First Hand Account

WASSAIL WHILE YOU WORK

There’s nothing like singing with your co-workers to bring you closer together as a team — and while you’re at it, deliver some holiday cheer to those in need.

Steve and Roberta Neubauer, owners of Neubauer’s Flowers, invite their 20 employees’ family members to come along on their annual Christmas caroling jaunts to two or three local nursing homes. Armed with lyrics to about a dozen carols, employees sing in the hallways outside residents’ doors, and children give them a plant or flower — and a hug. The residents love it, Steve Neubauer said, and seeing their reaction is “amazing.” “They’ll sit and clap and smile.”

Afterward, the group goes out to dinner “so no one has to go home and cook,” he said.

The staff decided to go caroling with family members to help make up for their time away from home while working long hours for the shop, Neubauer said. “It’s fun,” he said. “It’s just a good thing for everybody to go out and do. For the price of a meal, I get a great morale booster.”

The team, including some who have worked for Neubauer’s from eight to 17 years, has caroled four out of the last five years. The year they weren’t able to (because of the swine flu scare), a nursing home called to say they missed them coming.

While it’s all in the name of goodwill and fun, Neubauer is nonetheless strategic about both the singing and dining destinations. The nursing homes they visit (as many as three in one night one year) are clients of the Uniontown, Pa., store. They dine at a different restaurant each year, reciprocating at establishments that have done business with Neubauer’s.

But they’re not “crassly commercial” about it: The Neubauers choose not to seek local media coverage of the event for promotional purposes. It’s a way for the fourth-generation business, in its 90th year, to give back to the community, Neubauer said. “We get enough out of it,” without publicity, he said. “You don’t need recognition for everything you do.”

A team that sings together stays together, Neubauer says, even if their voices are off key: “I sing solo — so low that no one can hear me.”
POINTER ON HELPING GIFT BUYERS

> With a few exceptions, three types of customers will wander into your store this holiday shopping season. To make the most sales possible, you must know which type you’re dealing with and how to handle them.

The first type is on a mission to find the specific item she wants, said retail consultant Harry Friedman, founder of The Friedman Group, in a Nov. 2 webinar, “Preparing for the Holidays: The Best Time of Year to Ruin Your Business or Boom It.” While she may be in a hurry, it would be unwise to assume that all customers want to get in and out quickly, Friedman said. The second type has a general idea of what he wants but hasn’t yet identified it. Treat him like Type 1, and you may turn him off if he wants more assistance. “Customers should never sense that you’re rushing,” he said.

The third type, who thinks she’s in the right type of store, and is looking around hoping to trigger an idea for a purchase, needs not just more time than Type 1, but also the most experienced, knowledgeable salesperson to answer her questions and guide her, Friedman said.

UNIFYING UNIFORMS Paul Iantosca, left, and Jorge Quintero model Exotic Flowers’ new staff shirts, a 2011 resolution that owner Rick Canale said polishes the shop’s presentation.

NO-FAIL NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS

> Resolved to start 2012 on the right foot? Take a step forward with these practical changes, culled from a review of New Year’s resolutions for florists and small retailers.

Invest a higher percentage of your marketing budget in packaging. One year ago, florist Rick Canale resolved to shift Yellow Pages ad dollars into monogramed bags and cellophane, as well as interior and exterior signage for Boston-based Exotic Flowers. The exterior signage, in development now to replace two illuminated “relics,” “will pay for itself the first year,” he said. “The new signs are grabbers.”

Canale also updated the staff uniforms: “The polished look has made a huge difference in the psyche and approach of staff when we all dress in the same color (maroon),” he said. The new signs are grabbers.

Tell — and show — your unique story in a blog or other outlet. Kent and Tina Cooksey moved Gateway Florist in 2007 after 17 years in Waldorf, Md., to the family’s 130-acre farm in La Plata, Md., where they now grow flowering plants, hay and seasonal produce, in addition to raising cattle. Photos of the bucolic setting on their website make it stand out as the one-of-a-kind business that it is.

Communicate each employee’s role. They should know how their job relates to the company’s overall vision, and have goals with measurable standards and timetables, advised PowerHomeBiz.com, an online resource for small business owners.

Know your top 10 customers. “What more can you do for them? Where can you find more just like them?” the online publisher said. List your top ten customers by sales volume and tell everyone on staff about them.
Tim Huckabee goes undercover to report the good, the bad and the “you better hope this wasn’t your shop.”

The Call

**SHOP:** A florist outside Miami  
**SCENARIO:** Shopping online for a Christmas gift

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EMPLOYEE:</strong></th>
<th>Good morning. ABC Flowers. Carrie speaking, how may I help you?</th>
<th><strong>TIM:</strong></th>
<th>Hi Carrie. I am doing some Christmas shopping on your website. Can you help me?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYEE:</strong></td>
<td>Of course! What were you looking for?</td>
<td><strong>TIM:</strong></td>
<td>Well, I am on the page with the basket arrangements and I really can’t decide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYEE:</strong></td>
<td>Let me get on that page too and we can look at them together.</td>
<td><strong>TIM:</strong></td>
<td>Perfect. Thank you. I like the ABC one but think the DEF one is nice too.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYEE:</strong></td>
<td>They’re all really nice, though sometimes we don’t have those exact flowers.</td>
<td><strong>TIM:</strong></td>
<td>Then how close will you get to the picture? And what’s the difference between the “standard,” “deluxe” and “premium” prices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYEE:</strong></td>
<td>We’ll get pretty close to the picture, don’t worry. The difference between the “standard,” “deluxe” and “premium” is that we can make the arrangement a lot bigger and nicer.</td>
<td><strong>TIM:</strong></td>
<td>OK. Well, let’s keep going because I want to talk to you about the GHI design too.</td>
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Carrie spent another ten minutes letting me drag her through every image in the Christmas section on the shop’s website. I finally just asked, “Well, which one do you like?” and went with her choice.

**The Analysis**

- I appreciated Carrie’s willingness to help me shop and her candor about the possibility of not getting the design exactly as pictured. (But see caveat below.) Customers like to feel that you are looking out for them.

- Carrie fell right into the trap that I set for her. Never offer to control the sale! At the holidays more than ever, we need to be efficient (read: quick!) on the phone while maintaining a friendly, warm demeanor. More and more customers who start their shopping online migrate to the phone. If the customer truly had his mind made up, he would have just clicked through and finished his order on the site. However, customers opt to call after browsing online for many reasons: they are overwhelmed by the choices, they want to make sure the order will still get out today, they want to confirm that you have a product they saw on the web, they are double-checking that you deliver to the ZIP code where their relative lives, etc. Knowing all this, prepare to take control of those calls, and keep ‘em short!

  1. **Love the customer’s first choice.** When a customer tells me, “I am looking at the ABC arrangement...” I shoot back with, “Oh, that’s my favorite!” or “That’s so popular this season!” regardless of what they are looking at. Customers just want us to validate their choices. Use this technique and you’ll cut your call time in half.

  2. **Let them down easily.** When you know that you are low on a product or out of a container, educate the customer in a positive fashion and give viable alternatives. “On the outside chance that we don’t have those peppermint carnations, may we use solid red ones instead? They’ll be just as festive!” And please communicate that on the order.

  3. **Keep it real.** Educate customers about size too: “The basic difference between the three price points is that we add more flowers to the arrangement at each increment. It will be beautiful no matter what you spend.” Interestingly, this approach typically moves customers to spend more.

And remember, customers look at you as the expert, so control the sale!

- She told me that increasing the budget by $10, going from “standard” to “deluxe,” would make my gift noticeably bigger and better. This is misleading: Ten dollars simply does not make that kind of impact.

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**The Fix**

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**Tim Huckabee**, an international flower shop sales and customer service mentor, is founder and president of Floral Strategies, LLC, and the American Institute of Floral Sales Experts (AIFSE), a retail floral sales certification program. If you would like Tim to test call your shop for this column, contact him at 800 983-6184 or tim@floralstrategies.com.

Prepare your staff for your most successful Thanksgiving ever! Attend the SAF-sponsored webinar, “Shop Management 101: Hire, Interview, Train and Motivate Better!” on Dec. 6 presented by Tim Huckabee, AIFSE. Register today at www.floralstrategies.eventbrite.com
**Hands On**

Twitter, Facebook posts  
Calls to 2011 b-days, anniversaries  
Change website products to reflect buying trends  
Attend networking event

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SUNDAY</th>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
<th>SATURDAY</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>NEW YEAR'S DAY</td>
<td>2 Map out days at gift shows</td>
<td>3 Team meeting: Set 2012 sales goals</td>
<td>4 Decorate windows for Valentine's Day</td>
<td>5 Pitch standing orders to holiday corporate accounts</td>
<td>6 Post wedding photos to FB and website</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Bridal show</strong></td>
<td>9 Order Valentine's Day flowers, vases</td>
<td>10 “Valentine Boot Camp” Webinar (<a href="http://floralstrategies.eventbrite.com">floralstrategies.eventbrite.com</a>)</td>
<td>11 Atlanta Gift Show</td>
<td>12 Update wedding consult area</td>
<td>13 Make books online showcasing wedding work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Atlanta Gift Show</td>
<td>16 MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td><strong>Dallas Gift Show</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25 February birthday, anniversary reminders</td>
<td>26 Blog: Dark chocolate cacao content differences</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Brainstorm tension-busting tips with staff</td>
<td>31 Email Early-bird special for orders placed by Feb. 4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
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</table>

**Saturday, January 7, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Friday, January 13, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Monday, January 16, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Wednesday, January 18, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Saturday, January 21, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Tuesday, January 24, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Thursday, January 26, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Monday, January 29, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Friday, January 30, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

**Saturday, January 31, 2012**

- **Bridal show**

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**WHY DON’T YOU...**

- **Partner with a school or church to sell Valentine’s Day flowers.** Sell wrapped bouquets at a school, on the Monday before the Tuesday holiday, or the weekend prior at a church, and give back a cut of the profits. Or sell the bouquets outright to the organizations, and they resell them and keep the profit. Either way, you build relationships and get exposure.

- **Order something whimsical for Valentine’s Day.** “Talking” books and stuffed animals that record voice messages will be a hit this year, predicts Terri Schubel of Beneva Solutions, adding that two of last year’s hits — huge talking, singing balloons and preserved roses — might be hot again. But don’t forget to stock up on everyone’s favorites (roses and pre-wrapped mixed bouquets) because you will sell out of them, she said. “I guarantee it.”

- **Give ‘em a cuppa for National Hot Tea Month.** Assemble gift baskets with fine teas and assorted goodies. If you sell a line of teas, invite connoisseurs in for a tea tasting. They might buy some even if they don’t fancy your fake British accent.

- **Encourage customers to celebrate “Self-Love” month.** In a blog, email or Facebook post, urge them to stop in and choose the gift they really wanted for Christmas. Tell them to come by and see your giftware while they’re out returning presents, or to buy flowers for themselves.

- **Makeover your wedding consultation area.** Nancy Witte-Dycus of Fantasy Flowers plans to use Tiffany blue accents, and paint the walls. “Nothing refreshes faster” than color, she said. 🌟