Take This Job and Love It

By Amanda Long

Nominating The Enchanted Florist as a “best place to work” is just one of the ways these employees show their love.

After her first day on the job at The Enchanted Florist, Autumn Valentine left feeling, in a word, enchanted.

“I called my friends as soon as I got home and said, “This is the best job I’ve ever had,’” says the newest addition to the Alexandria, Va., flower shop, who answers phones, works the counter and manages the traffic flow of designers and customers. Valentine compares her cozy work confines (600 square feet) to the store from the 1940 classic movie “Shop Around the Corner” and the bookstore in the movie’s remake, “You’ve Got Mail.” The dreamy reverie isn’t broken when customers start milling in and the phone starts ringing, says Valentine. “The customers love coming in here, you can tell, it’s like a hub of the neighborhood,” the former kindergarden teacher says. “And I like being in the middle of it.”

Too Good to Be True?

Reading such effusive compliments, it’s hard not to wonder what spell The Enchanted Florist has cast on Valentine or if she’s gunning for some co-worker of the month award. But take a visit to the shop, where laughter drowns out the classical music playing softly in the background and where customers hover long after their orders have been filled, soaking up the family-like warmth, and you realize that the shop’s magnetic charm isn’t just the stuff of movies. This shop around the corner is the real thing and its hard-working, customer-loving owner could teach even Meg Ryan’s character a thing or two about charm. Phyllis Kennedy, who opened the shop about 16 years ago, is described by her employees as a good mood personified.

Still don’t believe that a floral shop employee considers her work enchanting? Betsy Jones begs to differ. The shop’s wedding planner was enchanted enough to respond to a call for nominations for “the best place to work” from Washingtonian magazine. The city magazine chooses 50 best places to work annually, usually large corporations, agencies and firms, for its main feature and solicits nominations from employees to round out its coverage of small businesses with big appeal. The editors chose “The Enchanted Florist” to feature in the “Days of Beauty” category. The section focused on three small, yet creative, businesses where “looks aren’t deceiving,” referring to places like florists and spas.
A Nice Arrangement: From left to right, Enchanted Florist staff members Erlinda Romero, CeCile Interdonato, Gina Ziegler, Betsy Jones, owner Phyllis Kennedy and Daisy.

plays a major role in creating Enchanted Florist's fun-loving environment. After all, even the most fun-loving, friendly staff can't be expected to improvise their way through every assignment or produce high volume without some processes in place. So Kennedy, with the help of wedding and event planner Betsy Jones, has implemented systems and policies to keep the edges smooth. She and Jones recently created a massive “chore chart” (just like a family would have) that goes beyond basic job descriptions into divvying up tasks that fall in the gray area between manager, owner, counter sales, prep and design. Many tasks reflect the expertise of the staff member. For instance, instead of having the main counter contact (Valentine) answer all flower questions from in-store customers, questions are farmed out according to expertise. Someone needs to know about orchids, they talk to Gina Ziegler, questions about weddings go straight to Jones, potted plant inquiries are passed to someone else. The chore chart also acts as an equalizer by dividing among employees mundane, but necessary tasks like refilling the paper towels and changing the display signs. “When we’re doing a million things, this keeps the engine running smoothly,” Kennedy says. “The customers don’t see us scrambling around trying to find something or someone to help them. Everyone knows when it’s their job to step up.”

As weddings and events have taken up an increasingly large chunk of Enchanted’s business (22 to 25 percent of sales) and of Kennedy’s time, she’s made significant changes to the processes behind the pageantry. Hiring a wedding coordinator was the first step toward better organization. Jones joined the team a year and half ago. From the bride’s first call or e-mail, Jones is her main point of contact. This allows Kennedy to order product, create centerpiece recipes and divvy up responsibilities among staff. Kennedy specifies exactly how much of each variety goes

that to the outsider always “look like fun places to work” (until it’s 3 a.m. on Feb. 13 and you’re elbow deep in flower food). The city magazine mentioned the shop’s twice-a-year girl’s weekend retreat at Kennedy’s bayside house and its weekly potluck lunch. “Phyllis makes everyone feel at home,” says Jones, who had worked with The Enchanted Florist for over a decade in her former job with a local caterer. “I’ve never seen anyone come close to touching her level of performance — with employees, customers and business relationships.”

Methods to the Magic
Organization — giving staff the tools and systems they need to perform —
into each centerpiece right down to the ribbon. This isn’t to cookie cut out the designer’s creativity, but to save them the stress of inventing from scratch when producing a high volume of work.

“They have free creative reign in their everyday work and appreciate having someone else figure out how this is going to come together before diving into 100 centerpieces!” Kennedy says. Another way she keeps the inherently dramatic events less so is with a grid that spells out what each employee will do in the one or two weeks leading up to the wedding and on the day of the event.

**The Phyllis Factor**

Any business owner who questions the role their personality and attitude play in keeping employees happy and productive can look to Enchanted Florist for an answer. One of the few things Kennedy and her employees disagree about is what makes Enchanted Florist the best place to work. Ask Kennedy and she’ll tell you its employees. Ask the staff and they all say Phyllis (even when she’s not around!).

“I’ve never seen her down. She’s not sickeningly sweet, but you just don’t see any grounchiness or stress getting to her. Everyone is a lucky recipient of that attitude,” says Gina Ziegler, who, after a career with Nordstrom, can speak with some authority about working for a retailer that knows how to treat customers and employees alike. Looking for a change, Ziegler began processing flowers four years ago and is now a designer.

Kennedy’s perkinness extends into acts of kindness and thoughtfulness for her staff. “She doesn’t let anything just ‘happen’ without making it special for us,” says Ziegler. When the staff goes to New York for a gift show, it’s more like a slumber party, with everyone going out shopping and eating together after the work is finished. And Kennedy is the perfect host, Ziegler says, recounting the time she opened up a picnic basket of gourmet treats and lunches on the train to New York. “I’d say it was an unexpected treat, but she’s always doing something like this to keep morale up and make us feel like family,” Ziegler says.

Preparation for the weekly potluck is done in Kennedy’s kitchen since she lives above the shop. And she’s quick to provide something from her closet or kitchen when a staff member’s needs extend beyond the office-supply closet. During our interview, Kennedy spotted Jones, the event planner, nursing a sore shoulder. A few minutes later, Jones was wearing a lavender-filled heating pad around her neck, compliments of Dr. Phyllis.

**We Are Family**

A nurturing employer, in effect, creates a similarly nurturing working environment, whose effects are felt among co-workers and customers alike. “I love it, what else can I say?,” says Erlinda Romero, of her eight years with Enchanted Florist. Described by Kennedy as the shop’s “secret weapon,” Romero’s low-key attitude balances the intense personalities of other employees.

The constant low hum of conversation is peppered by compliments for one another’s work, terms of endearment (sweetie, hon), questions about family and plenty of giggling. And customers are more often than not included in the conversation. “Most of our customers know us, they ask about us when we’re not here, they want to be a part of the laughter,” Ziegler says. But Jones insists that everyone who comes in the door is treated like they’ve been coming for years and dropping all kinds of cash, even if it’s a first timer picking up a $15 bunch of tulips. Thanks to the shop’s size, a certain level of intimacy is guaranteed and Kennedy is often the most gregarious with customers, second in line to her dog, Daisy, who greets everyone at the door. “If you don’t see your boss acting like that, then why would you bother going out of your way to be nice?” Jones asks.

Customers notice: At least 80 percent of Kennedy’s customers are regulars, purchasing between seven to 10 times a year. The shop does more than a million in annual sales and counts big D.C. organizations like the NASA’s Goddard Space Museum as event clientele. But for Kennedy, friendliness isn’t a function of some management class or profit-boosting seminar. It’s just her way of thanking employees and customers who’ve treated her like family. When Kennedy was diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago, the staff rallied around her and she will be forever grateful.
Worth the Cost
Like any good head of the household, Kennedy invests in her family’s future and health. All employees are eligible for a health-care plan after six months, of which the shop covers 50 percent. Employees can participate in a Simple IRA plan after six months of employment. Enchanted Florist contributes 3 percent of its earnings each month. She and Jones are creating a menu of benefits so part-time employees aren’t overlooked in the reward and benefits programs, especially since most part-timers are long-time employees. The plan will also outline promotional and bonus options.

“You have to be competitive, especially in this area, and offer salaries and benefits that attract the level of employees you want,” says Kennedy about the D.C. job market, where the competition for good employees is not just among corporations, retailers, manufacturers and service industries, but also government (both federal and military jobs), tourism and the significant non-profit sector. To get the caliber she and customers expect, Kennedy has to factor in her immediate neighborhood, historic Old Town, Alexandria, where the antique shops are swanky, the women’s boutiques are French (or priced that way) and the hardware stores are of the Restoration, not Ace, brand.

Can We Work for You?
Kennedy’s willingness to hire from outside the industry is a good example of what makes her a good boss and good florist. She’s open to new ideas, willing to give people a chance to prove themselves and conscious that florists need to know more than how to send a wire order when it comes to treating customers well and running a low-stress workplace. A regular Enchanted Florist customer, Ziegler wasn’t the first to ask to move to the other side of the counter. “Whenever I came in here, I didn’t want to leave. Sure, it’s busy and can get a little crowded, but there was none of that drama or attitude flying around. It just felt like a party.”

Although several customers have asked to join the party, Kennedy looks beyond a love of her shop in new employees. Ziegler’s background in retail fashion, eye for style and passion has translated well into design work. Valentine, the former kindergarten teacher, sold Kennedy on her organization, a skill equally important in handling a room full of five-year-olds and handling dozens of orders, ringing phones and the hectic pace of a flower shop. With a proven record of multi-tasking and grace under pressure, Valentine can keep a smile on her face, and in her voice, no matter how crazy it gets behind the counter. In Kennedy’s opinion, customers would rather get a smile from someone with little floral background than attitude from someone who could explain the difference between an Oriental and Asiatic lily.

Employees’ Best Friend: Employees say they’re loyal to owner Phyllis Kennedy, with the shop’s mascot Daisy, because she’s “always up, always smiling and always looking out for us.”

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Benefits and Perks that Win Loyalty and Love

Floral Management asked its readers what they do to make employees happy and keep them that way, in an online survey. Of the nearly 250 respondents (9 percent), 105 responded with specialized perks, beyond the usual vacation time and health insurance.

Employees of Crissey Flowers in Seattle are treated to an “informal” benefit program, which means “tuning into the individual needs of folks on the team,” says Sten Crissey, AAF, one of nearly 250 SAF members responding to the survey.

Chatting with an employee who comes in early to do odds and ends, Crissey learned how he used to listen to baseball games on the radio growing up in Kansas, but had never been to a Mariner game because the tickets were too expensive. “The next time I was given tickets to a ball game, I asked him along,” Crissey says. “The look on his face when he went into stadium was priceless.”

Crissey covers half the cost of designers’ footwear, specially suited for people who have to stand on their feet all day. Other samples of how florists are enchanting their employees with high-impact perks:

- Free accommodations at owner’s beach condo for a week.
- Food, food and more food, especially healthier options so employees don’t feel like pizza is the only take-out option.
- Profit sharing: 50 percent of after-tax income goes back to employees. Of this amount, managers get half and the remaining half is invested in an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) that all employees have an interest in. Once an employee qualifies for entry into the ESOP (three years to begin vesting), vesting occurs at a rate of 20 percent.
- A Simple IRA plan.
- Generous holiday bonuses, massages on the clock during stressful holidays, massage gift certificates.
- Tuition and ongoing education assistance, dues to floral groups, books for formal courses; some monetary, time, and product help with design contests.
- Encourage participation in local and state functions and help with cost of accreditation.
- Part-time employees who average four days per week receive three paid vacation days to use as they wish per year.
- Holiday party and summer picnic, featuring $2,000 in prizes.
- Travel costs to educational seminars, design shows and gift shows.
- Allow employees to trade hours or days as long as everything is covered.
- Flexible scheduling.
- Spontaneous perks, like free lunch during peak floral times, early departure if warranted.
- A 40 percent employee discount.
- Personal auto tire purchase through fleet discount provider.
- Birthday acknowledgement, moderate Christmas and Valentine’s Day cash bonuses, in-store credit bonuses.
- Mass transit allowance and pick-up/drop-off at train station; 10 vacation days per year, including one or two floating holidays, retirement/401(k) planning and seminars.

—A.L.

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No Divas Allowed

“T'm always thinking about the chemistry of the staff — both in personalities and talent,” Kennedy says. “We’re doing a million dollars in business in 600 square feet, we have to love each other or we’d kill each other.”

Kennedy looks for simple clues to how new hires affect the dynamics. Everyone has to have a pleasant voice, no matter what the position. She’s a big believer in “hearing someone smile” through the phone and rarely calls anyone in for an interview if she doesn’t detect that vocal grin. Terminology and vocabulary are important because so much selling is done over the phone in a short amount of time. Being descriptive and personable are paramount, outranking a command of the English language. “We have a very international staff, but their love of the flowers translates. You don’t have to speak perfect English to understand it. Customers want someone who will listen,” Kennedy says. Current staff includes those from France, Trinidad and Guatemala. A few years ago, Kennedy sponsored a designer in getting her Green Card, helping with the legal paperwork and referencing needed to show she has a unique talent.

Kennedy’s hiring approach is paying off. Several employees have been there more than 10 years, with a few designers nearing the 20-year mark. “They’re like gum on my shoe! I can’t get rid of them,” she says with a laugh. But if one of them needs to go, she’ll quickly kick off those shoes. For example, after one employee began displaying diva-like symptoms of rudeness, selfishness and just plain meanness, Kennedy posted a Zero Tolerance for Bad Behavior policy on the shop’s employee board, basically prohibiting emotional outbursts and fussing. The guilty party, a fabulous designer, must not have realized she fit the description, or assumed her talent outweighed her attitude. She was wrong. “She threw another fit and I had to fire her,” Kennedy says. Gorgeous bouquets can’t hide what one employee’s ugly behavior can do to morale. “As soon as she left, the change in this place was amazing. Tension evaporated.”

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