Four florists in need of a shakeup find new spaces that better fit their needs and maximize their potential.

BY MARY WESTBROOK
The floors did it. The sight of the rich-with-character oak floors were almost enough to convince Chris Brazil and John Miller that an empty, former pharmacy was going to be the next home of Ramblin’ Rose, their flower shop in Lemoore, Calif.

Compared to the hard, unforgiving, backache-inducing concrete floors of their longtime store, those full-of-potential, oh-so-forgiving hardwood floors had a certain appeal. But is this a good enough reason to move from a location they’d been in for 25 years?

To some florists, “move” is a four-letter word, up there with the @#&%! worst of ‘em. Sorting years of accumulated displays, packing up merchandise, moving out, unpacking, setting up coolers, phones and POS systems anew — not to mention risking lost customers, courting new customers — convincing staff that the change is worth it — ugh. It’s enough to make you put up with that cramped design room, teensy parking lot, obscured street view, leaky roof or flaky landlord. Better the devil you know, right? Maybe not. This month, we talked to florists who were compelled to move, because their old situations proved untenable or a new opportunity was too good to pass up, to find out how they made the transitions and settled into new locations that have helped increase sales, boost morale and inject new energy into established shops.
have to remain current to be viable; you have to look current and fresh.”

Fortunately, the owners of the former pharmacy building, Lemoore Odd Fellows Lodge 280, were eager to see the building occupied, and after a three-to-four-month research and planning period on the part of Brazil and Miller, the two parties hammered out an agreement that worked for everyone: Ramblin’ Rose would invest in some of the updates and DIY tasks — custom built-in coolers and sanding the floors — and the Lodge would fix other areas, including the roof and providing a new canopy above the main entrance. (See budgeting tips in “Bit of a Fixer-Upper?” on p. 25.)

Renovation work started in July 2013, and by January 2014, Ramblin’ Rose was in its new home. (Miller and Brazil couldn’t accommodate walk-in customers for about a 10-day period in early January; other than that, they were open for business throughout.)

Right away, the new energy was palpable.

“When a building like this is empty for four years, in the middle of the recession, it does something to the morale of a city,” Miller explained. “We lit up the building again. People were coming in just to say thank you for doing this. They still are.”

Their previous location, which Brazil originally rented and later purchased, was long and narrow, with a design room on the second floor. The new space is wider with chocolate-colored ceilings.
that are at least 3 feet higher, and a dedicated, private consultation room for wedding and sympathy clients, along with a larger classroom, in the back of the store, for the workshops and classes Brazil and Miller host during the year for customers and community groups.

Not only is the new design room three times as big as the area in the previous location, it also uses space more efficiently, providing more workspace for Brazil and their other full-time designer, Cathy Morse, to create designs, with help from part-time and seasonal employees. “This first Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day were incredible,” Brazil said. “We weren’t walking over each other.”

A second cooler also was a boon: Before, Brazil and Miller had to rent a refrigerated trailer to handle product for high-volume holidays; they had to park it in an alleyway behind a nearby restaurant... adding insult to injury, an electric pole in the middle of that alley made moving large designs extra tricky. Now the “overflow” cooler, housed in the space that used to be the pharmacist’s dispensary, is practically an arm’s reach away at any given time. “The trailer!” Miller said with a weary laugh. “It was hard to maneuver it into the space (behind the store) and then there was so much back and forth. This year it was a treat to have that cooler two steps away.”

Because they moved to a neighboring location, losing customers was not an issue, and, much to Brazil and Miller’s surprise, many longtime Lemoore residents are stopping in to check out the “new” flower shop in town. They still own the previous location and, in fact, have rented it to a woman who salvages and sells antiques and used items, which has helped generate more foot traffic in the shopping area. “Immediately, we had people coming in and saying they never knew we are here,” Brazil said. “They see our signs now, because we’re on the corner.”

Less than a year after moving in, sales are up 13 percent at the new location and Brazil and Miller say they’re happier than ever before in a space that’s far more visible to walk-in customers, and right in line with their own long-term plans. “I love all the light,” Brazil said, referencing the floor-to-ceiling front windows. “It just streams in.”

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**BIT OF A FIXER-UPPER?**

So, you’ve found your dream location and you’re ready to sign that lease... but man! Could those floors use a nice, new finish, or what? And wouldn’t it be cool to knock out that half wall over there?

The question of whether to take on renovation costs as a renter is a good one, said Derrick Myers, CPA, CFP, one of Floral Management’s resident financial gurus. “Whether you pay for [updates] yourself really depends on how long the lease is,” he said. “If it’s a two-year lease, that may not be enough time to amortize the renovation or rehab expense. But if it’s 10 years, that’s a different story. Ultimately, it’s all about your sales volume; will it increase enough to pay for the changes?” To make the best decision for your business:

- **Do Your Homework.** Chris Brazil and John Miller, of Ramblin’ Rose in Lemoore, Calif., took about four months to research their move, and the cost of updates, before they committed.

- **Expect the Unexpected.** Brazil and Miller’s final moving budget included a 25- to 30-percent cushion for the unexpected costs that always pop up during construction and renovation work.

- **Ask for Help.** In Jackson, Miss., Nancy and Tom McIntyre worked with their landlords to reconfigure space for their coolers, at no additional cost. Myers said florists would be wise to follow their lead: Talk to your landlord. Negotiate. In many areas of the country, as communities are coming back to life, you’ll find management companies and landlords that are eager to attract great tenants. If they’re forward thinking, they’ll hear you out, and make the move-in as painless and affordable as possible.

  “I’ve seen lots of shops negotiate with their landlord to cover some or all of the renovation costs,” he said. “This happens a lot. The landlords see this as a great investment, because even after you move on, the asset is still theirs, so they benefit from those improvements. You can also negotiate a lease where you pay for the improvements in exchange for a lower monthly lease, or a fixed lease.” **M.W.**
The McIntyres moved in right after Mother’s Day 2010, luxuriating immediately in the open layout, large windows and expansive display area, not to mention the footpaths and fountains in the surrounding shopping center. At 3,000 square feet, the store is about the same size as the previous location, but thanks to an open floor plan, luminous windows and higher ceilings, don’t try telling that to A Daisy A Day customers: “They all think it’s bigger,” McIntyre said. (Even though they moved across the street, the shop sent out emails and direct mail to customers and posted a sign at the old location. Their phone number stayed the same.)

While the store has always sold gift items, after the move, they expanded and changed some of their merchandise to appeal to higher end clients, adding new candle, soap and lotion lines, all exquisitely packaged for customers who duck in for one-of-a-kind gifts. By the end of summer, in 2010, McIntyre turned to her daughter, Laura Gibson, and said: “Where did all of our merchandise go?” They were selling out in an unprecedented way. In fact, since making the move, overall sales are up 15 percent; walk-in sales alone are up 20 percent.

No one is more pleased with the new space than Gibson, who oversees much of the visual merchandising and display work. “In the last space, we had very little natural light, and our design room was way in the back,” she said. “Now, our design room is open, people can watch and I have more freedom. I can hang things like umbrellas in the summertime. It’s just a lighter, brighter, more open store.”
When Cindy Palleschi bought Young and Richard’s in 2009, she didn’t plan to relocate the 62-year-old store. But then a building a block away came up for sale in 2012, and she had to take a look. The new location, in an historic area, had a loft apartment above — perfect for Palleschi and her husband, Jerry, who were looking to downsize their own home — and it was closer to other local stores. Turns out, a mere block made a big difference.

“Even though it was just a block, it was a totally different environment,” explained Palleschi, who rented her previous location. “The biggest difference has been walk-ins; we see the same number of people in a day here as we used to see in a month.”

At 2,700 square feet, the new store is about the same size as the previous location, but charming historic details and a different layout, including an open design room, give the shop a different atmosphere: original hardwood floors, knockout walls, tin ceilings. Below the shop, a garage provides ample room for compressors and large cooler that can be used during busy periods.

“Our previous location was an older building too, but the owners had updated it over the years regularly, so it lost some of that historic feel,” Palleschi said.

Since moving in March 2012, walk-in sales have more than doubled. Even though the new location has less window display space, it’s on a much more trafficked street (the previous location was on a one-way). “You know how they say, location, location, location?” Palleschi said, “Well, I guess it’s true.”

Palleschi and her husband have also introduced new product lines, including scarves, Tiffany glassware and homemade fudge. Thanks to the open design room, customers often come in and linger, chatting with the staff. “People are still coming in and saying, ‘Oh! I never knew about you, even though the store’s been around forever,” Palleschi said. “To think we can move a block and have that kind of reaction.”
The Down-Sizers
When Christine Keller Patton of Keller & Stein Florist in Canton, Mich., started toying with the idea of relocating her family’s business, her goals were fairly straightforward: She and her husband, Glenn, wanted to reduce costs, find a building that used space more efficiently and embrace the “freedom” of renting — instead of feeling weighed down by too much land, too many greenhouses and “an antique building” that was falling down around her.

At the time, Keller & Stein consisted of two acres of 100-year-old greenhouses and a 15,000-square-foot retail building, which had no AC and a propensity to flood every time it rained. “The building was so massive, it was just really hard to keep fresh, clean and updated in general,” Patton said.

Other headaches? Utility costs five times over their target and higher taxes (up 25 percent) due to recent zoning changes.

Patton knew the 116-year-old business had to change to survive. After discounting the option to rebuild on the existing property, and “a long and heated” discussion with the fourth generation (her mom and dad), Patton “decided to... gamble with what we thought was a new start and better location,” she said.

Last year, she found that perfect new space to rent, four miles away in a busier section of town, “the heart of Canton,” as Patton described it. The business no longer has the greenhouses or the land to keep up, and work and design space are roughly equal, but the retail showroom area is a vast improvement. Now, Patton and her team can make full use of every corner (before they often had to work around sections of the building that were in disrepair or terribly inefficient to heat and cool, along with a “warren of storerooms”).

In the new space, customers can see employees and be greeted by them when they walk in. A walk-in and display cooler are also in the front room, putting fresh cuts on full display. The more organized space has also helped the shop reduce waste and inefficiency, maintaining and rotating fresh product and hard goods.

Motivation for the Move:
The wrong kind of space, and too much of it

Investment:
Routine moving costs

Payoff:
More efficient space, less waste and less worry

Best Advice for Would-Be Movers:
Be patient with family members who aren’t ready to move. Work with your accountant to provide hard numbers that support your decision.
far more efficiently. In fact, COGS are down by 10 percent in the new location and sales are up 23 percent — utilities are also down by a “staggering 50 percent,” according to Christine.

“Our old store had huge space and that was actually a bad thing,” Patton said. “It was not effective or efficient and allowed us to gather years of [assorted stuff] that just collected dust and not move product effectively. We know where everything is now, see it and can just grab it. We know when stock is low and just have a better handle on how we buy and sell.”

Seven months after the move, some of the shop’s older customers still express sadness over the greenhouses. And Patton is empathetic to a point. “We miss the greenhouses, too, [they were] wonderful in the past,” she said. But Patton is looking toward the future, she said, and the move “has been far better for our customers” and the new generation of owners.

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**SCALED DOWN** A strategic move to a more modern space, without the burden of greenhouses, helped Christine Keller Patton and Glenn Patton reduce utility expenses by 50 percent while increasing sales.