When it comes to hiring for Valentine’s Day, Dana Cook, AAF, is all about two things: Efficiency and truth in advertising.

“Our Craigslist ad reads, ‘You will NOT be designing,’” said the owner of Julia’s Florist in Wilmington, North Carolina, who includes that line first, to weed out folks who romanticize the idea of leisurely dropping roses in a vase. “This is about very long hours and very hard work,” the ad continues, “but if you want to try something different, this may be the job for you.”

For the past five years, that tell-it-like-she-sees-it approach has helped Cook find and train what she calls her “team of four” for the floral industry’s two biggest holidays. (She uses the same approach for Mother’s Day.)

For Valentine’s Day, she generally places the ad in early to mid-January. From there, she’ll bring in all the applicants — in 2014, she got about 20 responses — for a group interview. There, she underscores the ad message. “I tell them again it’s going to be overwhelming and hard,” she said. Usually, a few people slink out about that time.

But once Cook has chosen her four candidates, she stops scaring them and starts training them — for everything. (There’s no magic precisely in the number four; it’s just the number Cook estimates she needs to round out her full-time staff of 14.) They set up tables and coolers on their first day and start processing flowers on the second and organizing the trucks after that. So what if they’re only with the shop for the season? Cook says. Everyone learns flower names, and all four workers are available to run flowers to designers. By the time the holiday comes, the team of four is on the sales floor, helping customers, who have no clue the team isn’t part of the regular staff.

Before she implemented this system, Cook said, she had designers running back and forth to grab their own flowers, which cut into productivity, or she’d have seasonal helpers who hadn’t been in the shop long enough to, well, help in a meaningful way. The new system hits the sweet spot, with the seasonal employees staying just long enough to master not only flower names but also basic care and handling. (And some of the seasonal workers come back from one year to the next, or jump from Valentine’s Day to Mother’s Day. One gem of a find, a former publishing house employee recently transplanted to Wilmington, now helps the shop with its website and graphic design.)

The system does require some additional effort on Cook’s part. She has to show the team how to do a task correctly the first time, and she’s learned it’s helpful to be very specific. (“I show them how to process a flower, give them a goal for number of stems and then say, ‘See ya’ll in four hours,’” she said with a laugh.) And, as with any seasonal workers, it requires some prep on the owner/manager’s part. (“Everything has to be priced when they’re on the sales floor,” Cook said.)

But for the most part, the system has made a busy, potentially hectic run-up to the holiday a whole lot smoother. And, for all the tough talk Cook dispenses, she also said the workers end up loving the work. “It’s something special and they realize that,” she said. “In 10 years, they’ll look back and say, ‘You know, this one time, I worked in a flower shop on Valentine’s Day.’”
Valentine’s Day on a Sunday and a long holiday weekend? You won’t hear groans from Lori Wheat, AAF, of Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop and Garden Center in Lafayette, Colorado. At press time, Wheat was already gearing up to remind customers about the holiday, and planning her in-store displays to drive sales. One message customers won’t miss: “Our front windows will be painted with [the words] ‘Open Sunday’ and Valentine-themed graphics,” Wheat explained, adding that similar verbiage will appear on the marquee. (The shop is open every Sunday but she wants to underscore the message for the shoppers who tend to come in only on major gift-giving occasions.) This year, to complement the Valentine’s Day plush, chocolates and cards on the sales floor (which go out early, as soon as the Christmas goods are gone), the shop is also going high tech, with “Snapchat-style” selfie photos on the walls of the cooler, along with reminders and invitations for customers to share their own posts on social media.

With Valentine’s Day falling on a Sunday — and a holiday weekend, no less — florists will need to work harder than ever to make sure they’re a part of whatever mix of dining out or weekend getaways they have planned. But it can be done, contend dozens of florists who were bound and determined to stay top of mind last year, when the holiday fell on a Saturday. See how they did it, at safnow.org/moreonline.

A sure way to make Valentine’s Day inefficient: Tie up your experienced team members with tasks a newbie (or a computer) could master. That was a message Chris Drummond, AAF, of Plaza Flowers in Philadelphia, shared last fall with attendees at SAF Amelia Island. With a bit of advanced planning (ahem, start now), you can staff your shop for maximum efficiency come Valentine’s Day, said Drummond, who gave the following examples:

Holiday Fail: Full-time sale staff is stuck cleaning up addresses from Internet orders or addressing routine incoming message inquiries (over and again).
Holiday Win: “In the middle of January, lay out the 12 most common messages and teach a seasonal worker or college student how to resolve them,” Drummond said. Most POS systems have an alert system to notify you when there’s an issue with an address. If you don’t know how to set that up, contact your provider for help.

Holiday Fail: Teams of temporary hired drivers heading out with minimal direction and oversight.
Holiday Win: “Our regular drivers become dispatchers at the holidays, and it’s the seasonal ones who do the driving,” Drummond says. “It works like clockwork.”

Holiday Fail: Leave employees in the dark about production objectives.
Holiday Win: “Everybody likes to know the score,” Drummond said, so clue people in to the goal they’re working toward. “Show them the spreadsheet, the production schedule.” Praise people publicly for hitting certain milestones. Want to make it even more visual? Put up a large board and update it as you move through tasks.