What Women Want

A grower fixes his eye on a "new" flower holiday in the downtime between Valentine's Day and Mother's Day — and ends up winning Floral Management's 2014 Marketer of the Year honors.

BY MARY WESTBROOK
Two peaks. That's what Lana DeVries saw in 2009 when she looked at sales graphs for Sun Valley Floral Farms in Arcata, Calif. They were the same peaks other domestic growers, and for that matter, U.S. wholesalers, shippers and retail florists, saw on their own charts: one for Valentine's Day, another for Mother's Day. Overall, business was good for Sun Valley in 2009, and the grower, known for its prize-winning lilies and tulips, among other flowers, was well positioned to weather the looming recession. Still, DeVries, the company president and CEO, knew that Americans on average buy far fewer flowers than their counterparts in other industrialized countries and, as she considered his long-term strategy at Sun Valley, one question nagged him: How to grow the company, and the U.S. floral industry, beyond those two established holidays?

So when Debbie Hamman, the manager of Sun Valley's West Coast events division, mentioned Women's Day at a morning meeting and asked, "Wouldn't it be great if this could be a flower holiday?", DeVries' eyes lit up.

A native of the Netherlands, DeVries was already familiar with the late-winter holiday, which has a strong following internationally, particularly in Eastern Europe and Russia. Even though International Women's Day was first observed in New York in 1909, DeVries had never thought of the holiday as an American event. Hartman's question made him wonder: With the right marketing push, could Women's Day become a flower-giving event in the U.S. — and, potentially, a growth opportunity for Sun Valley? Was it possible to create a "new" holiday, in 2009?

Five years later, Women's Day may not be a household holiday (yet), but thanks to the efforts of the Sun Valley team, many florists, wholesalers, growers, supermarkets and national floral companies have gotten behind the idea and promoted the day, some with significant success. That success is most obvious at Sun Valley, where DeVries' Women's Day campaign has led to an increase in overall revenue in late February and early March for the past several years, as well as modified growing and shipping calendars that prioritize the holiday.

DeVries' efforts to build awareness and demand for Women's Day, inside the industry and among the general public, and even those more important occasions for floral gifts in the U.S. helped him land this year's coveted Floral Management Marketer of the Year honor.

Understanding Women's Day

Once Hartman and DeVries started thinking seriously about Women's Day — and researching the holiday — DeVries quickly decided the idea had serious potential.

A number of factors gave the holiday advantages, he said. First, the date, March 8, fell between Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, when many Sun Valley customers (and much of the U.S. floral industry) experience a slowdown. The consumer market was significant, with women and men buying gifts for female family members, co-workers, bosses, friends and acquaintances. No romantic feelings or sense of filial obligation required. Finally, while Women's Day arrangements and bouquets often incorporate lilies and roses, the holiday doesn't have a signature flower (think poinsettias for Christmas, red roses for Valentine's Day), meaning savvy growers, wholesalers and retailers could push the stems and plants they had to sell.

Encouraged by his findings, DeVries dove deeper into his research. He talked to a number of flower farmers in Holland, who told him that the holiday had become a "spectacular" event for them, bigger, sometimes by far, than Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. DeVries also collected anecdotal evidence of the holiday's growing popularity: YouTube videos showed Russian customers waiting patiently — happily — for flowers in lines that wrapped around city blocks and here in the U.S., where cities and towns with large immigrant populations from Eastern Europe and Russia already embraced the holiday with gifts and parties. (One item he found online reported 74 U.S. Women's Day public celebrations in 2011, compared to nearly 270 in 2012; sites such as internationalwomensday.com)

Respect is a country like the U.S., where consumers must be reminded to buy flowers. "Women's Day was low hanging fruit," said Jon DeVries, Sun Valley's president and CEO, adding that everyone has women in their lives they admire. DeVries is pictured here with Beth Doxen, sales assistant; Marisol Manoquez, CFP Manager; Laura Kurtz, national sales representative; and Laura Shea, sales assistant.
WHAT WOMEN WANT

THE RESULTS

From 2012 to 2014, Sun Valley saw a 76 percent rise in tulip sales on Week No. 9 of its calendar (the week Women’s Day product would need to ship). Over all time period rose 39 percent.

Company President and CEO Lane DeVries has made promoting Women’s Day a top priority for the past five years — so calculating the costs of the campaign (including the time giving talks, preparing for presentations and crafting co-eds) is challenging, but some investments include:

- Advertising campaign in industry publications: $5,000 in 2013; $2,500 in 2014
- Educational booth at 2012 International Floriculture Expo: $35,000
- Creation and production of POP materials: $5,000
- Total: $63,500

“We’re all looking for ways to increase consumption and demand, but we can’t keep focusing on Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day... We need to look for other opportunities.”

LANE DEVRIES, SUN VALLEY PRESIDENT AND CEO

DeVries remembers standing at the podium that day and recognizing a look of genuine surprise among his fellow board members; many of them had never heard of the holiday and no one seemed to have considered its relevance to the U.S. floral industry. Ultimately, however, DeVries generated enough support that day among the tight-knit group of industry leaders to execute what would become something of a campaign signature: a Women’s Day flower giveaway — part flash mob, part grassroots advocacy — in one of the country’s major metros.

For the 2010 D.C. event, about 30 of the SAF members who had gathered to DeVries’ booth traveled four blocks on foot with him to trendy (and busy) Georgetown on Women’s Day, the day after DeVries gave his brief presentation. There, they gave away 200 10-stem Sun Valley tulip bunches with a bear claw accent. Each bouquet included a brief, printed Women’s Day description; volunteers also explained the holiday to the sometimes-astonished female recipients. “People were so happy to get flowers on the street,” DeVries. Few of the women had heard of the holiday, but all of them

CAMPAIGN TIMELINE

1909: International Women’s Day is first observed in New York City.

1977: The United Nations General Assembly invites member states to proclaim March 8 as the “UN Day for women’s rights and world peace.”

2009: Debbie Hartman, Sun Valley’s manager of west coast operations, suggested Women’s Day as a floral holiday.

2010: Thirty SAF members give away Sun Valley tulips on Women’s Day in Washington, D.C.

2011: Women’s Day events are documented in 100-plus countries. President Obama declares March 2011 “Women’s History Month.”
welcomed the attention. They were surprised — some of them really surprised. They asked us: ‘Why are you giving these to me?’”

But DeVries didn’t stop there. For the next five years, a central part of his Women’s Day strategy involved reaching out to industry partners and clients — wholesale florists and supermarket chains, and also retailers, national providers including FTD, Teleflora, 1-800-Flowers.com, and trade associations such as SAF and the California Cut Flower Commission, along with industry celebrity floral designers, who could give the holiday a wider platform and broader audience.

In one of his most memorable outreach efforts, he converted Sun Valley’s entire 20-bedroom hotel to Women’s Day materials at the 2012 International Florculture Expo, in Miami, into an interactive infostand for Women’s Day, and at the same event, presented a 40-minute educational session on the value of the holiday to all industry members. In years past, the booth would have been a showplace for Sun Valley Flowers at the Expo, which draws hundreds of people annually. After one attendee attended the session and then reviewed the holiday materials at the booth, he turned to DeVries with admiration — and perhaps, a touch of disbelief. “He said, ‘Wow! You must really believe in this,’ to go to all this trouble,” DeVries said. “And I do.”
WHAT OTHERS SAY

FLORISTS
In Troy, MI, a bedroom community northwest of St. Louis, Carrie Emerick sold 11 arrangements and 24 bundles of wrapped flowers for the 2014 holiday. “The sales numbers weren’t great, but I wasn’t unhappy,” said the owner of Troy Flower Shop. Instead, Emerick focused on more positive numbers: 63 likes, 14 shares, and 74 comments on her Facebook post about Women’s Day.

Bill Wasilewicz, co-owner of Chester’s Flowers in Utica, N.Y., had a very busy day. “We got more than double our usual Saturday business,” he said. He credits a lot of that success to Lita’s large immigrant population, but said the SAF images were a nice boost. “They were top quality — and free!” he said. “We had them up the week before the holiday.”

In Brooklyn, N.Y., Boris Krunyakolov had a similar experience. “March 8 was like two or three Valentine’s Days put together. Everybody here knows about it,” he said of his highly Russian neighborhood. He also spoke of a quality of Women’s Day that makes it worthwhile for retail florists. “It’s not like other occasions where the customer is buying one arrangement for one person,” he said. “They’re buying multiple bouquets for all the women they love — grandmothers, mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, friends, etc.”

WHOLESAVERS
Margaret Herget, Baisch & Skinner’s director of marketing, said she enjoyed helping retailers promote the 2014 holiday, with tools provided by SAF (Baisch & Skinner is headquartered in St. Louis, Mo.). “We have had fun getting the word out to our customers about it,” she said. “It is something we have never really promoted before.”

Likewise, Lori Callister, the fresh flower manager and buyer for Ensign Wholesale Flowers, with locations in Salt Lake City and Ogden, Utah, said she was “very happy with the response that we got from our retail customers, and the support that they were getting from the general public,” after their first effort promoting Women’s Day, with Sun Valley promotional materials, in 2014. “Sales were up [for us] the first week in March, which is a definite plus.”

SUPERMARKETS
Joe Dan Zuttscho, director of floral for H-E-B, based in San Antonio, Texas, and the chairman of the Produce Marketing Association Floral Council, said recently that he was pleased with the progress of the holiday, which H-E-B promoted, with the help of Sun Valley POP items, in 2014. “We’re confident the holiday will grow in importance in the future.”

Albertson’s LLC, headquartered in Boise, Idaho, promoted the holiday for the first time in 2014, using Sun Valley materials. Based on their positive results, Head Flower Buyer Debra Coleman plans to try again in 2015. “Many of our customers were very interested in what this holiday was all about.”

NATIONAL FLORAL PROVIDERS
As a private company, 1-800-Flowers.com, Sun Valley’s partner for a New York City giveaway on Women’s Day 2014, does not release sales figures. Yanique Woodward, vice president, enterprise public relations, for 1-800-Flowers.com, did point to positive press coverage, including a glowing article on Parade.com, as PR victories.

Teleflora “supported the holiday [in a] comprehensive manner” for the first time in 2014, according to Missy Miller, a company spokesperson. While Teleflora cannot disclose sales figures, Miller said the company is always looking for unique ways to help generate awareness of and increase sales for our florists,” adding that Teleflora used email and social media to promote the holiday and make available targeted products, such as Women’s Day cards, among other efforts.

FTD’s Emily Bucholtz said the “running of Women’s Day was fairly low from a consumer interest perspective” on FTD.com in 2014. “However, we understand the importance in supporting smaller occasions and will continue to follow trends and understand the consumer’s needs.” The company plans to promote the holiday again next year.

M.W.
Tools for All
While DeVries’ passion was clearly aimed at elevating the entire industry through increased consummation, he never lost sight of his specific goals for Sun Valley. By 2013, DeVries was planning for a strong showing in the 2014 holiday and had increased his tulip plantings by about 74 percent. But DeVries wasn’t about to sit back and hope for those sales to come in unaided. Instead, he set about making Women’s Day promotion as easy as possible for his customers.

Starting in 2012, DeVries and his in-house marketing team, with the help of an outside agency, created complimentary point-of-purchase materials for Sun Valley customers. The digital files (posters, web banners, flyers) could be printed by the customers, and they included professional images of happy women receiving gorgeous flowers, customer-friendly care and handling tips (the final step: buy more flowers) along with cheerful headlines, e.g.,

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(877) HAF-LILY
www.HollandAmericaFlowers.com
www.HABF.net
“Give Joy!” DeVries’ team also created a series of Women’s Day drop-off bouquets, targeted primarily to supermarket customers.

The point-of-purchase tools were a hit at Ensign Wholesale Floral, in Ogden, Utah, and Salt Lake City, where Lars Callister, the fresh flower manager and buyer, saw increased sales the first week of March 2014 after promoting the holiday with Sun Valley resources. “Our best-selling item was the seven-stem tulip bunch,” said Callister, who plans to promote Women’s Day again in 2015. “We displayed them front and center in large flower stands with the colorful Women’s Day signs on them; it definitely raised awareness for the holiday and sparked impulse purchases.”

By fall 2013, a total of eight super-market chains and four wholesalers had requested Sun Valley’s promotional materials or were on track to sell the bouquets. These companies included Roundy’s, headquartered in Milwaukee, Wis.; Safeway, the country’s second largest chain, headquartered in Pleasanton, Calif.; H-E-B, out of San Antonio, Texas; Ensign Wholesale Floral; Mayesh Wholesale Florist Inc., out of Lee Angeles; and Krueger Wholesale Florist Inc. in Rothschild, Wis. The interest told DeVries “we were finally hitting our stride,” he said.
At around the same time, DeVries also had convinced SAF to create its own set of Women’s Day collateral materials, including web banner ads, print ads, social media graphics and sample posts, press releases, talking points, radio scripts and a list of marketing ideas, available to SAF members at no charge for the 2014 holiday. (They’re still available. For more info visit safnow.org.) SAF promoted these materials and the holiday itself to members throughout 2014, and about 30 people downloaded the Women’s Day files that year, said SAF’s vice president of marketing, Jennifer Sparks. “The first step in introducing any new observation to consumers is to create awareness,” Sparks said. “We wanted to make sure our members have the tools to succeed, now and in the future. It is always best to be ahead of the curve rather than behind the eight ball.”

J. Schwank, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, the highly regarded floral designer and educator, also used his substantial platform online, via uloom.com, and at events to present industry members with tips, advice and background info—much of it from Sun Valley— on Women’s Day and, more specifically, how to capitalize on it. Schwank also took the message directly to consumers, passing out 500 bunches of Sun Valley flowers at the West Michigan Home & Garden Show. “One thing the enthusiastic Schwank won’t do? Call Women’s Day a “holiday.” Read more in Master the Art, p. 14.

Taking it to the Press
The media—mainstream outlets, industry publications and social media—also played a key role in DeVries’ outreach efforts. In 2011 and 2012, he started to pitch op-eds to publications such as Floral Management and Produce News; in those articles, he made the case for Women’s Day directly to readers who might otherwise be unfamiliar with the idea. “Working together we can build Women’s Day as a holiday,” he wrote in the May 2013 issue of Floral Management. “Doing so is a winning proposition for our entire industry. It will lead directly to more sales in the short term, but, more importantly, it will also cultivate a new group of flower consumers and build the amount of people who enjoy flowers as a central part of their lifestyle. This will lead to more sales in the long term, as a new generation embraces a renewed tradition.” (Floral Management, and other industry publications, have also covered Women’s Day.)
WHAT MAKES A MARKETER OF THE YEAR?

Since 1994, Floral Management has invited retailers, wholesalers and growers to vie for this annual award, luring them with the prospect of a $5,000 cash prize. For the 21st year in a row, that cash prize is sponsored by Design Master color tool, Inc.

The Criteria
The judges rate each entrant in the following four categories: effectiveness of campaign, originality, professionalism and overall excellence.

The Judges
Each year we choose a panel of seasoned professionals within and outside the floral industry.

Paul Bachman, Bachman’s, Minneapolis
Rick Canal, Exotic Flowers, Boston, Mass.
Cheryl Denham, Arizona Family Florist, Phoenix
B.J. Dyer, AAF, AIFD, Rosqueta, Rosqueta, Denver
Martyn Lopponen, Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse, Waukesha, Wisc.
Danielle Mackey, marketing director for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, the agency that handles the consumer relations campaign for the Society of American Florists.

WANT TO BE AN ENTRANT? Contact Floral Management’s 21st Annual Marketer of the Year competition. Call, fax or e-mail a request for an entry to Kate Fenner at Floral Management, (500) 335-4743; fax (500) 335-0078; E-mail kfenner@floralmag.com

“YOU CAN’T STAND THERE AS A FLOWER GROWER YOURSELF BUT ONCE YOU START ENGAGING A WIDE RANGE OF PEOPLE, PEOPLE START HEARING THE MESSAGE OVER AND OVER AGAIN, YOU CAN MAKE PROGRESS.”

LANCE DEVRIES, SUN VALLEY PRESIDENT AND CEO

Sales and promotional efforts, on a yearly basis.

Devries complemented these editorial efforts with a paid advertising campaign targeting even more readers through publications such as Florists’ Review and Super Floral Retailing. His hard work and the efforts of those strong industry partnerships also paid off, with the help of CEFC, SAF and other industry groups and media partners. Devries organized a flower giveaway bonanza — a family fun day centered around iconic New York City landmarks, including Penn Station and Grand Central Station. On March 8, 2010, about 10,000 Sun Valley employees gave away about 10,000 Sun Valley tulips to women passing by, many of whom were just as astonished as the Georgetown woman who had been four years earlier.

Later that day, the hosts of CBS’s “The Talk” (which has an audience of 2.5 million viewers) briefly discussed the holiday and lucky studio audience members were among the first to receive the gift. Devries also ran an article promoting the holiday, and the importance of flowers, around Women’s Day 2010. (That article was another result of the $5,000 prize by Sun Valley media push.)

“We had been beating the drum for a long time already, but you have to keep beating it,” said Devries, who noted that by 2014 he was found himself at industry events, including CA’s annual Fun N’ Sun, learning about how others were promoting the event on their own, without the pushing, prodding and adu
calling he'd been engaged in for five years. "I think there's more (momentum for the holiday now) than I even knew," he said.

The Payoff

By spring 2014, the effect of Women's Day was clear at Sun Valley, with results from 2012 to 2014 proving to be particularly strong. From 2012 to 2014, the company saw a 7% percent rise in sales on Week No. 9 of its calendar (the week Women's Day product would need to ship). Overall revenue during the same time period rose 9%. For his part, DeVries isn't about to stop promoting the holiday — and he hopes others will join the movement, too. "It's like building a snowball," he said. "In the beginning, the snowball doesn't look like it's getting any bigger and then suddenly, there it is."

As for industry members who laugh off the effort, or argue the holiday will never work for them, DeVries has two words: Think bigger. "Women's Day will never take off if we stay quiet about it," he said. "As an industry we have an obligation to tell consumers about this holiday if we want to grow and survive. We have a great story to tell, but it's not going to sell itself."

Mary Westbrook is a contributing writer and editor for Floral Management. mwestbrook@safnow.org

**WINNER'S CIRCLE: 20 YEARS OF FLORAL MANAGEMENT MARKETER OF THE YEAR WINNERS**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Scott Carlin</td>
<td>Rarabundance, KS</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Deneen Dye, AAF, AIFD, and Guatier Vay</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Andrew Marnie and Roger Holt</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Southern California Plant Tour Days</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Bill Caffing, Kuhl Flowers, Jacksonville, FL</td>
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