

Let Them Eat Cake!

By Kate F. Penn

Floral
Management's

11th
Annual

Marketer
of the Year

2004

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**Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse
toasts its 100th anniversary with a
12-foot cake, diamonds, bridal
dresses . . . and the 2004 Marketer
of the Year title.**

**In Jane and Marty Loppnow's minds, there's nothing
small about small talk.** Not that they don't engage in it. Quite the con-

trary, their friendly demeanor makes them a magnet for people with stories to tell.

Like when a fellow bus mate on a tour through Italy last summer happened to mention that she made a 10-foot cake as part of her business' one-year anniversary. An interesting story, the kind you might share with someone else, and then, eventually, forget. Not the Loppnows. "We take ideas like that and file them away," Jane says.

"Some day you'll need them."

She means it. To get a glimpse of what they did with that particular nugget of information, fast forward nine months to April 23, 2004, to the entrance lobby of Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse, where a 12-foot-tall, 7-foot-diameter cake had customers stopping in their tracks before they even got through the door.

"We heard the (cake) idea, filed it away," says Jane, and resurfaced it for what became Waukesha Floral's most

memorable, successful and well-attended customer event and public relations victory. "We were looking for something special to do" to celebrate the store's 100th anniversary, recalls Marty. His parents bought the then 73-year-old business in 1977 and he and his brother, Tom, took it over in 1998. "We inherited the 100 years," he says. "So we needed to do something big (to celebrate)." The cake became a much-needed focal

point in the front atrium. "People hadn't even made it through the front door and they were saying, 'Wow . . .'"

The wow factor didn't stop with the giant cake. Among the well-conceived tie-ins to the anniversary theme: three hidden diamond rings in the cake for three lucky finders and a fashion show of 32 different bridal dresses and bouquets, spanning the last century.

"We really wanted to generate community excitement and increase awareness of our store," Jane says.

And that they did. Viewers in Southeastern Wisconsin saw coverage of Waukesha Floral's three-day anniversary event on nearly all the local network affiliates. Sales during and since the event have been up by double digits, even during the dog days of summer.

The ingenuity behind the event, its success and the Loppnows' prudent use of resources were enough to impress the panel of judges that named Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse Floral Management's 2004 Marketer of the



Photo by Douglas Brueckner

Year, an honor that brings with it a \$5,000 cash prize sponsored by Design Master color tool, Inc.

We Have to Beat Our Own Drum

If a 12-foot cake, diamond rings and vintage bridal gowns sound a bit over-the-top for a well-established shop, take a closer look. Waukesha Floral is a business that's rich in history yet deficient in walk-by traffic. "We're off the beaten path," Marty says. "There's an industrial park across the street, but we're not near any retail." The Lopponows even considered moving at one point. They talked to bankers, accountants and builders, but were advised to stay at the original location, and remain "that shop on Prairie Avenue" to the locals.

The Lopponows have much to celebrate: a successful 100th anniversary gala, double-digit sales increase and being the subject of plenty of "buzz" around town. Above, from left: Tom, Jane and Marty Lopponow.

Still, the Lopponows wanted to target customers beyond the local population, to capture the ever-growing communities in and around Waukesha, located in the fastest growing county in the state in 2003. With location as their Achilles heel, they'd need to ramp up their marketing efforts and "beat our own drum" as Jane puts it.

If it Ain't Broke, Fix it Anyway

Events were something they knew they did well, with 25-plus years' worth of successful, pre-holiday open houses under their belt. "Mom and grandma baked dozens of tea cookies and served hot cider to appreciative customers,"

Marty recalls. These events continued during the year the shop moved its offices temporarily into another building on the property while they had a new building built to replace the aging structure from 1904.

A well-attended grand re-opening in 2000 gave birth to twice-yearly open houses, one to kick off the spring season and a pre-holiday event in November. These included seminars, a coloring contest and other kids' activities, door prizes and a small discount on purchases. "Every hour we had a different show on the stage in the conservatory greenhouse. At 9 a.m., we talked about violets, at 10 a.m., corsages, at 11 a.m., greenhouse plants. These really

pulled the people in," Marty says.

The twice yearly open houses were successful — sales increased by record numbers from one open house to the next, both at the event and for a six- to eight-week period following. But they still were not "getting their name out there" beyond the immediate customer base. As 2004 approached, "we wanted to make Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse more of a destination . . . the place you think of when you need flowers," Marty says. This desire happened to coincide with the business's 100th anniversary in April. "We decided to combine this milestone event with our love for open houses and began to gather ideas for a huge anniversary party."

The Main Event

The Loppnows planned a weekend-long 100th Anniversary Extravaganza, featuring:

- "The Biggest Cake You've Ever Seen," (as they billed it in an invitation) with three diamond rings hidden inside for three lucky recipients. Customers could witness the building of the cake all day Friday, and the mayor came for the official cutting of the cake.
- 100 Years of Weddings Flower and Fashion Show, featuring 32 wedding gowns and bridal bouquets from the 1890s through the 1990s, modeled by community volunteers.
- Flowers Forward — a futuristic view of flowers for the next century and beyond.
- A wedding bouquet and corsage-making demonstration.
- Performance art — a mural in honor of the centennial was painted "live" by a local artist on one shop wall. Guests at the Friday night preview party could watch the work in progress.
- For kids, a make-your-own wind chime activity, using terra cotta pots, and a coloring contest.

Just Say Yes

The Loppnows seem to have the magic touch when it comes to getting people to donate time and product to their events. Things such as an appearance by the mayor make for a more memorable event. And getting donations from suppliers — who never turned them down — helped keep event costs down. What's their secret? While the size of their store certainly helps, Marty Loppnow says his mantra, instilled by his parents, is "You're only going to be treated as well as you treat back." In other words, he says, "We pay our bills on time, we never go past the due date." And when they ask for donations, they approach it open-ended. "We don't put an onis on it, like 'you owe me one.'"

Scoring an appearance by the mayor at the event was relatively easy. "We're not exactly shrinking violets," Loppnow says. "We really toot our own horn in town." Given the significant re-building and renovation project the business completed in 2000, "I just said (to the mayor), 'I think it would be silly if the mayor didn't give us some recognition for this.'" How could she refuse? 🌿

—K.P.

Counting on the Kindness of Strangers

Partnerships, sweat equity and serendipity were key to pulling off the event cost-effectively.

One day late in February, a new deli and pastry shop owner — who knew nothing of the Loppnows' giant cake needs — popped into



The pastry chef needed an 8-foot ladder to cut the cake — 768 pieces — throughout the weekend anniversary event.





1930s bride with a bouquet of Tiger lilies, 1940s orchid corsage for the Mother of the Bride.

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Waukesha Floral to mention that he was looking for some exposure. "He said, 'I'd like to bake a cake for you if I can give out some cards,'" recalls Marty, who just two days before was sketching out plans for their colossal cake, whose creator had yet to be chosen. "Little did he know what he was getting himself into." To be exact: 40 dozen eggs, 120 pounds of sugar, 100 pounds of flour, 50 pounds of butter, 8 gallons of cream, 4 gallons of whole milk, 10 gallons of filling and 15 gallons of frosting. Enough to make a 1-foot perimeter of Genoese French sponge cake to go around the perimeter of the giant cake-frame, which had been built by a handyman, and covered "Rosebowl parade-style" with 25,000 flower heads.

After a business associate had mentioned that Goodwill Industries offers a

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fashion show featuring bridal gowns, Jane and two managers immersed themselves into floral research to choose historically accurate flowers and bouquet styles, and they assigned each designer a decade. "Everybody here was involved in putting that show together," Jane says. They leaned on suppliers to source the more unusual product such as sweet pea, mock orange, ornamental sage and other flowers used throughout the decades. Even the mechanics were historically accurate. "If floral foam had not yet been invented," Jane says, "we used the old fashioned method of yarn and tin foil."

The Loppnows didn't want to bank completely on the cake as a slam dunk for the press. "We still needed an idea to draw in the media," Marty says.

Six weeks before the event, he pulled his staff and marketing team together for an "anything goes" brainstorming session. "We were just throwing out ideas, like dropping engraved rose petals out of a balloon at the county fair," he says. Someone suggested hiding a diamond in the cake, donated by a local, long-time jeweler, Krumrich's. Everybody loved the idea, but no one wanted to call the jeweler. "So I just stopped in there one day and said, 'this is up for grabs, we'll give you lots of publicity, please feel free to turn me down flat,'" Marty says. The jeweler immediately went for it and well exceeded Marty's expectations of "maybe a chip on a pendant" by offering three diamonds, one for each day. "And they said, 'Since you're doing a bridal show, let's make it rings,'" Marty says.

They turned to local and national suppliers for free samples,



The Loppnows commissioned a local artist to paint a commemorative mural during the gala event, with the latin phrase, *Tempest Fugit* (Time Flies). Above, Tom (left), Jane and Marty Loppnow.

supplies or literature to use in gift bags for attendees or in the design shows. "It was a tremendous show of generosity from our suppliers," says Marty. "We'd say, 'Do you mind . . .?' and they always came through with product." (See sidebar, p. 22)

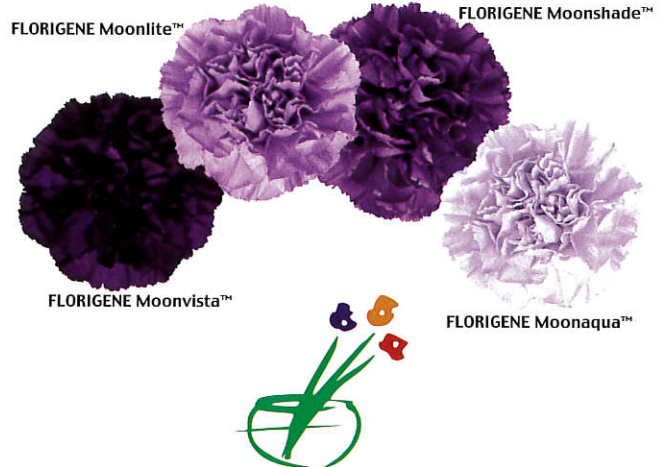
Spreading the Word

The anniversary gala required a huge publicity effort. In 2003, after years of wearing the "marketer" hat, Marty surrendered his marketing duties. "Our budget, which we always kept at 4 percent of sales, had reached \$80,000," he says, "and I didn't feel like I had enough of a grasp to be able to use that budget well." So he outsourced the marketing to a local agency called Image Makers. Marty continued to have an integral role in the idea generation and marketing, but Waukesha Floral would benefit from, among other things, the buying power of an agency. "They get better rates on things," Marty says. "If I were to go to a TV station and say that I want to run my ad, what are my chances of getting a spot on the Today show? Not a chance. But (the agency) is buying enough time" that they can get the prime spots. The outside team also gave Waukesha Floral a consistent, uniform look and style in all their print, radio and TV ads.

The Power of PR

That buying power and public relations influence paid off for their anniversary gala. Public service announcements and a print ad appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel and Waukesha Freeman newspapers. And a 15-second TV spot aired multiple times prior to the event.

But Tom Kaupp, president of Image Makers, says that it was the well-crafted combination of newsworthy "events" during the weekend event — the cake with diamonds in it, the bridal fashions, the official cake cutting by the mayor, the "performance art" — that made Waukesha's event a media magnet. Their biggest coup from a PR perspective was getting the attention of local "About Town" TV personality Gus Gnorski of Fox-6 News. He spent his two-hour morning news show at the event, which amounted to six "teasers" and two five-minute segments. In addition, the local NBC, UPN and



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ABC affiliates all visited during the three-day event.

Between the media coverage, the event announcements sent in monthly statements and deliveries, and the formal invitation for the preview party, the event attracted hundreds of customers to the store. "They have engaged their customer, and isn't that what (running a floral business) is all about?" says Marketer of the Year judge Sylvia Nichols, AIFD, who was named Marketer of the Year in 1996. "You've got to establish that personal connec-

tion with customers, and that's what this campaign did."

Lovin' the Buzz

The anniversary extravaganza showed an increase of 28.3 percent in gross sales over the 2003 spring open house, with walk-in traffic growing by about 48 percent. Gross sales for the one-month period after the campaign increased 11 percent over the previous year. Walk-in traffic and in-store pick-ups have increased more than 10 and 26 percent, respectively. Even the typically slow days of summer are up: June and July combined are up 22 percent over the same period last year, and the average sale is up 8.2 percent.

But there's something less tangible than sales dollars that, for Marty, confirms the event was a success. "There's a buzz," he says. "It's strange. I'll be in

town, and someone will be talking about (the anniversary gala). Or I'll walk in a store and someone says, 'Oh, I missed your open house.' That's when we know that the event is paying off over the long haul." 🌸

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The Payoff

Pulling off an event of this magnitude takes some money, even with volumes of donated product. Marty Loppnow urges florists to be patient when it comes to the payoff. While sales during Waukesha Floral's anniversary gala weekend didn't cover the costs, "it has more than paid for itself during the months following with increased sales," Loppnow says.

Mailing materials: \$7,430
(Printed announcements, postage, television advertising, gift bags/flyers)

Friday preview party expenses \$5,859
(Catering, music, mural, vases)

Saturday/Sunday expenses \$2,713

(Cake frame/flowers, pastry chef commentator, goodwill donation, violinist punch, supplies, rentals, brochures, kids' crafts, miscellaneous floral products)

Total Costs \$15,992

Sales increase during and month after event: \$18,033

—K.P.

Photos To Go



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