

Wholesalers are not in Competition with Retailers

The “Other” Customers

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As wholesale florists we are in a unique position to control our own destiny in the flower trade. We are able to choose what direction we will take our businesses. Are we going to continue depending entirely on the retail florist, or are we going to find an additional source of income for our companies? There are more customers than the traditional retail flower shop.

Depending on the wholesaler, the retail trade covers between 50% and 90% of our sales. As more retailers explore “direct buying” as an option, those wholesalers that continue to succeed in these tough times have found that the key is finding more customers, and retailers are not multiplying. With the number of retail florists at a 30-year low, we must find those “other” customers that are seeking out our wares and services. They will help us to weather the tough times, and make us better wholesalers for the retailer. This is where we begin to walk the tight rope of marketing. How do you promote your business to a clientele that is also a possible customer to your customers?

As a wholesaler, we must distinguish ourselves from the retail florist at every opportunity. How are we to depend on our most faithful customer base (in the retail florist) if we try to sell ourselves to their customers as a replacement? We are not going to succeed at either task if that is our goal. We must carve out our own niche in the market that is unique and does not encroach upon the retailer.

Let’s begin with how we differentiate ourselves from the retailers.

When you go out to eat at a nice restaurant, let’s say a Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse, what do you expect? You expect an exceptional meal, prepared with the utmost care and skill to surpass anything you could do yourself. You are paying for the service. This is what customers are seeking when they enter a flower shop. The customer is looking for a beautiful arrangement made by a talented and skilled floral designer. They are looking for something they can’t do themselves.

When you walk into a butcher’s shop or farmer’s market, you are looking for the best cut of meat or freshest produce for that special meal. You are going to do it yourself, and prepare the best meal you can make yourself. This is the do-it-yourself mentality. These are the customers for the wholesale florist. We don’t sell the experience or event; we sell the supplies to help someone make it for them self.

Think of it like a hardware store. No one walks into Ace Hardware and says, “I’d like to buy a deck for my house, please.” They don’t sell decks. They sell lumber, nails, screws, weatherproofing, levels, hammers, cement, drills, saws, measuring tapes, and shovels. A wholesale florist doesn’t sell a wedding; we sell flowers, greenery, bouquet holders, wire, tape, Floralife®, Oasis®, vases, pins, wristlets, pew clips and plants. A retail florist sells a wedding... an experience... a carefree beautiful day... a memory to

last a lifetime. We are not in competition with what retailers do; they do it better than anyone. We are the supplier, not the skilled artisan.

We are not retailers, and we don't want to be retailers. That's not how wholesalers work best. Their business model is not our business model, and that is not how we will succeed. We succeed by broadening our customer base (making the pie bigger) and bringing in the customers that can use our services, not by taking customers from our customers. We are searching for the "other" customers that are not looking for florists.

Who are these "other" customers?

We are looking for the customers that want to do the job for their selves, or maybe want to do it for someone else. These people might need a little direction to pull it off, so we will sell them some design books or sign them up for our seasonal design course. They might even be ex-florists doing a favor for a family member. These are those "other" customers we are seeking out. These are the customers that are not looking for a florist to do it all for them. Occasionally, these customers need to be referred back to a florist because the job is much bigger than they originally planned. Our job is still to promote the floral industry at every turn, and sometimes the best way to do it is by encouraging a customer to go to a florist.

There are also some "other" business entrepreneurs looking to broaden their business opportunities with new offerings. Wedding planners, Event Coordinators, Interior Decorators, and many more people are seeking to broaden their appeal. If someone can offer multiple services, a customer is more likely to call them again. I have realtors decorating show houses, floral preservationists doing party flowers, and interior decorators doing flowers for a christening. Why wouldn't we encourage these customers to purchase from a wholesaler instead of a grocery store or online supplier?

We have the ability to create new flower buyers. The do-it-yourself "florist" and "other" customers that we are creating are also customers for the retail florist. On those days when they don't have the time to do-it-yourself, they head to the retailer because flowers become a part of their lifestyle. They bring flowers out of the weddings and funerals by showing others how flowers fit into any part of your life. Why wouldn't we encourage them?

For far too long the wholesale floral industry has held back from advertising, marketing and branching out. I am not naïve enough to think retailers will be recommending us to their customers, I know better. We will have to find these customers for our self. This is territory wholesalers are not accustomed to treading.

1. Some of the "other" customers will find us just by being there, through word of mouth. Who doesn't love a good referral?
2. Take a bridal show for a good example. A wholesaler going to a bridal show with a stack of business cards can seek out the vendors at the show as customers, not the brides. If they are busy with brides (and we hope they are), take their card and call them later. We want the vendors, because they will

come back event after event. The returning customer is worth more than all the one-time brides.

3. Advertise in the local bridal magazine: pick-up the interested vendors as customers, and refer the brides to you great retailers.
4. Don't be afraid to put your name, phone number, and website on the side of your van. It's the best billboard you have, and I bet it gets more "hits" than your website everyday.

Find the methods that work best for your market, whether it is large or small. There is no reason why wholesalers should stay cooped-up in our warehouses, waiting for customers to come to us. Why should we wait for the end to come, while the rest of the business world is scraping and clawing through the tough economy?

I know these customers are out there, because I am a "Do-it-yourselfer." I built my daughter's swing set, refinished my hardwood floors, replaced my bathroom sink and changed the spark plugs in my '82 Ford F-150. I also hired an electrician to fix my wiring, an HVAC person to repair my gas heater and a mechanic to replace the brakes on my truck. I can usually do it myself, but sometimes you need a professional. There are customers out there in need of reliable, fresh, amazing flowers **from a wholesaler**...just like the majority of people want a retail florist to take care of their flower needs in the beautiful and skilled way they do best.