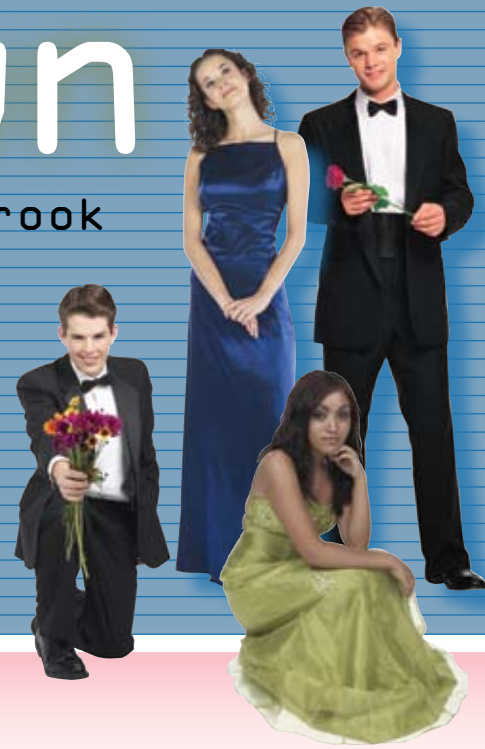


Countdown to Prom

By Mary Westbrook

Teens can be picky, moody and indecisive but they have dollars to spend — and a lifetime of buying flowers ahead of them.



A teen skips into your shop — bright-eyed and particular. It's prom! It's homecoming! The specific dance doesn't matter, really. The important thing is that he or she has found the perfect a) date b) outfit c) limo and d) dining spot. For a night, this hometown kid is one of Hollywood's bright young things, dressed up, with places to go. All that remains: the flowers.

If you have a hard time mustering excitement for high school dance work — especially when it falls oh-so-inconveniently on Mother's Day or a major wedding weekend — you're not alone. Generally speaking, prom work is time-consuming and detailed. If you don't price it right, it's not profitable. And, then there are the customers: Hormone-filled, anxiety-ridden gals and guys who are convinced this night represents the most important event in the history of mankind.

On the other hand, when properly planned for, prom and homecoming work can mean a welcome cash injection, a chance to meet and educate young customers who are open to creativity and ingenuity and an opportunity to get involved with your community. In that spirit, Floral Management recently talked to florists about the best aspects of prom — the reasons they not only do the work, but look forward to it.



Appeal to their Web Smarts.

The class of 2008 was born in 1990, nine years *after* IBM unveiled its first personal computer. Students coming to

you for high school dances are digital natives; they're not only familiar with computers and the Internet, they often prefer electronic to personal interactions (often, but not always). Some florists are leveraging that high level of comfort by adding teen-friendly pages to their Web sites and optimizing pages for words such as prom, homecoming and winter formal. The result? Smooth,

easily tracked transactions that require less manpower to conduct.

Such is the case at Schaefer Greenhouses in Montgomery, Ill. Several years ago, the business updated its Web site, and in the process, optimized the site for local school-related searches (with keywords such as local school names as well as generic prom terms). The redesign included a new page design specifically for proms: www.schaeffergreenhouses.com/homecoming-prom-flowers.html. That page allows the shop to tout its work online without taking away from other content — or tying up sales professionals with frequently asked questions.

“With the power of the Internet, you can focus on different types of product, like prom work, you wouldn't advertise in other mediums because of high costs,” says Schaeffer co-owner Mary Ann Kutnick. High school students “are first-time buyers who don't know where to go, but kids are Internet savvy.”

The shop's prom and homecoming page is easy to maintain: Kutnick says the content basically changes twice a year, once



Everything is important to them. For them, it's all about creating a look.

— Julie Poeltler, AIFD

Julie's Fountain of Flowers and Gifts,
Lone Tree, Iowa

for prom and once for homecoming, with occasional tweaks along the way. As an added benefit, when teens buy online, order tracking kicks in automatically, meaning Kutnick and her team know exactly which prom items are selling well and which aren't — almost as soon as the orders come in.



Cater to their need to make a statement.

Forget the 50-something man who *only* buys his wife red roses or the 20-something professional who turns up her nose

at exotic foliage, calling it “filler.” Teens, in general, are open to new ideas — and, often, they want and value your expertise. (Fancy that.) Beads, lights, glitter, sequins, boas and anklets — the teen prom market is filled with flight-of-fancy ideas sure to jumpstart even designers stuck in creative ruts.

“There’s a lot of customization,” Kutnick says. “They like the glitzy-shiny stuff.”

“Everything is important to them,” adds Julie Poeltler, AIFD, of Julie’s Fountain of Flowers and Gifts in Lone Tree, Iowa. “For them, it’s all about creating a look” — meaning the flowers not only complement the dress but also the date, the date’s outfit, etc.



Show it and then sell it.

To satisfy anxious young customers — and to help guide their creativity to a realistic place — Poeltler and her team put together a board of silk samples just before the dance season kicks off. The simple board helps teens visualize what the finished designs will look like, but if they need more information, Poeltler is happy to comply: She encourages teens to return to the shop several days before the event to “inspect” the flowers. (Inviting girls to bring their dresses in to match flowers and ribbons is standard practice for many florists.)

Along with corsage boards, florists can help educate teens on the industry by keeping prom-related resources (such as The John Henry Company’s prom book) near the register. And remember, unlike older customers, teens may

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On the Runway

Prom trends last about as long as a celebrity marriage, but some trends are emerging for 2008. Here's a look at what experts are telling teens to try out on the dance floor:

Bright Colors. The March issue of Seventeen magazine turned the spotlight on color, especially bright blues, hot pinks and metallic shades.

No Middle Ground. The Seventeen editors also encouraged girls to accessorize a lot — or not at all. "Lots of gold bangles on both arms add to the cool party feel of [a] tiered [gold] dress," according to the story. Conversely, a more ornate dress calls for nothing but "pretty earrings." This kind

of advice matters: Julie Poeltler, AIFD, of Julie's Fountain of Flowers and Gifts in Lone Tree, Iowa, says, increasingly, teens view prom flowers as accessories, part of a unified look. "That's one of the biggest changes," she says. "They want that whole look" as opposed to in the past, when flowers might have been a last-minute addition.

Go Goth. In its March issue, Cosmo Girl encouraged readers to head down a darker path for prom: gothic. Smoky eyes, silver dresses and dramatic hair complement the look, which included voluminous silk gowns in pale blues and grays paired with black leather jackets, scarves and broaches. — M.W.

PROM PRIMERS Flowers become the jewels, for prom-goers looking for unique ways to accessorize. Hot pink, metallic wire combined with pink and blue florals appeals to the "bright" trend.

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have very little understanding of distinctions between, say, a freesia and a lily. Walking them through the order and simultaneously educating them about flowers is a surefire way to increase their satisfaction and guarantee their business, Kutnick says.

The proactive work of showing teens visuals and samples early can pay off in the long-run, too, Poeltler says. She explains that the more time you spend with teens on the front-end, the less time you'll spend on the phone reassuring them about their orders — or adjusting designs.



Don't underestimate their spending power.

While **MarketResearch.com** estimated teen spending power actually dropped 12 percent between 2003 and 2006, teens still have a lot of allowance, baby-sitting and lawn-mowing money to spend — an estimated \$153 billion in 2006, according to **MarketResearch.com**. For many teens, there's no bigger event — or better way to spend their money — than prom or homecoming dinners, dresses, tuxes, dances and flowers.

“Teens have money to spend and they're willing to do whatever it takes to make it a memorable occasion,” Kutnick says. “It's important that you show these kids that this is what a florist can do.”



Get started early.

Unlike other business segments, teen-related work is fairly reliable. Savvy florists in tune with their local high schools know approximately when major school dances occur — and the smartest florists call a school contact months in advance to confirm dates.

“I'm always the second person the [school] activities director talks to about the dates,” says Poeltler. “If you find out the date for homecoming in the spring, you have the whole summer to prepare” foundation items such as wristbands.

By calling early, Poeltler and other florists also avoid common springtime conflicts — such as a weekend of weddings and proms. Some conflicts — Mother's Day occasionally coincides with prom — cannot be avoided, but they can be planned for.

“Truthfully, it's a push,” admits Kutnick.

At Schaefer's, a three-person corsage and wedding department usually takes the lead on prom flowers, but if it's a busy weekend with multiple events, “we all pitch in,” Kutnick says. “Sometimes, you're lucky [with school schedules]. Sometimes, you're not.”

Last-minute orders are a given, Poeltler says, so don't even think about leaving your shop without a capable



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designer on the day of the dance. And don't forget to optimize your Web site for prom and homecoming sales a few months before the dance, advises Kutnick. If you do, you can attract business from browsers dreaming of the big day — no matter how far off it is.

 **Nurture their "customer for life" potential.**

Perhaps the most important characteristic of teen customers is this: In a few years, they'll be adult customers with mature and varied needs, including wedding work, décor items, corporate gifts, anniversary presents, sympathy arrangements, thank you bouquets and more. Treating them seriously when they are still in high school can go a long way.

"If you satisfy customers when they're young, there's no reason they won't come back," Kutnick says.

And the teens coming into your shop may have strong connections to your business already: Word-of-mouth recommendations from mothers, fathers, older sisters and brothers, after all, remain the gold standard of prom marketing.

With some teens, "they've been coming into your shop since they were babies and then they go to dances and then you have a wedding," Poeltler says. "These are customers you've nurtured." 🌸

Mary Westbrook is a contributing writer for Floral Management. E-mail: mwestbrook@safnow.org

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