"I’ll have what she’s having." Of all the memorable dialogue in “When Harry Met Sally,” this may be the line that resonates with most viewers. Sally’s passionate (albeit phony) response to the sheer ecstasy of a sandwich in Katz’s Delicatessen prompts a fellow female customer to place the same order. Though intended to make a statement about faking, the quote speaks to a very real human tendency: Faced with a big decision — selecting a restaurant, buying a car, ordering the chicken salad or hiring a florist — we want a little guidance, especially from someone who’s already made the same choice. “When it comes to things we buy, what other people think matters. A lot. Even when those people are complete strangers,” wrote branding expert Martin Lindstrom in the January 2012 issue of Fast Company.

The Internet makes it extremely easy for shoppers to summon the opinions of others. A survey by Opinion Research found that 61 percent of respondents said they had checked online reviews, blogs and other online customer feedback before buying a new product or service. When that service or product is wedding-related, the reliance on the Internet is undeniable: Almost 80 percent of couples will find their vendors through online research, while only 60 percent will ask for recommendations from friends or family members, according to The Wedding Report’s 2012 U.S. Wedding Market Insight Report. In other words, the opinion of strangers in cyberspace often trumps what their inner circle suggests.

Peer review is the basic foundation of sites such as The Knot, Wedding Wire and Yelp, a fact retailers know all too well. But what many may not realize is that the most praised florists take an aggressive, active role in shaping that opinion.

What characteristics get that opinion tilting overwhelmingly toward the positive? We pored through hundreds of reviews to find the answers. Communication, honesty, artistry and dependability earned the most praise — characteristics that have nothing to do with the size or swankiness of the shop — but have everything to do with the tenets of customer service. We spoke with three florists who seem to possess an endless supply of these qualities (according to their former brides) and who credit online reviews for a hefty portion of their wedding business to find out their tactics for garnering such glowing praise.

By Katie Hendrick
Give her the attention she deserves.

**“Martha treated me with courtesy and the utmost attention. She is very patient and understands how important of a day your wedding can be.”**

Amanda, about Ashland Addison Florist

**“She heard us perfectly. Martha is everything you want and need from your florist.”**

Cheryl, about Ashland Addison Florist

You may have 600 weddings under your belt, but this likely is your client’s first trip down the aisle. It’s not just beautiful flowers she’s after; she wants a florist who is pumped about her big day and focused on making it memorable. The No. 1 way to show her you’re that florist? Listen.

At Ashland Addison Florist in Chicago, wedding stylist Martha Carrasco devotes two-and-a-half hours to a consultation. And that’s after the customer already spent 30 minutes on the phone with Carrasco or another bridal team member to sched-
I started off completely clueless. Jinger helped me and pretty much took over with her exceptional ideas once she got a feel for me and my liking.
Kristen, about The Flower House

“Jinger was very insightful on helping me express what I wanted and what flowers best expressed my personality.”
Laura, about The Flower House

Besides winning favor with the bride, listening — indeed, one of the most oft-used compliments in wedding reviews — provides the knowledge you need to excel at your job.

“With weddings, you mold each event to each client,” said Jinger Leonard, owner of The Flower House in Livermore, Calif.

“The consultation process is mostly psychological — it’s trying to truly figure out who she is and what she wants to convey, so you can give her a wedding that’s not like anybody else’s.”

Decipher her style.

“I wasn’t one of those brides who has had her wedding planned out since she was a little girl.
Among Leonard’s go-to questions: What’s your occupation? Where do you shop for clothes? How do you decorate your home? What’s your favorite movie?

“You really can tell a lot from what someone does for a living,” she said. “If she’s a teacher, for instance, she probably likes things organized. If she’s an engineer, she’ll prefer structured rather than loose arrangements.” Movie titles can reveal a bride’s personality — serious (The Godfather), playful (Dumb and Dumber), adventurous (Pirates of the Caribbean), romantic (The Notebook), nostalgic (The Great Gatsby).

Leonard gets a complete wish list before offering input. “It gives a better idea of who they are and what they want,” she said. Once the bride’s thoughts are in writing, it’s much easier to distinguish the “must-haves” from the “would-like-to-haves,” she said.

Her thoroughness paid off with Christine, a bride who, in her Yelp review, admitted to coming to Leonard with some “pretty vague and wacky ideas,” which she masterfully interpreted. “I really wanted to carry some kind of vegetable in my bouquet. Jinger came up with the idea of doing purple artichokes and I absolutely loved the result,” she wrote. “The bouquet was gorgeous, unique and I didn’t want to put it down!”

Address the thorny issues upfront, specifically, the cost and flower availability.

“Helping her zip first, then the request to help her get to the bathroom.”

“Take a pedestal for a wedding to the church and the verger said, "You’d better fix your arrangements, they all fell down when I opened the door.”
Ruby Rose, Birkenhead, United Kingdom

“Drove 300 miles round trip to pick up four stems of cymbidium orchids the day before the wedding because my order came in moldy.”
Melissa Bonoffski, Stylish Blooms, Bristol, Ct.

“Bride 1: I created a floral cake topper because her toddler niece put her hand through a cake layer. Bride 2: Held the bodice of her wedding dress so she could breastfeed her infant without having to completely undress.”
-Shayai Lucero, Earth & Sky Floral Designs and Gallery, Casa Blanca, N.M.

“Figuring out a way to cover the word ‘SAMPLE’ stamped across the backside of her mom’s dress!! They hadn’t noticed this when they bought the dress at a sample sale!!”
Verna Sykes Farris, Colleyville Florist, Colleyville, Texas

“Deliver her knickers to her with the bouquet — she forgot them at home!”
Cemal Cemal, Phillo Flowers, London, England

“Make a flower tiara for the mother of the bride who said the wedding was all about her!”

“Picked up her contact lens from the floor, wet it in my mouth, put it back in for her (her acrylic nails were too long!) and sent her down the aisle (UGH!) probably wouldn’t repeat that one”
Shelley Adair, Blumz…byJR Designs, Detroit and Ferndale, Mich.
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Robert - Wedding Flowers 4 Less, CA
No one likes to be led on. While a bride may appreciate the opportunity to share all her matrimonial dreams, you risk breaking her heart if you delay the inevitable inevitable discussion of money. Most brides really have no concept of what flowers cost,” said Karen Powell, owner of OK Florist in Summerville, S.C. “If she waits for weeks on a quote, she’ll probably be shocked at your price — and go somewhere else.” That’s why Powell asks for a budget and offers an estimate during that first meeting. In person, you can flip through your notes and point to several ways to close the gap between her fantasy and financial reality.

“It’s much easier to help them adjust their vision when they’re sitting there,” Powell said. She makes suggestions, such as alternating table décor with floral centerpieces and candles, or displaying the bridesmaids’ bouquets at various focal points at the reception. She brings her iPad to consultations, “so I can Google a flower and show them possible substitutions right then and there,” she said. She reminds them that the price can go down if the final headcount does.

Working to meet any bride’s budget is a no-brainer for Powell — and it speaks to the increasing power of word of mouth (and mouse). “Just because she doesn’t have a big budget, doesn’t mean she doesn’t know someone who does,” she said. “Even if she only has $500, treat her as if she’s spending a million.”

Powell has plenty of evidence that this philosophy pays off: A September bride has already referred three wedding clients, and online brides rave about her affordability and knack for “making it work.” Michelle, a 2007 bride, posted that, despite her small budget, “Karen treated me like royalty.”

Being straightforward earned Ashland Addison at least one bride’s rave review, posted the day after she tied the knot. “From the first phone call, I knew they were going to be helpful,” wrote bride Cassie B. on Yelp. “They faxed me an ITEMIZED estimate when no other florist would even give me a ballpark number without coming in to a face-to-face meeting, because ‘everything’s custom.’ Well I KNOW, but help me out here!” Cassie’s review goes on to describe how Carrasco discussed how she could lower the price. In the end, she actually opted to “spend a little more” and gushed that she and husband “felt like we got so much value for it.”

INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE Wedding stylist Martha Carrasco called the shop’s consultation room “600-square-feet of interactive fun.” The staff decorates it in the bride’s color scheme and style, pulling from a huge inventory of tables, chairs, linens, pattern projections and up-lights. “We even have a floor-length mirror where brides can ‘try on’ a bouquet for size,” she said.

Don’t let her look like a fool.

“I made the call a day before the wedding because some feathers I had requested were just not working. She was right, the feathers would have been crazy. I’m so happy she called me to discuss, rather than do what I asked. That’s a true professional!” lindseywel, about The Flower House

“[Jinger] is not afraid to let you know if something won’t work or she has a better suggestion, which is refreshing. I’m not there to be coddled. I’m there to get the best job done that I can find.” Kate, about The Flower House
Florists can now offer David Austin’s luxury roses at any time of the year. Find out how these romantic, highly desirable flowers can be used to add a touch of luxury to your floral designs for everyday living.

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EFFORTLESS ELEGANCE

Christy Sablan admitted her wedding vision was a bit “unorganized” (yellow and white; natural for the ceremony; wow for the reception). But after her consultation with florist Jinger Leonard, “I felt excited, confident and very happy,” she said. Leonard interpreted exactly what she wanted “and pulled it together effortlessly.”

Even if a bride comes in with a notebook full of instructions, she’s hiring for expertise. When wedding-dress shopping, she wants the sales associate who to tell her if the mermaid-style gown accentuates her hips or the sweetheart-neckline shows too much cleavage for her religious ceremony. When she comes to you, she trusts that you’ll speak up when she asks for something that’s, well, ugly.

First off: never utter the u-word, Carrasco said. When a bride’s floral ideas are a bit topsy-turvy, the florist should find something to compliment, then explain that there may be “too much going on.”

“One gal wanted a table design using elements she planned to purchase herself,” she said. “She wanted a tall vase filled with water, swimming fish, red gems at the bottom, peacock feathers, black sticks and black callas coming out the top.” Carrasco talked her off the showy ledge with this: “Let us show out the top.” Carrasco talked her off the showy ledge with this: “Let us show out the top.”

For every gushing bride, there’s an amateurish move that is used on gift wrap. The invoice bow and the one I got was the kind of... weddings he’s done and insisted that he could produce the most beautiful flowers in town. I knew exactly what I wanted. He seemed receptive and mailed an invoice listing the items I needed with the flowers, colors and styles. Later, I asked him what types of accent flowers we could do in my bouquet. He acted extremely annoyed and told me not to worry about the details — I just wanted input! When my husband, brother and brother-in-law went to pick up the flowers on the wedding day, the flowers were totally dying, brown and wilted. If three men were flooding, we left, de-flated, and frankly, insulted.”

To guide brides, Powell urges them to think about desired colors and textures, rather than specific flowers. In part, this tactic allows the designer to steer the customer toward items in season and in her price range. It also gives more room for Powell to give her own suggestions. “When you’re just working with a color palette, it’s easy to come up with lots of different styles that look good for any budget,” she said.

It’s all about being honest, Powell said, whether the issue’s price, availability, style or design mechanics. “Don’t sugarcoat: Call them as soon as you know something’s not going to work, so her expectations aren’t different when you show up on her wedding day.”

Leonard’s forthrightness does not go unnoticed. Dozens of brides commended her take-charge demeanor, with phrases, such as “very knowl-
edgeable and straight forward,” “no-bullsh*t” and “a little type A.”

“She’s not going to fawn over you and kiss your feet,” wrote Jenna on Yelp. “She’s going to do her job and make sure you have gorgeous flowers at your wedding.”

Though some brides may flinch at the slightest criticism (one called her “condescending”), Leonard defends her candor. “People hire florists because they have experience, or else they’d be DIY,” she said. “It’s my job to steer them in the right direction.” For the bride who is adamant she knows best, Leonard keeps a collection of “bad” photographs in her portfolio of more than 4,000 images. “It’s a way of educating them — showing them that something that sounds good may not look good,” she said. For instance, many brides request an all-white wedding and need photographic evidence that ivory buds on ivory linens beg for a little contrast.

Eliminate (at least some of) her worries.

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐ “As we sat with her, describing my vision, she would run out and whip together a mock up centerpiece/bouquet/etc. She brought amazing flowers and put them into amazing arrangements before our eyes!”

Meredith, about Ashland Addison Florist

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐ “[Jinger and her staff] really took care of everything after I shared with them what I wanted. Once it was in their hands, it was one less thing I had to worry about, which was wonderful.”

Jennifer, about The Flower House

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐ “Karen was always quick to respond and easy to get a hold of.”

Krista, about OK Florist

No matter how beautifully you describe an arrangement, nothing eases a bride’s mind as well as seeing, touching or smelling it.

“Brides are so visual these days,” Powell said. “They really want to see exactly what they’re going to get.” She never hesitates to design a mock-up, be it at the consultation or in the months leading up to the big day, texting a photo if the bride’s not in the shop.

“Making the designs in advance is one of the best tools to put her at ease,” Powell said, adding that it doesn’t usually cost her anything, as she can often sell the designs in her daily orders. She does charge a little for a mock bouquet, which she suggests the bride use in a wedding photo shoot — an idea most of them love, she said.

At Ashland Addison, samples speak volumes to clients — and don’t do any damage to the florist’s bottom line, Carrasco said. As with OK Florist, most samples are purchased by the shop’s other customers, and those that aren’t go back in the cooler to return for the next day’s bridal consultations. Indeed, this little service made a big impression with many brides, who said having a visual gave them major relief. “By meeting right at the warehouse, we didn’t have to guess about what the flowers would look like, as she just went and grabbed samples and put together samples...”

In this image, the text reads:

**INSPIRING CONFIDENCE** For out of town brides, Ashland Addison emails an inspiration board, a collection of photos that depicts the style of the bride’s big day.
Gorgeous. Luxurious. Color. These water-storing gel beads add fashionable flair to floral and candle arrangements. Deco Beads are easy to use: Fill a clear bowl or vase with Deco Beads, add water, and then watch the beads expand. These shimmering beads add dimension while gently securing silk or fresh flowers, or anchoring candles.

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right there for us,” said bride “t-mo” in her Wedding Wire review.

For out-of-towners she can’t meet in person, Carrasco creates an inspiration board with photos depicting the different points of the wedding, which she emails to the bride, along with a written description walking her through the day.

Powell, who works in Charleston, the country’s no. 2 location for destination weddings, relies heavily on Skype for her communication with brides. Assuring her you have a written record of all the specifics helps the detail-juggling bride feel secure that everything will unfold in an orderly fashion — and that someone else will oversee this unfolding.

“One her wedding day, she shouldn’t be worrying about if the cake shows up by 4 p.m. or if the lanterns are hung properly,” Powell said. Her protocol: Show up early and don’t let the bride know if other vendors slip up. She recalled one wedding when the caterers, who were assigned to set the tables, were extremely tardy. “I saw the tables and chairs folded up and realized, I need to do it myself,” she said. “It may not be my job to put up the tables and the linens, but it’s my responsibility that her centerpieces look good, so why sit around and trust someone else to do it? Just do it!”

Even though staying on top of all the logistics is a fundamental part of your job description, it doesn’t go unnoticed by brides, nor does the simple gesture of a personal delivery from her florist. “When I saw Jinger walk into my hotel room with our flowers, I almost died! Jinger actually dropped them off herself,” wrote Julie in her Wedding Wire review.

But the best way to help a bride relax? Give her your cell phone number and email address, with no restraints on when she can use them. “They seldom abuse the privilege and it really builds trust,” Powell said, adding that she’s never had a bride who wondered why she didn’t reply to a middle-of-the-night text right away. About one out of every 10 of Carrasco’s brides forgets about a relative who needs flowers, she said, “and all she has to do is text us and we’ll make a corsage or bou-