Top wedding planners and venue managers dish about what it takes to earn a spot on their preferred florist list.
Stephanie Crona stood in the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota, staring at the imposing iron gates that separated the wedding party from the ceremony. Her stomach dropped. Nearby, Crona’s client, the bride, was resplendent in a couture gown that needed to be carefully arranged before her walk down the aisle. But the gates also had to be opened for each bridesmaid; Crona knew she couldn’t both man the gates and take care of the bride. The combo — heavy dress, heavy gates — was something the veteran, detail-oriented planner just hadn’t planned for, and, with minutes to go before the ceremony, she began to panic. That’s when Ian Prosser, AAF, AIFD, CFD, NDSF, PFCI, of Botanica International Design & Décor Studio and Ian Prosser Productions in Tampa, Fla., stepped in. “We can help,” he said cheerfully, gesturing toward his assistant.
The two stood beside the gate, opening and closing it, as Crona attended to her bride. While the couple got hitched without a hitch, another relationship was also cemented that day: florist and planner. “I was quite overwhelmed by Ian’s support,” said Crona, who had already been impressed by a years-long working relationship with Botanica. “He didn’t have to stay, and certainly his assistant did not have to help, but this kind of gesture speaks volumes to a planner, and it sealed my devoted relationship to them.”

Botanica’s blend of artistry, professionalism and a willingness to engage in some roll-up-your-sleeves, ego-free teamwork is also why the business is one of a select group of florists Crona turns to regularly for her wedding clients (the budget for the Sarasota wedding: $250,000). And that’s a good thing for Prosser, because wedding and event planners hold serious sway with brides. Particularly with higher-budget events ($3,000 on florals and up), as well as destination weddings, the planner is the person the couple trusts most for vendor recommendations — and, for these weddings, her endorsement is gold, more valuable to florists than any other referral or dozens of positive online reviews put together.

This month, we talked to 11 top event planners and venue managers to find out what florists can do to rise to the top of those coveted preferred vendor lists and build productive, collaborative planner-florist relationships that last beyond any one big day.

**You make a great first impression.**

Even though top planners have a great deal of influence over vendor selection, they don’t have final say, particularly with clients who sign on for a la carte services (first-step planning, final-step planning or day-of services), and planners say a florist’s initial sit-down with a client is a make-or-break-it moment, even if the florist has received a glowing endorsement. To stand out, think visuals, visuals, visuals.

“Most of our clients can’t picture a finished product the same way industry professionals can,” said Tracie Domino, of Tracie Domino Events, headquartered in Tampa. “Anything [florists] can do to make a better picture, whether in actual photos or words, helps a lot.”

Planners also notice when florists take the time to help educate the brides and grooms, said Cindy Stonehouse, of Stonehouse Events, also headquartered...
in Tampa. “One of the biggest challenges is really helping a bride understand what, say, $250 of flowers look like,”—especially in the age of Pinterest, when brides are privy to so many photos with so little context (including price.)

Clear visuals of centerpieces in different size options serve as a good starting-off point and prevent miscommunication and disappointment. “Sometimes that’s the most nerve-wracking part,” Stonehouse said, “trying to match what’s in a bride’s head” with her budget.

Remember, size matters. Show examples and discuss your abilities in detail (“This will be about 18-inches tall” versus “This is medium-sized”).

Mock-ups and fresh samples, of course, are excellent resources, too, said Beth Anderson, of the Kismet Event Group, who has watched florists in Minneapolis wow clients by showing couples samples on the spot, during the initial consultation. “They get to look and see and touch,” she said. “That’s amazing. Photos are great, but live product is even better.”

In South Carolina, Stacey Fraunfelter, of RLE Charleston, said the wedding division of one of her favorite shops, Tiger Lily Florist, has taken that approach further, setting up a mock table complete with linens and florals for a client “who was having a really hard time envisioning the concept. (Together, they landed that job, with its roughly $3,500 floral budget.)

Beyond the nitty-gritty, remember that the consultation is likely the bride’s first significant interaction with your shop, said Crona, of Table 6 Productions in Florida, along with Colorado, Georgia and Massachusetts. Look your best. Take a moment before the meeting to freshen up your space and look around your store as if you were walking in for the first time. “First impression is everything,” she said.

Try this: Look at your look book, Pinterest page, slide show or whatever tool you use to show your work. Is your latest work on it? Create a centerpiece section that gives a sense of price points: the under $100 centerpieces, $100-$200, etc. And be ready to give dimensions on what you’re showing.

TOTAL PACKAGE Couples are looking to personalize every aspect of their wedding, even small details. Planners say the best florists anticipate those requests and deliver more than the couple imagined.
Florists who ‘engage with the bride and find out what her dream look is for her wedding’ can expand on traditional floral services exponentially.

— STEPHANIE CRONA, TABLE 6 PRODUCTIONS

You tell me about flowers and floral trends.

Planners don’t simply want your help educating clients … they also want your help staying abreast of new information themselves.

In Elizabethtown, Ky., Jeannie Smith, of AshBy Wedding & Event Planning, said local florists earn a spot on her “favorites” list, and make her job easier, when they reach out and educate her on new products throughout the year so that she’s ready with information when she meets brides. Those updates give her important talking points and news to share with brides. (“I was just talking to Main Street Floral about these vases that would be perfect for your cocktail-hour tables.”)

Fraunfelter also relies on florists to stay on top of floral industry trends, including new varieties, which can be a great selling point for trend-conscious couples. “If there’s a new variegated garden rose on the market, I want to hear about it,” she said. “I want to be educated on new things florists are offering to serve my clients.”

Many planners also crave care and handling tips, not to take over the florist’s job, but so that they can be aware of the limitations of the flowers and challenges posed by certain venues (hello, direct sun and 90-degree temps). “I love to work with florists who understand and respect the boundaries of flowers themselves,” Fraunfelter said. “They can educate me, and I can educate the client, on what those boundaries are.”

Try this: Make a point to share the latest floral trends — from bridal and shelter publications or from your latest events — with the event and venue planners in your market. If you’re not already posting trends to your social media, add that to your list, but once a week, take time to reach out specifically to a planner with some customized trend news (“This tabletop décor layout in InStyle: Weddings is more budget-friendly than it looks if the bride is OK with a few substitutions … ”) Make Floral Management’s monthly “Fresh Choices” and “Business of Design” columns and the annual “Outstanding Varieties” cover story must-reads.

You have a strong online presence.

It’s an online world, and brides want to be able to see samples of your work on websites, blogs and social media sites; don’t make it hard for planners to sell your skills by cluttering your platforms with outdated, out-of-focus pics or disorganized albums.

That’s advice from Sandy Tijero, director of catering at The Bridges Golf Club in San Ramon, Calif., and Tasha Work, lead on-site director at Boojum Tree Hidden Gardens in Phoenix. Both say a strong web presence that clearly defines your brand and capabilities is key for wedding clients of all budgets and a big help to planners in the early stages.

Florist websites with well-thought-out, professional wedding showcases can be particularly helpful for planners with many destination weddings, such as Jackie Ross, of Table 6 Productions. “Those clients rely on examples of your work [via social media and the Internet],” she said.

Try this: Take an hour to look at your wedding albums on social media as if it were your first time seeing them. Delete out-of-focus photos and anything that doesn’t show your product in its best light.

You know your venues.

During the consultation, intimate knowledge of local venues gives florists a tremendous advantage. Tijero’s favorite florists, for instance, understand that one of The Bridges’ two main reception rooms will have to be turned quickly after lunch service, and the plans they present to couples reflect that tight timeline.

Seasoned florists also are familiar already with the table sizes, shape and overall color scheme of popular sites, giving them an edge over people who have never set foot in the room. For her part, Work will never forget the extra effort a florist put in to secure the perfect additional chairs and bags of sand for a beach-themed wedding — she knew the exact colors and materials that would make the venue (and the florist) dazzle the couple and their guests.

Try this: Once a month, plan to visit popular local venues where you’ve never done a wedding. Take notes on available table sizes and shapes, color schemes and any interesting (or potentially challenging)
architectural details. Talk with the venue manager about how the space is used outside of events to get a sense for turnaround time and other constraints.

**You have great ideas on personalization.**

Want to earn serious cred with planners? Use the planning process to introduce ideas to planners and clients that will help personalize just about every detail of the wedding: linens, lighting, vignettes around the guest book, flowers for the cocktail hour, bar and restroom, along with pre-wedding gatherings or post-wedding brunches (both increasingly common as brides and grooms extend wedding days into wedding weekends).

“People are paying attention to spots that they haven’t in the past — the cocktail area, the dance floor,” Anderson said. Introducing designs for these areas may increase the overall budget — good news for florists — but it also aligns with wedding industry trends and gives the bride options she didn’t even know she wanted, making the florist and planner look top-notch.

Don’t be timid about looking beyond the flowers, agreed Crona. “Sometimes florists can just get wrapped into the actual floral aspect of the wedding,” she said. “There are so many opportunities to garner business with a bride — linens, chargers, furniture, lighting, etc.” Florists who “engage with the bride and find out what her dream look is for her wedding” can expand on traditional floral services exponentially.

And florists who provide wedding clients with different options and extra flourishes, rather than packages that may appear cookie-cutter, are in a much better position to win over discerning brides, said Anna Lucia Richardson, of Anna Lucia Events in Tampa. “Our biggest thing [with brides] is having the flexibility to customize,” she said. “When the guests walk into one of our weddings, we want them to say, ‘That’s so Tina.’”

**Try this:** Take stock of all of the (countless) times the décor reflected the uniqueness of your bride and groom, and make a look book that’s ready to show event planners.

Table 6 Productions
Florida, along with Georgia and Massachusetts
table6productions.com
**Years in business:** 7
**Average wedding budget:** $75,000-$100,000; 30 percent for décor
**Weddings per year:** 14-16
**No. of florist on her short list:** 6

**Standout quality in a florist:** Flexibility. They can pinpoint the style based on the client’s ideas and then offer creative ways to achieve that style within the client’s budget.

AshBy Wedding & Event Planning
Elizabethtown, Ky.
ashbyweddingevents.com
**Years in business:** full-time for 4.5 years; 15-plus total
**Average wedding budget:** $20,000; 10 percent for flowers
**Weddings per year:** 33
**No. of florist on her short list:** 5

**Standout quality in a florist:** Dependability. They arrive on time with everything they promised to have.

Stonehouse Events
Tampa, Fla.
stonehouseevents.com
**Years in business:** 7
**Average wedding budget:** $60,000; 15-20 percent for flowers
**Weddings per year:** 12
**No. of florist on her short list:** 3

**Standout quality in a florist:** Extra touches. I look for florists who are willing to go the extra mile for my clients with thoughtful details I may not have considered.
FOOT IN THE DOOR?
Six-figure wedding budgets — thousands, even tens of thousands spent on flowers and décor: if the numbers these planners are working with make you green with envy, you’re not alone, but our sources insist that getting a foot in the door with them, and planners elsewhere like them, isn’t as hard as you imagine.

Put Yourself Out There. “Reach out to me,” Stephanie Crona, of Table 6 Productions, said. “Set up a meeting and show me your portfolio.” From there, stay on her radar by sending pictures of updated inventory throughout the year. “We’re always looking for fresh and new ideas.” Beth Anderson, of Kismet Event Group, recommends a similar approach. “It’s amazing what a good coffee meet-up can do,” she said. “I love it when florists reach out to me and want to learn more about my business.”

Give Back. Consider offering complimentary designs for wedding events and shows, which planners and venues can use at their booths. “We have florists who are very eager to help when we have photo shoots or bridal shows on the property, and that goes a long way” toward building goodwill, said Sandy Tijero, of The Bridges Golf Club. Don’t forget that many planners also work with nonprofits, who may have small budgets for events. If you can offer a nonprofit rate or donation to them, you may be more likely to top the preferred vendor list for the next big wedding.

Phone a Friend. A mutual vendor friend — photographer, baker, DJ, dress shop owner — may be able to facilitate an intro with top planners in your area. “If venturing into new territory is scary, the best approach may be finding a friend,” said Jackie Ross, of Table 6 Productions. “Having someone that I trust vouch for you speaks volumes.” — Mary Westbrook

You know how to work a budget.
Of course, not all brides who want a highly personal wedding have sky-high budgets. As Anderson and Stonehouse point out, if you know that ceremony flowers can be reused in the cocktail hour, talk about those options. “It’s a great selling point,” Anderson said. Doing so will help you gain the trust and loyalty of planners and their clients.

Well-informed planners can also help budget-sensitive brides rethink DIY decisions, which can result in more stress and more work for the bride and planners when best-laid plans go wrong (we’re looking at you, bridesmaid No. 4, who swore she had floral design chops and then disappeared the night before the wedding).

At The Bridges, Tijero advocates for professional florists in early meetings even when budgets are tighter, thanks to florists who, from day one, empower her with info on different levels of services. “Most of the time, [brides’ concerns are] budget related — they think flowers are so expensive, so they’ll do it themselves to keep costs down,” she said. “I try to explain the negatives of that; it’s a lot of stress at the last minute” on the wedding day.

Try this: When showing your work to a bride or wedding planner, be prepared to talk about each wedding in a way that shows your flexibility with budgets. “This bride loved peonies and had a generous centerpiece budget, but we could achieve a similar look with other lush blooms for about half the cost.”

**Standout quality in a florist:**
Fix-it Mentality. If a client is unhappy, a vendor who makes things right goes a long way.

**Standout quality in a florist:**
Proactive. I love it when florists reach out to me. I don’t want to be another phone number on the bride’s planning document. Get to know me.

**ON-SITE HELP:** Planners appreciate florists who lend a hand on-site, even if the tasks fall outside of their job description.
You keep those communication lines open.

Brides (and, increasingly, grooms) can be a little — well — needy. Dozens of emails. Extra meetings. Calls to review those centerpieces, just one more time. When a couple hires a planner or works with an on-site coordinator to manage part or all of their wedding planning, that expert can serve as the gatekeeper and field most of those worried check-ins, but to do her job well, she needs you to communicate effectively and efficiently.

To Stonehouse, that means setting clear expectations from the beginning: How often can she (and the bride) expect to hear from you via email, phone and in-person meetings? “A big part of my job is all about alleviating stress,” she explained, and uncertainty and confusion are stress creators.

During follow-up calls or meetings, take the time to summarize an agenda, however informal (“Today we’re finalizing centerpieces”), allow time for a brief wrap-up (“Today we decided to…”) and explicitly state the next step in the process (“We’ll talk again on...”). Handling client interactions in this way “takes time, but it’s professional and it also sets an expectation in their mind: ‘I don’t have to check in with the florist every week,’” Stonehouse said.

When the email floodgates do open at an inopportune time — or a message arrives on Feb. 13 — Anderson suggests sending a simple note explaining that you don’t have the answer immediately, but you’ll respond by such and such date (and then, be sure to follow through on that date.) “We are all super busy, but timing is everything and some brides
are impatient,” she said. “A week or two delay can kill the relationship.” Whatever you do, don’t ignore or lose track of emails, Ross said. “Each of those emails” — even the sometimes irksome one-liners — “contains a bit of information that is important to the client,” she explained. “Nothing is worse than a change not being made on a proposal and the client having a copy of the sent email.” When that happens, everyone looks bad.

Try this: Train your staff to include a brief overview, summary and next step in all wedding consultations. Create a short “communications expectations” document that cheerfully details your average response time to calls and emails. Assign one staff member to respond to wedding inquiries and questions and draft standard response language for common questions.

You get proposals and paperwork out on time.

Want to get on a planner’s “do not call” list? Sit on your proposals for more than a week and make her hound you for invoices or contracts. “In the past, I’ve worked with some vendors who I have to beg for proposals,” Fraunfelter said. “When they finally come in — two months later — they’re incomplete or unprofessional.” No wonder Fraunfelter prefers to work with Tiger Lily, where the detailed invoices include pictures and flower names, and arrive days after the consultation. (Review proposal samples from Tiger Lily and Botanica at safnow.org/moreonline.)

Try this: If you don’t already, make it a policy to get proposals out within a week. Look at your current proposal format through the lens of a bride: Does it reflect the brand of your shop, or is it outdated? Can you change the format to include photos?

You send your all-stars on the wedding day.

While most florists send in their A team to woo brides at a consultation, planners say they don’t always show the same care in staffing the wedding day delivery, setup and teardown, choosing to rely on delivery drivers or junior staff members instead of designers and owners. But on the big day, planners don’t have time to manage inexperienced workers. That’s why Richardson raves about Botanicals on The Gulf in Naples, Fla. During a recent outdoor
wedding, the florist moved an intricate chuppah inside, and later, back outside, to accommodate a bride’s dream of saying “I do” on the beach, despite the threat of a thunderstorm. The second move was a real scramble thanks to an unexpected break in the storm — and something the florist didn’t have to do, and couldn’t have done if the florist hadn’t stayed on site long enough to ensure the event was perfect. After the wedding, Richardson received email after email from the bride and her family, thanking her for the last-minute changeup, and she won’t soon forget how good the florist helped make her look.

Beyond the practical help of an experienced staff member on site, Stonehouse argues that flower delivery is an important moment for florists intent on having a long-term relationship with the clients (and all of the anniversaries, birthdays and gifts to come).

“You want to be the person there who can share that excitement with her.”

Try this: Planners don’t expect owners or managers to be on site for all weddings, but train staff members who will be there to deliver the same level of service that a senior staff member would provide in the same situation. Empower your wedding team to make certain decisions and design adjustments on the spot.

You lend a hand.

When a delivery driver for The Flower House in Livermore, Calif., noticed Tijero was understaffed one night, he didn’t let her team hustle alone. Instead, he jumped in and started putting down tablecloths alongside them, cementing his shop’s space on Tijero’s preferred vendor list in the process.

“That made such an impression on us,” she said. “It made us even more comfortable referring them because it was obvious they valued customer service and exceeding our expectations.” (The shop now handles 50 to 60 percent of Tijero’s weddings.)

Try this: The phrase “How can I help?” is music to a busy planner’s ear. When you arrive on site, train yourself and your staff to look around and ask this question.
NO POACHING?
A strong relationship between florists and local event planners is ideal, but if florists start offering planning services and planners start offering floral options, tensions can flare.

That happened in Charleston during the recession, when Manny Gonzales, of Tiger Lily Florist, watched the local wedding market drop by 30 percent, from 2008 to 2009, as fewer brides traveled to the popular destination city and other brides slashed their spending. To capture every dollar, some planners started offering floral services on their own by working with hourly or part-time floral designers (some of them former Tiger Lily employees) or procuring flowers from local sources for simple designs (vases filled with bunches of roses, lilies or hydrangeas.)

In 2011, Gonzales and his wife, Clara, decided to “move against this trend” and started offering their own in-house planning service using two planners paid on commission. “We figured since we have a strong reputation, we’ll make money off of planning and (the Tiger Lily planners will) also funnel all the flower business to us,” Gonzales said. But the planning business — with its focus on all aspects of the wedding, not just flowers and décor — proved more challenging than the couple expected, and it took their focus away from their core business. (Among the biggest headaches: fielding complaints about other vendors, which the Gonzaleses worried could damage their hard-earned reputation.) “When anything goes wrong at a wedding, the bride holds the planner accountable,” Manny said. “When the planner is wearing a Tiger Lily name tag, it’s a bad reflection on us. It was damaging our brand.” Two years in, they discontinued the planning service.

Today, thanks in part to a recovered economy in Charleston, Tiger Lily’s wedding business is back up to more than $400,000 a year, the Gonzaleses’ goal, and planners who had stopped working with them when the shop had its own planning service are calling again. (Other planners still offer those simple floral services, and Manny thinks they’ll never return to florists — but they aren’t his target anymore.) In fact, one of the shop’s planners, Arielle Stratton, went on to start her own business, Party.Love.Birds by The Charleston Planning Partners.

“Offering wedding planning was a lot of work and trouble, but I don’t regret it,” Gonzales said. “We learned a lot, and now see weddings through a different lens. It helped us recreate our wedding department for the post-recession economy … I have a lot of respect for good planners; they earn every dollar they make.”

It wasn’t just a better economy that helped Manny and Clara meet their wedding goals. The couple has also made strategic, sometimes difficult, decisions about staff compensation in recent years. Read more about Tiger Lily’s efforts to revitalize its wedding business at safnow.org/moreonline. — M.W.

You’re detail oriented.
Tijero and Fraunfelter agree that florists can’t be too detail oriented on the big day; personal flowers that were so clearly articulated on a proposal sheet months before may be hard to keep straight on the wedding day, so it’s a big help to include clear labels and to package flowers in boxes and containers that are easy to move from staging areas and hotel rooms to ceremony sites. For venue managers, punctuality is close to godliness, Tijero said: be on time, and be clear about which materials will be retrieved (quickly and efficiently) and which can be tossed.

Most planners aren’t looking to micro manage your staff on the wedding day; actually, the opposite is true. “The vendors I work with show up on the day and execute flawlessly,” Crona said. “They simply do what they were hired to do and don’t ask a million questions.”

Try this: Look at your labeling as if you were not going to be on site to pass out the flowers — is it clear who gets what? Make sure your team is prepped, and assign a team leader who can direct and field basic questions without interrupting the planner or bride.

You anticipate every need — even the nonfloral ones.
Arielle Stratton of Party.Love.Birds. by The Charleston Planning Partners in Charleston said she loves it when florists arrive on site bearing tools and supplies — including backup vases, extra stems and bows — because the last thing she wants to worry about on the day of is finding a screwdriver or hammer. “I rely on the setup and breakdown crew to not only have the necessary supplies, but to also not require any directions from me,” she said. “Failure in this department can be the major determining factor on whether I suggest or deter my clients toward using that florist in the future.”

Try this: Make a list, check it twice and pack extra supplies.

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