When looking to grow his wedding business, a Chicago florist goes back to where it all begins: the bridal consultation.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

PAIR OF PROS
To make the most of wedding consultations, David Mitchell, AAF, (far right) handles the logistics of planning the big day, while designer Bob Obajtek wows the bride and groom Amanda Micheel and Chris Bies.

And his wedding business was growing throughout the 2000s. The trouble wasn’t the business itself, but the Herculean effort Mitchell put in to score those weddings: 90-minute consultations that didn’t always convince brides to commit and put down a deposit, constant reminders to the community that, “Yes! We do weddings,” Sundays away from his family at bridal shows that (fingers crossed) would lead to some weddings.
Like many florists, Mitchell saw weddings as an important niche that local florists (rather than out-of-town competitors) can still own, but he was bone-tired and had this not-so sneaking suspicion that, for all his effort, his energies might be better spent on other responsibilities — bookkeeping, strategic thinking, general oversight.

About a year ago, he came to a realization. He couldn’t possibly work harder. He had to work smarter. The light bulb moment led Mitchell to reconsider just about every basic principle associated with his shop’s wedding work, from the way he meets with brides to how he divvies up tasks and what his employees wear… even the name of his family’s 97-year-old business, Orland Park Flowers. Anything — everything — was up for inspection, consideration, tweaking or overhaul.

“We made a real commitment to growing this segment of our business,” Mitchell said. “We’ve had steady growth, but you have to keep at it.”

Mitchell’s instinct that he could grow his wedding segment even more with a better strategy paid off. Today the shop does about 95 weddings a year, with an average price point of $1,700, compared to 65 weddings a year at an average of $1,000 in 2006. Those numbers reflect steady, incremental growth and a diverse blend of full-service affairs (ceremony, reception and personal flowers) and a la carte offerings (personal flowers only or centerpieces but no ceremony work).

His experience also seems to line up with national trends indicating that brides, grooms and their families are willing to spend significant chunks of change on the big day. According to a recent Brides magazine survey, the average U.S. couple dished out close to $27,000 on their nuptials in 2012, not including

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**YOU’RE INVITED**

**Who** Mitchell’s Flowers and Events  
**Where** Orland Park, Ill.  
**Number of Weddings Per Year** About 95  
**Average Sale** $1,700  
**Vows** Minimize consultation no-shows, maximize conversion rate. Keep consultations to 60 minutes. Trade small add-ons (aunt Betty’s corsage) for big impact (more extravagant bridal and table flowers).
the honeymoon. That number, a $500 increase over 2011, is down from a pre-recession peak of more than $28,000, but it’s a figure that provides plenty of potential for florists who can meet and exceed couples’ expectations...and even more profit for owners, like Mitchell, who find a way to win over brides without running themselves (and their staffs) into the ground.

Meet and Greet Makeover
The consultation process was one of the first places Mitchell looked when he decided to rethink his wedding business. For years Mitchell, who has a background in accounting, had been manning the consultations himself, sometimes with the help of designer Bob Obajtek. His approach was fairly straightforward. Brides would come in with their entourages for a free appointment and Mitchell would hustle to wow them, escorting them into the shop’s designated consultation area, whipping together a demo bouquet and walking them through details of the event, including, at times, the most minor aspects (“Now, are you sure you won’t need a corsage for your Great Aunt Betty?”)

For the most part, the process worked, but Mitchell knew he wasn’t “a natural designer;” he could put together a demo tussie-mussie or make suggestions, but his ideas never lived up to the boundless creativity he saw in his own design room. Plus, the 90-minute consultations had become a series of immovable blocks in his day, preventing him from paying attention to other aspects of the business that could have benefited from his strengths. Once Mitchell took a critical step back, the solution became obvious: Obajtek needed to play a larger role in the consultations.

“Consultations clearly weren’t the best use of my time,” Mitchell said. “I have good ideas, but Bob is a great designer. He sees past the obvious, and that’s the kind of service I wanted

GREET THE GROOM, TOO!
Thinking outside the box helped David Mitchell, AAF, enhance his wedding work and pointed him toward obvious solutions that the hubbub of daily life can obscure. If you’re looking to increase your own sales, one important client may already be sitting quietly in your shop, said Chris Easter, co-founder of The Man Registry, a blog for grooms. If you want his business, don’t leave him out.

“Grooms are getting more and more involved in all aspects of the planning process,” said Chris Easter, co-founder of The Man Registry, a blog for grooms. “There are still some traditional ‘groom areas’ – the rehearsal dinner, the band/DJ, vehicle choices and honeymoon – but things are starting to blend more.”

One mistake vendors make is ignoring grooms, or assuming that they aren’t going to be involved in nuanced details, including flowers. In fact, Easter said, more and more men are getting on Pinterest as they plan bachelor parties, weddings and honeymoons (though the majority are less forthcoming about their activity than brides tend to be).

Want to get in good with the grooms? Here are a few areas Easter said are worth considering:

Go Team. Easter has seen a number of sport-themed weddings of late. Usually, the couple has a shared passion: They met at college and want to incorporate their alma mater’s colors in the décor, including flowers. Helping the couple think through options will go a long way toward endearing you to brides and grooms. Personalization extends far beyond the gridiron or baseball diamond, of course: Easter noted that many grooms are lobbying for craft beer stands or bourbon bars at the reception. The attention paid to these libations can rival the attention paid to the main course at a sit-down meal.

Dressed Rehearsal. “I often tell grooms that rehearsal dinners are a great opportunity to leave their mark on the wedding,” Easter said. More and more brides and grooms are moving traditional aspects of the reception – including bridal party intros and some toasts – to the rehearsal dinner, giving them additional time on the big day for dancing and celebrating. If the groom has a cake, look for it to be served up the evening before, too. In general people are paying more attention to the pre-fest activities, making it an ideal area for florists to consider.

Suit Up. It’s a given that you’ll talk at length about the bride’s gown, but don’t forget to ask about the groom’s attire, which could have been chosen with equally meticulous care. Tuxedos are classic but lots of fellas are opting for custom-made suits – and they may like a similarly custom-feel to their personal flowers. Accessories (cuff links, pocket squares) are also receiving a new wave of interest, not only for the grooms but also the groomsmen and male family members. M.W.
RING THAT BELL  Mitchell’s Flowers and Events has grown its wedding segment from 65 to 95 weddings a year. To maximize efficiency and profit on limited bridal budgets, David Mitchell tries to direct dollars toward more profitable and “high impact” bridal, ceremony and reception pieces, versus funnelling dollars toward corsages and boutonnieres.

brides to see. Plus, he’s amazing with the customers.”

The shop now routinely books 60 percent of its consultations, up from around 30 percent two years ago, and Mitchell and Obajtek have become a dream team of consultations. They greet clients together and chat about the bride’s “big picture” vision for the event. Obajtek listens for keywords — vintage, Grace Kelly, bohemian — and then slips away to create a demo bouquet while Mitchell shows off a few select boutonnière pictures and centerpiece examples (made of silk flowers) or peruses the bride’s Pinterest boards or planning binder. When Obajtek reappears, he usually shows the bride two bouquet variations: This is what you told me you wanted (Option No. 1, the bride’s instructions, more or less to a T) but here’s something really special that you might not have considered (Option No. 2, the bride’s vision, but infused with an extra oomph, thanks to Obajtek’s experience and talent). Cue the squeals of delight.

“At that point, their eyes light up,” said Mitchell. “We try to show them fresh product more than books or pictures. A lot of them already come in with 100 images through Pinterest. They’re overwhelmed. But seeing the fresh product, and what Bob can whip up in 10 minutes, is exciting for them. They can’t imagine what he’ll be able to do with more time.”

The tag-team strategy has another benefit, too. Clients are never left alone to twiddle their thumbs, or worse, talk themselves or each other out of Mitchell’s suggestions...
and into ideas that complicate the couple's vision and, ultimately, the florist's job. (You know the types: The know-it-all bridesmaid. The mother set on one hard-to-source flower.) Instead, Obajtek and Mitchell act as benevolent, expert cohosts, interpreting what a bride means when she says she wants a vintage look, but shows a decidedly modern flower and color combo (hot pink gerbers), and keeping the conversation on track and under 60 minutes.

“Sometimes brides have looked up so many things that it can confuse them,” Mitchell explained. “They’ll have 97 different things and nothing matches. A big part of the consultation process is listening to them and showing them actual flowers and just talking to them.”

Professionalism Prioritized
Mitchell has made other adjustments to the consultation process, all of them aimed at efficiency, cost control and great customer service. For instance, the shop has long asked brides to complete a questionnaire for the consultation, but the shop now sends immediate email reminders once an appointment is booked. The message includes information about the consultation and links to the shop’s Flicker and Facebook pages, so that industrious brides and grooms can look through the shop’s wedding work ahead of time. Most important, it asks the couple to confirm their appointment.

“I noticed that a lot doctors’ and dentists’ offices are asking for confirmation now,” Mitchell explained. “I think the email gives us a professional air, and it’s definitely cut down on our ‘no-show’ appointments,” from about 20 percent to less than five percent.

The morning of a consultation, Obajtek and Mitchell huddle at the cooler, reviewing what they already know about the day’s bridal clients and pre-sorting flowers that might be a good fit for the demo bouquets. That way, Obajtek isn’t scrambling to find the exquisite pink garden-style rose or that perfect blue hydrangea while the client is waiting. After the consultation, Mitchell (who remains the numbers man even if Obajtek is the creative guru) will sometimes present a tamped down version of the demo bouquet to brides who put down their 10 percent deposit (or seem on the cusp of doing so). Otherwise, the flowers are repurposed in other work, including additional demos, later in the day.

“That way, there’s very little waste,” Mitchell said.

If all goes well, they’ll sign a contract and see the bride two to three weeks before her wedding. (For more tips from Mitchell on timing weddings, see p. 28.)

In the past, Mitchell spent time pushing extras, including boutonnières and corsages for the extended family. He doesn’t do that anymore. With Pinterest and the Internet at large, brides today are generally well prepared before they set foot in a flower shop. Many are over-prepared. More often than not, Mitchell’s challenge is to help a client refine her vision and edit her selections, and he’s gotten better at reading his bridal clients. Instead of pushing brides to add in labor-intensive items that she may not want or need, Mitchell and his staff focus on her priorities. If she doesn’t want reception flowers, no problem, Mitchell said. That’s one less set-up for his staff, and the mix of full-service affairs and simpler orders means they can keep their wedding segment diversified and touch more weddings per weekend. He’ll immediately pivot and start talking in more detail about the personal flowers she does want for the ceremony, and how the shop can make those memorable and special.

Top of Mind and On Message
The consultation shakeup was an internal shift for the shop, but Mitchell also launched an external change, too. While the name Orland Park Flowers had the
Adding “events” to the name helps keep Mitchell’s Flowers top of mind with clients who might have previously thought of the business mainly for daily or holiday floral needs. While those segments are still important to Mitchell, events are an area that he wants to push: Why not put the words out front and center whenever possible?

“With the name change, we wanted to get past Orland Park,” he said, “so that we’re more competitive in other areas, too.”

Along with the name change came an updated logo, website and social media refreshes and new magenta T-shirts for staff members — something...
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that Mitchell said is especially important to brides who are often looking for neat, professional appearances.

To stay on customers’ radars, Mitchell is also putting renewed energy into his social networking efforts. On Facebook the shop has dozens of wedding albums, labeled by weekend. (A busy weekend will bring four to five weddings, and despite the shop’s location outside blustery Chicago, their work comes in year-round.) Mitchell’s goal is to post pictures immediately after a wedding, and sometimes before. Here again, he tries to be strategic about assigning team members to this task. A young staff member who handles much of the shop’s technology needs had been manning the task. Now that he’s pursuing other aspirations at school, Mitchell’s 17-year-old daughter may help out.

“Usually, the week after the weddings, we’ll sit down and download pictures and edit them,” so the albums aren’t overwhelming, Mitchell said. “We haven’t gotten into texting photos to clients yet, but that may be something we try in 2013.”

The shop will also post “action” shots of their team as they put orders together, giving brides and their families a sneak peek of what is to come and educating potential clients about how much goes into the seemingly effortless wedding flowers they love.

**Rethinking Wedding Shows**

The final step in Mitchell’s wedding reboot was to carefully reconsider the local bridal show circuit. There are plenty of options in the Chicagoland area, but without a strategic approach, florists and other wedding vendors can end up investing time and energy in shows that don’t attract brides, or don’t pull in the brides most likely to sign on as clients. Mitchell’s now participates in shows organized by Bridal Expo Chicago, a company that puts together “couter” shows, complete with high-end fashion where the models and gowns look as if they just stepped off the runway in Milan.

“The company has a higher price point (for vendors), but they also bring in brides with larger budgets,” Mitchell said. “I always ask brides on our questionnaires how they heard about us, and a good number say Bridal Expo, so there’s been a good ROI.”

The shop aims to participate in one show per quarter, most of them on Sundays. Here, Mitchell has tweaked and refined his process, too. He usually sends a team of four to work a booth and talk to an estimated 200-300 brides. Rather than having “lots and lots” of bouquets and books available as they have in the past (and as some shops still offer), Mitchell’s presents an edited selection of three different looks that the design team has crafted based on current and upcoming trends.

Sometimes the looks have straightforward themes — Fall, Winter, Spring — and sometimes the gang gets a bit more creative — “City Lights” or “Garden.” For each theme, they’ll have a few centerpieces and several examples of personal flowers.

“Brides come in with so many ideas, we have to help them focus,” Mitchell said, adding that the shop’s organized booth and the staff members’ cheerful engagement (and matching T-shirts) help underscore the message at the heart of all his wedding work overhaul: We’re the professionals. We’ll do the job right, and exceed all of your expectations.

“The more organized you are” in the shop, at wedding shows and during the big day setup, the more professional you look, Mitchell said. “High-quality, beautiful flowers are a must. That’s a given. If you have that aura of professionalism, too, that’s key.”

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**Online Portfolio**

Brides searching online for wedding vendors (read: every bride) can get an updated glimpse of Mitchell’s bridal creations, as the staff posts photos the week after the event. Check out their work, at [www.flickr.com/photos/mitchellsflowers](http://www.flickr.com/photos/mitchellsflowers).

**A Mere FORMality**

Well thought out forms help to keep the trains moving on time, from the wedding consultation right through to the big day. Check out Mitchell’s go-to forms for its wedding and events work, at [www.safnow.org/moreonline](http://www.safnow.org/moreonline).
Make her night in white satin unforgetable with **Moody Blues!** and **Purple Haze** from the **Royal Flowers** lavender collection. Both roses feature a breathtaking array of lilacs, purples, and lavenders, complimented by a high petal count and long vase life.