Summer may not be the easy boon to your bottom line that it is for Hollywood, beachfront rental companies or ice cream parlors, but don't dismiss the season as a sweltering black hole of inactivity. The natural tendency is to scale back, shrink staff hours and freeze any non-essential spending. And that's a prudent path to take: These are the actions “that give a sense of control,” said Lori Wheat, AAF, marketing director of Lafayette Florist & Greenhouses in Lafayette, Colo. But while you’re cutting the fat, don’t miss the opportunity to work on the areas of your business that have been neglected and “gone flabby.”

Use the long summer days to conceive promotions that aren’t tied to the usual suspects (Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Administrative Professionals Week, Christmas) and stop dodging those chores you’ve relegated to a calmer, slower time.

The time is now — the dog days of summer — to get healthy and get “hot,” so when the world returns to its normal routine in September, it’ll be clear that you used your “downtime” to beef up.
Get Warmed Up

Grab Prime Online Real Estate. Even if customers never physically visit your shop and just want to order online, their search should lead to your Google Maps listing. The more “bells and whistles” yours has — reviews, photos, videos, coupons — the more likely you will outshine your nearby competitors and win the shopper’s business.

Just Do It: Before you can gussy up your Google listing into a marketing outpost, you must claim it. Go to the Google Maps website (http://maps.google.com) and search for your business. If it comes up, click on its placemark or listing in the left panel. In the pop-up that appears, you’ll see an option to “edit” the business details (it may be hidden behind a “more” link). Click it. If the business is unclaimed, anyone can edit the details. Click the “claim your business” link. You’ll be prompted with three options: “edit my business information,” “suspend this listing,” or “this isn’t my listing.” Start editing. Enter your basic info — name, address, phone number, website, hours of operation and payment options accepted. Then upload photos and videos. If your company isn’t on the map, go to the Google Places website (www.google.com/places) and click “Add a new business.” Google will verify that the business is actually yours, the company will give you a unique PIN number by mail or telephone.

All the Right Moves: Choose categories to describe your business, as they’ll show up when folks do keyword searches. You can even specify your delivery range. To make sure Google Maps users search no further than your listing, offer coupons, using Google’s formatting and distribution tools. Shoppers just print them out directly from Google Maps — or use a web code you’ve listed.

Get on the Map: Add bells and whistles to your Google Maps listing this summer; dressed up profiles get noticed.
MANAGE YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION. Now that you’ve claimed your Google Places listing, you can read what people are saying about you there — and respond publicly to complaints. You show your responsiveness when you acknowledge a problem and offer a solution. And you may just convert that disgruntled customer into a supporter.

**Just Do It:** Visit your shop’s Place page. Scroll to the reviews section. Click “Respond publicly as the owner.” Write a note and click “Publish.”

**All the Right Moves:** Be polite and professional. Your response may be directed at an individual, but remember, the whole world can read it, so post information that’s useful for all. Keep it short and sweet. Don’t water down a genuine response with gratuitous apologies or excuses. Be thankful. A customer who wrote a review, no matter the tone, invested time in your business. If you improve your business based on a review, be sure to share the news and thank the poster for the comment. Be a friend, not a salesperson. Reviewers are already customers; omit incentives and advertisements.

SPREAD YOUR SOCIAL NETWORKING WINGS. Sure, if you stick in the weeds of celebrities’ ramblings (ahem, Charlie Sheen), Twitter becomes a vortex of wasted time, but if you are selective in who you follow, this social networking source helps you monitor your competition, reach the media and capture clever ideas from people in the know.

**Just Do It:** Follow customers (who tweet their interests, habits and desires), the media (to whom you can pitch stories), competitors (who keep you on your toes) and trendsetters (who share cutting edge designs and shrewd promotions).

Add current customers by searching their email addresses. If your salespeople don’t habitually ask for this information, host a contest or promotion that requires customers to supply an email address to enter. For prospective customers, try Twitter’s “Advanced Search” to find people talking about your business or happenings in your area. Locate it by going to the “Help” menu, click “Twitter Basics,” and then “Search.” You can also use any of the local Twitter search engines, such as LocalFollow or Nearby Tweets. Track down a reporter or columnist with a Twitter directory site like Twellow or Listorious, searching for tags like “reporter,” “writer” or “media.” You can also search by topic, such as bridal media or event media, as well as by location. MuckRack (http://muckrack.com) lists reporters on Twitter by publication and beat.

Survey the competition by searching business names in Twitter’s “Find People” tab or by going to their websites, where they likely list their Twitter handle. Identify folks in the know by checking whose content is getting the most retweets in your network. You can turn Twitter into a “floral industry news and trends chaser” by following influential sources, including other go-getter florists (@CHRulloada), designers (@JSchwaneke), associations (@safdelivers), bridal gurus (@PrestonRBailey) and local business champions.

**All the Right Moves:** Twitter has an official business account that shares tips for building a following, enhancing your reputation and cementing customer’s trust at http://business.twitter.com/basics/best-practices. Follow @TwitterBusiness.

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Get Fit

**COMMENCE THE CLEANING.** In Arlington, Wash., summertime, with its potential for “a nice sunny streak of weather,” calls for the annual waxing of the vans for Flowers by George, Inc. “It’s very important that our vans look good while out on the road,” said owner David Boulton, AAF. “It makes a good impression to our community to have a clean operating vehicle.”

**Just Do It:** Make it a staff activity, Boulton said. Working together, this chore is quick and painless, requiring only two hours, he said — an hour for each van.

**WAX ON** Chelsea Boulton, head of delivery personnel for Flowers by George, knows the value of clean, polished vehicles and takes advantage of summer downtime to get the company’s vans in tip-top shape.

**ENROLL IN UNIVERSITY OF YOUTUBE.** YouTube.com is more than a video conglomerate of goofy dance and lip-synching routines or celebrities’ foot-in-mouth gaffes. For busy small business owners without the time or funds to enroll at Harvard Business School, YouTube offers plenty of practical, professional advice.

**Just Do It:** Finding videos that will help you and your staff amidst the “oceans of video junk” can be a daunting task, said Matt Silverman, associate features editor for Mashable, a site that follows Internet trends. To streamline your education, try these “top five” small biz tutors Silverman shared with American Express’ Open Forum: Harvard Business Publishing (www.
youtube.com/user/HarvardBusiness), Google Business (www.youtube.com/user/GoogleBusiness), the U.S. Small Business Administration (www.youtube.com/user/sba), Robert Scoble’s Channel (www.youtube.com/user/Scobleizer) and Fast Forward (www.youtube.com/user/FastForward). Sign up for a YouTube account and click “Subscribe” to receive notifications of new videos for your favorite channels.

**EXERCISE THE MIND.** Summer’s a great time to read, but we’re not talking “The Odyssey” or “Paradise Lost.” If you want to earn big bucks from stylish flower buyers, keeping up with publications that detail trends is “absolutely essential,” said BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, of Bouquets in Denver and Beaver Creek, Colo., and two-time winner of Floral Management’s Marketer of the Year award. Doing so not only gives you great insight, “it saves you a lot of money,” as professional trend-spotters charge a lot for this information, said Rievo Lesonsky, CEO of consulting company GrowBiz Media, in an article for American Express’ Open Forum.

**Just Do It:** Regularly peruse sources that affect flower purchases. Bridal blogs, such as 100 Layer Cake, Wedding Bee and Style Me Pretty, offer your potential clients dozens of inspirational shots daily. You can also glean information about the dominating aesthetics from fashion and design magazines, such as Vogue, Elle Décor and House Beautiful. Don’t forget your industry publications (including this fine one), major newspapers and business publications.

**All the Right Moves:** Pull out pages and organize trends by categories, such as colors, shapes, textures and motifs, said Marisa Tsikounas, manager of Michael Daigian Design in San Francisco, whose clients’ floral and décor budget for events typically falls between $5,000 and $25,000. That way, when customers come in for a consultation, “you have a comprehensive catalogue that’s easy to flip through,” she said.
collect window concepts, procure props. Nothing cures the dol-drums of slow days and spares you future stress like planning your displays for the next six months, said freelance florist Kyra Kelley. Bright, distinctive window displays that change regularly generate foot traffic, said the now retired owner of Comal Flower Shop on the Plaza in New Braunfels, Texas. “It’s too important to put on the backburner,” she said. “Plan your window designs in advance, then schedule installation dates every four to six weeks and stick to them, as you would a party or wedding. You’re not going to get sales if your window has some dusty silk rose up front.”

COLLECT WINDOW CONCEPTS, PROCURE PROPS. Nothing cures the dol-drums of slow days and spares you future stress like planning your displays for the next six months, said freelance florist Kyra Kelley. Bright, distinctive window displays that change regularly generate foot traffic, said the now retired owner of Comal Flower Shop on the Plaza in New Braunfels, Texas. “It’s too important to put on the backburner,” she said. “Plan your window designs in advance, then schedule installation dates every four to six weeks and stick to them, as you would a party or wedding. You’re not going to get sales if your window has some dusty silk rose up front.”

Kelley kept files for each month of the year, where she’d stick ideas as she came across them — and she has passed them to the store’s new owner. In the summers, she would select her favorites, sketch a concept then present it to her staff to brainstorm slogans and items that illustrated her vision. The installation typically took anywhere from two to six hours, “but was always a fun way to the staff to pass the time,” she said.

All the Right Moves: Everything on display should be for sale, and you should keep the contents itemized and priced on a sheet at your front counter. “You don’t want a warehouse full of props,” and you shouldn’t ever repeat themes, Kelley said.

Her window displays, which never cost more than $100, occasionally sold for as much as $800. “We had one woman who bought everything in the window every Christmas and Easter, so it got to the point that we made duplicates of these knowing that she’d want to buy it almost immediately after we put it up,” Kelley said. For pricing, she advises a triple markup.

To incentivize staff, she suggests offering prizes, such as gift certificates to a restaurant, to the employee whose slogan goes in the window and to the one who makes the most display sales.

REQUEST REVIEWS. Customer reviews build your credibility and help you appear on customers’ radar by making you more prominent in customers’ searches. Case in point: An influx (244) of reviews for Starbright Floral Design gets the shop’s Place Page to pop up when customers type the phrase, “Who is the best florist in New York City?” But you need to take the time to fish for some praise.

Just Do It: Follow up with customers via email (you should always capture an email for every customer) and ask them

TREASURE HUNT Use summer downtime to scour flea markets and gift shows for unusual props, then plan displays for the rest of the year that show them off.
to write a review based on their experience with you. Let them know how their feedback benefits your shop. Lori Kunian, CFD, puts it this way to customers: “The best way for people to select small businesses today is to read online how other people like or don’t like them.” The owner of Affairs to Remember in Melrose, Mass., also emphasizes that a review “lets us know what you think and tells us what we need to work on in terms of quality, style and service.” This message has yielded dozens of comments on sites including Google, Yahoo, Citysearch, Yelp, hotfrog and WeddingWire, which have drawn in new customers, particularly those who are out of state and ordering funeral flowers, she said.

**All the Right Moves:** If you’re shy about requesting feedback, follow the “subtle solicitation” tactic of Nic Faitos, senior partner of Starbright Floral Design. He emails every customer a receipt with a thank you note, which often gets a conversation rolling. “Once I feel there’s a close relationship with a client, or they share a situation where we were the heroes who saved the day by doing an amazing feat,” that’s an appropriate time to ask if they’d be willing to publicly share their experience. His rate of receiving reviews upon request “is close to 100 percent,” he said.

**BRAND YOUR PHOTOS.** Steve Sorrell got tired of seeing his shop’s custom arrangements, which he features on his website, bamaflowers.com, show up on other florists’ sites and Facebook pages in recent months. “While that is flattering to know that my work has gained the attention of other shops, I work hard to produce those photos,” said the owner of The House of Flowers in Valley, Ala. “Seeing other shops ride my coattails has made me realize I need to protect my investment of time.” How will he spend his summer vacation? Watermarking images.

There are numerous online services that watermark images, such as Digimarc and PicMarkr, but Photoshop, which offers the most flexibility in selecting watermark size, color and placement, is Sorrell’s choice.

**Just Do It:** Open the image in Photoshop, then click on the toolbar to select the font type, color and size. Put your cursor over the image and type in your watermark. You can make it subtler by adjusting the opacity. Go to “Layer,” select “Layer style,” then “blending options.” Drag the bar down until the watermark is as faint as you want it. To insert a copyright symbol, go to “Layer,” select “Shapes,” and then “Custom Shapes.”

**DUST OFF THE DATABASE.** It’s time to pull out your database and identify customers who have been “hibernating.” In addition to enticing new shoppers (more on that later), use your downtime to try to revive estranged relationships with old customers. Even if you don’t win them back, it behooves you to learn what happened. If they’ve switched to a competitor, there’s an opportunity to inquire about your weaknesses; if they’ve quit purchasing flowers in general, you can point to studies that reveal the health and emotional benefits of flowers.

**Just Do It:** Ask customers why they left — over the phone, ideally; it’s more personal. Otherwise, online surveys and polls
Summer Shop Fitness Routine

Sweet Surprise: Is there a “special someone” you’ve been dying to add as a customer? Send him or her a secret admirer bouquet with your phone number. When they call, spill the beans.

Can glean this information; just be sure your questions are direct. Ask former customers to name your weaknesses, and welcome their suggestions for improvement. Then, implement their changes, tell them you did and thank them for the feedback. Goodwill will ensue.

All the Right Moves: Sometimes it takes more than words to lure them back. Pick a powerful “we’ve missed you” promo (free anniversary arrangement, anyone?) or personalized service (complimentary consultation, half-off home decorating) that they won’t find elsewhere. Show (don’t tell) them you’re great. Spare them clichés (“elegant arrangements”, “excellent customer service”); instead, let photographic evidence and happy reviews sell your skills. Connect with social networking. Where are your customers? Likely among the 500 million people on Facebook. Search for them, add them as friends and engage them with some flower chat. Facebook and Twitter are excellent forums for instructional content, discounts and links to floral information.

Count Corporate Clients. Summer downtime affords you the opportunity to devote some love to businesses you’d like to have as regular customers, said Heather Waits, co-owner of Bloomtastic in Columbus, Ohio. Think beyond lobby arrangements, she said: Corporate clients are the ones who call for event work or when an employee has a baby or loses a family member. Finding the right contact person “takes a game plan,” she said, but the payoff’s high.

Just Do It: When you take recipients’ addresses, make a note of those that go to businesses. The day after you deliver their flowers, call them: Introduce yourself as the owner, ask how they’re enjoying the gift, offer flower care tips and then ask who within their company orders flowers. “Presto! I get a name and phone number like that,” Waits said. She then sends the designated flower orderer an arrangement the next day and follows up with a similar phone conversation. Send, then call, she emphasizes: “It’s easier to sell to them when they see your product first.”

All the Right Moves: “Companies have their bottom line in mind,” Waits said, so you have to speak to how flowers will improve it, such as enhancing employees’ morale or creating a more inviting atmosphere when they have client visits. Create a brochure specifically for businesses. Bloomtastic’s brochure, for instance, advertises a $5 discount for deliveries to the office and a $15 discount for company employees’ personal orders, and it emphasizes that all arrangements will be custom designed for the company.

Get dramatic on YouTube. Video has become a power sales tool to attract customers to your business: In 2010, 30 percent of traffic on the Internet was driven by video; by 2013, Cisco predicts this number will jump to 90 percent. Someone who sees a video is more likely to buy and less likely to return a product, said Joan Broughton, vice president of the National Retail Federation. And according to Craig Wax, CEO of Invodo, an ecommerce video company, 65 percent of us learn visually, while only 25 percent learn by what we hear. You can turn a lot of those “how to pin a boutonniere” or “fight tulip droop” watchers into customers, if you do it right.

Just Do It: Make a video showing you active at work — making an arrangement, going on a delivery, handing a bride her bouquet on her wedding day, asking prom-goers to show off their dance moves, or offering design advice. First, go to youtube.com and sign up for an account. Once it’s verified, go to “Profile Setup” and follow instructions. Pick a logical title for your channel, such as “Wedding Flowers in Chicago,” then click “Channel Tags,” where you’ll input critical keywords to optimize your website — “florist Chicago,” “bridal bouquets,” “fresh
Keep arrangements fresh longer!

Your clients will love Artesia* floral foam because it makes your fresh flower arrangements last up to 50% longer than water alone. You’ll love Artesia because it’s so easy to work with – it soaks up water quickly, holds stems securely in place and offers a variety of shapes and sizes to suit any design project. Plus, it delivers the superior value you expect from FloraCraft* – making floral designers happy for over 65 years.
flower delivery,” for instance. Next, have a co-worker film you with any consumer-grade camera, such as the Flip UltraHD, Sony’s Webbie HD MHS-PM1 or an iPhone. If you have a PC, you can manage your video with free MovieMaker software; Mac users can use free iMovie software. Log into YouTube, hit “Account” and click “Uploaded Videos” in the Overview section. Click “start uploading a video now.” Give your video a logical (read: searchable) title, description and tags. Once you have the hang of it, filming, editing and uploading takes less than 30 minutes, said Georgianne Vincincone, owner of Monday Morning Flowers and Balloon Company in Princeton, N.J., and Yardley, Pa.

All the Right Moves: Keep it short: The average viewing time for a video clip is two and a half minutes, said YouTube co-founder Chad Hurley. Film in good lighting and without much background noise. Enunciate, speak up and use your shop’s name. For SAF Chief Information Officer Renato Sogueco’s tips on selecting and operating a video camera, see “Give a Flip: Videos Made Easy” (Plugged In, September 2010) at www.safnow.org/moreonline.

Get Results

PLAY UP SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER HYPE. Don’t let movie executives and actors be the only ones who benefit from packed theaters this summer. Looking for a marketing muse? Let this summer’s biggest hits be your guide. “Tapping into the crazes of our media-obsessed, celebrity-drenched society lets you milk the excitement the mainstream press has already created,” Reyhle wrote on her blog.

When Carrie Bradshaw returned to theaters in May 2010, Welkes House of Roses in Milwaukee created a “Sex and The City 2” package that included tickets for the movie’s opening at a local cinema/diner, a sample of Sarah Jessica Parker’s perfume, and free cocktails, dinner and dessert during the show. Nicole Lemler, the shop’s vice president, appeared on the local Fox affiliate to promote the festivities, where she served some floral cocktails that would greet movie goers.

Just Do It: Play up the pomp of the silver screen. Though this year’s blockbusters lean toward the masculine side (“Thor,” “Green Lantern,” “Conan the Barbarian”), you can play with the films’ themes; for instance, putting one of the brawny stars in your window holding a bouquet will surely garner some attention!

MARKET SOME MYSTERY. Last summer, Pugh’s Flowers in Memphis, Tenn., pumped up summer sales by issuing 1,000 “mystery cards” — plastic, logoed cards — redeemable for an unknown cash discount ranging from $5 to $50. (Most were priced below $10.) Customers could reserve a card online, but they still had to physically come into the shop to use it. About 25 people used their cards within the week, but dozens have trickled in throughout the year, as the cards have no expiration date. Pugh’s Debbie Crawford, account manager?, doesn’t mind that some folks put off redeeming their card: “I like knowing they’re carrying us around in their wallet for a constant reminder of our shop.”

Just Do It: Crawford was so pleased with this promotion, she personally passes out about 20 cards a week to new people she meets, which generally nets about 5 new customers for Pugh’s.

All the Right Moves: Go to a printer, such as www.cardprinting.us. Crawford ordered 1,000 magnetic cards for about $1.75 each, a steal, she said, because “when people turn them in to redeem them, we can reload and reuse them.” To lure other businesses into joining Pugh’s “preferred customer club,” she sends them $20 cards.

BE COY WITH PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS. Is there a certain someone (or business) you’ve been longing to have as a customer? Get their attention by sending an anonymous knockout arrangement. “Secrecy is amazingly effective,” said Mike Michalowicz, president of behavioral web optimization firm Obsidian Launch and author of “The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur.”

Just Do It: Sign your note, “Your secret admirer,” and leave your number to call for details. When the recipient calls, spill the beans and share why you appreciate them and have always wanted to do business with them.

SURPRISE PRIZE Pugh’s Flowers drummed up summer walk-in traffic by issuing cards worth unknown values.
All the Right Moves: To minimize costs, Kelley advises targeting only those with the highest ratings online and those who specialize in million-dollar listings.

SHOW GRATITUDE THE OLD FASHIONED WAY. The easiest way to stand out in today’s email, electronic messaging environment is to send a written note. Summer’s the perfect opportunity to get in the habit of sending thank you notes to customers.

Just Do It: Do it “as soon as possible,” suggests the staff at the Emily Post Institute, the authority on etiquette. Penning your note within a week of a customer’s purchase means the memory of their order is fresh, helping you write a sincere, personal message.

Katie Hendrick is assistant editor of Floral Management. khendrick@safnow.org

RECYCLE GOOD HABITS. Encourage vase recycling — and thus, more foot traffic for your shop — with special incentives for conscientious customers. Shirley Lyons, AAF, tried this tactic for a similarly slow period at Dandelions Flowers & Gifts last January and had “tremendous” results, the Eugene, Ore., florist said. About 30 customers participated, donating about 250 vases, including “one lovely designer vase that we resold immediately for $29.99,” Lyons said. She estimates the containers were worth more than $250, “which effectively offset” the $210 the shop issued in gift certificates. More importantly, it had people talking for weeks after it ended, she said, adding that she’ll repeat it this summer.

Just Do It: Lyons announced her shop’s recycling week by emailing her customer database, offering a $5 gift certificate for those who brought in five to 10 vases, a $10 gift certificate for 11 to 20 vases and a $15 gift certificate for more than 20. She also advertised the promotion on her shop’s blog and on cards attached to arrangements the shop delivered. “This is a project that is easy to do, has virtually no costs, and creates goodwill in the community as well as a reason to walk in the door,” Lyons said.

REEL IN REALTORS AND NEW HOMEOWNERS. While the real estate industry has taken a hit in the recent recession, “there will always be some very rich people who are buying homes,” Kyra Kelley said. Offering a small, complimentary plant for the realtor is a great way to say, “Welcome” to the new homeowner and foster a relationship with both parties.

Just Do It: When Kelley did this promotion years ago, she took a blanket approach, sending 6-inch plants she bought in bulk to every realtor in the area. When she did this, almost every realtor called back within two or three days, ordering an even larger plant for another client, and the new homeowners became new customers. Her investment: $400.

GREEN IDEA
A recycling promotion saved Shirley Lyons money on inventory and got customers talking.

SAY ‘MERCI’ The good old-fashioned handwritten note shows your appreciation and resonates with customers.