

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 Lane DeVries saw in 2009 when he 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 he 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 Hartman, the manager of Sun Valley's west coast evergreens 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 create one more important occasion for floral gifts in the U.S. helped him land this year's coveted Floral Management Marketer of the Year honors.

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 abroad (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

R-E-S-P-E-C-T In a country like the U.S., where consumers must be reminded to buy flowers, "Women's Day was low-hanging fruit," said Lane DeVries, Sun Valley's president and CEO, adding that everyone has women in their life they admire. DeVries is pictured here with Beth Deaton, sales assistant; Marisol Marquez, CIP Manager; Laura Kurtz, national sales representative; and Erica Shea, sales assistant.

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). Overall revenue during the same time period rose **39 percent**.

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

- > Advertising campaign in industry publications: \$5,000 in 2013; \$3,500 in 2014
- > Educational booth at 2012 International Floriculture Expo: \$35,000
- > Creation and production of POP materials: > \$5,000
- > Total: \$43,500

-M.W.

compile a list of events each year, organized by country.)

In a country like the U.S., where consumers must be reminded to buy flowers, "Women's Day was low-hanging fruit," said DeVries; yet the holiday still felt out of reach — and justifiably so. After all, one grower working alone can't hope to create demand among consumers for a new occasion. But DeVries wasn't deterred. Instead, he became a man on a mission to walk, talk and breathe Women's Day, at industry events, in customer meetings and just about anytime he ran into another person with a vested interest in flowers and plants ... He knew that to be successful with his Women's Day aspirations, he'd have to rally support from his floral industry friends.

"I knew it would take broad industry support to get something new off the ground," DeVries said. "You can't stand there as a flower grower yourself. But once you start engaging a broad base of people, and people start hearing the message over and over again, you can make progress."

Laying the Groundwork

In March 2010, less than a year after Hartman had planted the seed of the idea, DeVries, then a member of SAF's board of directors, took his first major step toward launching his Women's Day campaign, presenting the idea to a room of about 100 industry leaders from across segments, who were gathered in Washington, D.C., for SAF's annual Congressional Action Days (CAD). "I basically told them, 'Look, 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,'" when most businesses — growers, retailers and everyone in between — already operate at maximum capacity, said DeVries. "We need to look for other opportunities."

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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 listened to DeVries' pitch traveled four blocks on foot with him to tony (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 grass 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 evergreens, suggests 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."



AMY KUMLER

MARKET WATCH When the Sun Valley team started researching Women’s Day, they liked what they saw: a new flower-giving event with a huge potential market and not many preconceived ideas about what a gift should be. The team includes Tim Crockenberg (standing), lead agronomist, Arcata; DeVries, Bill Prescott, marketing communications associate; JW Brown, national sales representative; Erica Shea, sales assistant; Doug Dobecki, manager; Laura Kurtz, national sales representative.

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 broad audience.

In one of his most memorable outreach efforts, he converted Sun Valley’s entire 20- by 20-foot booth at the 2012 International Floriculture Expo, in Miami, into an interactive info stand 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 showpiece 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.”

2012: Google unveils its first Women’s Day “Google Doodle.”

2012: Sun Valley turns its International Floriculture Expo booth in Miami into a Women’s Day info clearinghouse.

2012: Sun Valley creates point-of-purchase (POP) materials to help its customers promote the holiday; at around the same time SAF creates POP materials for members.

2014: Mega-star Beyonce Knowles posts a special Women’s Day video to YouTube.

2014: 1-800-Flowers.com and Sun Valley give away 10,000 tulips in key New York City landmarks on Women’s Day. High-profile news outlets, including Parade.com and “The Talk,” feature the holiday and the flower connections.

-M.W.

WHAT OTHERS SAY



FLORISTS

In Troy, Mo., a bedroom community northwest of St. Louis, Carla Emert 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, Emert focused on more positive numbers: 63 likes, 14 shares and 74 comments on her Facebook post about Women's Day. Bill Waszkiewicz, 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 Utica'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 Krunyabskiy 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 a worthwhile pursuit 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."



WHOLESALERS

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's] something we have never really promoted before."

Likewise, Lani Callister, the fresh flower manager and buyer for Ensign Wholesale Flower, 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 Don Zetsche, 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 Woodall, 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 made available targeted products, such as Women's Day cards, among other efforts.

FTD's Emily Bucholz said the "ranking of Women's Day was fairly low from a consumer interest [perspective] on FTD.com [in 2014], but 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.



COOL TOOLS POP and marketing materials from Sun Valley and SAF helped industry members promote Women's Day.



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NOT SO IMPOSSIBLE DREAM Bill Prescott, marketing communications associate, and DeVries say they increased tulip plantings by 74 percent in anticipation of Women's Day 2014.

AMY KUMLER

Tools for All

While DeVries' passion was clearly aimed at elevating the entire industry through increased consumption, 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 complimen-

tary point-of-purchase materials for Sun Valley customers. The digital files (posters, web banners, flyers) could be printed by the customer, 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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SELF-PROMOTION

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"Give Joy!" DeVries' team also created a series of Women's Day drop-ship bouquets, targeted primarily to super-market customers.

The point-of-purchase tools were a hit at Ensign Wholesale Floral, in Ogden, Utah, and Salt Lake City, where Lani 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] bestselling 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 buckets 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. Those 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 Los Angeles; and Krueger Wholesale Florist Inc. in Rothschild, Wis. The interest told DeVries "we were finally hitting our stride," he said.



SHOWCASE SHOWDOWN In one of his most memorable outreach efforts, DeVries converted Sun Valley's entire 20- by 20-foot booth at the 2012 International Floriculture Expo, in Miami, into an interactive info stand 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.

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 those 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 observance 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 Schwanke, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, the highly regarded floral designer and educator, also used his substantial platform online, via uBloom.com, and at events to present industry members



MEMBERS ONLY With a little push from DeVries, SAF created 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. (For more info visit safnow.org.)

with tips, advice and background info — much of it from Sun Valley — on Women's Day and, more specifically, how to capitalize on it. Schwanke 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 Schwanke 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 floral 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, even 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



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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 in Floral Management's 22nd Annual Marketer of the Year competition? Call, fax or e-mail a request for an entry to Kate F. Penn, at Floral Management, (800) 336-4743; fax (800) 208-0078; E-mail kpenn@safnow.org

sales and promotional efforts, on a year-by-year basis.)

DeVries complemented those editorial efforts with a paid advertising campaign targeting even more readers through publications such as Florists' Review and Super Floral Retailing. His hard work shoring up those strong industry partnerships also paid off, with CCFC, SAF and other industry groups promoting the holiday via blogs and social media.

By winter 2014, DeVries felt confident enough to take his message to a national stage, with the help of 1-800-Flowers.com. Leveraging that company's signifi-

cant media contacts, DeVries organized another flower giveaway bonanza, this time centered around iconic New York City landmarks, including Penn Station and Grand Central Station. On March 8, 2014, about a dozen 1-800-Flowers.com employees gave away about 10,000 Sun Valley tulips to women passing by — many of whom were just as astonished as the Georgetown women had been four years earlier.

Later that day, the hosts of CBS's "The Talk" (which has an audience of 2.5-plus million viewers) briefly discussed the holiday, and lucky studio audience members went home with Sun Valley flowers and 1-800-Flowers.com gift cards. Parade.com also ran an article promoting the holiday, and the importance of flowers, around Women's Day 2014. (That article was another result of the 1-800-Flowers.com-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 often found himself at industry events, including CalFlowers' annual Fun 'N Sun, learning about how others were promoting the event on their own, without the pushing, prodding and edu-

"You can't stand there as a flower grower yourself. But once you start engaging a broad base of people, and people start hearing the message over and over again, you can make progress."

LANE DEVRIES, SUN VALLEY PRESIDENT AND CEO



ALL IN About 30 SAF members traveled with DeVries to Georgetown on Women's Day 2014 during SAF's annual Congressional Action Days. There, they passed out flowers to sometimes stunned women, hurrying by on the street. "They were surprised — some of them really surprised," DeVries said. "They asked us: 'Why are you giving these to me?'"

cating he'd been engaged in for five years. "I think there's more [momentum for the holiday now] than I even know," 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 76 percent rise in tulip 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 39 percent.

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. "We as an industry 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 tell 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

2013 Sandy Nielsen Baumann, Nielsen's Florist, Darien, Conn.

2012 Cheryl Denham, Arizona Family Florist, Phoenix

2011 Paul Bachman, Bachman's, Minneapolis

2010 Oralia and David Espinoza, Spring Garden Flower Shop, San Antonio, Texas

2009 BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD and Guenther Vogt, AAF, Bouquets, Denver

2008 Rick Canale Exotic Flowers, Boston, Mass.

2007 John Baisch, Baisch & Skinner, St. Louis

2006 Lyn and Skip Shipman, Brenda's House of Flowers, Woodstock, Ga.

2005 Frances Hopkins, Under A Foot Plant, Co., Salem, Ore.

2004 Marty & Jane Loppnow, Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse, Waukesha, Wis.

2003 Scott Carlson, Florabundance, Miami

2002 BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, and Guenther Vogt, AAF, Bouquets, Denver

2001 Andrew Manton-Zamora and Rutger Borst, Apisis Group, Miami

2000 Southern California Plant Tour Days

1999 Greg and Heather Katz, Al Manning Florist, Kansas City, Mo.

1998 Bill Cutting, Kuhn Flowers, Jacksonville, Fla.

1997 Brooks Jacobs, Greenbrook Flowers, Jackson, Miss.

1996 Sylvia Nichols, AIFD, The Window Box, Cheshire, Conn. United Floral Exchange, Carlsbad, Calif., and Denver.

1995 Mary Dark, Broadmoor Florist, Shreveport, La., Greg Royer, Royer's, Lebanon, Pa.

1994 Mary Lore, McFarland Florist & Greenhouses, Inc., Detroit Tom Aykens, AAF, Memorial Florist & Greenhouses, Appleton, Wis.

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