Stop procrastinating: It’s time to embrace a technology regimen that will transform your business into the powerhouse it was meant to be.

BY RENATO SOGUECO
Since the first shopping cart rolled across an online shopping page two decades ago to the first customer who clicked a button on her phone and ordered flowers for her mom, the incredibly lame excuses from florists have come at a pace that rivals that of the introduction of new technologies.

But you can only make excuses for so long. While you’re shaking your head and standing your slowly eroding ground, your competitors are taking your business.

The refusal to adapt to technology is usually a result of fear, uncertainty and doubt, better known as FUD. Let’s be clear, FUD can put you out of business or, at the very least, leave you woefully lagging behind competitors, always in catch-up mode. You may even know a few former colleagues who succumbed to FUD and are no longer in business.

“I kept avoiding the technology wave,” said Hank Maarse, president of Jacob Maarse Florist in Pasadena, Calif. “But it was obviously not going away, so we recently just relaunched our Facebook and Twitter pages and will soon be starting a newsletter and blog.” His next step: Use the information he gathers from his point-of-sale system.

“I think the most important thing to do is take one step at a time so it does not look so overwhelming,” Maarse said.

Perhaps it’s the time investment that has you cringing. Numerous Plugged In articles and social media presentations have left Lori Wheat, AAF, thinking, “How am I going to fit this into my routine?” said the co-owner of Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop and Garden Center in Lafayette, Colo. But making the effort’s worthwhile, she said, because “keeping on the cutting edge of technology is vital to staying relevant to today’s customer.” Facebook and blog posts “are really paying off,” in terms of engaging with customers and making the shop’s website more informative.

You may be reading this, thinking, “Well I’m not a “FUD-dy Dud. I’m on Facebook. I have a Twitter account. Almost 20 percent of my sales are online.” Think again. Consider those steps as dipping your toes into the technology waters before you truly dive in — and you must dive headfirst. Although wading is a vast improvement over not trying it at all, this narrow, lemming-like strategy may still fail you because it positions technologies as items on a checklist as opposed to a more holistic way of embracing technology as part of your business.

This month, consider us that naughty sibling that sneaks up on you while you’re at the edge of the pool and pushes you in. Is it sink or swim? No, it’s just tough love. We’ll have you treading water at first and then doing backstrokes in no time by demystifying several technology trends and issues, drawn from discussions among SAF’s Technology Committee and Retailers Council members in March 2012. Read this with an open mind, and you’ll discover ways you can leverage technology to help you thrive as a 21st century floral business.
I’ve watched audience sizes fluctuate from a 1,200 to a dozen,” he said. Video is ideal for those who can’t be somewhere live. “It’s like a salesman who’s available at 10 p.m.,” he said. “It won’t interfere with soccer practices or recitals.”

His advice for amateur cinematographers: Be brief. “A really good documentary-style video will be between eight and 12 minutes,” he said. “That’s all people can digest.” Also, practice. “Remember the packaging,” he said. “You need the video to match your branding, so consider things like lighting, camera angles and background noise.”

Lastly, this broadband exploration provides a great opportunity to review your telecommunications costs. Have a T1 line(s) for broadband and/or voice? Ka-ching, that’s at least $600 for each T1 and its data rate is a measly 1.5 megabits per second, compared to cable or fiber optic broadband which gives you at least 10 megabits per second for a fraction of the cost, at $100.

When you search for broadband providers, first consider fiber optic for the fastest and most reliable connection. Check out Verizon Fios or Cable One. The next best? Cable connections, usually provided by local cable TV providers. Explore bundles out there that can tie Internet with your phone lines, all for less than $100 a month. It’s important that you get business level service for the Service Level Agreement that guarantees the company will restore service within a set time — usually four hours.

So with the money you save, consider opening a wireless account to provide all employees mobile wireless access and equip them with Smartphones (see “Smartphones, Smart shoppers, Smart florist?” at www.safnow.org/moreonline).

The Cloud Cometh
Now that you’re connected with broadband at the shop, let’s explore “the cloud.” The cloud replaces premise-based computing: that server in a certain, fixed place, usually a dusty closet, and all the ancient PCs or terminals are connected through networking cables. This has been the state of business computing for the last 20 years.
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Art Conforti
Beneva Flowers
Sarasota, Fla.

“You just want to make sure in mobile, that you do have a presence,” said Jamie Jamison Adams, Flower Shop Network’s SEO/inbound marketing manager. In addition to being sized for smartphone viewing, your mobile-ready site also must be mobile-friendly, to convert visitors into buyers. Navigating a mobile-friendly site from a phone should be as easy as maneuvering on a regular website from a computer, she said. “You don’t want any obstacles that cause issues for the consumers, because they will be easily distracted and move on,” Adams said. Converting mobile shoppers may require giving them fewer choices, or less text than the descriptions found on regular websites, for instance, she said, because the mobile platform is more image-driven.

Bob Aykens, former chairman of SAF’s Technology Committee, agreed some features from your regular website won’t work as well on a mobile-ready site, so you have to eliminate them if they take too long to download, for example. “We’ve always gone for simplicity,” said Aykens of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses in Appleton, Wis.

“Try it, they’ll ‘like’ it” Rebecca Redman of Windermere Flowers & Gifts in Orlando, Fla., uses Hootsuite to manage her business’ presence on Facebook, Foursquare, Twitter and LinkedIn. For coherence, she centers her daily posts on Facebook, still the most effective social medium for her, around a theme. Her overall strategy must work; Windermere has nearly 2,000 Likes.

**Master Mobile**

More than 50 percent of your customers are using smartphones, according to data from Nielsen. With built-in GPS, they visit a neighborhood and search for a florist. If you have a mobile-ready website, updated Google Places information, a presence on FourSquare and Yelp, customers can likely find you more easily than if you don’t.

According to Google, more than 65 percent of these smartphone carriers use information from the gadgets to make an in-store buying decision.

The ongoing debate among florists is whether they should focus on mobile web or mobile app. Our recommendation is to get a mobile-web ready website first, since smartphone users still predominately use their devices to search the web, according to a recent Kelsey report. The other critical reason is that, once you have a mobile-web ready website, it will display the same on all smartphones. If you develop an app, each one must be created separately for each operating system of the different devices — one for an iPhone, another for Blackberry and yet another for Android. But with a mobile-web ready website, it’s readable on every platform.

Runs fine for the most part. So what’s the problem? Fire, flood, theft, maintenance and replacement. And the potential to lose all your data.

What the cloud is or does is move at least the server component off your premise and into secure datacenters that provide redundant facilities, such as back-up power, data back-ups, multiple disk stores to minimize down-time and more. Server software is upgraded on the fly so no one is asking you to install anything, nor does anyone need to show up to do it for you. So the next time you need a POS upgrade, your provider does it on the main server at headquarters, and the next time you access your POS over the Internet, it’s updated. It’s like having your own backup generator in a secure facility — and a staff of IT guys minus the expense. Let’s be realistic: You don’t have the expertise, time or money.

Since the shop’s POS is usually the de facto system running the business, ask your vendor if it’s running in the cloud, or at least backing up your data in the cloud. Several already do or at least provide a version that does. If you don’t have a floral POS, consider hosting your server and/or your data in a cloud service such as Amazon’s EC2 or Microsoft’s Azure. Data backup providers include carbonite.com, mozy.com or ironmountain.com.
After you have squared away a mobile web version of your website, consider a mobile app to fully control the customer purchasing experience.

“Today’s consumer is coupon-driven and technology retained,” said Conforti, of Beneva Flowers, which has both a mobile-ready website and a mobile flower-ordering app, Floralapp. “There are two items that you don’t leave your house without these days — your car keys and your smartphone,” Conforti said. “We have to be realistic and watch the changing pattern of our customers. If this is where the customer’s going, why don’t we want to be there?”

Conforti said consumers who prefer to shop from mobile devices gravitate toward businesses that send coupons or special offers, and like how quickly they can complete a purchase. An app further speeds the process — to under a minute — because shoppers don’t have to login, register or fill out all the fields since the recipients’ contact information is already in the phone, he said.

When customers order via mobile device, Beneva’s receipt includes a link to download Floralapp, resulting in an “amazing increase” in downloads, Conforti said. Once they download the app, they receive $10 off their first order. He and other florists using the app receive, so far, about 10 to 15 orders for every 100 people who download the app, he said.

An app does more to keep customers ordering from your shop, instead of choosing a competitor, Conforti said.

At the shop, mobile smartphones and tablets, such as an iPad, can be useful sales tools. More floral tech companies are adapting their POS systems to run on iPads to take orders. Or, imagine an iPad as a vast catalogue of your work that your wedding sales staff can use to quickly pull up design images for brides. You can even accept payment with an iPad by inserting a Square or Intuit Gopayment credit card reader and swiping a credit card.

QR (quick response) codes are the latest trend in capturing mobile customers. QR refers to those square bar-codes that, when scanned by a smartphone’s built-in camera, take the user to a website, play a movie, download contact info, send an email, order the product on the spot and much more. The key payoff? QR codes potentially revive your mainstay print advertising. By adding a QR code to existing print advertisements or your website, blog or Facebook page, you entice users to get more information and make a more informed purchase.

Social Mobility
According to ComScore, more than half of smartphone users use the device to update social media. There’s no reason you can’t do the same for your business, especially if you are working at an event. In just a few minutes, you can post your location and status via Facebook, Twitter or Foursquare; snap photos to post on your Facebook Fan page, blog or Pinterest boards; and capture video of your work to share with customers on YouTube.

Great desktop social media management tools such as Hootsuite and Tweetdeck have equally impressive mobile versions, so monitoring and posting to social media is made very easy on the road.

The best way to explore mobile is to get a smartphone and iPad ASAP — yes, we’ve just given you a great reason to chalk up the latest, hottest gadgets as business expenses (you’re welcome). Again, get an iPhone or Android device, because they have the largest and fastest growing market share, according to Nielsen data, and consider handing them out to key staff. The idea is to familiarize yourself with the customer mobile experience to effectively deliver the right marketing and information in the way they would use and consume it on a smartphone.

Stay Social (or Beyond Facebook)
Most floral businesses have a Facebook Fan page. Great. Florists have seen the light in leveraging this massive social media of 900 million-plus members and it’s the right first choice. But what about Flickr, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter, Foursquare, LinkedIn, a blog and the next great social media that will surely pop up in the near future?

It’s all about time, of course, but the payoff is huge. Social media greatly expands your brand online, solidifies your online reputation as a local florist and ultimately drives traffic to your website. Specific social media such as YouTube,
Flickr and Pinterest allow florists to showcase their work in video and photos — the most shared items among social users — 24/7/365.

The florists who effectively use multiple social media don’t necessarily work harder — just smarter — using the many tools we already mentioned. More importantly, they’ve developed a methodology and focus on return on investment.

Rebecca Redman of Windermere Flowers & Gifts in Orlando, Fla., said Facebook still is most effective for her, but she’s also on Twitter, Pinterest, Foursquare and LinkedIn, and uses Hootsuite to manage her business’ presence. (An intern also helps Redman manage accounts, and contributes blog posts.) Redman sets goals such as adding 25 new friends a month, especially wedding planners, hotel event coordinators and others who will bring her business. “It’s all about the follow-up,” she said. To make her messages, posted at least once a day, cohesive, she focuses them around a theme such as weddings or a holiday. Over time, she has learned what kinds of material help her connect with fans. “People love photos and quotes,” Redman said. “Trivia gets a lot of interaction.” But only if you’re consistent about it, posting daily: “If you’re not willing to commit to it regularly, it’s not worth doing,” she said.

A Wondrous Website

All roads (read: technology mentioned up to this point) lead to more sales on your website. Broadband enables richer, multimedia content. Hosting the website in the cloud, versus in your developer’s closet, ensures it stays up and running even during the busiest holidays. A mobile-web version enables you to be found by wanderlust customers and promotes walk-in traffic. And social media expands your online presence, for which the website is hub, with the added bonus of creating many, greatly beneficial inbound links back to the website, enhancing your website’s search engine optimization (SEO).

Florists need to realize the business website requires the same amount of care and detail you would invest in the brick and mortar. Giving a shop’s website adequate attention is a cause close to the heart of Brandon Kirkland, owner of The Enchanted Florist in Ashland, Ore., and founder of EpicFlowers, a company that advises florists on technology. When Kirkland asks his peers, “How many people come in your store a day?” he often hears “20 or so.” When he asks how many daily web visits they get, the answer is at least double — “50 on average,” he said. Despite the heavy online traffic, most florists tell him they don’t spend a thing marketing their websites. “Most florists don’t understand their site doesn’t just sell flowers, it’s selling a service,” he said. “That service is allowing the customer to place an order online.” However, the website is still a different animal, compared to a real storefront, so aside from an attractive look and friendly feel, it should function to entice visitors to drop by, buy and come back for more. A few of Kirkland’s secrets: Offer Paypal, have a one-page checkout, let customers check out as a "guest," and place the birthday category up on the top left side of the home page.

Analyze This

Did we mention statistics? Another unique capability of websites is tracking exactly who comes to visit, the criteria they used to find you, how long they browsed the goods and all the steps they took to a final sale (or didn’t, so you can adjust the process). We’re talking website analytics. Imagine having that kind of information for those walking into your store!

Having this information allows you to understand your customer better and, consequently, make informed changes to the website. Lots of florists are starting to use this information in real-time, especially around holidays. If you see something is being clicked more but is found on a sub page, promote it up to the homepage to exploit customer preference. Or if you see something that isn’t performing so well, but you have tons of inventory, label it a “best seller” and push it to the top!

Aykens looks at his site’s Google Analytics twice a day, and said labeling an item a “top seller” works like “magic” with guys at Valentine’s Day. Analytics also help him steer promotions, he said. For example, if he runs a newspaper ad, he determines it must generate 30 orders to pay off. If it doesn’t, which he tracks through analytics, he knows not to place such an ad again. “If you’re not using [analytics], you’re not using your website to its fullest potential,” Aykens said. “You’re throwing dollars away.” It can be overwhelming at first, he said, but start small and build up.

As you’ve discovered, many of the technologies you once thought were disparate functions, which you may or may not have checked off a list, are really part of a complementary technology toolset that can take your business to new levels. Florists who’ve thrived in a down economy attribute much of their success to leveraging technology to tap or create new markets, reach customers in different ways and make the sell because they’ve gained the customer’s trust.

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