Is DIY Worth a Try?

How to make money off of brides who don’t want to spend it.

BY JENNIFER DERRYPERRY MANN
You can’t throw a bridal bouquet without hitting a crafty, thrifty bride-to-be who has vowed that when her big day comes, she’s taking matters into her own hands. And you can’t talk shop with wedding florists without someone popping the big question: Do you do DIY brides?

The official keepers of wedding statistics echo the anecdotal popularity of brides who want their wedding flowers to be of their own making: At eWedding.com, a blog post, 2011 Wedding Trends for the Fashionista Bride, reported that:

- The recent nostalgic and simple trend for weddings will accelerate this year.
- Floral centerpieces that are extravagant and expensive are a thing of the past.
- Small, simple, country-inspired flowers are chic.
- The DIY trend will continue, helping to reduce cost, eliminate waste and add a personal, creative touch to the wedding.

And yet — and yet! — florists are finding ways to win sales from brides who don’t seem to be buying. We TV’s Wedding Report predicts “only moderate increases, if any” in wedding spending this year, but in Portland, Ore., Broadway Floral & Gifts owner Doug Fick has increased his monthly sales for the last two years by at least 5 percent through his near-wholesale business with DIY brides. And although the number of annual weddings is predicted to decrease for another few years, Candy Cannon, AIFD, at The Flower Studio in Sun Prairie, Wis., anticipates 10 percent growth in her wedding business again this year. In Tampa, Fla., Apple Blossoms Floral Design & Wedding Center owner Scott Darhower sees a chance to boost his profile by venturing into bulk flower sales and creating a consignment bridal gown and accessory exchange.

Through hands-on customer service, education and lower prices reflecting less labor, florists are hanging on to dollars that would otherwise be spent with online consumer-direct shippers, at farmers’ and floral markets, or seemingly not at all. The way these feisty florists see it, the only other option is to throw up your hand-tied bouquets in a fit of frustration. And since these florists’ businesses survive on weddings, that’s no option at all.

So, clearly some florists are seeing a return on investment by working with — and not just for — brides. But just as with any relationship, this one requires setting clear boundaries, recognizing the talents and limitations of each party and not changing who you are (a florist is a business, not a helpful hand desperate to impress) to make someone else happy. And just because some people are giving DIY a try doesn’t mean you have to. There are plenty of variables to consider — from promoting your brand to finding the storage space — that can help determine if this clientele is right for you. Besides, plenty of couples would rather swipe a credit card than strip a rose.

But for those who want to pursue this partnership, take it from our DIY-loving florists: When you marry the relatively low revenues of DIY flowers with the low labor costs of bulk sales, a high-margin honeymoon awaits.
Two years ago, Fick noticed that wedding budgets were on the decline, and the DIY vibe was on the upswing. Brides wanted simple settings: mason jars filled with dahlias, zinnias and local blooms. Wondering whether he might make a profit from these tighter-fisted consumers, he invested eight hours in making a no-frills, wholesale-style website to sell flowers in bulk. PortlandFlowerMarket.com (PFM) had its humble beginning in August 2008. Today, it brings in 6 percent of total monthly revenues for his $500,000 plus enterprise.

“When our wedding coordinator asks [bridal customers] about their reception and they say, ‘We’re going DIY,’ we point them to PFM,” Fick said. “So they’re still getting their flowers from us, but from under our wholesale umbrella.”

At first, promotion for the site was slim. No Google AdWords or links from the Broadway site encouraged the bulk sales. But even then, Fick was pleasantly surprised by the traffic.

With DIY showing no signs of a slowdown, Fick’s wife, Janice, encouraged him this past year to do more with the wholesale site. In October, he paid a consultant about $300 to modify some of the page layouts and add some features to the checkout. Fick logged more than 100 hours enhancing the site’s minimal online presence with flower descriptions, price information and Web meta tags, which improved search engine optimization and increased traffic tenfold. Fick continues to tweak the site and his approach to marketing it. Sales from the wholesale site — averaging $500 per order, at a 1.75 average markup — continue to rise.

Making Wholesale Work
PortlandFlowerMarket.com isn’t a true wholesaler, of course. The business doesn’t import flowers, other than a few drop-shipped tropicaals from Hawaii. “Bulk sales” is a more accurate description.

Fick keeps Broadway Floral’s design staff and their labor expense well away from PFM. “This business model basically tries to limit the ‘hand-holding’ involved with the DIY bride,” he said. “Because we consider ourselves wholesale, we make the assumption that the bride has finalized her wedding-flower colors, styles and designs, and is ready to order product.”

PFM orders require a $49.95 minimum; there’s an $8 upcharge for those who fall short. Once the order is placed, Fick gives it the once-over, then sends it on to his wholesaler. The wholesaler prepares the order, then ships it to Broadway Floral for the bride to collect.
Brides who prefer not to pick up their own flowers can opt for a $29.95 flat-rate delivery service. It’s no extra work for Fick. He contracts out 95 percent of his deliveries — everything except nearby local orders, last-minute orders and funeral flowers — to a company that delivers for most florists in Portland.

“It’s easier for the delivery service to deliver bulk flowers than arrangements,” Fick said. “Bulk flowers are sleeved and boxed in Procona packs. The wholesalers are happy to get rid of those with us, and I’m happy to pass them along for bulk flower deliveries.” It’s all part of what Fick sees as the win-win-win of wholesaling to DIY brides.

**Upselling Customer Service**

DIY brides who opt for a PFM wholesale order get better customer service, Fick said, than those who buy from an online consumer-direct operation that involves no human interaction: Either the wholesaler or PFM employees pre-pack the orders in a Procona ready for delivery, and if a bride needs to store the flowers in a cooler until her event, Fick can hold the blooms for two to three days at no charge. Most importantly, he said, there’s a professional, accessible florist on the other end of the transaction.

The no-fee consultation available to DIY brides before ordering is limited to Fick’s advice on flower quantity, availability and, if needed, alternatives. “Pretty much the only way you can offer inexpensive prices is not to engage with them too much,” he said. As an industry veteran with 37 years of floral buying experience, Fick’s comfortable offering brides an idea or two. “But I’m not a wedding coordinator or a designer, so it’s easy for me not to get too involved or come up with too many suggestions.”

For DIY brides who do want a designer’s insight, a 30-minute phone consult with a Broadway floral designer is available for $35. One hour of help runs $60.

For Fick, growing his business by launching PFM required no additional square footage or staffing. His wholesalers appreciate the extra business, and he’s bringing in, with relative ease, wedding dollars that would have otherwise been lost.

**A Work in Progress**

Educating brides about flowers is the main challenge in selling wholesale.

“Pretty much the only way you can offer inexpensive prices is not to engage with them too much.”

DOUG FICK
BROADWAY FLORAL HOME & GARDEN
PORTLAND, ORE.

**FYI for DIY: You Need Class(es)**

**THE SHOP:** The Flower Studio in Sun Prairie, Wis.
**THE OWNER:** Candy Cannon, AIFD, past president of the Wisconsin & Upper Michigan Florists Association
**THE IDEA:** DIY bridal floral classes have inspired a series of workshops for customers, opening up a new line of business for the shop.
**THE INSIGHT:** What brides save in money may cost them in time — and piece of mind — on their precious wedding day.
Cannon is out to teach DIY brides a lesson—nicely, and for $300. That investment buys a bride and two guests two hours of personal floral instruction. By the time she finishes talking flower prep, the essentials of care-and-handling and design basics for personal flowers and a simple centerpiece, about a third of the brides decide the only thing they'll be DIYing is the booking of Cannon's wedding services.

This year marks The Flower Studio's third season of DIY classes. About half of the shop's roughly $300,000 in annual sales come from wedding work. Cannon taught 10 floral training sessions for brides last year. At press time, interest in DIY bridal classes seemed to be down, even though wedding revenues were poised to rise. Cannon isn't calling the DIY trend dead any time soon, but she suspects the word is getting out among brides: Wedding flowers are no walk in the park.

Teach ‘Em A Thing or Two

“If you can’t book a wedding the way you’d like to, you have to book it another way to recapture some of the lost revenue,” Cannon said. That belief and having to play the hero more than a few times to brides who wound up with awful-looking flowers from online bulk sellers motivated Cannon to offer DIY design classes. The Flower Studio has sold flowers in bulk for six of its seven years; adding the classes helped Cannon with her mission to convince brides to buy flowers from a local professional. "I tell them, ‘If you get flowers from us, and there’s something wrong, we’re going to take care of it. We’re a safety net that you can count on’," she said.

Cannon tailors each DIY design session to the bride and her interests. For an extra charge, brides can practice their design work with the same flower types they’ve ordered for their wedding. In addition to practicing designs for corsages and boutonnieres, Cannon shares wedding-week logistics, suggesting timelines for working with the flowers. She uses a flowchart to help brides think through their time, the tasks and how much workspace and support they have.
As Cannon paints the picture of picking up flowers on Tuesday or Wednesday, designing on Thursday and Friday, and coordinating transportation to the wedding and reception site on Saturday, plenty of brides begin to inquire about the cost of having the work done for them. After getting out the spreadsheet and producing a quote, some DIY designers become full-service floral customers.

“We’re careful to let them draw their own conclusions,” Cannon said. “Either way, it turns into actual revenue. The design classes may not make up the difference in overall average wedding totals, but it is income I wouldn’t have otherwise had.”

**More Class Acts Beyond Brides**

Of the Flower Studio’s 1,100 square feet, 350 of it is used for the DIY classes. The classes don’t cut into workday operations or require additional staff because Cannon teaches them herself on weeknights or Sundays, when the shop is closed.

Although Cannon anticipates fewer bridal classes this year, that doesn’t necessarily mean she’s out the $3,000 in revenue they generated last season. “Customers have said, ‘I see you were down at the shop last night. What was going on?’ And then they want to know if I can offer a class for them,” Cannon said. New classes, such as wreath-making and front-porch decoration, have evolved from the bridal DIY courses.

Group classes tend to be 60 to 90 minutes and cost between $50 to $150, depending on the project. By offering classes covering home-decor trends, Cannon is seeing a bump in those sales. She offers students a discount for purchases made the night of the class, and she’s quick to provide suggestions about containers or additional product they can buy at the store to enhance their DIY creation.

**Balance-Sheet Boost**

Among DIY students, bridal and beyond, Cannon sees customers having fun: “They’re looking for a way back to nature, and that needs to be cultivated.” She’s toyed with the idea of building out a separate aspect of her business to do more with class offerings, but for now, she’s reigning in her self-described Type-A personality.
At the beginning of 2011, Darhower took a can’t-beat-’em, join-’em approach to DIY brides, adding bulk sales to his retail business, which he markets on Facebook. Better to get a slice of the pie, he figured, than no pie at all. He’s not concerned that this added approach will cut into his full-service wedding work, which earns Apple Blossoms more than 65 percent of its revenues. Rather than pushing full-service brides into DIYers, he sees his bulk sales option as a deterrent to those who’d take their dollars out of the community and spend them online.

> Bulking Up, Venturing In
THE SHOP: Apple Blossoms Floral Design & Wedding Center in Tampa, Fla.
THE OWNER: Floral designer Scott Darhower has 25 years in the industry, with the past seven focused on wedding design
THE IDEA: Bulk sales started in 2011, and a bridal dress consignment program opened last fall.
THE INSIGHT: Darhower sees bulk sales as a way to keep bridal dollars in the community.

Just the Facts, No Fluff
On the Apple Blossoms website, the bulk flower sales page welcomes DIY brides and wedding planners. A simple text-only list of flowers and prices follows. Nearly three dozen items are available, including basic flowers, a few tropicales and several options for greenery.

The floral information is elementary, emphasizing color over varietal names. For instance, DIY brides looking for lilies will find Asiatics available in orange, yellow, white, red or pink. Quantities of 100 stems are available for $199.95 and 200 stems for $359.95. Other flowers are offered in bunches. Purple, white or pink statice, for example, is 10 bunches for $89.95 or 20 bunches for $159.95.

For greater savings, customers can order flowers by the box. There’s a 10-bunch-per-box minimum, and those Asiatic lilies run $21.99 per 10-stem bunch. Darhower marks up most flowerers 2-2.5 times. Some he prices a little higher, based on what competing online bulk floral sales operations are offering.

The extent of Darhower’s labor in the transaction: Once the bulk order comes in from the wholesaler, he immediately double-checks the flowers. Like Fick, Darhower has found bulk-ordering brides require specific education. “We remind them that flowers are a natural product,” he said. “They vary in color. Color differentiations depend on where a flower was grown, what time of year, and the weather conditions.”
Apple Blossoms, true to its community-first philosophy, lets DIY brides bring in containers to figure out how much product to order. "We do give them some guidance so their flowers look good," Darhower said. "But we’re not giving away all our secrets, of course." That approach seems to work for the shop. They’re already enjoying word-of-mouth marketing that is "amazing and free," Darhower said. He sees bulk flower shoppers coming back as full-service customers.

Bride Central
Looking to build business aside from bulk flower sales, Darhower and several affiliated vendors created a bridal exchange adjacent to his floral shop, called Apple Blossoms Wedding Center Tampa. The exchange offers consignment sales of dresses, accessories and wedding décor.

Facilitating a “one-stop shop” for Tampa’s brides, Apple Blossoms’ Wedding Center includes a conference room, which visitors can rent to meet with various wedding professionals — from caterers to officiants — in one convenient location. Darhower also provides floral design classes and demonstrations, and arranges seminars on wedding trends, such as videography. The Wedding Center’s also set up for brides who just want to browse through a slew of accessories to rent or buy, including linens, tiaras and flower confetti.

The bridal boutique, like the bulk flower sales initiative, speaks to Darhower’s take on operating a successful floral business. “A lot of flower shops going out of business aren’t thinking outside the box,” he said. “There’s something out there that people are asking for. It may not be exactly what we wanted to do, but I’d rather have a piece of the pie than starve. I’m happy to make the customer happy.”

Jennifer Derryberry Mann is a contributing editor for Floral Management. She is co-author of “Yard & Garden Makeovers: Your Guide to a Beautiful, Logical Landscape.”

fmeditor@safnow.org