PRIZED PARTNERSHIP Frank Mancuso III secured the Hard Rock Cafe in Detroit as a sponsor for Mancuso’s Florist’s bi-annual contests, which draw dozens of entries and “hundreds and hundreds” of votes.
Aiden and Brenden, twin 2-year-olds in Alexandria, Va., have never met Tony, a medic from Sarasota, Fla., who is stationed in Iraq, nor played with Puddi Pie, a festively dressed guinea pig in Trumbull, Conn. But these far-flung strangers all work for flower shops. No, they don’t don aprons and strip roses, but as entries in the shops’ contests, they’ve fattened e-mail databases, generated publicity and increased customer interaction.

The twins’ mother entered the snapshot of the toddlers teetering through a snowdrift for Conklyn’s Florist’s “Snow, Snow & More Snow” contest during the Mid-Atlantic snowstorms of 2010. Tony’s mother shared a story of her son knitting booties overseas for his newborn daughter he’d never met in “Sarasota’s Favorite Dad” contest for Beneva Flowers last year. And Puddi Pie’s owner shared the image of her guinea pig in a Santa hat for City Line Florist’s “Halloween Pet Costume” contest.

None won, but while they were having fun, sharing the entries on Facebook, recruiting votes from friends and deepening their relationship with a local business, they were also helping that business win new fans, more engaged customers and those all-important e-mail addresses and demographic data.

How? Well, for one thing, playing a game is fun. Consumers certainly think so, evidenced by the hundreds of online companies — contestblogger.com, onlinesweepstakes.com, to name just a few — whose sole purpose is to list the countless online contests and sweepstakes opportunities on any given day. And businesses are keen to consumers’ seemingly unlimited appetite for games. Ben Pickering, CEO of Strutta, an Internet company that creates contest platforms for businesses, counts hundreds of companies as clients, from the likes of Crate & Barrel, Procter & Gamble and the Professional Golf Association to small businesses, including an orthodontist and a lawn care service.

“Contests as a marketing tool have been around for a long time, but with the growth of online marketing and specifically social media, they’ve become especially popular and effective at increasing brand interaction,” Pickering said.
When someone enters a contest, they are, in essence, volunteering to spend more time with your company (virtually or in-store), talk you up to friends, and redirect voters to your site, who must supply certain details before they can vote.

But ensuring your shop leverages the potential of contests is more than just fun and games. It takes some strategy, said Jordan Behan, Strutta’s director of community relations. To begin, announce it to your subscriber list to “kick-start a word-of-mouth campaign with the most loyal of your evangelists,” he said. Another Strutta strategy: for online contests, include a “share with a friend” button to make your contest go viral on social media.

Requiring personal data is the No. 1 rule of the hosting-contests game, said Art Conforti, owner of Beneva Flowers in Sarasota, Fla. After running at least 20 contests in the past five years, Conforti insists the stakes are low and the rewards high. “It’s hard to quantify the value of a contest,” he said. “You might only get nine new names out of it and feel discouraged, but any one of those people makes it worthwhile. You never know who might turn into a life-long customer.”

Conforti’s so convinced of the value of contests that he’s advised 52 other florists, clients of his side business, Advanced Marketing Strategies, on how they can have some fun and gain excitement, press and revenue for their shops.

Here, he and six other florists share their game plans for being the biggest winner when it comes to holding contests.

What’s in it for you?
First, determine what you hope to gain with your contest. Publicity? Walk-in traffic? Website visits? Community involvement?

For instance, if you want to capture e-mail addresses to beef up your database, make providing personal information a requirement to vote. That’s Conforti’s

AND THE WINNER IS...

“DESIGNING WITH THE STARS”
Shelley’s Flowers & Gifts; Waldoboro, Maine
This take-off of the popular television dance challenge gave participants an hour to create a floral arrangement, while the public cheered them on.
Prize: Bragging rights
Number of Participants: 7 local celebrities, 125 fans
Payoff: News coverage, a 60 percent increase in sales that month
Marketing: Facebook, statement stuffers, shop marquee

“NICE GUYS RULE”
Lake Gaston Flower Shop; Gastburg, Va.
Customers shared stories showing why they or their significant other deserved the “nice guy” moniker.
Prize: One dozen roses, jumbo Mylar balloon, teddy bear and chocolates, worth $200
Number of Entries: 50-plus
Payoff: Publicity, capturing e-mail addresses
Marketing: Newspaper ad, Facebook

“BUDS & BRAS”
The Bud Connection; Ellsworth, Maine
Using everything from sequins to fishing bait, residents brought in bedazzled brassieres to raise money for breast cancer treatment.
Prize: $100 gift certificate to shop
Number of Entries: 39
Payoff: $1,200 for local cancer center; three weeks’ worth of newspaper coverage
Marketing: Facebook

“HOLIDAY FUN PHOTO CONTEST”
Mancuso’s Florist, Inc.; St. Clair Shores, Mich.
Customers are challenged to submit snapshots in their brightest holiday get-ups.
Prize: Concert tickets, gift cards
Number of Entries: 20 to 40, on average
Number of Voters: Several hundred
Payoff: Community exposure, customer engagement
Marketing: Postcards, brochures, tags on arrangements, social media

“BEST VALENTINE’S DAY CARD MESSAGE”
Boulder Blooms; Boulder, Colo.
Locals shared their most memorable card messages, from the heartfelt to the hilarious. Co-owner Jerrica Park, CPF, said her favorite came from a group of girls cheering up their friend mourning a recent breakup: “It’s better to have lost a love than to love a loser.”
Prize: Free dozen red roses available for pick up
Number of Entries: Dozens
Payoff: Increased interaction with customers
Marketing: Facebook

“Sarasota’s Favorite Mom,” while reminding residents to get their Mother’s Day buds from Beneva Flowers.
goal for his four annual contests — photo contests for Halloween and Christmas and essay contests for Mother’s Day and Father’s Day — each of which routinely add 200 to 300 names to Beneva’s customer base.

“It’s key to know what action you want to elicit from customers when you organize a contest, because the rules you set can get you the end result you desire,” Conforti said.

Steve Sorrell’s contests, on the other hand, are more about giving information than getting it. When he launched a website in 2009 for The House of Flowers in Valley, Ala., he wanted to make sure consumers remembered the address: bamaflowers.com. So he began directing people to the site with a monthly flower trivia contest, which he promotes on Facebook. Sorrell sees the contests as an opportunity to educate and excite consumers about flowers, while ultimately creating a habit that makes them memorize his address. On average, about 50 people enter, but one contest once netted 100 submissions. He selects the winner at random from the correct answers. (And more than half the time, he said, the winner forgets to collect their free flowers.) To encourage participation, Sorrell strays from queries that are too esoteric. “I pick questions that are relatively easy — at least with Google’s help,” he said. “The point isn’t to create some Jeopardy-like competition. It’s to get people to go to my website.”

In Maine, retailers Barbara Courchesne and Shelley Pease increased foot traffic and generated publicity for their respective shops by hosting on-site competitive events. Last October, Courchesne of The Bud Connection in Ellsworth, celebrated National Breast Cancer month with “Buds and Bras,” a month-long bra design contest and auction. At the shop, contestants’ creations served as window display items, luring passersby to come inside and pick their favorite, for $1 a vote. At month’s end, Courchesne auctioned the 39 bras, raising $1,200 for a local cancer resource center. Following the contest, The Bud Connection appeared in the local weekly newspaper for three straight weeks, receiving front-page coverage twice, and once in the local daily paper. Three local TV stations covered the event, as well as the Chamber of Commerce in two monthly newsletters. “It’s the contest that keeps on giving,” Courchesne said, noting that it brought in several new customers who have already begun dabbling with brassiere embellishments in anticipation of next year’s contest. Her promotion costs were next to nothing — just a few posters around the local shopping mall, Chamber of Commerce and other businesses, and a Facebook mention. (Adrienne’s Flower Garden in Union, N.J., has thrown a similar contest, encouraging residents to submit “bra sculptures.” For more details, see www.safnow.org/moreonline.com.)

Just down the road at Shelley’s Flowers & Gifts in Waldoboro, Pease tapped into the “celebrities outside of their element” craze from reality television with her “Designing with the Stars” contest last November. She challenged seven local “celebrities,” including a pizza shop and auto body shop owner, to make a floral arrangement in one hour. Fans placed votes for their favorites by

**Floral App**

1/3 Square

4.625” x 4.625”

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placing a dollar in a jar. The event attracted more than 125 fans, raised $820, which Pease donated to a local food pantry, and created attention for the shop. Just days later, Pease’s holiday open house had its highest attendance in 11 years — including a line out the door — and her Thanksgiving sales were up 60 percent from the year before.

What’s in it for them?

Once you know what you want out of the contest, you need to make it appealing to the public. “It’s essential that your prize is exciting and worthwhile,” Conforti said. “It takes contestants time to write essays and upload pictures. Why should someone bother to enter if there’s not the potential for something great in the end?”

In Austin, Texas, Freytag’s Florist is preparing for its “Austin’s Favorite Mom” contest, which had 13 entries and roughly 250 votes last Mother’s Day in its inaugural year. Chad Freytag attributes the interest largely to a prize package that included monthly floral arrangements for a year, a spa gift certificate, a string of pearls and dinner reservations for two — worth roughly $1,000. If that price tag makes you balk, know this: the spa supplied the gift certificate gratis in exchange for publicity, the jeweler donated the necklace and the restaurant provided the meal. Freytag’s expense was less than a third of the total price, and customers got the full effect of a luxurious experience. “Free flowers are fun,” Freytag said, “but you get much more excitement with a full meal.”

To court his sponsors, Freytag started with corporate accounts and businesses his family patronizes and found that he didn’t need to do much
Nothing douses the fun of a contest like learning you’ve violated state regulations and have penalties to pay. Before you launch a contest, be sure you’re playing by the rules. While regulations vary from state to state and depend on the type of contest, a few principles apply in all situations, said Craig Tregillus, an attorney for the Federal Trade Commission:

**No pay to play.** Making a purchase for a company cannot be the sole condition of entry for a contest. “It can be a way to enter, but you must also have an alternative,” Tregillus said, adding that, if he was creating a contest, he’d “be conservative and take a ‘no pay to play’ approach, so there’s no chance of misunderstanding.”

**Give them the odds.** Another across-the-board rule: there must be some disclaimer about the odds of winning. “If the odds can’t be calculated in advance, as is often the case, you just need to tell consumers, ‘it will be determined by the number of people who enter,’” Tregillus said.

These rules exist to protect businesses from consumer redresses and consumers from scams, he said. Violators typically must return any money they make from a contest, but the FTC has authority to impose fines up to $16,000, Tregillus said. For the FTC’s complete list of rules, see http://business.ftc.gov/documents/bus27-complying-telemarketing-sales-rule#prize.

To ensure fair play, Chad Freytag consulted an attorney for his shop’s photo contest. “It wasn’t free, but it was just a one-time cost,” he said. His legal advisor helped him outline 12 sections of rules covering eligibility (U.S. citizens 18 and older, no employees, no relatives), entry guidelines (original photos, videos and captions; no corporate logos or trademarks), media rights (entries become property of sponsors immediately upon submission) and prizes (no substitution or cash redemption permitted; any applicable taxes are the winner’s responsibility). His rules also specify that Freytag’s Florist collects personal information to use for promotional purposes benefitting the shop, and that the winner’s name, photo, likeness, biographical information and entry may be used at any time, in any form, in any media without compensation, notice, review or approval.

And if Facebook, with its 500 million active users, sounds like a natural platform for a contest, be aware: the social media site has very specific guidelines for contests, such as requiring a third-party application to set one up and forbidding wall posts as entries. One such application is Strutta. Access the company’s contest platform for Facebook at www.strutta.com/products.

For Facebook’s complete list of “dos and don’ts,” see www.facebook.com/promotions_guidelines.php.

arm-twisting — just mentioning that, every time the Freytag name landed in front of a customer so would theirs, usually did the trick.

“Most businesses recognize that it’s a lot of exposure for a low cost,” he said. His one stipulation for sponsors: Once they’ve agreed, he requires them to provide their portion of the prize before promotions begin. “You don’t want to be in a situation where they promise something, but don’t come through after the contest ends,” he said. For a sample contract for potential sponsors, see www.safnow.org/moreonline.

Conforti, like Freytag, solicits potential contest partners that can donate services. He targets businesses, such as theaters, hotels, pet care centers, sports teams and limousine companies. “Cash is great because it pays for your ads, but it’s more helpful to have sponsors up the value in your giveaways,” Conforti said.

Furthermore, Conforti found businesses more responsive when he asks for a service instead of money, as it gives them an economic, efficient way to reach prospective customers with a sample. (Beneva Flowers administers and promotes the contest; sponsors enjoy the reward of new faces in the door.) And don’t forget the media — Conforti said you build in publicity by having a newspaper, blog, radio or TV station on your team. The Herald Tribune, his biggest sponsor, provides Beneva Flowers with a banner ad on its homepage for a month. In return, every time someone votes, a thank you note pops up with the phrase “sponsored by the Herald Tribune.”

For Frank Mancuso III, Hard Rock Café is the most generous sponsor, providing tickets for performances, including “Jersey Boys” and “Two for the Rain: A Tribute To The Beatles.” Prizes from Mancuso’s Florist, Inc. in St. Clair Shores, Mich., are such a hit that customers spend months honing their photography skills and penning their essays in hopes of winning the next contest, Mancuso said. And though customers count on the prize having some kind of musical element to it, the flower shop keeps those details secret until announcing the contest, which usually occurs about three weeks in advance.
“It’s all about creating anticipation,” Mancuso said. “It’s good to change up the prizes a little. And the longer we keep them wondering what the next prize will be, the more the excitement builds.” Mancuso’s bi-annual contests held in December and May usually attract 20 to 40 entries and “hundreds and hundreds” of votes.

**How you gonna promote it, without going broke?**

Think of your staff as the loudest, proudest cheerleaders for the games you’re playing. Florists’ biggest hang-ups with a contest are viewing it as a chore and forgetting to give employees all the details, Conforti said. He’s known florists to spend days laying the logistical groundwork, then not relay that information to the person who answers the phones. “It takes away from the contest and makes customers uncomfortable if the first person they talk to is clueless,” he said.

Equally important to keeping employees informed: keeping them enthusiastic. If they have trouble mustering a chuckle for a dachshund in a skeleton sweater or a smile for a son’s story about his trip to the zoo with Mom, remind them “a contest is not about attracting an order, it’s about building relationships with your customers,” Conforti said.

Advertising for contests usually comes cheap, our sources said. The majority of it is virtual, through e-mail, Facebook and Twitter. Social media is a powerful momentum builder “because the more you get word out, the more people retweet and repost, giving you exponentially more exposure,” Freytag said.

At his shop, e-mail marketing starts about a month before the contest ends. E-mails detail the rules and prizes and usually include other shop information, like specials and upcoming events. Keeping clutter out of those in-boxes is key.

“If, say in a month, you send out 10 e-mails about your contest and another four about your holiday offerings, people might opt off your e-mail list, which is the exact opposite goal of most contests,” Freytag said. He suggested similar restraint for Facebook and Twitter: “You want momentum, so definitely post every few days, but you don’t want a wall of nothing but contest posts.”
As soon as the contest ends and votes are tallied, announce the results through your website, Facebook, Twitter, newsletter — everywhere you mentioned the competition. Thank all your contestants for entering and encourage them to keep trying by announcing your next contest and keeping that competitive spirit alive. And be sure to put a photo in your shop of the winner — especially if your contest was an effort to build walk-in traffic!

For more formal marketing, Freytag prints cards with the contest name, an illustration and a list of sponsors. He attaches a card to every arrangement sold during the contest and a week or two before. Sponsors, too, are given cards to distribute. For this year’s “Austin’s Favorite Sweethearts” contest, he estimates roughly 100 cards went out daily for a little more than a month, exposing the contest, Freytag’s and sponsors’ names to customers 30,000 to 40,000 times.

A Freytag’s salesperson adept with Photoshop designed the cards. Attaching an image to the contest added credibility for the contest. Although staff didn’t spend much time or money ($250) on the design and production of the cards, Freytag said, “it looked like we did.”

Game over, now what?
Now that you’ve built up customers’ excitement for the contest and have them (you hope) waiting with baited breath to find out the winner, make sure you don’t curb that enthusiasm by dragging out the results.

As soon as the contest ends and votes are tallied, announce the results through your website, Facebook, Twitter, newsletter — everywhere you mentioned the competition. Thank all your contestants for entering and encourage them to keep trying by announcing your next contest and keeping that competitive spirit alive. And be sure to put a photo in your shop of the winner — especially if your contest was an effort to build walk-in traffic!

Diligent follow-up with sponsors is just as important. Triggering the memory of his contest, Freytag sends his contacts at the co-sponsoring spa, restaurant and jewelry store a floral arrangement with a report of his marketing efforts (number of Facebook posts, tweets, cards passed out), so they get a sense of how wide a net the contest cast for them. “The biggest thing to remember with contests is maintaining a good working relationship with your sponsors,” he said. “Not only would you like them to sponsor you in future efforts; you’d like them to be your customers, too.”

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