12 ONLINE OUTPOSTS
SURVIVAL-MINDED FLORISTS
UTPOSTS MUST CLAIM

BY RENATO SOGUECO

A great website isn’t enough. Nor is a Facebook fan page. Driving traffic to your shop means staking out several online properties. Here are the 12 most important ones.

> Remember when you set up your shop’s first website? If you did this in the 1990s, it likely was little more than a billboard in cyberspace with your pixelated logo, address, a few sentences about your business and, for the super snazzy techies, photos of products, customers and a flashing 800 number.

For close to a decade, this was your entire online presence — and that got the job done just fine. If you started early, you most likely were listed as the No. 1 result when people searched for florists in your area.

Then order-gatherers came onto the scene. These online powerhouses paid attention to what Google and other search engines wanted and, as a result, became leaders in search engine optimization (SEO). Savvier florists and order-gathers used and, some say, abused (see “Use Your Adwords” in box, p. 25) SEO with spectacular results, capturing the coveted top 10 spots on the first page of search results for any given location. In doing so, they pushed real local florists to page two and three — the no man’s land of the Internet, clicked on in fewer than 5 percent of searches. Order-gatherers and Web-centric florists also began to dominate pay-per-click advertising with huge ad budgets.

That was then. This is now.

The difference 10 years can make is that today’s florist can compete, thanks to recent tweaks by Google and other search engines to level the playing field by focusing on local business results rather than rewarding clever (albeit sometimes misleading) SEO practices.

Now is the time to (re)stake your claim on your piece of cyberspace commerce. The first thing you must realize is how much more land there is to grab — and that your website is but one parcel. We’ve identified 12 such web properties that can help you regain your footing and competitive edge. Each unique initiative is good singularly, but better when combined. Together, they provide a more solid foundation for driving customers to your store.

**Jump in the Mesh Pit**

If the mere thought of managing a dozen online outposts makes you want to wave the white flag, keep in mind that building an effective Internet presence today requires meshing several strategies: brand-building, online references, SEO and your website. One outpost won’t do all that for you. You build the shop’s brand with rich, multimedia content, through social media sites. You allow customers to comparison shop, write reviews and decide whether to buy from you via online references, such as florist directories and review sites including Yelp. SEO, although no longer the only driver of web ranking, is still critical, since your outposts and website have to synchronize to validate your status as a real local florist. And all that money spent in development and staff time updating your website was not wasted — keep it up. Just shift your perspective a bit, realizing that your website may not be the first place customers come, but the final destination — from any of the 12 outposts.
Open-Mic Night

YouTube (www.youtube.com) Like Facebook, YouTube’s numbers are off the charts. More video is uploaded to YouTube in 60 days than the three major U.S. networks created in 60 years, and YouTube reached 700 billion playbacks in 2010.

YouTube is a free opportunity to showcase your talents in wedding work, events, flower care, trends and much more. Creating video is cheap. If you have a smartphone, you can use its camera, but realize that editing may be a challenge. We recommend the Kodak Zi8 or the Sony Bloggie Touch (both less than $150). If you’re tempted by the Cisco Flip, be aware the manufacturer killed the product and won’t make updates. Both Kodak and Sony provide video software you can easily edit with and upload to a YouTube account.

Best route
Regardless of the camera used, always focus on lighting and length. Use natural or incandescent lighting over fluorescent and keep videos to less than three minutes. Don’t forget to tag your videos with relevant keywords, so customers will find them in searches.

Visit www.youtube.com/signup to create an account. Create an account name to brand your shop since YouTube provides a unique URL based on account name — www.youtube.com/yourshopname.

Cyber Podium
Blog/Special Interest Website Have a bustling wedding business? Specialize in sympathy work? Talk about it in a blog created free at www.blogspot.com or www.wordpress.com. You can create a unique URL for your blog (such as www.chicagoweddingflowers.com) sold for just $10 at www.godaddy.com. (Check out livecodes.blogspot.com for a promo code to save a few bucks on your domain names.)

Best route
The blog is just another online entry point to your shop and SEO rank booster. Blog posts can be about anything. Just be sure to use specific keywords and link back to relevant sections of your website, not just the main URL. Keep posts short and sweet, less than 140 words.

Optimize Your Outposts
Need more info on how to really make the most of your Online Outposts? We’ve got it. It’s just a click away — specific guidance on each of the web outposts outlined in this article. Go to www.safnow.org/moreonline.
Fast Talk
Twitter (www.twitter.com) No more dismissing this as a silly, bird-brained waste of time. Everybody’s using this mini-blog (140 characters or less per tweet), from lawmakers and movie stars to, yes, floral industry leaders (Teleflora and 1-800-Flowers tweet with the best of them).

What to tweet about? Flower meanings, gift suggestions, care tips, in-store events, exclusive tweet coupons, helpful advice to other florists and — of course — same-day promotions.

Just be sure to keep it short and sassy. Think like a texter, and you get the idea. LOL, BRB, GR8T. Twitter works for you if you proactively use it to create symbiotic relationships: Retweet worthy posts from someone you follow. Everyone has a different follow list, so it’s safe to conclude your retweet will be hitting a fresh audience. Simply cut and paste the tweet in a post and add the prefix of the person’s handle with RT before it (this will make sense once you start using it).

BEST ROUTE Another twist to Twitter is the use of hash tags. Within your posts, if you add # before a word such as #flowers, #florist, etc., these hash tags are submitted to Twitter search so when other people search for “flowers,” your post will appear.

Twitter limits the length of usernames to 15 characters. Rather than your shop name, consider grabbing a location username such as chicagoflorist.

USE YOUR ADWORDS — BEFORE COMPETITORS DO
Find out how to fight fire with fire against competitors who bid on your shop’s name as a keyword in a pay-per-click Google Adwords account, at www.safnow.org/moreonline.

New Kid on the Block
FourSquare (www.foursquare.com) Foursquare leverages the fact that more of your customers — IT research company Gartner estimates 95 million will be sold this year — will have smartphones with Internet connectivity. Foursquare allows mobile device owners to “check in” to your store, competing with their friends and others to become “mayor” of your business with enough check-ins. For businesses, the benefit is that it’s a social medium that actually drives walk-in traffic.

BEST ROUTE Claim ownership of your business and immediately start offering specials that pop up when Foursquare users are near your store — your updates will automatically pop up on their phones when the GPS function recognizes they are in the vicinity of your shop.

Photo Depot
Flickr (www.flickr.com) If you’ve been diligent in snapping digital photos of all your work, Flickr is the perfect place to share them. Although tagging is important with all social media, it’s critical in Flickr as you can’t write a description for each photo. When you tag, think flower, color, event and location. A potential tag list could be “white, calla, wedding flowers, St. Leo’s Catholic Church, Fairfax, Va.”

BEST ROUTE Have a vast collection of event work or prom flowers you want to show off? Upload albums to Flickr, so when customers search for “bridal bouquet, peonies” or “purple corsages”, they’ll find your work and then shop.

“Baronesse”
Exclusive Nostalgic Garden Roses, available year round

For more information, please contact your favorite wholesaler, or visit our web page at www.alexandrafarms.com or Call Joey at 305-528-3657. sales@alexandrafarms.com
Resume Resource
LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) More like the student council of the Internet — to Facebook’s and Twitter’s football and cheerleading analogies — LinkedIn should not be underestimated for its ability to buttress your online reputation. When customers look for you online, they’ll likely see your site first, followed by your Facebook fan page and then the LinkedIn profile for shop employees. Simply put: LinkedIn raises your search engine potential.

Having 10 employees means you have the potential for 10 LinkedIn references to your business. Although LinkedIn focuses on professionals, it benefits your shop to have 10 employees list you as their employer, with titles such as floral designer, flower shop manager, etc.

**BEST ROUTE** Create a profile for yourself. Then invite employees to register as well. Use yours as the sample and have them duplicate the section that asks for personal and company websites. Cross reference your LinkedIn profiles to all your online outposts (blog, Facebook, etc.).

Favorite Local Hangout
Google Places (www.google.com/ places) Google is the No. 1 search engine, capturing more than 84 percent of international market share. And with Google’s October 2010 launch of Place Search, Google now layers local information on top of organic searches. This means a shop physically located in Detroit can’t just publish a subpage on its website offering “flower delivery in Indianapolis, Ind.” and expect to get good results. Without content about, for example, specific hospitals or funeral homes in Indianapolis, that Detroit florist will struggle to gather orders there. That’s because Google scans for local information in context with the rest of the site to generate rankings in Google Places searches.

**BEST ROUTE** Here’s how to claim your Google Places listing: Visit www.google.com/places and click “Get Started.” As with all web properties, fill out all the information with specific detail about your business, including parking, types of credit cards you accept, etc., in addition to the regular business information. You’ll also have a chance to upload video and pictures. Another cool thing about Places: You can create a QR code that allows mobile phone users to zap the code and go directly to your Google Places listing.

Runner Up
Yahoo Local (local.yahoo.com) Although Google gets all the headlines, Yahoo, as the No. 2 search engine and with its 8 percent marketshare, has a formidable online presence. Visit local.yahoo.com, scroll down to the bottom and click, “Add a Business.”

**BEST ROUTE** The process is almost exactly the same as a Google Places account. While you’re at it, do the same with search engine upstart Bing.com. With Microsoft pushing it, Bing will certainly grow its market share over the years.

JUGGLING YOUR SOCIAL (MEDIA) LIFE
You may be thinking, “Will I have time to manage all this?” Probably not at first. The best strategy is just to create the accounts — it’s OK to let them sit. It’s not OK to let someone else grab your brand on all these media before you do. And as the next big thing arises, get there first. Just create the account.

Start with the top of the list and work your way down. As you get comfortable, have more time, or can delegate, you can take it up a notch with each social medium to spice up your online marketing mix.
The Op-Ed Page

**Yelp** ([biz.yelp.com]) Yelp gets more than 40 million visits a month from people checking out local businesses. This includes folks who’ve downloaded the excellent mobile Yelp App onto their smartphones while on the road. What powers all this traffic? Simply put, Yelp’s primary purpose is to share reviews and recommendations.

**BEST ROUTE** Before potential customers buy from your shop, they’ll likely check out what other people have to say about your business. You may have already seen reviews in both Google and Yahoo, but Yelp takes reviews up a notch by adding the social element where reviews are attached to user profiles. Visit biz.yelp.com to start.

Traffic Cop

**StumbleUpon** ([www.stumbleupon.com]) Huh? What’s this? Yes, we said the same until we checked it out. Stumbleupon, a social bookmarking website, drives up to 30 percent of web traffic, second only to Facebook, which drives around 48 percent, according to data based on page views from Stat Counter, a web tracker. Although Stumbleupon touts only 15 million registered members, the fact that referring websites is its primary business makes this a hot web property.

**BEST ROUTE** An account is not needed, but get a badge on your site ASAP. Visit www.stumbleupon.com/badges/landing/for the how-to.

Lucrative Listings

**Florist Directories** These websites optimize for geographic search to get themselves on page one of search results. Do they deliver? Quick test: Search for your own shop, and if you see a florist directory on page one, consider signing up, since your competition more than likely already has.

**BEST ROUTE** SAF’s directory, National Florist Directory, is the first on the following list. It’s free for SAF members, and we take your dues investment and pour it into ongoing search engine optimization to ensure it ranks high in searches. Check out your listing and make sure it includes a hotlink to your shop’s website. (If not, contact SAF and we’ll make it happen, (800) 336-4743.) Many other florist directories can complement your free listing, so be sure to check them out, too:

- www.nationalfloristdirectory.com
- www.locateaflowershop.com
- www.directoryfloral.com
- www.localflorist.com
- www.ilocalflorist.com
- www.findaflorist.com (Teleflora)
- www.ftdfloristsonline.com (FTD)
- www.localflowershop.com
- www.flowershopnetwork.com
- www.onlyflorist.com

A River of Information

To maximize your claim on these outposts, create a “river of information,” suggests Scott Klososky in “Enterprise Social Technology: Helping Organizations Harness the Power of Social Media, Social Networking, Social Relevance.” In a nutshell, Klososky compares the town crier, as the first effective word-of-mouth advertising, to the combination of your website, coupled with these social outposts, as today’s modern equivalent.

Fill your “river” (social outposts) with multiple posts on a wide variety of topics, writes Klososky, and customers will float your way. 

**Renato Sogueco** is SAF’s chief information officer, author of the Plugged In column and liaison to the SAF Technology Committee. rsogueco@safnow.org

---

Some of our customers
love the thrill of
OUR ONLINE AUCTION

...Others just
love the bargains

We have thousands of
happy customers, and
they’re all different.
That’s why we provide
options to fit the way you
want to do business.
All backed by exceptional
customer service.

CALL US TODAY
and join us for the auction

1·877·625·3243

www.flowerbuyer.com