

Having a tough time building your sympathy business? Here's how *Floral Management's* Marketer of the Year winner in the under \$1 million in sales category used an unusual approach to build a close relationship with her local funeral homes—and built up profits doing it.

An Unusual Undertaking

by Michael Baldwin

Most florists think there's little that can be done to increase their sympathy business — it's the kind of work that's always going to be there. Not to mention the uneasy feeling of not knowing exactly how to approach funeral directors. Fortunately, Mary Dark, this year's Marketer of the Year winner in the under \$1 million in sales category, isn't your typical florist.

Sizing-up Competition

Dark, owner of Broadmoor Florist in Shreveport, La., used an unusually direct approach combining humor and personality to make her shop stand out from the crowd. And quite a crowd it is — there are 43 florists serving the six funeral homes in Dark's area without in-house floral shops.

Besides intense local competition, Dark also faced a thorny problem common across the country — charity funeral contributions in lieu of flowers. Because acknowledgments from the charities don't make a distinction between a \$5 and \$100 tax-deductible gift, it's very difficult for a florist to compete, says Dark. "It's just going to be more expensive to send flowers to a grieving family," she adds, "and that's a big factor when deciding between flowers and a donation."

But instead of throwing in the towel, Dark motivated her associates

to reach new heights of creativity to win more funeral work over from charity donations. "As the old expression goes, 'You only have to do three things in this life — be born, pay taxes and die.'" says Dark. "With this marketing strategy we focused on what we felt was the most profitable — death."

Did it work? You bet. Broadmoor's overall sales rose and the relationships with the local funeral homes have never been rosier. In addition, Dark cites less-tangible results, such as the increased enthusiasm of her staff and the laser-like focus on her business that creating an original marketing plan required.

Here's how Broadmoor did it:

Making An Initial Splash

Broadmoor called each funeral home and asked the funeral director if they could make an appointment to come by and get their feedback on Broadmoor's funeral work. "It was just a basic 'get to know you' visit, but the funeral directors weren't used to this sort of treatment, so they were pleasantly surprised at our request," says Dark. After establishing a friendly rapport, Dark invited the entire staff of the funeral home to her shop for a small, personal "symposium style" funeral show. She explained that she would like to get their feedback on some sample funeral arrangements her asso-



ciates were designing. Each funeral home accepted the offer gratefully, with one acknowledging that "no florist has ever invited us to their shop... they have never done anything for us."

Shortly before the scheduled date for each symposium, Broadmoor hand-delivered a tiny wooden casket found on the dusty back shelf of a gift wholesaler with a printed invitation to each funeral staff member to attend the symposium. "These

people were some of the friendliest and down to earth that I have ever met," says Dark, "so I wanted even more to tap into their enthusiasm for their business and make a little joke with the invitation." Couched in funeral terms, the invitations were written to suggest a viewing for the funeral director. The "visitation" was set for 5:30, along with refreshments and floral arrangements "directed" by Broadmoor.

The Viewing

When the funeral home staff entered Broadmoor on the evening of their "viewing," they were welcomed with the best funeral arrangements Broadmoor's designers could produce. "After a long day at work, they were really ecstatic to have a refreshment and beautiful flowers surrounding them," says Dark. "You could really tell that they were thrilled with the treatment they were getting." Although the evening was billed as a "symposium" and Dark asked the funeral personnel for any changes or input they might like to see on the designs, the guests liked the designs as presented.



Mary Dark's invitations delivered in a mini-wooden casket charmed funeral directors.

we generally carry in the shop to give them a true impression of what we can do," she says.

Campaign follow-up

In keeping with the original spirit of fostering friendship between Broadmoor and area funeral homes, Dark asked the funeral home staffs to preview an "edible funeral arrangement" as a thank-you for taking time to critique their work. Although greeted with raised eyebrows, "they knew we were a bit nuts by now and were willing to go along with anything we suggested," laughs Dark. She arrived at each funeral home carrying a wonderful casket spray covering a large container of Dark's homemade ice cream. She gave each member of the staff an insulated travel coffee mug printed with Broadmoor's name and filled it with a big dollop of ice cream. And in keeping with southern tradition, tea cookies rounded out the treat.

Tallying The Results

The thank-you, like the informal design symposium, was a glowing success, fostering even closer relations between previously indifferent businesses. In little over a year, Broadmoor increased its funeral sales by 28 percent, due in large part to their targeted efforts courting an often neglected part of their customer base, maintaining exquisitely high quality and selling themselves — not a one-time gimmick. Store traffic also increased — leading to additional non-funeral sales — and in-house accounts are up as well.

Dark says that this type of promotion should be able to work for florists across the country, not just for her. She's so sure, in fact, that she's willing to give her recipe for a homemade thank you to any florist who asks for it. But when asked if she'll also whip up a batch for them, she pauses, then giggles nervously, "Oh no, they'll have to do a little work themselves." Sounds like a bargain too good to pass up. ■

Michael Baldwin is senior editor for Floral Management.

On the evening of the first show, the funeral home manager asked Dark if he could have the arrangements photographed with some of his caskets. "Heck, your flowers will sell our caskets," Dark recalls him saying. The next morning, three hearses pulled up to Broadmoor and unloaded three caskets. Floral designs were placed on each casket and the photographer went to work. "We were now in the funeral business," says Dark, "Lights! Camera! Action!" The photographs of the floral arrangements on the caskets were so successful that each funeral home requested copies of the pictures to show their clients.

To keep expenses down, Dark re-used all the flowers used in the presentations for the next day's standard design work. "I made it a point to just use flowers that

MARKETER OF THE YEAR

over \$1 million in sales

Despite a misguided first attempt, here's how a dedicated floral marketer stumbled upon an idea that led to a "frequent flower buyer" program that turned business around — and landed him *Floral Management's* Marketer of the Year Award.

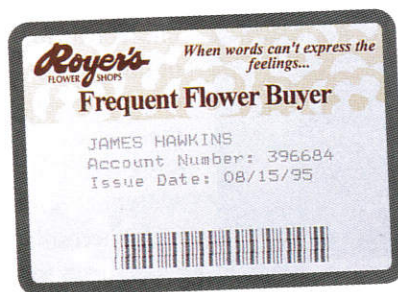
The Accidental Promotion

by Michael Baldwin

This is a classic story of turning lemons into lemonade. What started out as a marketing promotion to enter cash-and-carry customers into a computerized database fell short of its goal. But in its ashes was a nugget that enabled Royer's Flowers, Inc., a mini-empire of 24 stores centered around the central Pennsylvania town of Lebanon, to boost sales an impressive 14 percent within a year. It also sent him to the top of the heap in *Floral Management's* Marketer of the Year Award in the above \$1 million in sales category.

The Trial Balloon

Financially, 1991 and 1992 weren't good years for Royer's. Overall, sales were flat — and even dipped slightly in 1992. At the beginning of 1993, Greg Royer, president of Royer's, decided that something had to be done to reverse this trend and regain some of the market share he saw slipping away to mass marketers and supermarkets. "We originally intended to capture the names and addresses of cash and credit card customers who came into the stores," says Royer. "These were the customers we thought we were losing to mass markets and wanted to accurately target them with direct mail to draw them back in."



To meet this goal, Royer's rolled out a test program in early 1993. They distributed Frequent Flower Buyer cards to all cash, credit and in-house charge customers who provided their name and address information. For each purchase, customers earned a point, with no weight given to the size of the purchase. As customers reached various point levels, they were rewarded with fresh flowers. Royer's ran the test for a year, because "if we don't test it, we don't do it," and found that the anticipated results just weren't there.

"Although we were able to increase our database of cash and credit card customers, they weren't responding to our direct mailings," says Royer. In addition, it was very expensive to mail out the card and coupons to customers first class — and

delivery wasn't guaranteed for more affordable third class.

Another flaw was noted as well. Since the promotion weighed small purchases as much as larger ones, most rewards went to customers making small, but frequent, purchases. "We actually ended up losing money on this type of customer," says Royer.

However, a silver lining to this cloud appeared. Royer's discovered that house charge customers responded very well to the direct marketing efforts and actually increased their purchases on a yearly basis. Taking the positive and negative aspects of the initial program into consideration, Royer's rolled out a revised marketing program in February 1994.

Try Number Two

The revised "Frequent Flower Buyer Program" included additional elements that turned the shortcomings of the trial promotion into assets. For instance, the program focused on the existing in-house charge customers. In addition, Royer's altered the point system to a \$3 coupon for every \$100 spent in a one-year period — and also reduced postage by sending out cards and coupons with the regular billing statements.

The new program rolled out with a bang. Signs inside all Royer's stores loudly promoted the advantages of signing up for a house charge. Announcements also accompanied monthly billings. Eventually, every customer in good standing received a promotional card. To avoid sending several cards to one customer, Royer's placed a note on the customer's electronic account as they received a card. Enrolling each customer in the program cost Royer's just over ten cents.

Royer's prints the customer's name, account number and bar code on each card. On the back of the card is a list of store locations and phone numbers, to make phone orders effortless. Royer's purchased a special printer to print the cards attached to the mailers — plastic cards were too tough on the original printer. In

addition, Royer's experimented with the adhesive attaching the card to the mailer. Early adhesives caused the cards to stick in customer wallets.

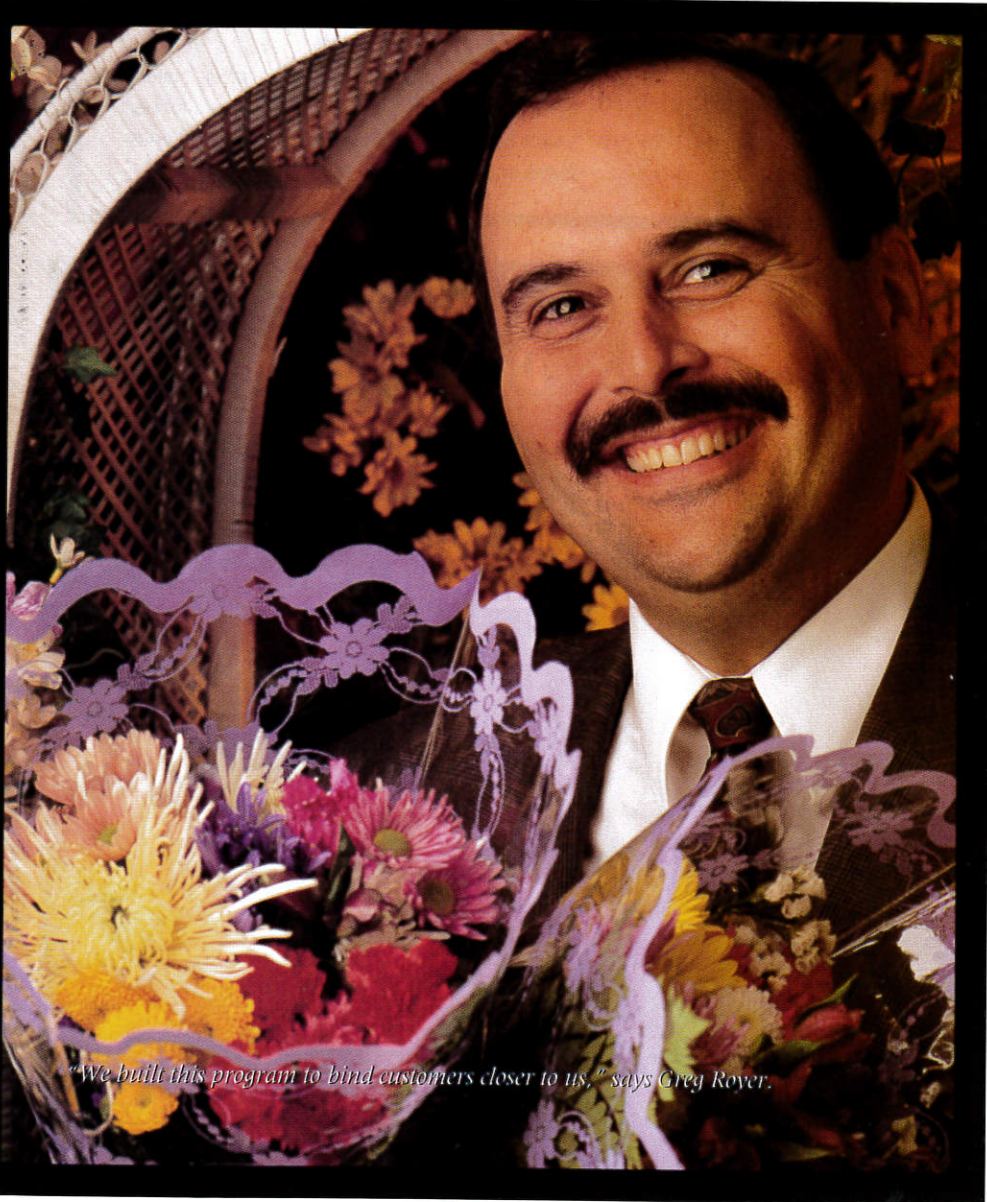
Every time the customer makes a purchase, the barcode is scanned by Royer's point-of-purchase system that automatically tracks the sale. As a customer passes the next \$100 mark, a coupon for \$3 is automatically printed on the next statement. During the first year of the program, \$140,000 worth of coupons were sent out — and customers redeemed 50 percent of them. To encourage customers to redeem coupons (and usually make additional purchases), the coupons are given an expiration date close to when Royer's wants them to use it. "We noticed that the coupons were all coming in at the end of the two-month expiration date," says Royer. "We decided to play up to this impulse and give expiration dates for when we want them to shop — like just before Easter."

Crunching The Numbers

When Royer's analyzed the customer files to find out if the promotion was working, they were pleasantly surprised. The analysis indicated that 21 percent of customers who received the card increased their total dollar purchases over the previous year. Overall, the average spent per customer increased by \$5 and outgoing wire orders also increased by 12 percent over the previous year. And the news just keeps getting better: for the current fiscal year, sales have increased 14 percent.

Why It's Not Over

Royer advises any retailer attempting a similar program to be cautious. "This type of promotion was very effective for us, but it should definitely be considered for the long-term," says Royer. "We looked at the airlines," he continues, "and saw how irate customers



"We built this program to bind customers closer to us," says Greg Royer.

became when they tried to roll back some of the frequent flyer benefits they were offering." Royer's doesn't want to be caught in the same trap. "We built this program to bind our customers tighter to us," says Royer, who cautions that discontinuing the program would be disastrous. "I think that it would create a rift that would be very difficult to repair."

His parting words of wisdom? "Test, test, test. We thought we had this thing right the first time, but it didn't work out that way. Luckily, it finally led us in the right direction." ■

Michael Baldwin is senior editor for Floral Management.

WHAT MAKES A MARKETER OF THE YEAR?

When *Floral Management* launched the Marketer of the Year Award in 1994, we hoped to draw attention to some of the industry's outstanding marketing efforts — and inspire the rest of the industry with their ideas. This year's winners certainly exceeded our expectations. Once again, *Floral Management* invited retailers, wholesalers and growers to take part in the contest, luring them with the prospect of a \$2,500 cash prize, sponsored by Design Master color tool, Inc. All entries are divided into one of two categories — above \$1 million in gross sales and below \$1 million in gross sales — and the winner in each receives a \$2,500 award.

THE CRITERIA

What constitutes an outstanding marketing effort? The judges were charged with reviewing the entries and rating each entrant in the following five categories:

- Effectiveness of Campaign
- Originality
- Use of Available Resources
- Professionalism
- Overall Excellence

THE JUDGES

We knew that only experienced marketers with a track record of success could make such judgements. So we chose a panel of seasoned professionals from within and outside of the floral industry:

Joan Watson, AAF, retailer, The Sunflowers Florist in Phoenix, Ariz.

JoLynn Gustin, retailer, Jones the Florist in Cincinnati.

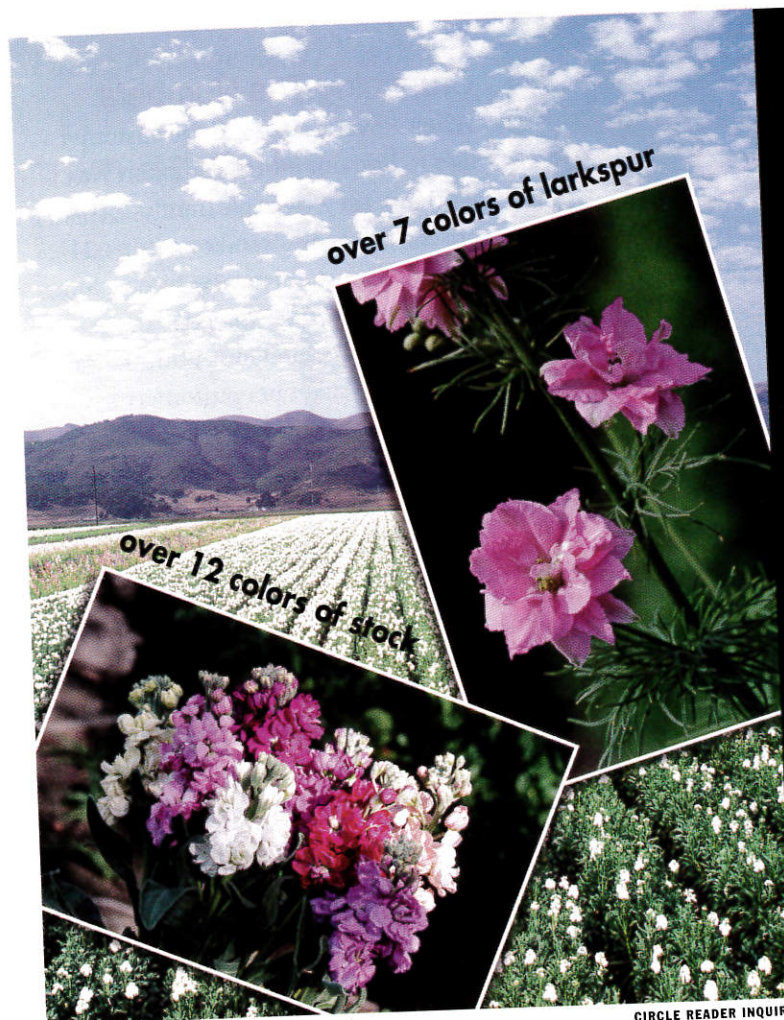
Dave Mears, wholesaler, Bob Mears Wholesale Florist, Inc., in Springfield, Mo.

Paul Ecke, Jr., AAF, grower, Paul Ecke Ranch, Encinitas, Calif.

Steve Dahllof, vice president of marketing with Ogilvy Adams & Rinehart, the agency that handles the American Floral Marketing Council's (AFMC) national consumer relations campaign.

GIVE IT A TRY NEXT YEAR

Think you may have the marketing savvy it takes to be Marketer of the Year? Keep an eye out for next year's contest — we'll be ready to send out entry forms in January, with a **May 31 deadline**.



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