



Are You a

Prom Cheap ^ Date?

Don't get outclassed by florists who know exactly how to score with the prom crowd.

BY CHRISTY O'FARRELL

With Kendall Jenner (of Kardashian family overexposure) in a couture frock on the cover of TeenProm magazine and stretch Hummers carting couples to and fro, the prom scene — like most everything in a teenager's life — bears little resemblance to what you experienced when you gussied up, teased your hair and hit the high school gym. Well attuned to the rite of passage's rising hemlines and price tag, designer Loann Burke, AIFD, PFCI, is not easily surprised by what the kids wear these days. But she was shocked to spot what she calls "underwear elastic" on girls' corsages at restaurants she visits for her annual prom-season trend watching.



PHOTOS BY BRENDA POTTINGER

ALL THAT GLITTERS Jewelry at Fassler Florist captivates the prom crowd and sells as gifts year round.



PHOTOS BY BRENDA POTTINGER

The elastic wristband reveals not only cheap, outdated design mechanics, but also some ugly truths about the florist's business skills. By not cashing in on the luxury budgets, or evolving to keep current with an increasingly sophisticated shopper, florists are missing out.

"You still see florists trying to do business as usual, and it's not a business-as-usual marketplace," Burke said.

Her shop, Furst the Florist and Greenhouses in Dayton, Ohio, abandoned years ago the prom standard

of "five sweetheart roses with baby's breath and a ribbon on an elastic band," and is among 47 percent of shops whose prom business revenue has increased since 2008, according to an online survey of SAF retailers in January. Florists in both large metropolitan areas and small rural communities have found that bracelets, anklets, rings and embellished wristlets sell for \$35 to \$40, compared to a norm of \$25 a few years ago. Add a boutonniere and a third item such as a hair accessory, purse decoration or boxed rose for Mom, and you're up to \$75.



RULE THE SCHOOL

Destiny (left) and Celeste Mackey bring prom orders they collect at the local high school cafeteria back to their shop, Fassler Florist in Covington, Ky. Selling on school premises is the top recommendation from prom jewelry designer Dan Fisher, a presenter at AIFD's 2011 symposium, "Imagine."

But it's not just higher average orders driving up business, it's also more orders. And that's due to more ambitious marketing by florists. Although the prom market remains a comparatively small percentage of overall business, the potential it offers for future sales, including weddings, is worth it, say those who've seen it happen.

For example, Burke sold prom and homecoming flowers to a woman for her older daughter and son. The woman told Burke she was so happy with the service and quality that she was moved to buy a funeral spray for her mother's casket, even though that's unusual in the Jewish faith. She also told Burke she would use the florist for her younger kids' dances and her daughter's wedding, when the time comes.

So how exactly are florists who've grown their prom business making that lasting connection now? By getting on teens' radar early in the game as the fun, cool and convenient place to score perfect prom flowers.

Secure a Hall Pass

Estimates of prom spending range from an average of \$807 per family (from a 2011 survey by Visa) to \$1,825 (from a Fitz Design review of published data). To get your share of the increasing dollars couples spend on prom, get on their turf. "The single most important thing is to sell in the schools," said Dan Fisher of Fitz Design, maker and distributor of prom

jewelry, and a presenter at the 2011 AIFD symposium, "Imagine."

School sales provide access to more students than would ever walk into your store and position you as the school's preferred florist. Fisher, who teaches prom marketing and design workshops at wholesale operations around the country, said taking orders on school grounds also increases the likelihood that the couple will order together and therefore spend more.

Given how precious that access is, don't hold back on working every possible angle to get it, he said. Write to as many as 20 contacts from each school in your area, including your billing contact, if the school already has an account with your shop, as well as administrators and prom committee members, asking for on-site sales permission. It will be the best \$8.80 (for a book of stamps) you've ever spent, Fisher said. He has sample letters, marketing materials and other florist-tested ideas on his website, www.creationsbyfitzdesign.com.

If you want a fast track into schools, offer to help with a fundraiser. "Every single school in the United States is raising money for something," Fisher said. Offer to contribute a percentage of corsage and boutonniere sales to the after-prom party or a scholarship fund. To keep the after-prom publicity glow, present the check in person as a giant mock-up, with a news photographer on hand and your own camera ready to post to Facebook.

Regardless of how you get school administrators' attention, emphasize the convenience of in-school ordering. Ideally, you'll return to the school on a second or even third day, Fisher said, because inevitably some kids will forget their money on the first day.

Stand Out from the Crowd

All the access won't amount to much, if no one notices you're there. Get heads turning, jaws flapping, texts flying and tweets tweeting with a few extra flourishes. Arrive in a limo, Fisher recommends. Wear a retro prom dress, or put your driver in a tux; give away candy. Send your youngest staff member to do the selling, as high schoolers don't want to buy from gray-haired employees. "The youngest person in your flower shop is your designated prom salesperson," he said.

Make that table pop with color by surrounding yourself with flowers, and stop traffic by demonstrating how you make corsages and boutonnieres. Bring 12 pre-made corsages, and be strategic about who you give them to. Give six to "those" girls, Fisher said, of the usually recognizable popular girls (ask a friend with kids in the school if you're not sure). Give the other six to the most visible faculty members — principals, coaches and counselors (skip the English teacher who holes up in her room all day).



NONTRADITIONAL Loann Burke, AIFD, PFCI, shuns "underwear elastic" in favor of jewelry and decorative wire for corsages. She designs at Furst the Florist in Dayton, Ohio.



COOL INVITE The postcard invitation to Shirley's Flowers' prom party grabbed students' attention.

Fassler Florist in Covington, Ky., has parked itself in the lunchroom of a local high school for the last several years, sometimes along with a tux company, and expects to do the same at two schools this year. The shop's orders have not been tied to a fundraiser, though it helps the schools at other times of the year, said owner Celeste Mackey. As an added convenience, Fassler Florist delivers the corsages and boutonnieres to the school on the day of the dance.



PARTY PLANNER Shelby Shy threw a party at her Rogers, Ark., shop, Shirley's Flowers & Gifts, where the business collected more than 800 corsage and boutonniere orders.

Following Fisher's advice to send your youngest salesperson, Mackey typically sends her daughter, Destiny, 32, to the schools. On a successful day, the shop takes about 50 orders at the school, Destiny said. Fassler has sold at public and private schools where the florist has accounts. Boys are more comfortable buying at school than in the shop, Destiny said, and may pay more for a corsage they spend more time choosing, or enlist help from their date or a female friend.

Throw a Party, Find a Catwalk

Free pizza. Red Bull at the ready. Candy, candy and more candy.

While that may sound like a recipe for heartburn for anyone over 30, those were just the ingredients Shelby Shy used to pack Shirley's Flowers for an in-store party two weeks before prom last year.

Administrators at the local high school denied her request for in-school sales, worried if they let one vendor in, they'd have to let them all in, co-owner Shy said. So she bought the snacks and invited as many students as would come to a party through the school newspaper, postcards, flyers tacked up at local hangouts, a Facebook notice, an email blast and on the radio. It was advertised as a two-night event from 4 to 6 p.m., but the party continued every weekday evening for nearly two weeks, Shy said.

She estimates Shirley's sold more than 800 corsages and boutonnieres, 200 more than the previous year.

"We made it kind of like a club scene," she said, playing Top-40 music and lighting the corsage bar in red and blue. Trying on accessories, instead of just looking at photos, makes a big difference to customers, Shy said.

"Our average sale went up like crazy," with most from \$35 to \$50. One order was for \$75, she said, the result of friends wanting to out-do each other: "Girls are girls." Another surprise: Shy expected primarily girls at the party, but about 45 percent were guys.

After two nights, Shy didn't need to buy pizza to keep the kids coming; they came anyway. And she reduced staff from several to just one other person plus herself to work the party, because the team had answered in advance questions that were likely to arise.

To reach students who missed the party, Shirley's places small arrangements with postcards in dress shops and tanning salons, Shy said.

Team Up for Marketing Power

Lack the space to hold a party, or just looking to expand the guest list?

Partner with other prom "all stars," Fisher said, of the local go-to prom businesses, to co-host a large

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order-taking event. Potential partners include restaurants, dress and tux boutiques, limo companies and hair, nail and tanning salons. Area nonprofits that support schools make ideal co-hosts, too.

Fashion Forward. In 2008, Furst the Florist, which has done prom work for customers from 10 high schools, made corsages for a fashion show the local Deb dress store hosted in the center of the mall. Staff came up with catchy names for eight corsages (including “Twilight,” and “Fireworks,”) and wrote descriptions that the master of ceremonies read along with dress information while the models traversed the catwalk. Publicity was great because it extended to people who hadn’t come specifically for the fashion show, Burke said. “Everyone passing by hears your name,” she said.

Furst has kept its dance card full, networking with another dress boutique in the area. Burke said more aggressive prom marketing, which began several years ago, helped push the shop’s average corsage order up initially by about \$5, from \$25 to \$30, and then by \$2 to \$3 each year after that, climbing to \$35 to \$40 today.

Benefit Helps Kids, Businesses.

Helen Miller, AIFD, of Flowers & Such in Adrian, Mich., got the next best thing to selling inside local schools. Last year, high school officials mentioned her shop in broadcast school announcements to students and in robocalls, thanks to Lenawee County’s Communities In Schools (CIS), a nonprofit that provides a range of interventions for students at risk of not graduating. The shop also participated in a winter dance event and benefit that CIS organized at a hair salon. Students paid \$5 for the fashion show with vendor tables. Miller gave the models, one from each of nine area schools, a free corsage and boutonniere.

“They’re showing it off,” she said. “What better advertising can you get?”

About 150 attendees received coupons from vendors, including \$5 off a \$30 purchase from Flowers & Such.

The fashion show resulted in a 20 percent increase in 2011 winter dance sales over the previous year, tracked via the coupons and on-site orders, Miller said, as well as the promise of more business in subsequent years from freshmen and sophomores, who will likely return for future dances, including their own prom. “A lot of them had never been in

our store before,” Miller said, noting that some students’ mothers returned to do some Christmas shopping.

Without CIS, Flowers & Such would not have had any exposure in the schools because of restrictions against subjecting kids to commercial offers, Miller said. The three sponsors shared the advertising expense for postcards and posters. Radio stations gave free public service announcements.

“We covered a lot of bases for very low cost,” she said. The group plans to do it again this spring for prom.





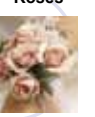



Not Just Wishful Thinking. At Fassler Florist, where prom business has doubled since 2008 from 2.5 percent to 5 percent of sales, prom shows drive much of the growth. The Mackeys put coupons or “prom wish list” forms on every seat at local prom events organized by the dress shops. The wish lists let girls note their dress color, favorite flowers and preference for crystal or pearl bracelets or other accessories — a real savior for guys who don’t know what their dates are wearing and have to fall back on ordering white corsages. (Though Mackey always offers to “oomph it up” with silver or another embellishment.)

Participating in such events, especially with high-end vendors, helps make your shop part of the local prom conversation.

“Your reputation is a big part of this,” said Celeste Mackey, president-elect of the Kentucky Florists Association. Once young customers entrust your shop with such a big event, they’re more likely to shop again for other dances and events. High school girls often call and ask for those “beaded things,” she said, knowing they can count on the florist’s style.

Displays of Affection

News flash: Teenage girls like to shop, so give them a browsing bounty when they say, “I’m just looking,” Fisher said. In all likelihood, they’ve never bought flowers before.

All Corsages created on a Fitz Design Flower Bracelet. You can choose which bracelet in any available color, as well as choosing the flower type and color!		Daisy Pomp	Alstromeria	Orchid	Roses
Colors Champagne Pepper Sugar Ice	Classic 				
		\$12.00	\$13.50	\$16.00	\$16.00
Champagne Turquoise Cotton Candy Sugar Licorice Raspberry	Empress 				
		\$16.00	\$17.50	\$20.00	\$20.00
Blueberry Cotton Candy Green Apple Sugar Plum Dazzle Pepper Cinnamon	Rock Candy 				
		\$18.00	\$19.50	\$22.00	\$22.00
Caramel Turquoise Cotton Candy Dazzle Licorice Raspberry	Flower Power 				
		\$30.00	\$31.50	\$34.00	\$34.00



PICK YOUR PRICE This sample pricing chart shows kids how customizing their look with different flowers, bracelets and colors changes the price.

THAT'LL BE \$20 \$40

If your shop's average corsage sells for less than \$20, you might be leaving money on the table. According to a recent survey of SAF members, the average prom order is \$28.50 — and 42 percent of respondents get more than that, with the top end of the range at \$75. Some tips on nabbing higher-ticket sales:

Talk to the girl. "If you want to get the most amount of money, you talk to the girl," prom specialist Dan Fisher said, not her date or his mother. "Even if the boy is paying for it, you still work it in such a way that you're talking to the girl."

Know dress prices. Charge accordingly. A girl who shelled out \$400 for a dress will likely have a different flower budget than one who spent \$75. "Corsages should start at 15 percent of the price of the dress," Fisher recommends. Consult prom magazines, look online and visit the mall. You can also go straight to the source and ask your customer to show you her dress in a magazine or on the Internet. A compliment sometimes elicits the cost of the dress. Try, "Wow! That looks like a \$500 dress." She may reply, "\$500? Are you kidding? That was \$800." Or: "Gorgeous. Looks like it cost you



PHOTO BY BRENDA POTTINGER

a fortune," which can prompt her to reveal what she paid.

Pitch the lifetime and sentimental value of the bling. Corsage accessories range from \$2 for simple bracelets to as high as almost \$40 wholesale, for a rhinestone belt. There's a market for such pieces, said Fisher — just remind her that she can wear it again, and it becomes a keepsake of her first big dance.

Fancy names, fancy prices. To limit comparison-shopping, try this: Make half a dozen really fancy, expensive corsages and name them. (For a training session, Fisher named some after Las Vegas hotels — the Venetian, Bellagio

and Luxor, for example.) The girl can't ask your competitor its price for the "Venetian" because it doesn't have one.

Don't apologize for your corsage prices. Girls spend an average of \$335 for their dress, and another \$150 on hair, makeup and nails, Fisher said, citing figures from multiple Conde Nast publications. "Today's florists feel guilty about [selling more expensive prom pieces] but they shouldn't," Fisher said. Upselling is widespread and widely accepted in all industries, he said. "Take the high margins and make them work for you."

Christy O'Farrell



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Make the maiden flower-shopping trip less confusing by giving customers some control in design. First the Florist sets up a “candy buffet” in the shop displaying all the bracelets, ribbons and charms in cubes by color. Last year, the staff put a wedding canopy over the display in March and April to make it stand out.

“If they have more ownership in the creation of [the corsage], they’re willing to pay more for it,” Burke said.

Give them another element of control, Fisher said, with pricing boards or charts near your displays and sample corsages. Show flower choices along the top, for example, and bracelet styles along the side, indicating how prices change depending on their selections (see photo, p. 26). Put signs up over each section of your display, directing girls to choose one garland, two dazzlers and three rhinestones or something similar, Fisher suggested.

At Shirley’s Flowers’ prom party, customers could see the cost of replacing a gerbera with an orchid on a pricing sheet with pictures. They could also choose from a ribbon wheel of col-

ors and types. With a chart in full view, none of the girls experienced sticker shock for their final product.

Despite the upfront work required to create the menu options, Shy said it becomes an effective selling tool and a way to showcase the breadth of her designers’ creativity. Besides, the party itself makes it easy to get the majority of orders in “one big shebang,” saving work, compared to a month-long daily trickle, Shy said.

While pricing must be readily available near displays, don’t put corsage prices on your website, Celeste Mackey advised. Corsage pricing varies widely, and when supplies run out it’s hard to change the Fessler Florist website often enough, she said.

And whether your prom displays are temporary or permanent — the Mackeys



BROWSABLE BANGLES Helen Miller, AIFD, of Flowers & Such in Adrian, Mich., uses light to make her prom display dazzle.



leave their prom jewelry displays up year-round because customers buy the accessories as gifts — make the items look glamorous. At Flowers & Such, Miller uses lots of light to “catch the sparkle.” A chocolate brown board with numbered ribbon and gem choices makes it easy for customers to order and staff to fulfill accurately.

A photo book showing about 45 prom designs complements Miller’s store displays. She and her staff made one on Snapfish for just \$25, and it has generated more sales than the John Henry and Teleflora catalogs, Miller said. Steering customers toward prepared designs saves time, and Miller credits the book for the jump in average boutonniere price: \$14-\$18 in 2011, compared to \$10 in 2010.

“The guys like the glitz too.”

Any florist who’s only dabbled in prom may consider the prospect of hanging out at high schools, buttering up principals, and dedicating show-room space and weekend nights hardly worth it for a \$40 sale.

Perhaps, but Burke can testify that the value of teen customers lingers well after prom. One prom customer told her father, who was getting remarried, to use Furst for his wedding. Two years later, the same girl chose Furst for her own wedding.

Fisher is adamant Burke’s experience is not an isolated one. “If florists will connect — truly connect — with the girl by treating her special and becoming her florist,” they can look forward to a lifetime of business estimated at \$27,500, he said.

Some girls already play bride, Burke points out, treating prom “like their little mini-wedding.” But you can plant the seed for a lifelong relationship by showing high school girls your wedding selection guides, since

they’re filled with corsages and boutonnières, not to mention bouquets and centerpieces. So cater to them, Fisher said, because the next time they come in, it may be to talk flowers for the real thing.

“What’s the next big floral purchase this girl’s going to make?” Fisher asked. “She will see that look in your store and come back to get it.”

Christy O’Farrell is senior editor of *Floral Management*. cofarrell@safnow.org



PICTURE BOOK The staff at Flowers & Such compiled about 45 of their best prom designs in a book to steer students toward looks they’re prepared to create.