Saturday Sales Slump: Says Who?

Florists share strategies for a profitable weekend Valentine’s Day.

BY KATIE HENDRICK

For lovebirds eager to celebrate their affection, the timing of this year’s Valentine’s Day — Saturday, during a holiday weekend, no less — couldn’t be more sublime. Whether it’s an out-of-town vacation, a romantic stay at the local inn, a leisurely dinner and late movie, a concert, or even a long hike and picnic, couples have endless choices when there’s no work (or school) to cut into festivities.
That’s the reality that makes many retailers’ stomachs sink. Indeed, florists statistically report their worst sales when Valentine’s Day coincides with a weekend. When SAF surveyed members in 2009, the last time the holiday fell on a Saturday, 74 percent of the 675 responders saw sales drop; 41 percent had decreases of 20 percent or more.

Bad as those numbers may be, they shouldn’t have you ready to wave the white flag. “Is Saturday a challenge? Always. So what?” said Art Conforti, PFCI, of Beneva Flowers in Sarasota, Fla. Like running a marathon or writing a term paper, a weekend Valentine’s Day “requires extra prep work,” he said. “But if you do it, you will be successful.”

Conforti is not alone in his belief that this Valentine’s Day can bring in as many or more sales as a weekday Valentine’s Day. Retailers across the country (and Canada!), in communities big and small, attest that hotels and restaurants don’t own the weekend Valentine’s Day. From shrewd partnerships to multi-channel marketing, they have plenty of tactics to keep flowers — their flowers — a part of the holiday. Here are some of their attack plans to conquer the weekend Valentine’s Day curse.

**Lure in the Guys — Early**

“The first and most important step to having a successful Valentine’s Day is that people know you exist when they’re deciding what to buy,” said Petra Janssen, owner of Wascana Flower Shoppe in Regina, Saskatchewan. “Shoppers aren’t going to just come looking for you — there are too many other options — so you have to make your shop a destination for them.”

Janssen drives customers her way with newspaper ads, social media posts and word of mouth marketing. The push begins in January so there’s no way Valentine’s Day will sneak up on shoppers.

In the paper, she runs a flier with photos of arrangements, including several big-ticket items from Wascana’s couture line. “Men bring these ads with them into the shop with a design circled,” she said. “They tell us their wives or girlfriends left it on their pillow or dashboard.” The flyer also advertises a beer and pizza party, held in early February. The purpose of the party is to get men in the door, so they’ll order in advance (while they’re full and happy!). Besides the free refreshments, the party entices men who appreciate a little camaraderie and some expert guidance while they shop.

Through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, Janssen highlights special Valentine’s Day merchandise, runs contests, and keeps a countdown to February 14. “We notice a lot of women ‘share’ these on their significant others’ pages, or they’ll tag his name,” she said. One contest promoted on Facebook — a drawing for a dozen red roses and a silver necklace and earring set — generated 826 likes and more than one thousand shares.

**Kill Two Birds**

Conforti’s staff at Beneva Flowers knows not to end a single call in January without first trying to secure a Valentine’s order. “Customers are busy and appreciate not having to make a second call,” he said. “And, of course, it makes our jobs so much easier to have those orders already in place.” (Customers who walk into Beneva Flowers receive the same treatment, as do those who order online or through the shop’s FloralApp; those platforms include an automated message asking if they’d like to make a Valentine’s purchase too.)

**Spread the B2B Love**

To encourage others to spread the Wascana name, Janssen delivers bouquets to some of her favorite small businesses, including bakeries and boutiques, to brighten up their reception area. “Any time they get a customer, they’ll tell them where they got their flowers,” she said. “You can’t pay for that kind of advertising!”

In Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Sherry Tannozzini takes a similar approach. The owner of Flowers From the Rainforest frequents neighboring businesses, from hardware stores to coffee shops, with a stack of her shop postcards, which include a professional shot of one of her most high-end arrangements on the front, and a coupon redeemable for 20 percent off on the back. She tells the managers, “Here’s a little something to show your staff your appreciation. Everyone enjoys a discount.” Employees will take several coupons and share them with their friends. “This saves me on postage and gets my name deep into the community right before Valentine’s Day.”

**Capitalize on Oscar Season**

Theresa Curry, owner of Curry’s Nursery and Floral in Three Rivers, Texas, runs an ad before previews at the eight theaters in her local movie complex, capitalizing on Oscar season, which draws in crowds every January and February to see all the contenders. “I’m confident this is one of our most effective tools,” Curry said of the ad, which costs her a mere $1 a day. “Movie-goers are surrounded by darkness, and the bright lights and colors on the huge screen rivet their attention.”
Cold-call the Big Spenders
Cold calling brings big Valentine’s business for The Blooming Idea in the Woodlands, Texas. “In our case, 80 percent of our Valentine’s Day revenue is provided by 20 percent of our customers,” said owner Brian McCarthy. Thus, the shop maintains a “high rollers” spreadsheet that lists contact details and previous years’ orders. Two weeks prior to Valentine’s Day, employees call customers on the list, “tempting them with offers of limited availability upsell arrangements,” McCarthy said. Echoing Conforti, McCarthy called the campaign “a win-win” tactic: Early orders help cash flow and inventory control, and businessmen “who are constantly on the go” (a big proportion of the big spenders) need the reminder. “Last year, one customer answered his cell phone inside an aircraft as it was about to push back for an international flight,” McCarthy said. “He spent more than $300 for a ‘wow arrangement’ for his wife, plus $100 for two arrangements for his young daughters!”

Aim High
Tannozzini also subliminally guides customers to her high-ticket items by populating her website’s front page and Valentine’s section with luxury offerings, such as all-orchid designs for $250 and bottles of Veuve Clicquot and Dom Perignon. “You’d be amazed how frequently they sell out, simply because it’s the first thing people see.” When people call in and claim they have no budget, a common occurrence “because they want to see if they can haggle,” Tannozzini starts by pitching a $350 arrangement. “More often than not, I end up making a sale that’s at least $150 because that price suddenly sounds like a steal.”

In the store, Conforti puts Beneva’s biggest, most stunning arrangements front and center to draw customers’ attention away from cash-and-carry bouquets. “Everyone has a budget until they see the unforeseen,” Conforti said. “Show them something that looks 10 times more impressive than what they were expecting, and they’ll spend more.”

The fact that a Saturday Valentine’s Day hits the day after payday might work in florists’ favor, said Janssen, who has “up-sell” engrained into the consciousness of the Wascana staff. “All those walk-in customers have more money in their wallets simply because it’s the first holiday, which Santamary views as a good for a day or two. “If it lasts too long, customers will forget,” she said. “If they realize the deal’s only temporary, they’ll act on it.”

Leverage “Buy Now!”
“It’s all about creating a sense of urgency,” said Tannozzini of her shop’s email campaigns. Starting in January, she’ll advertise a Valentine’s Day arrangement with a substantial incentive attached, be it a $10 discount or a luxury add-on, such as Godiva truffles or a bottle of wine, that is only good for a day or two. “If it lasts too long, customers will think ‘I’ll go back to it’ and will forget,” she said. “If they realize the deal’s only temporary, they’ll act on it.”

Celebrate a Week long Event
The Saturday holiday strikes no fear in the heart of Lynn Santamary. That’s because the owner of Santamary Florist and Greenhouses in Middlefield, Ohio, promotes “Valentine’s Week.” When customers quest delivery on the 14th, she says, “What about Wednesday? This way she can enjoy the flowers early and not think you forgot.” “They always go for it,” she said. Lining up orders for the whole week makes more room for walk-in business on the actual holiday, which Santamary views as extra revenue.

Other variations of this message: “Deliver early and make everyone jealous,” “Elicit some ‘oohs and ahhs’ by being first,” and “Don’t look like the one guy who forgot.”

Talk Consequences
Rick Rivers favors the scare tactic. Last year, his marketing campaign featured a guy sleeping on a couch because he didn’t send flowers; this year, he’ll show a sad girl in an empty cubicle surrounded by happy co-workers holding bouquets. Rivers kicks off his Valentine’s marketing during Super Bowl weekend, visiting sports bars with cards that extoll the benefits of delivering flowers to the office early (and the consequences when you don’t!). He reinforces this message with postcards, daily email blasts (beginning Feb. 9), and digital billboards that run next to Volusia County’s three biggest highways (starting Feb. 11).

Partner with the Competition
You could look at hotels, restaurants, spas, etc, as your competition — or as allies that will share customers and market for you. “People who want ‘an experience’ for Valentine’s Day are all about the big picture. And flowers make whatever they plan to do better,” said Conforti, who offers a “roses and reservations” package with several of Sarasota’s high-end restaurants and hotels.

Patti DeBlass, owner of Schmidt’s Flowers & Accessories in Williamsburg, Va., also partners with restaurants and hotels to score more Valentine’s Day sales. “Williamsburg is a destination, so this gets us a lot of orders from tourists,” she said. The hotels and restaurants handle flower sales for their guests, who can choose from a few designed specials. The concierge then uses the customer’s credit card on file to pay Schmidt’s.

In Selinsgrove, Pa., Cathy Herrold, owner of Graci’s Flowers, is one of several vendors featured in a “Love is in the Air” airplane ride over the Susquehanna River Valley. The $129 package — promoted on the valley’s website and by the Heritage Aviation — includes a 30-minute flight for two, a red rose from Graci’s Flowers, a jar of candles from Colonial Candlecrafters, and a bottle of wine from Shade
Mountain Winery.” For an extra $20, customers can get a dozen arranged roses. Herrald provides the product and in return the airport handles all the advertising (mostly through a local radio station), books the flights, then calls the shop to let Herrald know how many roses to prepare, which the airport staff picks up.

“We don’t pay anything and we get a ton of publicity from it,” Herrald said. Furthermore, some of the couples who’ve taken the flights have become regular Graci’s customers, and she’s also earned referrals from the other businesses involved in the promotion.

Make It a Memorable Experience

When Valentine’s Day finally hits, be ready to dazzle the walk-in customers.

At Exotic Flowers in Boston, owner Rick Canale uses Twitter to recruit local celebrities, including Baywatch alum Traci Bingham and singer Michael Bivins, to help sell flowers.

“The key is to ramp up your in-store experience,” Canale said. “Valentine’s Day on the weekend means more walk-in customers, and they all come in with smartphones in hand. Give them something memorable, like a celebrity handing them flowers, and they’ll post something on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, giving you free advertising that just might go viral.” On top of that, employees wear special Valentine’s Day uniforms to give every walk-in customer “a visual greeting,” said Canale. He also puts on pop or Motown music, so customers hear something upbeat and recognizable.

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Less of a Mad Dash?

In reviewing recent data from SAF member surveys, we found that when the holiday falls on a weekday, as it did in 2012, 2013 and 2014, florists deliver about 75 percent of their orders on the holiday itself. If 2009, the last Saturday Valentine’s Day, is any indication, however, deliveries this year could be more spread out: Fewer than a quarter of respondents in 2009 (24 percent) said they delivered more than half of their holiday orders on the holiday.

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