Generation
WHY?

How millennials are bringing energy, insight and new skills to industry businesses.
#WhoYaCallingCoddled
Kaytlin O’Dell, 28, is living the ideal millennial life: She’s educated. She has a great job, and enough flexibility from time time be on a surfboard or trailhead by 5 p.m.

Reading that, you might be thinking, “That’s why we are having such a tough time attracting 20-somethings: They don’t want to work hard. They’re more interested in snapping selfies on the beach than clocking in. They’re entitled.”

It’s a rap that makes O’Dell cringe. “Millennial, ugh, that word,” she said. “Honestly, when I found out I was part of that generation, I was devastated.”

But lo and behold, O’Dell works in the floral industry. Full-time. And when she is on the clock, she works hard. In fact, after just 2 years working at Mellano & Company in North San Diego County, Calif., she’s considered a leader, someone who can move easily between generations and departments, learning and teaching as she goes.

Diane Thielfoldt, co-founder of The Learning Café, says O’Dell is not alone and that, despite the negative stereotypes hanging over Gen Y (and the floral industry’s real struggles to recruit, train and keep young talent), this is a generation packed with skills and insight. “Five years ago, about 51 percent of baby boomers had no interaction at all with millennials in the workplace,” Thielfoldt said. “But the millennial market will soon comprise a full 50 percent of the world’s workers. Anytime the minority becomes the majority, it changes the way work gets done.”

Added to that, despite the fact that many Gen Y members face unprecedented debt in the form of student loans, and came of age in a faltering economy, numerous studies show many millennials prioritize meaningful work over high-paying jobs (making them a good fit for small businesses rooted in helping people express their emotions.)

And the floral industry needs these workers and future leaders. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median age of a U.S. retail florist is now 49, and many businesses depend on owners and managers who are significantly older. To be relevant today and, frankly, still in business in five, 10 or 20 years, industry businesses need to attract more millennials, even as university-level horticulture and floriculture programs become tougher to find and trendier professions lure away both new talent and second-, third- or fourth-generation industry members.

This month, we found bright, motivated 20-somethings who are making lasting contributions to established industry businesses. Along with their employers, they shared insight on how millennials work — and how other motivated business owners can best bring smart youngsters into their own fold.
Although she grew up in Southern California in a nature- and garden-loving family, O’Dell didn’t consider a career in the floral industry until she landed a coveted internship at the Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, Calif. From that experience, she met the Mellano family and — in short order — landed her current job as a grower, assisting in the management of 325 farmed acres and the associated crews. Her first impression of her new gig? Intimidating, she said. After all, O’Dell came to Mellano with limited floral industry background (in college she studied orchard and vineyard management) but was quickly conferring with two other farm managers, Juan Paz and Ken Tanaguchi, who each had 35-plus years of experience. Far from lording their experience over O’Dell, however, Paz and Tanaguchi drew her immediately into conversations. “I felt so young, but then I had these two farm managers asking me questions about what I’d learned in college, what I knew about irrigation and pest management,” she said. “They were sincerely curious and seemed to value what I was bringing to the table.”

The open-minded work environment, where new ideas were welcomed rather than feared, helped O’Dell find her footing quickly. Soon, she was collaborating with her co-workers to refine the company’s pest management procedures, including how to deal with rust, a pathogen that destroys myrtle crops.

Drawing on both what she learned in school and on the job, “I set up a new monitoring system that helped us identify smaller infestations faster and apply solutions in a more targeted way,” she said. In addition to her work in pest management, O’Dell has taken a lead role in creating the Mellano succulent program; the company went from selling 5,000 potted succulents last year to 26,000 potted and cut succulent heads this year. She’s also been active growing some of Mellano’s newest crops (hops, coffee and olives) through the company’s Flower Fields, an agritourism destination farm in Carlsbad that gets about 160,000 visitors in a six-week period, said Michelle Castellano Keeler, vice president of corporate affairs. O’Dell “used her communication skills to significantly improve the relationship between our production and sales divisions,” Keeler explained. “She has a quiet, but fun, personality and communication style that has brought her a tremendous amount of respect in our company.”

Speaking of fun, O’Dell has found that the intense seasonal aspect of her work — those compressed periods of grinding focus, long hours and hard work — square with her adventurous spirit and desire to achieve work-life balance. “My work does not define who I am,” she said. “I’m a farm manager, but I’m also pretty good at surfing. I like to cook and travel and hike. In-season, I know my tuchus is here at the ranch, six, seven days a week. Off-season, I’m off the ranch by 4:30.” “No day is the same,” O’Dell added. “I like that. It feels good to work hard, to feel really tired and then have time to play.”

**Millennial Mindset at Work:**
That work–hard, play–hard attitude is true for many millennials, said Thieffoldt. “Our research suggests that the No. 1 driver for engagement [among millennials] is challenging, stimulating, varied work.” (Hello, flower shop on just about any holiday or busy event weekend.) Moreover, Thieffoldt said, “What most attracts millennials to smaller companies is the fact that they wear seven hats every day.”

**Make it work for you:**
Mentors, formal and informal, can help ease the stress of busy periods and provide some institutional support. “One thing millennials like about smaller organizations is access to leaders,” Thieffoldt said. “Younger employees want to know you care about them and value their contributions.” (And, remember to look for reverse mentoring opportunities, where younger workers are encouraged to share their skills with older peers.)
Not long ago, during a meeting at Kennicott Brothers in Chicago, team members were discussing marketing materials. An intern named Jessica Walker suddenly chimed in: “Your designs look too 1994.” Company president Gustavo Gilchrist remembers thinking, “Well, 1994 was pretty recent, wasn’t it?”

Today, he laughs at the story but also points to it as a serious example of how the venerable wholesale house has benefited from a long-running, informal internship program that has included area college students and American Floral Endowment scholarship winners. (For more on that program, see p. 27.)

Walker, now 21 and scheduled to graduate from the University of Iowa in May with a degree in communications studies, has been an intern with Kennicott off and on (around her school commitments) for nearly two years. In that time, she’s taken the lead on a number of marketing projects. Last summer, for instance, Walker and her fellow interns created a “Halfway to Valentine’s Day” rose giveaway in collaboration with a local minor league baseball team and a local supermarket chain (and Kennicott customer). That event, promoted via social media, helped generate goodwill in the community and awareness for the supermarket, said Joe Barnes, Kennicott’s manager of new business development and Walker’s supervisor.

Far from having to hover over Walker, Barnes found himself admiring her follow-through and attention to detail. “When she came up with the idea of bringing flowers and baseball together, the plan included more than just a concept,” he said. “She had worked out the timing, logistics and finesse that most green employees would leave in the hands of upper management.”

Barnes said it’s important to everyone at Kennicott that interns have a true work experience (no fetching coffee or filing all day there). “Like any full-time employee, a Kennicott intern is put in a position to take calculated risks with their work,” he said. “If they fail at a task, they learn what not to do. If they succeed, they can take pride in owning the actions that yielded results.”

Taking the time to reach out to the local universities’ career services department can make a powerful impact.

Make it work for you:
Don’t have an internship program in your business? Create one fast, said Thieffoldt. Internships create a natural pipeline for young talent, so “get involved with folks when they are young, before college even — high school,” she said. “Meet with counselors and students. Take on as many interns as you can manage.” And remember that many students and career advisers are woefully uninformed on the diverse careers available in the industry. “A large part of increasing the floral industry as an attractive workplace is increasing its visibility,” Walker said. “Taking the time to reach out to the local universities’ career services department can make a powerful impact.”
The Social Butterflies

Lacee and Lenzee Bilke, 27 | Madeline’s Flower Shop | Edmond, Okla.

Lacee Bilke and Lenzee Bilke, both 27, grew up watching their grandmother and mother run Madeline’s Flower Shop in Edmond, Okla., but the decision to join the business themselves was never a sure bet.

The twin sisters studied fashion marketing and business and administration at the University of Central Oklahoma and worked part-time at the shop during their college years. But it wasn’t until they both earned a master’s degree in adult education and training that they began to realize just how much they could do to help their mom, Barbara, bring the 60-year-old business into a new age. About two years ago, they returned as co-owners, with Lenzee heading marketing efforts and Lacee revamping the design room, and neither has looked back.

“Mom says we’ve brought back energy and a go-out-and-promote-the-business mentality — we’re more daring,” said Lenzee, adding that she and her sister are happy to try out untested ideas, or overlooked markets, including a recent holiday shopping event put together by the local Junior League. “We wanted to promote our holiday decor services, and that seemed like a good venue to try,” Lenzee said. “I was amazed by how many people came up and said, ‘I’ve lived in Edmond for 30 years …’ or ‘I’ve shopped in your store for years, and I never realized you did this.’”

Since returning to the shop, the sisters also have made an effort to engage more customers in-store more often with a wide variety of classes targeted at different demographics, including holiday decorating seminars in the fall and workshops targeted at DIY brides. (“Instead of turning them away, we send them to our class,” Lenzee said).

In fairly short order, they’ve also added more colorful floral designs to their menu (intended to attract younger customers), revamped the store’s marketing materials, jettisoning stock and wire-service photos for customized designs and photography created in-house and revved up the business’s social media efforts beyond Facebook. (Twitter has proved especially effective for the sisters, who say the site taps into a 30- to 40-year-old demographic that’s already primed to purchase flowers — with the help of some timely tweets. One recent example: a quick promo about a popup shop provided a bump in business.

As Lenzee is quick to point out, they aren’t just making change for the sake of making change. As they’ve eased into their professional roles in the family business, they’ve also responded to their own sense of urgency — and desire to be in business another 60 years. (They’ve already overcome steep odds: According to the Family Business Institute, 30 percent of family businesses survive into the second generation, 12 percent are viable into the third generation, and only 3 percent operate into the fourth generation or beyond.)

“There are so many changes in the economy, and people can just buy flowers anywhere,” Lenzee said. “We have to give them a reason to keep coming to us.”

Millennial mindset at work:

What feels daring to one generation can be second nature to the next, Thielfoldt said. This is especially true with technology and social media platforms, which millennials have grown up with. “Love it or hate it, social media is here to stay,” Lenzee said, and for their part the sisters generally fall on the side of love. “We post photos and designs all the time to Pinterest, Facebook,” and an increasing number of customers reference those designs when they place their orders online, in-store and via phone.

Make it work for you:

If you’re struggling to build or maintain your presence on social media, by all means, call in a youngster, said Thielfoldt. Your greenest sales associate likely has skills online you’d have to pay big bucks to bring in. Instead of discouraging young employees from peeking at phones in the design room or during event setups, encourage them to snap, post and promote on your behalf. “Rather than looking around [your shop] and saying why does this person have their phone out, think about that application,” Thielfoldt said. “How can you use it?”
PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

If you think top university students with deep scientific knowledge only head to major corporations or big cities for internships, think again.

Each year, the American Floral Endowment provides annual scholarships and paid internship opportunities that help attract and retain young people in the floral industry. Since its founding, the group has contributed more than $1 million in funding to students studying floriculture and environmental horticulture.

At a time when enrollment in horticulture programs at universities is decreasing, these scholarships and opportunities offer students who might otherwise choose different industries a defined path and a host of mentors to help them start their careers.

That’s what happened to Erik Edwards, 24, who was awarded a Vic and Margaret Ball Internship in 2012 and completed a six-month internship at Pacific Plug and Liner in Watsonville, California. Edwards went on to graduate from the University of Georgia; today he’s a ranch section grower with Tagawa Greenhouses in Westminster, Colo., overseeing about 60,000 square feet of young plants.

“I like working with the plants, and the sense of accomplishment that comes with it,” Edwards said. “I definitely see myself in plant production for the next five or 10 years — maybe in a slightly different position,” he said with a laugh, “but definitely doing the same kind of work.”

Find out more about AFE opportunities and upcoming deadlines at endowment.org. — M.W.
ALL MILLENNIALS, ALL THE TIME

Unlike many retail florists today, Lynette McDougald isn’t struggling to find young workers. Instead, as the manager for 17 years of The University Florist at Mississippi State University in Starkville, she’s surrounded by them.

Any given semester, McDougald and her assistant manager (the sole other non-student in the shop) work with a crew of 15-20 paid students on university events and designs for students and the neighboring community.

While some of the challenges McDougald faces are particular to her unique setup (the headache of scheduling in shifts in two- or three-hour windows to accommodate student schedules; the difficulty of balancing her own teaching load with managing the shop, which functions as a “learning workshop” for the students), some of her insights and solutions have application for any business owner who employs young team members — and wants to see them learn and grow.

Tips from McDougald for employers and managers include:

Think of millennials as collaborative, big-picture thinkers. When McDougald became frustrated that her students had fallen behind on event work, she tried an experiment to perk up productivity. Instead of assigning students individual tasks (prep this glass bowl), she gave the entire team an overview of the project: event detail, flower selections, hard-good requirements and deadlines. Within 15 minutes the group had organized itself and everyone was working together, and the job was out the door on time. “They have to know the entire story: the who, what, why and where” McDougald said. “So often in a florist, we operate on a need-to-know basis. I’m guilty of this. [But] they like being their own boss. They like to take charge, understand and execute a process.”

Remember that some common tasks aren’t so common anymore. Once, when McDougald was writing daily specials on an in-store board, a bright, funny student approached her and pointed to the letters. “What does that say?” she asked. McDougald was slightly annoyed — “I mean, I have very nice handwriting,” she said — until she realized the student was being honest, not sassy. “She told me she couldn’t read cursive and I thought, ‘What in the world?’” McDougald now uses the comical misunderstanding as a reminder to check her expectations against reality. (How often do millennials write in longhand, after all, and how many school districts spend much time teaching or refining the skill?) She also makes an effort to train students on “basic” skills, including customer interactions, using innovative writing activities that help students build on what they already know about flowers and customer service with new and improved vocabulary. (Read more about those activities in “Master the Art,” p. 16.)

Structure is good. One stereotype of millennials that does seem to play out, at least from McDougald’s perspective: They’re busy, busy, busy. (Then again, haven’t college students always lived that way?) McDougald finds that because her students are so time-starved, they appreciate the structure she offers in the form of regular hours, clearly assigned tasks and detailed project outlines. “Living that lifestyle makes it hard for them to focus, so they have to work diligently to budget their time,” she said. “Rather than seeing constraints and (specific expectations) as obstacles, they look at them as part of the task. They want you to invest in them and explain things to them.” — M.W.

TOP TEACH Lynette McDougald, of The University Florist at Mississippi State, pictured with Patrick Coccaro, has used innovative writing exercises and hands-on activities to help improve the customer service skills of her student-employees.
When Sara Meadows, 27, started working as a sales associate at Shirley Floral Co. in San Angelo, Texas, she hit the ground running ... even though she wasn’t exactly sure what needed to be done or where her finish line might end up.

“I was working on my master’s degree (in kinesiology) and needed a job,” she admitted, but the work appealed to her quickly and deeply, in ways she hadn’t anticipated. “I realized very soon that we were helping people with their emotions, not just selling flowers,” she said, and the prospect of working in the floral industry for the long term began to look better and better, even though she didn’t have a clear picture of what her career path could look like.

That all changed in August 2011 when another 20-something, entrepreneur Kyle Brown, purchased the store and quickly recognized Meadows’ untapped potential: Within six months, she was working as the shop’s manager. “I could see that Sara was dedicated to the store and had a desire to do more in the store than simply customer service,” said Brown. “She’s self-motivated and strong-willed, not afraid to tell me she does not agree with me, which I need [as the owner] and not many people do.”

Over the next few years, as Brown’s floral empire grew (he now owns seven shops in four states), he promoted Meadows. Today she manages back-end operations, including marketing, sales, purchasing, HR and operations, for the entire company from Phoenix, Ariz.

Here again, Meadows finds value in being part of a larger story, in this case a new and expanding company, headed by a young leader who asks “why not?” far more than “why?”

Millennial mindset at work:
Millenials are “confident and collaborative,” Thielfoldt said. The first three words they use to describe the ideal boss? Coach, mentor and friend. In addition, even more than previous generations, “they want connection to a cause” and to feel part of something bigger than themselves. The opportunity to start something new — be it a business, a promotion or a project — can be an enticing carrot. As Meadows said, “At my job now, every day’s a new day, a chance to push things further.”

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