Former SAF President Red Kennicott, AAF, approached Bridget Carlson, AAF about coordinating on Petal It Forward immediately after SAF presented the idea during its annual convention in September.
A MATCH MADE IN (PR) Heaven

A Chicago-based retailer and wholesaler hook-up nets big-league publicity for the industry — and a playbook enterprising marketers can steal.

BY MARY WESTBROOK
While sitting in a ballroom on Sept. 11 during SAF Amelia Island 2015, Bridget Carlson, AAF, had a lightbulb moment.

On the stage was Jennifer Sparks, vice president of marketing for the Society of American Florists, who had just given the crowd a sneak preview of SAF’s soon-to-launch public relations campaign, Petal It Forward, aimed at capitalizing on popular pay-it-forward initiatives and designed to create and promote good feelings about flowers.

As Sparks described it, on the morning of Oct. 7, a team of SAF volunteers would take to Union Square and Times Square in New York City and hand out 4,000 bouquets of flowers to morning commuters and passersby — giving each person one bouquet to keep and one bouquet to hand off to someone else. The flowers would include tags branding the event, and recipients of the goodwill bouquets would be encouraged to share their experience on social media with a designated hashtag (#petalitforward).

While SAF’s efforts would focus on New York, Sparks encouraged audience members to consider participating from their hometowns, with giveaways of their own.

Sitting in the audience, Carlson could hardly believe the serendipity of the presentation. The element of surprise, the goodwill and the made-for-social-media moments sounded a lot like what Carlson had been doing back at Ashland Addison Florist Company in Chicago. As director of marketing, PR, promotions and advertising, she’d spearheaded the shop’s weekly Random of Acts of Kindness initiative, something the owners began 15 years earlier. The more Sparks told convention attendees about the new campaign and encouraged them to copy SAF’s efforts back home, the more Carlson recognized the similarities between the two — and one stark, undeniable difference: Petal It Forward had a youthful glow, and Sparks couldn’t help but convey that electricity to the crowd. Meanwhile, Random of Acts of Kindness had grown tired, and Carlson suspected, had run its course.

She didn’t have to wonder long. As the presentation ended and SAF members spilled out of the room, Red Kennicott, AAF, of Kennicott Brothers Company in Chicago, appeared in the crowd, his sights set on Carlson. He made a beeline for her.

“We have to do this together, right?” he asked. For the second time that morning, Carlson thought, “Hey, that’s my idea,” and loved that great minds were thinking alike.

What followed that serendipitous moment was a wildly successful campaign that generated hundreds of shares, likes and comments — and a level of excitement and interest around Chicagoland that all the money in the world couldn’t buy.

In the spirit of paying it forward, we’ve gathered the granular and big-picture details of how they made that PR magic happen. Just in time for Valentine’s Day planning, we have an outline of how Ashland Addison and Kennicott worked together, and tips on how you can use some of their best tactics.
After an interview with Red Kennicott, AAF, of Kennicott Brothers, and Jonas Zimmerman, a designer at Ashland Addison, reporter Joanie Lum tweeted several messages of support — to which Bridget Carlson and Joe Barnes quickly responded.

Three Steps to a Media Outreach Plan

The Internet can be a distracting place with so many places to promote your business; however, if you try to be everywhere at once and reach every media outlet, the results will be disappointing, according to Jordani Sarreal, CEO of Zebra Social, a PR and marketing agency in Tacoma, Washington. He offered these tips for small business owners:

1. **Lots of small potatoes > one big potato.** While getting your business or product featured in a national publication is a wonderful thing, don’t pass up opportunities to focus on smaller niche blogs or press. The readers of these publications are smaller in number, but greater in their focused attention on the subject. It’s also much easier to get into these smaller publications to build your brand name, so you can be featured in several places rather than one big spot for one month to a general readership.

2. **You don’t need to be everywhere at once.** When it comes to marketing your business on social media, do not try to be on every platform. Our general recommendation is to start with Facebook and Instagram. Maybe your business is a more in-the-moment service, or is constantly moving. If so, Twitter might be best. Whatever platform you choose, master it before moving on. If you’re spread too thin across every platform, you will lose the ability to engage with your audience on each site, and in the end, be less effective than if you were to focus on a couple of social media platforms.

3. **Know your customers.** Besides the typical customer profile or avatar, really get to know your customers. Find out what they’re reading, what they’re listening to, the TV shows they watch... these are all important bits of information that can be used to create compelling social media content and accurate media relations efforts. If you know your customers tend to tune in every Sunday evening to watch “The Good Wife,” watch it with them and live tweet, or create a Facebook post integrating the latest episode. Be your customers’ buddy and share in these experiences with them. It may seem unrelated to your business, but don’t forget that business is all about relationships. The more you understand your customers, the more they trust you, and their need to look elsewhere for a similar service or product is diminished.

— M.W.
one-day rollout, Petal It Forward spoke to Carlson’s desire to keep the budget and stress low. It was a contained, one-time event that wouldn’t require overtime or excessive staff prep.

Still, she admits, getting her shop’s bouquets ready and tagged with Petal It Forward branding was “an all-hands-on-deck affair” in the days leading up to the giveaway.

“We had teams of Ashland Addison staff working hard at tagging and wrapping the bouquets the day before the event, as well as that morning,” Carlson said. “Everyone was pitching in — our sales director, processing team, designers, owners — everyone.”

At Kennicott, there was a similar flurry of activity, Barnes said. “Our entire Chicago fresh sales and production team (about 15 to 20 people) took time out of their day to process, sticker and tie Cubs ribbon onto the 1,400 bouquets,” he explained.

Yet another reason Carlson liked Petal It Forward: The event fell on a weekday, in mid-fall, when things are relatively slow (slower, at least, than Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day or a busy wedding weekend). The shop’s sales director acted as a traffic manager, pulling staff away from Petal It Forward prep as needed to complete other tasks. Having that oversight was important, Carlson said.

“We had to stay ahead of everything,” she explained. “It’s not like we didn’t have all of our usual orders that day.”

The sharing-is-caring ethos extended to PR materials. SAF already had free Petal It Forward resources available to members. Carlson used some of those tools, including the layout for bouquet tags, and both she and Barnes logged time reading all of SAF’s materials, to make sure their language was consistent as they began to pitch the event to the media and promote it on social media. (SAF provided a bevy of helpful talking points, including university research on the positive benefit of getting and receiving flowers.)

**STOP HERE** Wrigleyville, the area surrounding the Cubs’ stadium, became a central Petal It Forward giveaway point in Chicago.

**MEET THE PR PROS**

Kennicott Brothers Company, Chicago
- **Number of players:** More than a dozen team members participated in the giveaway. The entire Chicago fresh sales and production team — 15-20 people — processed and prepped 1,400 bouquets.
- **Favorite campaign moment:** A photographer from Getty Images ran after a Kennicott team, asking to take their photo.
- **Results:** Organic reach for Facebook posts that day spiked by over 2,000 percent.

Ashland Addison Florist Company, Chicago
- **Number of players:** 13 team members participated in the giveaway; all hands were on deck, including the design team and sales team, to prep 350 bouquets and 1,500 roses in the days leading up to the event.
- **Favorite campaign moment:** Fox affiliate reporter (and avid social media user) Joanie Lum tweeted about “flower power” after an early morning interview on Oct. 7.
- **Results:** Organic impressions on Facebook were 10 times higher than an average day.
CAMERA HIGH

When a reporter contacted Joe Barnes and Bridget Carlson for a last-minute interview the morning of their Petal It Forward giveaways, both had to hustle to find an available spokesperson, but neither worried about how their team members would perform. That’s because they have spent time thinking about what makes a good spokesperson and training people to be interviewed on camera.

Here are some of their tips on identifying and prepping people for interviews:

- **Ditch the hierarchy.** While Red Kennicott, AAF, the company president, makes an ideal spokesman, don’t assume that the head honcho is the best talking head. The skills that make a person a top-notch head honcho aren’t always the things that make a person look comfortable on camera. “It’s not easy to be interviewed,” Barnes said. “People think it will be exciting, but the lights come on and they just stammer. You have to find someone who isn’t thrown.” That takes practice — and time.

- **Consider the story.** Carlson often serves as the spokeswoman for Ashland Addison, particularly on stories about the local economy and its effect on area businesses (a popular topic for reporters). But when a story centers on design, she bows out. “I can’t create those beautiful flower designs,” she said with a laugh. Instead, she has two to three designers who she can call on to talk about design styles and trends.

- **Pull your weight.** “I never assume that the words ‘Ashland Addison’ will appear on screen,” Carlson said. That’s why every person who appears on camera must wear a logo. She also practices incorporating the shop name into responses: Rather than saying, “We have a large selection of gift items,” Carlson and her team invariably say, “We at Ashland Addison have …”

— M.W.

GOOD BUDS The Petal It Forward campaign involved encouraging recipients to share the flower love, not only with people who received flowers, but also on social media. Hashtags, including #petalitforward, #chicago, and #wrigleyville, helped Ashland Addison and Kennicott track and engage with people, even after they’d left giveaway sites.

PR NO: EXTEND AN INVITE

PR PRO: GO FIND THE ACTION

Once Carlson and Barnes knew how much product they had to give away, the next step was to divide and conquer Chicago the day of the giveaway, Oct. 7.

Carlson had about 13 team members for the shop’s giveaway and divvied them among four sites. (The team included two drivers; two to three staff members manned each site.) Each of the sites had to be within the shop’s delivery area and in a high-traffic area, to take advantage of the evening rush hour — and the fact that SAF was doing its push in New York that morning.

(Ashland Addison specifically launched its effort on Oct. 7 to feed off SAF’s PR buzz. Other participating shops held events throughout the week. Read more about how your shop can still participate in the feel-good bonanza on p. 28.)

“We knew that SAF would make a really big impact on social media in New York,” Carlson explained. Since New York is an hour head of Chicago, to piggyback on that event, she created scheduled posts on Facebook and Twitter, announcing where her teams would be.

“That helped us tap into the excitement already generated through the [Petal It Forward] hashtag,” she explained. “Our goal was to reach the highest-impact area … our customers, along with consumers we see as future customers, and people who would participate in the event and share it.”

Planning posts is a must, according to Jordani Sarreal, CEO of Zebra Social, a PR and marketing agency in Tacoma, Washington. “It’s important to get the buzz going early,” he said. “Keep a calendar that gives you key actions to take daily. Your social media campaign shouldn’t be executed on a whim.”

The 12-member Kennicott team took a similar approach, concentrating on high-density areas, such as Chicago’s Magnificent Mile shopping area, and high-profile venues, including in front of the local NBC affiliate’s office. “The reporters looked out their windows, and
The magazine of the Society of American Florists (SAF)

PR NO: SEND A PRESS RELEASE. WAIT.

PR PRO: PESTER POLITELY

As Oct. 7 neared, Barnes and Carlson compared their media lists and started reaching out to contacts with press releases, media advisories and friendly calls. Over the past few years, the media landscape has changed so much that it’s no longer enough to send a single email or release, though, cautioned Carlson.

“A huge part of PR and media outreach is just being sensitive to reporters’ deadlines and showing appreciation for them,” she said. “I’ll call them and say, ‘Hi, this is Bridget! I know that you’re really busy but I’m super-excited about this event. Do you think you can fit us in?’”

Like Carlson, Barnes likes a strategy of friendliness and flexibility. “Often, with a feature story, rather than a hard news story, a reporter will say, ‘I’ll let you know if we can work you in,’” Barnes said. “That means

there we were, giving away flowers,” Barnes said. And soon enough, there were those reporters, giving away free publicity — or at least doing a segment on the campaign during the noon broadcast.

Both companies also sent employees to Wrigleyville, the area surrounding the Chicago Cubs’ stadium. Here, they happened into some good luck and good timing: A wild-card game scheduled for that evening turned out to be a major home game for the Cubs, their first post-season victory since 2003. Every major media outlet was on site, and just about every PR dream was coming true for Barnes and Carlson as they fielded questions from reporters and photographers.

“A photographer from the Chicago Tribune came up!” Carlson said. “I’ve been trying to get their attention for years. Suddenly, there he was, asking me for help.”

Likewise, earlier in the day, Barnes had seen a photographer trailing one of his teams as they handed out bouquets on a busy street. “Turns out he was with Getty Images,” Barnes said of one of the country’s largest photo-distribution services. (At press time, Barnes hadn’t seen those photos turn up yet, but the act of being trailed by a photographer was exciting for staff.)

Barnes and Carlson agree that the outcome of the wild-card game was the stuff of PR dreams, but they insist that even if they don’t have a high-stakes sports game in their midst, florists can pull from their deep knowledge of a local community to go where the action is, or might be. Map out your giveaway zone and plan your get-attention strategy. Ask yourself: Where do people gather and at what time? In urban areas, mass transit hubs can be an ideal spot during morning and evening commutes, and mealtimes are prime pitching-to-people places in all areas. What are the popular coffee shops and lunch spots? Any big local sports events (high school homecomings, college rivalries) coming up? Do restaurants and spas do impressive Valentine’s Day events?

TARGET-RICH ENVIRONMENT Wrigleyville, the area surrounding the Chicago Cubs’ stadium, proved to be prime stomping grounds for finding happy flower recipients. Thanks to a wild-card game where the Cubs had their first post-season victory since 2003, every major media outlet was on site.
Disappointed that you missed out on the chance to be part of Petal It Forward? Don’t be, says SAF Vice President of Marketing Jennifer Sparks. You can still put together a similar event in your city, any time of year, and the materials and advice SAF have to offer are still available to members at safnow.org/petalitforward.

“Petal It Forward is flexible and adaptable,” Sparks said. “Members can put whatever twist on the event that they want, but the key element should always be to give recipients the opportunity to ‘petal it forward’ — get one, give one. Otherwise, it’s just a flower giveaway, which has less substance.”

But Sparks cautions against doing it too many times in one market. “If you over-saturate the effort, you lose the randomness of it, or lose momentum,” she said. And that’s precisely why SAF, which is considering doing another Petal It Forward event in 2016, is not going to designate a specific, recurring date for the event. “The media are very wary of what they perceive as ‘manufactured’ holidays,” Sparks said. “It’s the randomness of an event like this that makes it press-worthy.”

— M.W.
PR NO: EXTEND AN INVITE

PR PRO: GO FIND THE ACTION

Much of the success of the Petal It Forward campaign rested on the fact that participants could easily snap selfies and share their experiences. But simply asking people to post doesn’t cut it. Responding to posts, commenting on Instagram photos, retweeting — this is how buzz builds. Going viral takes lots of contact. You have to be the main agent of spreading the buzz and keeping your news circulating.

That includes the media. After her early morning Fox interview, the reporter, Joanie Lum, posted a photo on Twitter with the words “Flower is power.” Carlson saw it and responded right away with an upbeat message of thanks. (Lum, an avid social media user, posted a number of positive messages that morning about the campaign.)

“To have her respond back like that is priceless,” Carlson said.

Both Carlson and Barnes also took time to respond to and thank consumers who posted on Facebook and Twitter using the Petal It Forward hashtag and the handles for each business. Don’t underestimate the need for those hashtags, by the way — they are crucial if you want to track and be part of conversations on social media. (And you want to do both of those things, said Barnes and Carlson.)

While PR results can be harder to track than sales event returns, it’s clear the campaign drove up activity across the social media platforms of both businesses. By the end of the day, for instance, Ashland Addison’s Facebook organic impressions had increased 10 times above an average day. “Our likes/comments/shares were also 10 times more than usual,” Carlson said.

At Kennicott, “our organic reach for our Facebook posts spiked by over 2,000 percent compared to our normal, day-to-day Facebook engagement,” Barnes said. “The [#petalitforward] hashtag campaign really worked.”

In fact, a key part of PR through social media should be personalization, said Sarreal.

“Engaging on an individual level in social media is absolutely vital to your online success,” he said. “The precaution with this is not to come off as a robot. Don’t respond to everybody with the same ‘Thanks!’ after every comment. Use this one-on-one opportunity to maybe start a conversation, or at least personalize it as best you can.”

The payoff for the effort is real engagement, Carlson explained. “That was a really fun part of the day,” Carlson said. “In this business, it’s always about the reaction that we get from the consumer, when they smile and you know your name is associated with that feeling, from a PR perspective, that’s all I can hope for. It doesn’t translate into increased sales for that day, but I hope it’s what keeps us around for another 83 years.”

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