

B-to-B

By Julia
Hoffman

Blockbusters

Three florists. Three towns. Find out how each capitalized on their locale and talent to capture — and keep — corporate accounts.

Picture it: The big corporation down the street just hired a new receptionist. She's young, fresh out of high school or college, and is more accustomed to visiting www.google.com than local businesses when she's looking for anything from shoes to a gift for mom. So when she's asked to "handle the office flowers" she's more likely to click than dial. And if you're like most retail florists, without thousands (or even millions) of dollars a year to spend on pay-per-click advertising or sponsored listings on major search engines, that could be bad news for your corporate business.

But even with high turnover rates at the front desk, tech-savvy administrative assistants and competition everywhere (around the corner, across town and online), some florists have realized that corporate work is a niche traditional retail florists can still call their own. They are finding ways to keep corporate business, and it's paying off.

Find a Specialty ... and Set Sail

Lisa LoVullo had strong corporate business sales, since opening her business near Annapolis, Md., in late 2000. Since day one, she positioned herself as the florist to call for event and corporate work. She eventually added walk-in and local delivery work, and while her business overall was growing, LoVullo wasn't spending as much time growing the corporate sales segment as she needed to. It was generally more profitable and had more growth potential in her market than everyday work. She considered



Annapolis florist Lisa LoVullo has found two corporate niches: maritime events and fall décor and gifts during Thanksgiving.

dedicating one of her four employees or even hiring an outside salesperson to grow the corporate business. But the key to getting more business from local businesses, she found, was going after it herself.

“As the owner, I’m the most passionate about the business,” she says. “You can’t train someone else to be like that. We’ve tried twice to get an outside person, but it just didn’t work out.”

She carved out time to search for new opportunities and found one “right under her nose.” Businesses in and around Annapolis, famous for its Chesapeake Bay locale, host lots of water events. Events need décor. LoVullo decided she should be the one providing it.

“Because we’re in Annapolis, there are a lot of hotels and a lot of companies taking people out on corporate charters,” she says.

Her next step was to figure out a way to tap into the maritime target market. She’d long been a member of the local Annapolis Chamber of Commerce and had gained scores of corporate work

networking with peers in that group. So she joined a local Chesapeake Bay group, full of corporate water-lovers (usually with plenty of money to spend on luxuries), and her business grew by word-of-mouth from there.

“In fact, right now we’re making arrangements for a ‘pirate party’ a company is having on a boat,” she says. Other events LoVullo decorates for include local boat races, Chesapeake Bay fund-raisers and yacht shows.

Be Aggressive, and Thankful

The additional maritime business helped, but LoVullo still wanted to find another way to pump up corporate sales. She looked to her shop’s busiest time of year, the winter holidays, to see if she could capitalize on it even more.

What she discovered instead was that another nearby holiday would hold the key to her corporate success.

For years, many florists have lamented that “Thanksgiving just isn’t the floral holiday it used to be.” LoVullo begs

Lisa LoVullo

Wild Thing

Annapolis, Md.

Founded: 2000

B-to-B Sales: 50 percent of annual sales

B-to-B Niche: Maritime events, Thanksgiving décor and gifts

B-to-B Silver Bullet: Networking

to differ. She tapped into a new market that marries Thanksgiving and corporate work: sunflower and pumpkin arrangements for lobbies and offices and festive, fall centerpieces for corporate boardrooms.

She starts pitching Thanksgiving floral arrangements and specialty gifts to corporate clients around Sept. 1, by sending out direct-mail pieces with catchy sayings (one recent piece read: “Don’t Let the Holidays Scare You”).

“Everywhere we go, we beat the drum (about Thanksgiving),” LoVullo says. The holiday, without the religious significance most holidays have, is ideal for corporate clients. “You don’t have to worry about offending people,” she says. An added bonus she emphasizes to her clients: “You can send a gift ahead of the competition,” since most companies are sending gifts for Christmas or Hannakuh, not Thanksgiving, “and your gift will be remembered.”

She says about 40 percent of her

corporate customers opt to send Thanksgiving arrangements (typically in the \$50 to \$75 range) to their clients, which accounts for 33 percent of her corporate sales at the holidays. An added benefit for LoVullo and her employees: It helps spread out Christmas work throughout the fall season, which makes for steadier profits and a more manageable workflow.

Be a Small Fish in a Big Pond

Anyone who thinks they have to be a big florist to get a big corporate account hasn't met Victor West.

Like so many other florists, West is the only full-time employee at his shop, so he wears many hats. Although he has four part-timers, he's a manager, driver, designer and salesman. Yet he's still managed to win the business of corporations such as Frito-Lay.

His business, near downtown Plymouth, Mich., is near a large corporate office park, which certainly helps. But he vies for the corporate business with four other florists, and getting it is usually a matter of being able to meet the corporate world's strong demands.

West does what it takes to show that he's ready for the challenge: he stays one step ahead of the local competition by guaranteeing delivery by noon. "I know I'm giving them something that other florists (in the area) can't because their service just is not comparable," he says. "Plus, I'm making the deliveries, so I can give realistic estimates."

He also makes friends with local CEOs by taking an interest in the community and local business organizations.

"I'm very active in the community, local groups and working at events such as garden shows," he says. "When you go to these things, like the garden shows,



Victor West Vanessa's Flowers

Plymouth, Mich.

Founded: 1992

B-to-B Sales: 20 percent of annual sales

B-to-B Niche: Anything from Frito-Lay to a small doctor's office

B-to-B Silver Bullet: Get to know the CEOs. Offer exceptional service.



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Summer's the Time to Secure B to B

Take advantage of the dog days of August to strengthen ties to your corporate clients:

■ During the slower summer months, Shelli Walker, of Community Florist in Phoenix, and head designer Sarah Noffsinger, schedule face-to-face meetings (after doing so much work over the telephone) to deliver "thank you" baskets to corporate clients. Walker tucks a PowerPoint CD into each basket that details all of the different types of work her company does, in hopes of signing up the client for even more business in the future.

■ Say "thank you" by creating links to your corporate clients on your flower shop's Web site. Harvey Designs in Savannah has a special "Links" section on its Web site that lists "Bands/Musicians," "Wedding Cakes," "Event Rentals," "Catering," and "Photographers." Links can either be related to your business or you can create an icon that says something like "Support Our Local Businesses!"

■ Use that rare moment of poolside relaxation to catch up on personalized "niceties," such as thank-you notes to corporate clients. It's standard procedure at Tipton & Hurst in Little Rock, Ark. "We keep a very personal relationship with our corporate clients," says Jason Guin of Tipton & Hurst. "In any business, relationships are important, especially in the floral business. Since we are selling 'emotions' it is of the utmost importance that our clients feel they have a personal contact." 🌸

— Mary Ann Barton
E-mail: mbarton@safnow.org

and someone's husband is vice president of a company, you can talk, be personable. It can pay off."

West has also positioned himself as not only a florist but also the "go-to" guy for services that extend well beyond office flowers. "Most CEOs and managers at these companies live out of town and commute in for work," he says. "They really don't know where to go to get things — caterers for parties, bakers, printers, travel agents. I know and I tell them."

In one case, when a local CEO was looking for a baker, West went as far as buying the baked goods for the company — and taking time out of his day to drive to the company event and deliver them (he was compensated for the extra work, he says).

"That company president always goes to me now," he says. "I got a great price for him that he couldn't find anywhere else."

West's service emphasis helps fuel

steady growth. In 2002, he had about 40 corporate clients, whose sales made up 15 percent of his business. Today, he has about 60 active clients in the B-to-B category. He services large corporations, with hundreds (or even thousands) of employees, and small companies alike, including doctors and accountants' offices. Together, they comprise 20 percent of total sales.

Sales By Design

The flowers themselves make the best sales pitch for corporate work at Community Florist in Phoenix. Owner Shelli Walker says she landed her first big corporate account — a local hospital — when the receptionist called to ask if they could send over some samples of their work. "They were looking to replace the florist that had been supplying their flowers for their gift shop," Walker recalls, "so we sent them some samples of our work, and we got the business." With another hospital,





GOBBLE IT UP Lisa LoVullo of Wild Thing in Annapolis has found a niche in Thanksgiving gifts and decor. Here's one arrangement she puts in front of businesses looking to impress their clients or decorate offices for the holiday.

Walker simply asked the receptionist about the hospital's floral needs and offered her services, and they followed up with an order for floral arrangements for the hospital lobby.

That was in 2003, when Walker bought the then-10-year-old shop. Three years later, Walker is the in-house florist for three hospitals — (and is working on adding a fourth). Corporate sales make up 72 percent of her shop's annual sales, and hospital work comprises about half of it. That's more than double the percentage of three years ago, before the hospital business started pouring in every week.

Become a Regular (and Then Some)

Walker makes getting the hospital business sound like a breeze: "We took care of what they needed," which include beautiful, long-lasting arrangements



Shelli Walker Community Florist

Phoenix

Founded: 1993

B-to-B Sales: 72 percent of annual sales

B-to-B Niche: Hospitals

B-to-B Silver Bullet: Ask for the business; give spectacular service

that were delivered on time. But any florist who's worked with hospitals knows it's a feat that's achievable only by those who've learned the often complex ins and outs of maneuvering through a hospital.

Relationship-building also played a role. After delivering that first arrangement, Walker continued to nurture the business by making daily trips to the hospital — so the hospital staff had a face to connect with the flowers they were offering. She also offered perks, such as free delivery for hospital employees and gratis arrangements for hospital fund-raisers. It paid off. With the second hospital account, she became well known within the hospital walls (and with the "higher-ups") and was made the "official" hospital florist. (See Info to Go to read more about how florists capitalize on hospital business).

Walker stocks two hospital gift shops with \$800 to \$1,000 in bouquets (60 to 80) a week. She delivers about 50 bouquets twice a week to the third, smaller hospital. For Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, those numbers sometimes double or triple. "They get all of that



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“I don’t say ‘no.’ It’s always about service, service, service.”

—Victor West
Vanessa’s Flowers
Plymouth, Mich.

through us,” she says, “and it basically all came from word of mouth after we landed one hospital account.” Keeping corporate accounts, says Walker, is a team effort, “from the person processing the flowers quickly and correctly to the designers creating beautiful arrangements — and keeping them to value,” she says, emphasizing the importance of keeping cost of goods in line (See Business of Design, page 38). The delivery driver, Walker says, has the ability to make or break the business. “They are the face that our customers see, and they represent what we do,” she says. “If they do that poorly, it reflects on all of us.”

Never Say No

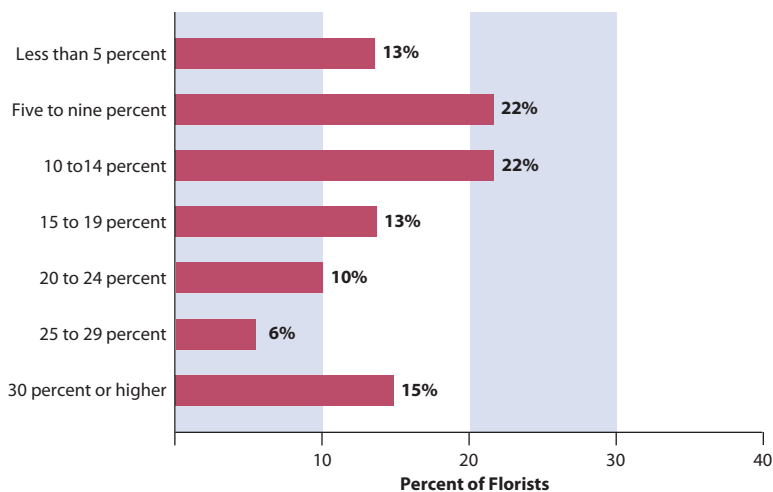
If the “never say no to a customer” adage is important to keeping customers happy, it’s in the “do or die” category when it comes to corporate accounts. Consider the stakes: one corporate account can be the equivalent of dozens and dozens of regular residential cus-

tomers. Plus, florists agree that the expectations of the b-to-b client are higher. “I don’t say ‘no,’” says West. “It’s always about service, service, service.”

LoVullo has a similar mantra. “I’ve never told a corporate client ‘No, I can’t do that,’” she says. There even have been times that her corporate clients — or personal accounts — bought flowers online from another source, were disappointed with the product and brought it to LoVullo to “fix” and rearrange.

LoVullo and Walker both have hired an extra driver to accommodate accounts that wanted morning-only deliveries. And they give a price break to corporate clients who balk at labor or set-up charges. “I deliver some \$50 to \$75 dollar arrangements to some financial consultants (to display in their offices) and I don’t charge for the set up,” says West. “They have wealthy clients and the prospect of winning them over is worth losing out on the setup costs.”

Percent of Sales from Corporate Accounts



Source: SAF online survey of 3,456 retail florists, June 2006. Six percent response rate.

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“We tailor things so much to the company that it makes it impossible for them to get what they want online.”

—Lisa LoVullo
Wild Thing
Annapolis, Md.

Keep It Local

Can even the best of service prevent that brand new receptionist, assigned with ordering lobby flowers, from doing an online search for “flowers in Annapolis” rather than calling your shop? More than a few florists have received an incoming order for a corporate customer who usually orders flowers directly from them.

The only way to avoid this situation is to make your shop indispensable to the client, says LoVullo. Easier said than

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—Rebecca Pollack
E-mail: rpollack@safnow.org

done, perhaps. But LoVullo says she's never lost a corporate account to an online company, because she makes sure the corporation can't operate without her.

From offering small, personalized touches (ribbons customized with the company's name), to surveying employees about their favorite colors, flowers and holidays, she constantly stays in

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Jeff Corbin and Ardith Beveridge offer different ways to use new products.



Info To Go

The Hook for Hospitals

In the August 2005 issue of *Floral Management*, editors talked to florists who are overcoming delivery challenges at hospitals. Get the story by clicking on the Info to Go logo on the home page of SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or, get it via SAF's Fast Fax by calling (888) 723-2000 and requesting document #860.

touch with corporate clients.

"We tailor things so much to the company that it makes it impossible for them to get what they want online," she says. She even talks to the CEOs of the company — asking them about their business goals, their business' challenges and how they motivate staff.

Armed with that knowledge, LoVullo says she can "make the (client) look fabulous." One Annapolis company was having a high turnover rate, and LoVullo suggested to the CEO that he should start giving the employees more recognition. The president took her advice and started using LoVullo's services to send "crazy gifts" to employees — arrangements for St. Patrick's Day, a funny card. "We made it a fun, happy place to work," she says. "Since we started doing it a year ago, the company has not lost any employees," and LoVullo knows she's captured that account for good.

Another way to achieve corporate success is through the heart of the receptionist, according to West.

"I noticed a secretary always had jelly beans on her desk, so I went out and bought a big bag of nice jelly beans," he says. "Another time, a receptionist told me she'd never received flowers, so when I brought her a bouquet for free one day, she cried." 🌸

Julia Hoffman is senior editor of *Floral Management* magazine. E-mail: jhoffman@safnow.org

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