When Roger Villere Jr., AAF, of Villere’s Florist in Metairie, La., walked into his shop in September, an overpowering smell wafted through the front door. It was the scent of dead, moldy flowers and plants. Product that should have been thrown away a week and a half before was instead baking in the New Orleans heat — and sitting in stagnant water. He also found his shop without working phone lines, an Internet connection, mail service, or electricity — basically everything a florist needs to run a store in 2005.

The ruins sat in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath. And the images and smells Villere describes are reminiscent of many national news reports that held viewers’ attention for weeks after the storm struck the Gulf Coast in August. But in late September, shortly after Villere returned to his shop and started plans to reopen, cameras left New Orleans and (understandably) shifted focus to the earthquake in Pakistan, which killed nearly 73,000 people in early October, and Hurricane Wilma, which devastated parts of Florida, the Caribbean and Mexico later that month.

The story they left behind: the rebuilding effort.

For many, rebuilding is not a given. The New York Times recently reported that some experts expect half of the city’s 115,000 small businesses to shut down permanently. So as cameras turned to other tragic events, many small-business owners, including dozens of floral industry members, were just starting what has become the ultimate test of their perseverance: rebuilding, relocating or making the difficult decision to leave the floral industry altogether.

**CAN’T KEEP HIM DOWN**

As Villere watched news images of flooded avenues, rooftops peeking out of rivers and, eventually, the destroyed, mildew-infested remains of buildings, he sat an hour away, hoping his home and shop survived Katrina. In mid-September, more than two weeks after the hurricane hit, Villere was finally able to get to downtown Metairie, about eight miles from New Orleans. A hurricane-spawned mini-tornado had hit his store, damaging tons of refrigeration and air conditioning equipment on his roof.

Amazingly, however, the thought of permanently closing the shop never crossed Villere’s mind. He was determined to get “up and running” despite technological delays. He sorted through the dead flowers and plants and harassed phone companies until they ventured to his main store. By the beginning of October, the “open” sign was back up.
DEMAND SUPPLY

But even Villere’s impressive resolve could carry him only so far. The storm created new challenges that are all too real. For one thing, business is, at least temporarily, drastically different. The Metairie store, which used to rely on a combination of birthday, anniversary, funeral and hospital work, plus two to six weddings a week, now deals mainly with funeral work and thank-you bouquets to families who housed people displaced by Katrina.

“We are doing five casket covers a day, seven days a week,” Villere says. “Before Katrina, we averaged one a day.”

And at press time, the Covington store’s phone lines were finally restored. The store itself was without power for five weeks following the storm.

Since reopening, getting fresh product has posed another challenge. Product couldn’t come into Metairie via trucks until deep into October, forcing Villere to drive about 75 miles to Baton Rouge to pick it up himself.

INSURANCE CHALLENGES

Villere also is still waiting on insurance settlements (both stores were covered). But it’s difficult to get in touch with anyone, let alone get money, he says.

“We know (the insurance company) is going to pay something, but we don’t know how much or when,” he says.

Another headache? Villere says his policy included nonperishable but not perishable inventory, something he didn’t realize until after the storm. (He needed a special rider to cover the perishable goods, according to his insurance company.)

“We’re out close to $20,000 between flowers and plants that (the insurance company) won’t cover,” he says.

He also says it will take about a year to complete the accounting-related paperwork necessary to file a claim for the business interruption service that should compensate him for mandatory time away from the store.

“Right now, everything is turned upside down — it’s like Alice in Wonderland,” Villere says. “But that isn’t holding him back. “We’re missing a couple thousand people right now,” he says. “But as they come back, business will pick up.”

BUSINESSES NEED BUSINESSES

New Orleans’ $5 billion a year tourism industry was Big Easy Flowers’ lifeblood. But the city has lost $1.5 million a day in tourism revenue since the levees broke, according to the Louisiana Office of Tourism, and now Craig Barker, the owner of Big Easy, is in a bind. He says before the storm, about 50 percent of his business came from corporate clients, mainly hotels lodging sightseers and convention-goers. Now, those hotels aren’t interested in stocking their lobbies with flowers that no one will see.

“While I’m still putting flowers in sev-
eral larger buildings, I’m still doing only one hotel,” he says. “Most others could care less right now if they have flowers.”

Barker hopes businesses come back, but the longer the population declines and tourism drops, the less optimistic he is. “I’m by a main intersection, but there are no businesses,” he says. “It’s naked. It’s dead.”

A skeletal customer base isn’t the only thing changing for the New Orleans florist. Things he once took for granted as a small-business owner — an ample and handy supply of virtually any product, for example — are becoming a big deal. “We’re used to that Burger King ‘have it your way’ mentality,” he says. “But now everything is restricted. From wholesalers with just a couple packs of red roses to restaurants with signs that say ‘limited menus.’”

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### ARE YOU PREPARED?

At least one-fourth of small businesses that close after a disaster never reopen, mostly because they don’t have a disaster plan, according to the Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS). Diana McClure, the institute’s assistant vice president for business protection, says to increase their likelihood of reopening, small-business owners should:

**Protect people.** Have several ways to contact employees after a disaster, McClure says. Get a home phone number, the number of a close relative and an e-mail address. Keep the information off-site, instead of in your shop. (Find out more about protecting your people in “Hard Times, Smooth Solutions,” p. 20.)

**Get the property ready.** Think about your location. If your area is prone to floods, don’t store paperwork or inventory in the basement. If you’re in a dry area, prone to fires, have a fireproof roof. Also, think about information stored in the shop and ask yourself: What would happen if I lost that? If the information is essential, keep backups in other locations (For more on backing up files, see p. 40).

**Think about aftereffects and alternatives.** Ask yourself: How long can I afford to be out of business or without a steady income? Is my location essential? Can I run a similar business elsewhere? How can I reorganize my business to suit the needs of a new customer base if necessary?

**Review insurance policies.** Buy coverage for disasters that strike your area. Check the fine print to make sure your policies cover the building, inventory and business-interruption service.

**Work with the community.** “No business exists in isolation,” McClure says. “A florist depends on infrastructures (electric, water, telecommunications), so even if your shop doesn’t receive damage, people may not be able to get to it.” Establish relationships early with other local businesses. Put together a joint disaster plan. “A community doesn’t recover unless its economy does, and vice versa,” she says.

For more tips, IBHS, a non-profit group based in Tampa, Fla., has a free booklet, “Open for Business,” at [www.ibhs.org](http://www.ibhs.org).

— J.H.
SHOULD I STAY OR GO?

While his physical shop was more or less intact, Barker decided to temporarily close his store, which, before the storm, was growing like wildfire since opening in April 2004 (his annual sales projection for this year was $750,000). At press time, the store was up and running again ... But for how long? That’s the question keeping Barker up at night.

“I’m not doing enough business to stay in business,” he says.

The store used to have seven full-time employees, plus two delivery drivers. Now it’s down to two full-time employees, plus Barker.

Further complicating Barker’s decision is his job as a single dad with four kids, all of whom are with family in Houston. He’s been dividing his time between the shop and his home in New Orleans and his family in Texas. The strain is significant. Barker is uncertain he’ll keep a shop (or home) in New Orleans, his hometown.

“A lot of people are making decisions based on the new reality, not what it was two and a half months ago,” he says.

“Are the businesses going to come back? And if so, when? There’s this uncertainty of the future.”

A HELPING HAND

When Amy Trestman of Twigs Flowers Etc. returned to Harahan, La., seven weeks after the storm to see her store, she was “hysterical.”

“I was crying and crying,” she says.

It wasn’t the state of her store that caused her tears. (In fact, Trestman says she had roof damage, but no major flooding.) It was her surroundings.

“It was like a little island in a huge sea of demolition,” she says.

Trestman’s “high-end” clients — hotels and law firms — were gone, and Harahan was a ghost town, except for workers involved in rebuilding, who, needless to say, weren’t “worried about flowers,” she says. “They’re worried about doing their work and then getting out of Dodge.”

To that effect, Trestman suspects florists who opened post-Katrina are only doing funeral work, and the number of florists willing to do that is very slim, she says.

“There are about 39 flower shops that I’m aware of (in the New Orleans area) that have gone out of business,” she says. “I know of maybe five florists that are left.”

Not one of Trestman’s four full-time or two part-time employees stayed in New Orleans — they were spread around the country. Her decision was clear: Twigs was finished. She filed for bankruptcy and closed the shop. While it was devastating to see her shop perish — especially after just having invested $20,000 on shop improvements after opening it last year — her livelihood did not depend upon it, and she knew she didn’t have the energy to rebuild — especially given that she already was dividing her time between Louisiana, where her husband works at a local hospital, and Atlanta, where her son now attends a private high school.

What she did have, however, was inventory, equipment and 10-plus years of floral industry know-how. She decided to use those assets to help another business owner in need.

Trestman went through the phone book alphabetically to see if other area florists wanted to buy her floral supplies at a discounted rate. She hit the jackpot with one of her first calls: Beth’s Flowers in Metairie, La., a florist whose livelihood depends upon reopening.

“(The owner) came over and bought everything,” she says. Trestman referred some of Twigs’ best customers to Beth’s, and the shop is using Twigs’ main phone line. She also advertised her delivery van and some furniture in a local paper. The goods sold in less than a week.

In addition to selling most of her belongings to the owner of Beth’s, Trestman plans to work for the shop part time, “at least through the holidays,” she says. “She’s really short-handed. The owner and her husband both are involved with the shop, so it’s their only source of income. It’s their livelihood. If I can’t run my own (flower shop), I’d like to help her build her business back up.”
UPLIFTING EMPLOYEES

Greenleaf Wholesale Florist’s New Orleans location may only have suffered “a modest amount of wind damage,” but the real damage was directed toward the people, says Scott Kitayama, president. “This is a unique situation because it hurt employees and customers more than it hurt (the physical store),” he says.

To remedy that, Greenleaf dedicated a full-time employee at its headquarters, in Brighton, Colo., to locating employees who temporarily relocated to other areas. “By the third week, we’d found everyone,” Kitayama says. The next

POST-KATRINA: BOOM OR BUST?

Sixty miles from New Orleans, businesses are seeing a different picture — jammed restaurants, long lines in retail stores and a real estate market ready to rip at the seams, according to the Baton Rouge (La.) Business Report. The influx of people from the Louisiana coast to inland cities, such as Baton Rouge, is so great that Buzzy Heroman, owner of Billy Heroman’s Flowerland in Baton Rouge, says it now takes two to three times as long to make deliveries, with trucks running three to four hours behind schedule.

“We didn’t know what to do,” he says. “I had to add more trucks into the mix to split up routes.”

“The Upside for the Bottom Line …”

While inconvenient, the unexpected population boom means more business. Buzzy says shop sales were up 50 percent in October (compared to last year), and off only 1 percent in September, despite 12 to 14 days of business lost from storm-related power outages.

Susie Heroman says a local women’s hospital announced 900 births in September (previous September averages were around 750).

“This, of course, means lots more flowers and balloons that we helped to sell,” she says.

The storm also, sadly, meant more sympathy business for the florist. Not because the few florists open in the New Orleans area can’t handle the work, but because several of the New Orleans cemeteries — and adjacent funeral homes — are still not open.

“Families came in here and would break down and cry,” Buzzy says. “They’d lost everything. Then they had to drive hours to find flowers to bury their loved ones.”

AND THE DOWNSIDE

Will the Baton Rouge business boom eventually bust? Some experts think so. “A projected 1.5 billion state budget deficit may force lawmakers to dramatically slash spending,” according to The Business Report. This could mean the potential for 20,000 “pink slips,” and funding cuts, according to Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council. “We have one heck of a potential for a natural economic disaster on our hands,” he told the magazine.

The Heromans also are skeptical.

“It’s really tricky,” Buzzy says. “All the businesspeople are trying to figure out how this thing is going to shake out so we can set up our businesses. Do we need to keep ordering the way we have been? Are we going to keep running at this pace?”

Another challenge for Heroman’s Flowerland is the workforce. “We’re about eight people short, and I haven’t been able to hire anyone,” Buzzy says. In his opinion, the shortage exists because people are trying to move back to New Orleans, instead of getting new jobs and settling in Baton Rouge. He says he’s lost several part-time college workers because their commutes have increased significantly since roads “are basically parking lots.”

— J.H.
step, still in progress, is providing emotional support through counseling.

At press time, Kitayama had recently received clearance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to set up three trailers in the New Orleans store parking lot, giving some of his displaced employees a temporary home. Greenleaf also started an employee relief fund that collected more than $60,000 to help Greenleaf employees. (For more on helping and protecting distressed employees, see “Hard Times, Smooth Solutions,” p. 20).

The 19 employees who used to show up to work every morning had diminished to 11 when the store reopened on Oct. 3. At press time, 13 employees were still on the payroll, Kitayama says. Because of displaced families and the emotionally traumatic nature of the storm’s aftermath, he thinks some of those employee losses will be permanent.

“Some have moved to different parts of the country and decided not to come back,” he says. “Now they have to rebuild their lives (elsewhere).”

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