is doing and tweak the new strategies to better suit Fascination's unique needs.

Checking in

One month later, Canadian Florist checked in with Teresa Rock to see how business has been since Fascination Rosery & Florist began implementing Tim Huckabee's sales strategies.

"It's been good. We are finding it a little hard to break habits, of course," said Rock. "Because of the short period of time that he was here, of course a lot of that wasn't covered, so we're stumbling a little bit with that, but overall in terms of what he trained us on, we've definitely increased our sales."

Valentine's Day was a real success story for the shop. Staff used Huckabee's strategies to up sell, suggesting that customers add gift items like balloons and boxes of chocolates to their orders.

"I did find that it worked. I did have a lot of the older men saying no, but I don't know if that's just because of their age," said Rock. "With the younger guys, we didn't seem to have a problem at all."

It's still a bit of a struggle for Rock and her staff to put their training into practice —old habits die hard — but they're trying. Staff monitor one another when taking orders. Anyone who forgets to follow Huckabee's selling formula is in for some good-natured teasing. Handouts from the training session are posted near the phone as a reminder of how orders should be handled, and staff are using Huckabee's self-monitoring forms to track their progress implementing the new strategies.

Now that they have the tools, Rock says her staff are finding it easier to make sales.

"I've seen the change myself in terms of getting more dollars," said Rock. At first, she said she and her staff felt guilty suggesting large arrangements in the \$75 to \$100 range, but positive customer response has changed that. "That kind of takes you by surprise a little bit because you're not used to it....The more we do it, the more we get comfortable about it. We have Tim's thinking going now: it's their money, and if they want to spend the money, then why should we care?"

For Fascination Rosery & Florist, the biggest obstacle to fully integrating Huckabee's sales strategies is the absence of a POS system in the shop.

"My biggest challenge is still putting that customer on hold, going to the book and looking it up and seeing if we have the product, said Rock. If the shop is out of a particular item, she and her staff must try to redirect the sale without falling back into comfortable habits that have the potential to hamper sales.

Rock hopes that investing in a POS system will make a big difference in how easily the sales training can be applied to phone orders. But with her mother looking to retire, Rock has her hands full making the transition to shop owner as well as manager. In the meantime, the POS system will have to wait.