Rave reviews. “Best of” honors from local magazines, national publications and wedding blogs. Referrals galore — and your shop name traded among brides like a secret password for a must-attend event.

For many florists, this is the stuff of dreams. And for good reason: As the economy has improved, couples headed down the aisle have increased their spending, and the trend seems poised to continue. According to TheKnot’s annual wedding survey, in 2013, U.S. wedding costs were the highest since the website began monitoring prices in 2007. (At press time, TheKnot had not yet released 2014 figures.) Among couples who spent the average $30,000 on their nuptials, more than $2,000 of their budgets went to floral and décor services.

Still, rising to the top of the wedding game is tricky. There’s lots of competition and lots of moving pieces in every event. Things can easily go wrong, especially when weddings overlap with everyday work, holidays or other event-related jobs. Still, in every major metro area, there are some wedding florists who consistently stand out, with brides, other vendors and editors. Their top-tier status may have made you occasionally wonder “How the heck do they do it?” In fact, we wondered, too.

This month, we talked to some of those very businesses to find out what they’re doing right, and how you can adapt some of their best practices to your business, rising to the top with couples and becoming the go-to florist in your area for brides in the know.

BY MARY WESTBROOK
With its 83-year history, Ashland-Addison Florist Co. in Chicago has a reputation for being the shop your mother trusted, and her mother, too, for special occasions and everyday designs. That long history is usually an asset for the business, according to Marketing Director Bridget Carlson, except when it comes to weddings, when brides and grooms are often looking for ideas that feel fresh, modern … in other words, decidedly un-grandma-like.

Recognizing the need to send a strong message to brides — Ashland-Addison is the place to go for weddings, specifically — about two years ago, the shop rebranded its wedding and event business, launching a new, separate site and subtly tweaking the long-standing colors and logo. Through the rebrand, “we wanted wedding clients to know that, with us, they’ll get the quality of a longtime florist but also the hip and young designs and ideas they’re after for their weddings,” Carlson explained.

The site now includes a seasonally updated portfolio of wedding photos, along with a brief history of the shop and information about their design and customer service philosophies, as well as links to their wedding blog and social media sites. Through the site, couples also can access a pre-consultation questionnaire ahead of time, without speaking directly to an Ashland-Addison rep (more on why that feature is so important later).

Since launching the site, Ashland-Addison’s wedding work has increased, though Carlson is loath to credit the upswing to the site alone. “It’s really been part of a concerted effort to up our [wedding] game all around, through better customer service, even more attention to detail,” she said. “A lot of our competition — big event planners — are 100 percent focused on weddings and events. We want brides to understand that, even though we’re a full-service florist, we’re 100 percent focused on them, too.”

In New York, TaraSimone Powell and her parents, Barbara and Fred, faced a similar situation a decade ago, when they decided to open a second location of Barbara’s Flowers in Manhattan, to complement the business’ original Brooklyn location. Today, the Manhattan shop is the hub of the florist’s bridal work, and the place where the design and delivery staff can focus exclusively on weddings during the busy spring, summer and fall seasons.

“Having two locations means having two different production and delivery teams, which allows us to divide and conquer,” said Powell, who joined the 43-year-old family business as a second-generation member in 1999. “That means my team is able to day in and day out focus on specific wedding and event tasks. It allows you, honestly, not to go crazy.”

The focus has helped Barbara’s Flowers win over editors and writers at publications such as Time Out New York and New York magazine, and it’s helped them build a reputation among brides and grooms, particularly (in recent years) among couples who are looking for out-of-
In San Francisco, Nancy Liu Chin looks outside of the floral industry for inspiration, to industries such as fashion and food and art forms such as calligraphy. She said doing so helps keep her fresh and open-minded, capable of creating innovative, cohesive looks for her wedding clients—where all details come together to form an unforgettable aesthetic—rather than simply replicating designs on Pinterest or Instagram.

Ashland-Addison Florist
Chicago (five locations)
Average Floral Budget: Full-service packages start at $2,500
Honors/Awards: Near perfect ratings; TheKnot “Best of” honors in 2015, 2014, 2013 and 2011
Wedding Work Vow: Best of Both Worlds. “We want wedding clients to know that, with us, they’ll get the quality of a longtime florist but also the hip and young designs and ideas they’re after for their weddings,” said Marketing Director Bridget Carlson.

Barbara’s Flowers
New York (two locations)
Average Floral Budget: $7,500
Honors/Awards: Singled out recently by Time Out New York and New York magazine
Wedding Work Vow: Have some fun. “As florists, it’s important to create outside the trend, too, and come at our work from a position of experimentation and play,” said second-generation owner Tara Powell.

Nancy Liu Chin Designs
San Francisco
Average Floral Budget: Undisclosed, but “in the five figures”
Honors/Awards: Singled out recently by Utterly Engaged and Today’s Bride, Junebug Weddings and Style Me Pretty
Wedding Work Vow: Be original. “Some shops are fine simply replicating designs made by others—I’m not,” said owner Nancy Liu Chin. “I think we all need to step up a little bit here; people don’t go into a restaurant with a photo of a meal and say, ‘Create this.’”

The magazine of the Society of American Florists (SAF) 23
“The blog is a place to relate to people that we’re in touch [with new ideas], we’re professional and we’re appreciative of the work we’ve already received.”

Bridget Carlson
Ashland-Addison Florist

STANDARD STYLE
Market Your Skills Online

TOP TIER WAY
Put Your Customers in the Spotlight.

Carlson also makes sure to populate the business’ social media pages with specific call-outs to wedding clients, using language that emphasizes just how important the events are to Ashland-Addison — and how lucky they sincerely feel to be part of every event.

“We want them to feel like their event is the only thing we’re thinking about,” even if it’s actually one of several the business is juggling on a busy weekend, said Carlson, who also presents the bride with a signature gift as soon as they sign a contract. (See sidebar, p. 27)

Carlson also is in charge of the business’ dedicated wedding blog. Here, her philosophy is simple: Post regularly and think like a bride. That means each post contains at least one strong visual along with a brief (emphasis on the brief) write-up that subtly extols the shop’s expertise by referencing floral and design trends.

“The blog is a place to relate to people that we’re in touch [with new ideas], we’re professional and we’re appreciative of the work we’ve already received,” she explained. “I don’t think a lot of brides spend long periods of time on any retail florist’s blog; it’s more about making a good first impression or confirming the positive feeling they already have about the business.

An important point to remember about online reviews, social media and wedding blogs, said Powell, is that, often, the conversations you are not involved with carry the most weight. “I would say about 75 percent of our [wedding work] comes from referrals,” she said. “Lots of times those referrals are coming from vendors, but they’re also definitely coming from our brides talking to other brides, posting about their experiences.”

As much as possible, Powell tries to track those conversations, because she sees their value to her business. “If someone has already heard or read good things about your business, it’s more about them confirming that you are a good fit when they do meet with you,” rather than trying to make a hard sale,

she said. “Social media — even the media you don’t directly post — can be a great marketing tool and a way to encourage those authentic conversations” about your business.

Icing on the Cake: On social media, language matters. Carlson recommends wedding-related posts that compliment the couple (“We’re so honored to have been part of Pam and Jim’s special day!”) rather than promoting your own work (“Check out the beautiful bouquet we made!”). “It’s about humility but it’s also a way to reinforce how important our customers are to us,” she said. And — while this hopefully goes without saying — respond immediately to negative reviews or posts that pop up in your social media feeds. Never allow a complaint to sit online unanswered or unacknowledged. Same goes for praise.

\[ RAVE ON \] TaraSimone Powell of Barbara’s Flowers in New York said that 75 percent of the shop’s wedding work stems from referrals, from clients and vendors. For that reason, positive reviews, such as those featured on TheKnot, are especially important to the shop, which closes the deal on about 90 percent of the prospective clients who come in to meet with the wedding staff.
For her part, Powell is a big fan of Evernote, a web-based app (compatible with both PCs and Macs) that allows her to share notes, schedules, images, deadlines and more with her staff and to create custom to-do lists for tasks related to sourcing flowers, props and other rental items. “To me, that can be one of the most stressful parts of a busy wedding season,” she said, “keeping the orders separate, ensuring that everything goes in on time and in good shape. So the app is a big help.”

Icing on the Cake: To free up more of her own time, Chin also has started to outsource tasks she used to do entirely on her own, including delivery and setup (through third-party companies) and some administrative work, including payroll, through apps and programs. While she has a business email account, Powell also recommends opening a Google account and using Gmail, Google Docs and Google’s shared calendars to collaborate seamlessly with staff. “It’s a great resource, and it’s free,” she said.

“Outsourcing’ is a big and scary word [to florists], because we’re artistic and hands-on — we’re used to managing things ourselves.”

Nancy Liu Chin

STANDARD STYLE
Do Everything Yourself

TOP TIER WAY
Prioritize Your Time, Outsource

Like many florists, Nancy Liu Chin, of Nancy Liu Chin Designs in San Francisco, has noticed that clients expect fast responses to their queries, making speed “essential,” she said. For that reason, she’s made it easier for clients to sign forms remotely and return PDFs online, and she’s launched wedding collections for the truly time-strapped who want edited choices to choose from (and don’t necessarily have the time or inclination to come into the studio in person).

“Outsourcing’ is a big and scary word [to florists], because we’re artistic and hands-on — we’re used to managing things ourselves,” Chin said, “but there are more and more tools out there that make [administrative and logistical] parts of the business easier and even more fiscally responsible. You just have to be open to them.”
“It’s easy for a bride to have her head turned temporarily, only to discover ... that the style she thought she liked isn’t really her style at all.”

TaraSimone Powell
Barbara’s Flowers

TOP TIER TACTICS

STANDARD STYLE
Set the Planning Process

TOP TIER WAY
Adapt. Follow Your Clients’ Lead

With a studio in the San Francisco Flower Mart, Chin may be near the heart of Silicon Valley, but in her own heart, she’s an old-fashioned businesswoman: She prefers face-to-face meetings or, barring that, at least a phone call; however, that’s not at all what her busy clients prefer.

“The [planning] process is really changing, especially in the last five years,” and particularly among her Bay Area clients, who have packed work and personal schedules, said Chin, a cofounder of the Oh So Inspired retreat for wedding professionals. “There are some brides I’ve never met in person, and for some of our clients, a phone call is the least effective way to talk to them,” let alone a meeting.

Today, “what’s the best way to communicate with you?” is one of the first questions Chin asks all clients. From there, she and her team adjust their practices (and ignore their own personal preferences), communicating as the client sees fit.

With its new website in place, Ashland-Addison embraced a similar, customer-friendly attitude. For instance, couples — or, most often, brides — can fill out that pre-consultation questionnaire online discreetly, while working themselves. (The form includes questions related to budget and venue but also personal preferences about style and design, as well as a link to Pinterest boards and an area for notes.)

The business also offers complimentary estimates before consultations, to help brides decide early if the shop is the right fit for their budget and their big-day vision — a potential time-saver for both florist and customer.

In addition, thanks to the advanced work, Carlson’s wedding team is better prepared to talk to the brides about their preferences and to assert their professional credibility with insight on the venue that the bride and groom may not have picked up on during their visit (e.g., color of carpets, lighting type, drapery style).

“Increasing communication before the consultation has been a big improvement for us,” Carlson said. “The questionnaire takes care of so much of the early legwork,” leaving consultation times more open for planning.

For her part, Powell shies away from texting with brides (though she fully embraces texting with her staff). “Texting, to me, is not a good idea because so much can be lost or misunderstood, plus texts aren’t searchable, so keeping information organized is more difficult,” she said. To keep her brides and grooms happy, Powell explains her no-texting policy up front and promptly follows up by phone or email.

“Whenever possible, I like to set up a scheduled call with brides [to handle follow-ups and questions],” she said. “I think it’s good to set those boundaries, and you can do that by saying, ‘I want to be able to give you my full attention when we talk.’”

ADVANCED WORK TaraSimone Powell, of Barbara’s Flowers in New York, said a big part of her job today is helping brides focus in on their true style and preferences. Showing brides actual product and samples during the consultation can help prevent disappointment and miscommunication, she said: “The visual details are too important to convey only through photos.” Florals below represent design work from Barbara’s Flowers (top) and Ashland-Addison Florist Co. (bottom two pictures).
SHOW SOME LOVE

Sometimes, a tangible thank you can go a long way toward securing a bride’s good favor, said Bridget Carlson, marketing director of Ashland-Addison Florist in Chicago. To show its appreciation for brides who book with the business, Carlson and team present a simple but thoughtful thank you: a goodie bag with items such as lip balm and a compact. “Customers want to feel appreciated, and this is one way we try to show them,” she said. “It’s a [graceful] way to say thank you for your down payment and your trust in us.” -M.W.

Icing on the Cake: The real secret to great reviews and a sterling reputation? Minimize your exposure to surprises, said Powell, stressing the only way to do that is to communicate early, often and precisely. At Barbara’s Flowers, that means showing brides a custom table mock-up with linens, sample flowers and relevant props during a consultation. “The visual details are too important to convey only through photos,” she explained. “It’s more work for us, but it ensures that everyone is on the same page.” Two weeks before the event, Powell and her assistant also conference with the couple, walking through each detail. One question Powell always asks: “Do you have any unanswered questions?” Doing so helps “mitigate any potential crises in advance, particularly among indecisive brides or brides who bring a group of people along with them (mom, mother-in-law, best friend who happens to be an amateur florist/event planner).”
GET THOSE BUTTERFLIES BACK

One of the hardest parts of staying relevant in the wedding industry is staying fresh — and excited yourself. “It can be hard, because things start to look alike,” admitted TaraSimone Powell of Barbara’s Flowers in New York. “The danger is we’re all dipping into the same well of ideas and images,” on social media and wedding-related blogs. “As florists, it’s important to create outside the trend, too, and come at our work from a position of experimentation and play. I tell my staff all the time that the spirit in which you create it is the spirit in which it will be received. When you’re just working on autopilot, your work is going to fall flat.”

Here are some of Powell’s go-to sources of inspiration, beyond Pinterest and Instagram, that help push the envelope:

< Australia Vogue. “I’ve never been to Australia, but there’s something about the Australian style — in fashion, home design, make-up, you name it — that is so effortless,” said Powell. “It’s much less choreographed than the ‘American style.’”

> Archive Rentals. The specialty rental company out of San Clemente, Calif., has a fantastic presence on Instagram, Powell said, with lots of visuals that present new and surprising twists on wedding setups.

< Inspired By This. The design-focused blog tackles weddings, home design, babies and more, promising readers they’ll feel like Ms. (Martha) Stewart herself through a hip and chic platform. (Or, perhaps, Ms. Stewart’s sassy niece.) “This is not about floral inspiration, but their overall aesthetic and tone really speak to me,” Powell said.

A final source of Powell’s inspiration is decidedly offline: Nature. She and her husband travel regularly to Jamaica and she’s always seeking out the textures of the rocks, foliage, etc. “It’s a place that really speaks to me visually,” she said.

For more sources of fresh insight from Nancy Liu Chin, of Nancy Liu Chin Designs, read “I Recommend,” p.13. — M.W.

STANDARD STYLE
Replicate Pinterest Boards

TOP TIER WAY
Be the Expert — and the Educator

While Pinterest, Instagram and a bevy of wedding blogs have helped inspire countless brides (and floral designers), the sites also create something of a challenge to the planning process. Namely, brides come in, enamored of an arrangement or design style, without realizing the flower is out of season, out of budget or Photoshopped and filtered beyond recognition.

“One of the biggest misconceptions among brides is that everything is attainable,” Chin said. “A bride sees peonies on 500 boards and thinks, ‘I can get these any day of the year.’ Plus, things that look very simple — lily of the valley comes to mind — can be very expensive. So that can be a real challenge: Educating the bride.”

Powell agrees. “We are all flooded with images, so many that everything seems to become accessible, ordinary,” she said. “Every bride wants a Kardashian wedding but most brides don’t have that unlimited floral or décor budget.”

Like Chin, Powell works with brides to help identify their true style, rather than the latest, greatest trend to turn their head. To do so, she walks them through a series of questions not always tackled in a consultation, such as:

- What kind of purse do you carry? (“A Hobo bag says something different than a canvas tote.”)
- Where do you shop for your clothes?
- How would you describe your style — classic, avant-garde?
The questions help Powell and her team focus on what the bride truly prefers, even if she’s unsure of those preferences herself.

“I like to think of myself as a [free-spirited] Carrie Bradshaw,” of the TV show “Sex and the City,” said Powell with a laugh. “But look in my closet and you’ll see I’m much more a [button-down] Miranda girl. The questions help us get at that real person and save us time; with so many images out there, it’s easy for a bride to have her head turned temporarily, only to discover several months into the planning that the style she thought she liked isn’t really her style at all.”

Icing on the Cake: Ooh and ahh over brides’ Pinterest boards (of course) but don’t be afraid to assert your expertise and show brides ideas they didn’t even realize existed.

“Some shops are fine simply replicating designs made by others — I’m not,” said Chin. “I think we all need to step up a little bit here; people don’t go into a restaurant with a photo of a meal and say, ‘Create this.’”

When you yourself need inspiration, try looking to the world of fashion, travel, even pop culture, rather than simply logging onto social media sites. “Remember,” Chin said, “if it’s on Instagram or Pinterest, it’s been done before.”

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