

Can Sympathy

By Mary Westbrook

Be Saved?

With a bit of research, a lot of networking and plenty of creativity, florists are keeping sympathy work at the forefront of their businesses.

When Mark Scicluna of K and M Flowers in Dearborn, Mich., started out in the floral industry nearly 35 years ago, funerals were multi-day events complete with formal, solemn viewings. Even amid the overwhelming emotions, people understood funerals — and the etiquette, the scheduling and the rhythm behind them.

That's not necessarily the case today. "A lot of people today are forgoing the traditional funeral period," says Scicluna, who attributes some 50 percent of his business to sympathy work. "Instead, they're holding a memorial service that is anywhere from three days to six months after the death, sometimes longer. People don't know if they're obligated to show up. They don't know how to respond."

Or, for that matter, what to send. As Scicluna points out, the floral industry already is vexed by the "value question" in some consumers' minds. Flowers are a perishable product. They die. If

flowers were a "must" at a three-day wake and funeral with entire families in attendance in 1957, how then should they fit into an outdoor, 20-minute "life celebration" for a handful of friends in 2007, let alone a "virtual funeral" or a memorial based entirely around a slideshow/podcast/YouTube presentation on the deceased's life?

"We've even seen a huge number of no-service" memorials, says Scicluna, who owns K and M with his brother, Kevin. "A lot of things are changing."

The strength of the sympathy business is being tested today, with the numbers being less than beneficial for shop own-

ers. An increasing number of family-owned funeral homes are being taken over by corporations and the red tape that shift can incur — strict contracts with outside businesses such as florists for one, or even in-house flower shops that shut out local florists completely. The problems all translate to a challenging working environment where it is hard to maintain, or even build, a successful sympathy business.

And, yet ... some florists are doing just that, creating solid sympathy segments under the guidance of marketing, advertising and communication plans that bear a striking resemblance



BY THE BOOK Nearly a decade ago, Bill Fisher of Hoover-Fisher Florist in Silver Spring, Md., partnered with a nearby funeral home to create a custom selection book, tailored for customers. Today the book still is in use — both the shop and the funeral home have several copies.

to the philosophies successful florists use to capture corporate or event work. They're advertising sympathy designs, dedicating Web pages — or entire sites — to funeral work and wooing funeral directors and their staffs with flowers, food and good old, face-to-face interaction. The pay-off is sales, of course, but the real satisfaction is in effectively serving customers at a time when flowers help them most.

“Sympathy is confusing for everyone because [families and friends] are dealing with an emotional time,” Scicluna says. “My goal is to put myself in my customer’s shoes. What would I want a florist to do?”

Guide the Process

That very question led Scicluna to launch a dedicated sympathy page on his Web site, www.kmflowers.com, in February 2007. The primarily text-based page offers guidance on choosing arrangements and products — from traditional casket sprays to pastry baskets — and includes details such as pricing and dimensions. Scicluna’s goal was simple: He wanted to walk his customers through the process of ordering flowers and simultaneously narrow the selections to make that process less overwhelming. The Web page has become a sales tool that Scicluna and his staff use to supplement low-tech customer service techniques — namely, talking to customers and funeral home directors.

“Too many florists make the customers make all the decisions,” Scicluna says. “They throw a big book of pictures and say, ‘Which one do you want?’ In two to three minutes, I think any skilled florist will have a good pulse on what will satisfy the customer, but you have to take the time to talk to them and to give them information. That’s the difference between a florist and an order taker.”

Like Scicluna, Bill Fisher of Hoover-Fisher Florist in Silver Spring, Md., believes that when it comes to sympathy work, customers need an edited range of

selections. Nearly a decade ago, Fisher partnered with a nearby funeral home to create a custom selection book, tailored for customers. He spent \$10,000 on the project but estimates he recouped that cost in less than a year. Today the book still is in use — both the shop and the funeral home have several copies on hand at all times.

“It’s still current because we used very classic designs, which is how my area skews,” says Fisher, who estimates that 20 percent to 25 percent of his business comes from sympathy sales. “Of course, if a family wants a custom design, we

work with them to create something more personal.”

Fisher has revisited and updated pricing many times since releasing the book eight years ago, a process florists should not tackle in isolation, says Tim Pugh of Pugh’s Flowers in Memphis, Tenn. Six months ago Pugh, who relies on sympathy sales for about 30 percent of his business, introduced high-end options at the suggestion of the funeral home with which he has a partnership.

“Our average sale has gone up 15 percent,” he says. “We’re actually seeing people spend more on family arrange-

ments, thanks in part to personalized items — photos and things. We saw a lot of that [personalization] 20 to 25 years ago. It’s back now.”

Clay Atchison III of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas, took the idea of guiding customers even further this past year when he launched an entire Web site, www.mcadamsfuneralflorest.com, for his shop’s sympathy business (about 28 percent of sales). The site retains the signature colors and distinctive branding of Atchison’s main site, www.mcadamsfloral.com, but subtle changes — a revised logo and graphics geared toward sympathy work — give the site a very targeted feel.

“The funeral part of my business is so detailed. I felt like it couldn’t be done properly just by clicking on ‘funeral tributes’ . . . on a main Web site,” says Atchison, who also leaves business cards with his shop’s revised name, McAdams Funeral Florist and logo, with funeral directors. (Atchison also has sectioned off a space in his physical store specifically for sympathy sales. Read more in Visual Impact, p. 15.)

Funeral Directors: Talk it Out

Communication is a vital component — some call it the lifeblood — of a florist’s relationship with local funeral homes and especially funeral directors.

Working effectively together “is really about communication and networking,” insists Debora Kellom, a spokeswoman for the National Funeral Directors Association. “Tell the funeral director you understand the trends and issues they’re dealing with. We’re looking for ideas on easier ways to display things that show a person’s passion and life. A florist can help provide those ideas.” (For tips on which funeral industry publications to turn to for more information on industry trends, see Hands On, p. 14.)

Atchison often makes a point to deliver arrangements himself to

Meet the Florists

Mark (left) and Kevin Scicluna K and M Flowers

Dearborn, Mich.

www.kmflowers.com

The Numbers: Sympathy represents 50 percent of sales



The Strategy:

Walk customers through the process of

buying sympathy flowers using the shop’s recently launched, dedicated sympathy Web page.

Bill Fisher Hoover-Fisher Florist

Silver Spring, Md.

www.hooverfisherflorist.com

The Numbers: Sympathy represents 20 percent to 25 percent of sales

The Strategy: Build relationships with funeral home staffs,

not just management, through delivered lunches and breakfasts.



Tim Pugh Pugh’s Flowers

Memphis, Tenn.

www.pughs.com

The Numbers: Sympathy represents 30 percent of sales

The Strategy: Don’t undersell. Six months ago, at the suggestion of a funeral home, the shop began offering more expensive tribute items, resulting in a sales spike.



Clay Atchison III, McAdams Floral

Victoria, Texas

www.mcadamsfloral.com

The Numbers: Sympathy represents 28 percent of sales

The Strategy: All bases are covered with a comprehensive sympathy Web site that features customized funeral logo and business cards, thank you gifts for the funeral home staff, an after-hours call center, ads targeting sympathy sales and more.



Sorting Out 'In Lieu Of'

Is there a more loathed phrase within the floral industry than "in lieu of flowers ..."? While every florist can appreciate a family's right to pay tribute to a deceased loved one in a manner it sees fit, those four words, many industry members claim, often are used unnecessarily or even incorrectly, at the expense of florists and loved ones who draw comfort from flowers and plants.

"If a family comes in and says they want to say, 'in lieu of flowers,' I usually ask them what they're thinking, what's going on," says National Funeral Directors Association Spokeswoman Debora Kellom of Wade Funeral Home

in St. Louis. "A lot of the time, they don't mean that they don't want flowers at all, they just mean that they know the person supported a particular charity and want to highlight that."

For his part, Clay Atchison III of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas, recently used Wordtracker software to estimate the number of hits an "in lieu of search" would generate. The number was "significant," he says, indicating that consumers are searching online for a definition of the term. In response,


ONE-STOP RESOURCE SAF offers extensive guidance on establishing relationships with funeral directors and building a thriving sympathy business, on www.safnow.org/sympathy.

Atchison purchased www.inlieuofflowers.info and www.inlieuofflowers.org and posted "pro-flower" information.

"Right now, it's just text," he says. "But down the road, I'd like to add graphics and logos."

While talking to funeral directors about the misuse of the phrase can help, it's not a sure bet, Kellom says, especially as memorial contributions become more popular.

"I don't think you can stop 'in lieu of,' to be honest," she says. "But then again, I don't think 'in lieu of' will ever stop flowers from being a part of memorialization entirely."

SAF has numerous resources florists can use to help open a dialogue with funeral directors about the phrase. For more information, visit www.safnow.org/sympathy or call (800) 336-4743. 

—M.W.

funeral homes, just so the staff and the funeral director can see him taking a personal interest in the delivery. He'll walk through the funeral home to get a feel for the layout and any updates or

changes to the facility.

Atchison, who has formalized partnerships with two funeral homes but frequently works with a handful of others in town, also has mini Web pages





THEY NEED SOMEBODY Mark Scicluna of K and M Flowers in Dearborn, Mich., put together a Web page dedicated to sympathy work in 2007.

about area funeral homes on his sympathy Web site, including the business names, owners, contact information and some history. He says it's a win-win for the funeral homes and for McAdams Floral: The homes get a professional presence online and Atchison benefits when search engine results for the homes drive people to his shop's site.

Another essential connection for florists to make is with the funeral home



ADVERTISING WITH TLC McAdams Floral advertises its sympathy work with specific ads that evoke funerals and the emotional journeys those events entail. The shop also buys banner ads on the Web site of its local newspaper, the Victoria Advocate. See more sympathy ads from McAdams Floral by clicking on the Photos to Go logo on SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. See the Info to Go box for more insight into the McAdams ad campaign.

director or manager, Scicluna says.

"It is the funeral director who makes the ultimate decision about who they want to work with," he says, simply. "They don't want any headaches."

Just remember, the funeral industry is a 24/7 position, Kellom cautions, so don't be surprised if you don't hear back immediately from a funeral director

— and don't be shy about calling back.

"The best time to call is probably right after lunch, after the morning services and before the afternoon activities," she says. "It's also a good idea to call and set up a meeting time, even if that meeting takes place over the phone."

Everybody Counts

While meeting periodically with directors is a must, and the importance of that relationship can't be overstated, florists with successful sympathy segments insist that it's vital to get in good with the lower-level employees, too. How do you do that? Start with food.

Twice a month Fisher treats the staff at the funeral home that provides 80 percent of his sympathy work to lunch or breakfast, delivered to the home. "I stop in myself and talk with the manager all the time, but I wanted to build something with the people who are on the frontline handling the flowers," he explains.

The effort, which Fisher started about a year ago, costs the shop about \$200 month, but "that's a drop in the bucket compared to the sales they send my way," Fisher says.

Atchison employs a similar strategy, giving inexpensive thank you gifts to the funeral home staffs at the holidays and thank you baskets to the funeral homes'

after-hours phone staff for their referrals.

At press time, Atchison also was in the final stages of putting together a print newsletter for his local funeral homes. He plans to send out the publication quarterly, focusing on light-hearted tips and trends, as well as practical information such as new products or designs.

"Even though I've already got a good relationship, you can't get complacent," he says. "More than anything else, this is about top-of-mind awareness. It's the same thing you would do for any other customer. Why not funeral homes?"

Above, Beyond and Outside

In some ways, Atchison's question gets to the heart of the real challenge in sympathy work today. As funerals become more diverse — and in many cases event-focused — florists have to adapt their services and their product offerings.

"We're being out-marketed by" charity groups, Atchison says. "We need to think about that and convince people to do both — send flowers and give dona-



STAY ON TARGET Clay Atchison III of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas, recently launched an entire Web site dedicated to serving sympathy customers. The site incorporates a specialized logo and name — McAdams Funeral Florist — specific to sympathy work while retaining branding elements of Atchison's main site.

tions — to recoup lost business. The younger generations don't have the sense of sending flowers to funeral homes, and funerals themselves are getting shorter, just as it is with hospital stays, so your chance of sending flowers is less."

As the trend toward personalization only increases, more and more funeral homes are using vignettes — in displays and at actual services — to better cap-

ture the unique aspects of a person's life, Kellom says, and that's often where the input and expertise of a florist is crucial.

"Give people options — a florist's role isn't just through flowers," she says.

"Maybe you can offer something after the service, like, for the first year, offer a customer the opportunity to provide the flowers for the grave. Get more into keepsake items." (For more on the

importance of keepsakes, see "A Very Personal Touch," in the Info to Go box.)

The bottom line is that, for most florists, year-round, consistent sympathy business is too lucrative — and too rewarding — to give up without a fight, Fisher says.

Sympathy arrangements "are our highest ticket item," Pugh adds. "Plus the cost of delivery is low because we're delivering multiple pieces to one place. It's the most important part of the business to me."

And remember, a little compassion and understanding — in relation to the stress the funeral homes are under and the emotional strain on the family — go an awfully long way, Scicluna says.

"Florists do not always connect with the emotion of a sympathy occasion," he says. "If someone has lost a close family member, they are more likely to understand the emotion. I've lost grandparents and close friends and those experiences turned a light bulb on for me, to help me understand my customers' point of view. Nine times out of 10, they don't want to be calling me [for a sympathy arrangement]. This is an obligatory thing." 🌸

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