If mere mention of such an event planner conjures up the image of “Franc,” actor Martin Short’s parody of the self-absorbed, temperamental wedding planner in the 1990s remake of the movie, Father of the Bride, then you likely haven’t seen Bailey in action. While his celebrity-studded client list would give some carte blanche to launch into prima-donna mode, Bailey seems about as unassuming as they come. As he puts it, “It’s not my party.”

That statement defines a philosophy that’s driven him since 1980, when, encouraged by an interior designer friend whose clients were looking for in-home flowers, he stumbled into floral design. In 1983, one of those client’s asked him to do her daughter’s wedding flowers, and his event business grew from there. “I love the idea of people walking into a space where it’s completely changed,” Bailey says.

Donald Trump is a lot more like the typical bridal client when it comes to watching the numbers than most would imagine.

Floral Management: Where did you develop and then refine your style?

Preston Bailey: One of my corporate clients early on was Christie’s (art auction) in New York. I used to do some flowers for the auctions and at the parties they had these wonderful Old Master paintings, beautiful floral compositions. Somehow it segued from there. I loved the compositions. Even today, everybody tries to be modern, but I really love that traditional composition with fruits and flowers. So I think it started from that experience. You try different things, and you realize there are certain things you like more than others.
**FM:** Who or what is your inspiration?

**PB:** I like abundance, and there’s something about the abundance of things in nature especially that appeals to me. I love the environment. I remember the first time I saw the cherry blossoms in Washington — the repetition, bigness, elaborateness. Everyone should see them at least once. And then, coming from Panama (Bailey’s birthplace), the first time I saw the fall colors (in upstate New York), it was unbelievable. I was so in awe by the fall. I love bringing the grandeur of nature into my event work. It’s that kind of abundance that really inspires me. I’m not a minimalist, by far.

**FM:** When you look back on your earlier years of developing your wedding florals business, what were some of the biggest challenges?

**PB:** I was not, in the early years, a good business person. I did not charge enough. I had financial problems for years and years because of it. Not charging enough is a huge problem. As the years have gone by, people have learned that flowers are not cheap, but it’s a continuous education for clients to understand what things cost. To do a beautiful job, and to spend the money wisely, it’s a challenge. You have to pay attention from the beginning. I don’t design anything without getting a contract and deposit.

**FM:** Many florists can relate to that challenge — but I’m not sure as many would agree that the average consumer understands the costs that go into creating wedding flowers. Any advice on how to convey and charge for that value?

**PB:** A lot of it is selling what you do and convincing them they have to pay for it. And, you have to build in enough profit. For me, 50 percent of the job is in the cost and 50 percent is profit. The trick is being able to include everything in that 50 percent — flowers, time, design, rent. Transportation, installation should be a line item. Explain that you need to spend eight hours with them (during the course of the job). Create line items and explain them so that client understands as much as possible.

**FM:** That sounds logical. But I suspect some florists might say, “Easy for you to say! Clients like Donald Trump probably don’t even pay attention to those line items.”

**PB:** Clearly as you get more successful, the dollars are bigger, but even today, with the clients I have, I have to travel that road of explaining what they’re getting. These clients basically got wealthy by watching that bottom line. Mr. Trump did not become Mr. Trump by saying, ‘Spend whatever you want.’ But, he will understand if I explain to him that if I have to go to Florida, I have to bill him. It’s not an easy thing but it’s much better than burying the costs in flowers.

Once I have a signed contract and deposit, I show clients everything — architectural drawings, mock-ups, how I’ll do it — so they see everything that I’ll do. Even on a smaller scale job you can do this: Show them the flowers, how you clean them, what you have to...
do to get the job done. You’ll be amazed how much that works — at least 80 percent of the time. Most people will be willing to pay once they see what it will take to do what you propose.

**FM:** How do you grow your client base?

**PB:** If you have two or three hundred people in a room, those are your potential clients; so you should approach each job like that. If people walk into an event and they see things that appeal to them, the natural thing is for them to ask the host, “Who did this?” Each job must have that one element that makes people ask that question. It’s really important.

**FM:** How much of your vision for an event comes from the bride or party host, and how much comes from you? Some designers dictate to customers, and others are known for cleverly implementing a client’s desires. How does your particular mix fall?

**PB:** It’s really simple for me. It’s not my party, it’s my client’s. I’ve learned the hard way that they do come to you and expect your expertise, but everyone has a point of view, something they’re thinking about or picturing about their event. Finding out what they really want, getting inside their head, is very important — 80 percent is already done if you get proper information from your client. I spend a lot of time on that. I go to their home to find out, for example, whether they like contemporary or traditional. Ask them what they like — in home decor and fashion. Who are their favorite designers? Don’t take “I don’t know” for an answer. You get a sense for what they like if you really ask the right questions. And if you don’t, there’s room for a lot of mistakes.

**FM:** At what point did you know you had become a “hot property”? What was the tipping point? Was it a particular party, or a book publication or did it have to do with media coverage?

**PB:** I don’t think of myself as being there yet — in fact, it surprises me sometimes. This is just what I do, what I enjoy. I don’t want to do anything else. Let’s face it, giving parties is a good thing, and it’s fun helping people spend their money. A lot of times you do a good job, and sometimes you might miss what the client was looking for. I just have to be open to the next great job that will come up. At times we’re in a position to choose certain jobs and not others. Right now, I’m in a position where I can say ‘no’ whenever I feel the situation is not right. That’s nice, but I still have to be selling and able to please the client and make sure they feel a good value. And, I have to be proud of what I do.

**FM:** How do you make sure a client has the budget to make it worth your time before setting up a consultation meeting? Or does your...
reputation automatically prescreen everyone so only the “right people” ask for your party services now?

PB: I ask the question, “How much is your budget?” If it’s less than our minimum ($100,000), then I very gently explain what our minimum is. If someone says the budget is $5,000, at least you can tell them what you can give them for that amount.

The main point is selling. You want to show them what they can afford, and you’d be surprised what people would be willing to pay for.

FM: What strategies do you employ to help prevent that post-event, “It’s not what I had pictured” or, “You’re charging me what?” call from the bride or mother-of-the-bride?

PB: The biggest strategy is the presentation: Show them things, have them approve it, take photos of it. Have a digital camera — it’s a matter of recording it properly. I’ve learned the hard way that you can’t do otherwise. Keep them informed all along the way. If you promised peonies, then they’re not available, you need to make that phone call before, not after. Say, “I’m really sorry, I tried my best, but I have this other flower that you’ll love just as much.” They might get a little stressed, but at least they’ll know that it won’t be exactly what they had pictured.

FM: What are some other potential pitfalls of wedding work — and how do you avoid them? Do you have some tried and true sort of rules for how you approach a job, such as, “never say this to a bride . . .”?

PB: Don’t make promises you’re not sure you can keep. Also, one of the biggest parts of any wedding business is the bonding with the bride or the bride’s mother. That relationship has to be one of trust, of service. At the same time, there has to be a line between the
professional relationship and a friendship, and while I’m working with them, I keep that line distinct. I’ll give great service, and always be pleasant — but I don’t cross that line. If you want to have a friendship after, fine, but before that, one has to be very careful. It’s not your family, it’s not your wedding. It’s a client that you treat with respect and promptness. Eventually, that pays off; they’re going to recommend you.

**FM:** You’re in a place where you don’t have to worry about a bridal client meeting with you for a lengthy consultation, only to take their business to another floral designer. It’s something most wedding florists have experienced at one time or another. Some charge a consultation fee to ensure that they get compensated for their time (and then they take it off the final bill if they get the job). Did you have to deal with this early on in your career? How do you feel about consultation fees? Should smaller florists charge one to guard against price shopping?

**PB:** Use that initial meeting to show your work, what you’re capable of doing, but not to give away ideas. Get to know the client and let them know that you can do a good job for them. The initial meetings, like this, should not be charged. Once you start giving ideas, you should charge for it.

**FM:** Can you share an event disaster (or at least a potential disaster) from which you learned a huge lesson?

**PB:** One of the typical and classic disasters is a client suggesting they want to do a wedding outside without a tent, and it rains. Never, ever go into an outdoor event without having a rain plan. I’ve had many experiences like that and now I don’t care if I lose the job, I don’t do it. That’s a really big lesson for me that I’ve learned the hard way.

**TABLE MANNERS** Table settings are one of Bailey’s passions. Here, he’s strung together orchid buds and blossoms to create borders on the table.
FM: Can you talk about some trends you see with weddings?
PB: The sit-down formal wedding reception is fading away. The ceremony is getting more ceremonial, and the reception is more casual. Instead of a sit-down dinner, it’s becoming more of a party, with cocktails and appetizers. The sequence of events at receptions is different. They’re adding another layer for the evening to keep it going as long as possible. There’s the wedding, then cocktails, then reception, then the after-party, with a DJ and dancing until 3 or 4 in the morning.

FM: What are your biggest daily challenges?
PB: The biggest challenge I have is getting the job done. As the stakes get higher, the production gets more complex. As we get bigger it becomes more
challenging, and that’s always something to keep improving. It’s good to get a job — then you have to execute it.

I’m incredibly loyal. I have a core staff and use a lot of suppliers. My relationship with my suppliers is really simple. As long as I can pick up the phone at night and know you’ll help me, I’ll work with you forever. You have to know that whoever is covering you is really going to put themselves out

**FM:** Any advice for florists who aspire to be the “Preston Baileys” of wedding and event design in their own markets?

**PB:** It’s so important to have a signature element that’s all yours and makes you different from other people. Finding that element often happens at times when you don’t think about them, like as you’re working. Everyone has things they’re known for, and florists should stick with that and elaborate on it. It’s not about being better, just different.

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