**THE ENEMY IN US**

> Proflowers is the enemy — or so say many of the florists I’ve spoken with this year, who blame their declining sales on the online flower merchant.

I think we sometimes point the finger in the wrong direction when in fact we’re our own worst enemy.

Granted, just about every consumer knows ProFlowers is an option. And that $29.95 bouquet might prove hard to resist. Truth be told, by the time they paid shipping fees, that $29.95 is close to $50, but they still think they spent $29.95.

Right or wrong, it is what we are up against.

But it’s not about the product. It’s about the marketing.

You can’t buy flowers from a shop that you can’t find or don’t know about.

And I see very little local marketing going on these days. At Valentine’s Day — after which so many businesses complained about sales being off — I talked to many shops who turned down orders, or resigned themselves to the fact that a Sunday holiday would be off before trying to make a go of it. I guess if you say something enough, you eventually start believing it.

What can the traditional retailer do to turn this receding sales tide? In a word: market.

It is our responsibility to keep customers coming back. If you think your customers already know who you are and what you can do, think again. With the marketing being done by our national competitors, we have to work extra hard to get on our customers’ radar. We have to market to our own delivery area — again and again and again.

And that marketing must emphasize what distinguishes your shop from other options. Traditional retailers still own that rare and powerful gem called same-day gift delivery. I’m in Sarasota, Fla., and can have flowers delivered to someone in St. Louis in an hour. Who else can do this? And why don’t we tout it more?

My shop doesn’t miss an opportunity to point this out to customers. Granted, our wire-outs are declining, but that doesn’t mean we’re giving up on them. Once we’ve helped customers choose a gift for local delivery, we remind them that buying gifts for friends and family around the country is just as easy. We tell them that everything on our Web site is guaranteed nationwide. Next thing you know, they’re calling to send flowers to their grandmother in Houston.

I recently picked up a call from a man who asked if we had peonies. This was in March, so I replied, “Not now, but if you’d like to reserve them for Mother’s Day, we can take care of that for you.” Bingo. I just took that guy away from what likely would have been a Proflowers order — and I’ve likely kept him for life (if we don’t disappoint on the customer-service side).

Speaking of customer service, another feature that earns Proflowers repeat business is consistently impeccable customer service. It offers immediate replacement, no questions asked. And you feel confident during the call that you will be taken care of.

When that phone rings, how do you handle the customer? Do you instill confidence, or do you say things like, “I’ll have to charge you a wire-order fee,” or “I don’t know if that other shop can do that.” Whether a customer calls us to place an order or to complain about one, we instill confidence from the beginning. We say things like, “Absolutely,” “Of course we can,” and, with a complaint, “You trusted us with your order, now we’re going to find out what happened and make sure it’s taken care of.”

Instead of blaming others, devote that energy to your marketing. Customers are going away. In many cases, they are not feeling confident calling their local florist. It’s our job to give them good reason to shop local.

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