**Hands On**

**TIPS, TRENDS AND TACTICS FOR THE SAVVY RETAILER**

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**FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT**

**CAR ACCIDENT NEARLY TAKES OUT VALENTINE’S DAY**

In the list of potential Valentine’s Day nightmares — mega-snowstorm, power failures, the sudden departure of a top-producing designer — a BMW crashing through your front window the week before the holiday probably ranks among the least likely, but that’s exactly what happened last year to Regina Cannon Treml of Belladonna Florist in Eden Prairie, Minn.

At about 3:30 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 7, Treml and designer Karen Sutherland were working in the back of the shop when they heard glass shatter. Treml’s first thought: the shelves filled with glassware that had always given her pause had finally given way. But when she rushed to the front of the store, the magnitude of the damage became clear. The car had plowed right through the windows and several feet into the main showroom, destroying displays and signage.

“I could see straight outside,” she said. “That’s never a normal thing in February in Minnesota.”

While no one was hurt in the accident, Treml had to quickly shift gears from ordinary Valentine’s Day prep to damage control. With the help of her staff members, friends and even clients, she covered the broken windows with plywood, swept away the broken glass and sorted through salvageable hard goods and fresh product. By Feb. 8, her team was back on track, creating orders and making deliveries on schedule, some of them wearing scarves, hats and gloves.

Treml then took to social media to update customers on the news and reassure them that Belladonna was open for business and ready for Valentine’s Day. To combat the image of a shuttered store, she also put up a temporary banner within days that reminded customers the shop was open — and when the local newspaper showed up the following Monday, Treml was ready with her talking points: She thanked community members and customers for their support, reminded readers of the coming holiday and even managed to reference a shop Valentine’s Day special, Minnesota-grown tulips.

How did she manage such cheerfulness in the face of such damage? “I lied through my teeth,” Treml said with a laugh, admitting she was terrified of the potential fallout for her business. “But, I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t afford to send my customers to some other florist for Valentine’s Day.”

By the end of the holiday, sales had dropped slightly over the previous year, but far less than Treml had feared, and the experience taught her several lessons about planning for disasters, including the need to closely review insurance policies and rental agreements to ensure items such as glass are fully covered. (Thankfully, Treml had a rider in her policy, but that’s not always the case.)

In the end, the accident highlighted her community’s generosity, Treml said — one client turned friend was on site immediately to help with cleanup — and showed how determined she and her staff could be, when faced with unimaginable challenges.

“We just gritted our teeth and smiled through it all,” said Treml, who relocated her business for unrelated reasons in October.

Treml’s can-do spirit and media savvy will serve any florist well around Valentine’s Day, when hardships (and hard questions from the media) are more often to pop up. For other Valentine’s Day best practices, see More Online, p. 6.