

**DANCE QUEEN.** By creating, photographing and marketing prom designs that are both profitable and unique to her store, Betsy Hall increased her prom sales by 11 percent.



*Prom!*

**NO PAIN.**

**MORE**

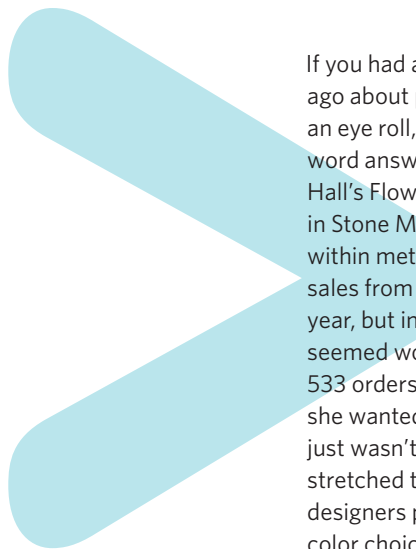
**PROFIT.**

A Georgia florist takes the pain out of prom season with standard designs and procedures that increase profit, while delighting local teens and their parents.

**BY MARY WESTBROOK**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIE KIPPELEN





If you had asked Betsy Hall three years ago about prom, you might have gotten an eye roll, a deep, weary sigh and a one-word answer: "Painful." Her business, Hall's Flower Shop and Garden Center in Stone Mountain, Ga., is well situated within metro Atlanta to capture prom sales from up to 20 high schools each year, but in 2011, the business hardly seemed worth the effort. With about 533 orders that year, Hall had the volume she wanted but not the margins; prom just wasn't profitable. Consultations stretched to 30 or even 45 minutes, as designers patiently walked kids through color choices and bling, while other customers waited, or went elsewhere. Average corsage orders hovered stubbornly in the low- to mid-\$20s. Every year, some orders had to be redone because of miscommunications among staff, or with customers. Designers were logging late nights on Fridays before each prom and spending too much time (and product) on custom designs and re-dos. And, of course, prom season overlapped with more lucrative work from spring weddings and Mother's Day.

It was almost enough to make Hall write off the business entirely. "I felt so frustrated," she said. Worst of all, many of her headaches — including an outdated website that featured generic prom pictures instead of original designs — felt self-inflicted. "It was like we were setting booby traps for ourselves," she said.

Like many florists, Hall saw promise in prom — the immediate sales and the potential lifetime value of each kid — but she knew she had to reconsider her approach to make the segment profitable, and worth the work. She made a commitment to do just that — make prom profitable. Three years later, the effort has resulted in consultations that rarely take more than 10 minutes (and are often done in seconds online), happier designers and more satisfied customers, along with standard designs that don't sacrifice creativity. Most important of all, Hall's efforts have led to better margins, and a double-digit percent increase in prom sales, from 2012 to 2013. Her practical, comprehensive approach just might make you rethink how you court teens in your neighborhood.

## Step One: Sell What You Want to Sell

For Hall, the path to better margins started with better photos. She wanted to create demand for designs that were beautiful, profitable and unique to her store — while still maintaining a range of price point options extending from carnations to orchids. That meant ditching generic photos and creating a custom prom catalog online.

To build that catalog, Hall asked her designers to take a picture of every thing the shop created for prom in 2011, from modest spray-rose boutonnières to the super-blinged-out corsages. "I wanted customers to see exactly what they were ordering," she said. "The only way to do that was to create it, photograph it and post it."

The process wasn't easy. Many of the photos Hall and her team captured that first year, well — "they stank," said Hall, with characteristic candor (think: blurry images, busy backgrounds). Still, by the end of the season, she had enough good shots to incorporate more original work onto her website for prom the following year, in 2012. That year, she also migrated to a new website (through got-Flowers), which gave her more creative control over her online presence — along with new functionality that she had long craved (more on that later).

Building on what she learned in 2011, Hall approached the 2012 prom season

## Prom Player

### HALL'S FLOWER SHOP AND GARDEN CENTER

Stone Mountain, Ga.

#### High Schools served

15-20 annually

#### Prom sales increase

11 percent from 2012 to 2013

#### 2013 prom orders

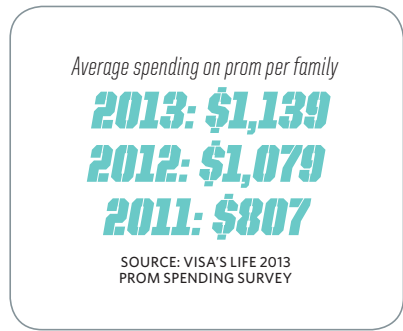
670

#### Average ticket growth

From \$9.99 to \$15.99 for boutonnières; from \$24.99 to \$39.99 for corsages

#### Secret to profitability

Sell customers on your designs, not stock photos. Make add-ons easy and second nature. Streamline communication and reduce errors with an updated website. Use design names and label add-ons and materials; embrace an organized workspace.



with new energy. Once again, she photographed all of the year's prom work, but this time Hall, who had been honing her own photo and Photoshop skills, streamlined the photo process with a low-cost "photo studio": a white foam board, a bench in the greenhouse that had plenty of nice, natural light, and a piece of blue

shower curtain. (Designs with a lot of white could be photographed against the blue backdrop to ensure that petals and details were distinct in pictures; later, in Photoshop, Hall could put all of the photos on the same white background — no busy backgrounds or bad manicures to work around.)

After the 2012 season, Hall and her team edited the photos again. From hundreds of photos, they pulled out about 75 designs that were 1) replicable 2) profitable and 3) representative of the shop's aesthetic, abilities and wide price range. (Hall is determined to work with kids across the budget spectrum; "Here, price doesn't dictate pretty," she said.) Those photos became the catalog for the shop's 2013 season.

## Step Two: Formalize Your Process

Since mistakes are margin-suckers, Hall also wanted to streamline and improve communication channels, both among staff members and

between the shop and its customers. Before 2012, one of the sticking points internally stemmed from inefficiencies in the order-taking process: The sales team member who took the initial order wasn't always around when the design team was creating the work, so when questions arose — *which* gold speckle-y ribbon do you think this girl wanted? — the designer had to guess. If she guessed incorrectly, it might mean a last-minute redo on prom day, while the teen (or her mother) waited impatiently in the showroom.

The fix was easy, but it required some legwork and a new system. Today, all of the materials used in prom — including ribbon and bling — receive specific names or numbers. It doesn't matter if Susie from Main Street High orders online, in-store, or talks to one staff member or three; everyone speaks the same language. "Once we had numbered our ribbons and created recipes for everything, there was no judgment call," and far less room for error, said Hall. The process also allowed for better organization in-store, with ribbons, for instance,

**WELCOME WAGON** While 60 percent of Hall's prom orders come in online, in-store, the staff makes sure that teens and their families feel appreciated, with cheerful signage and great customer service.



**GROUP THINK** Improving prom profitability has been a business-wide effort at Hall's, with renewed attention on process, education and organization that extends to the sales and design rooms. From left: Patti Chandler, Dodie Stien, Betsy Hall, Brian Baldwin and Ken Hall





**WEB WISE** By prom season in 2012, Betsy Hall had ditched an outdated website, replacing it with a new platform that gave her more creative control, showcasing her catalog of custom prom images and add-ons.

## Hall's Prom Timeline

**January:** Call area schools and find out prom dates.

**February:** Update online prom catalog with new images.

**March:** Prom season begins. Take photos of all designs.

**May:** Prom season ends

**June-August:** Review sales figures, prom pictures

**September-December:** Clean up selected new images in Photoshop

**Year-Round:** Invest in Google AdWords; Communicate regularly with customers via email and social media; Photograph new work; Use downtime for skills-building workshops for designers — and creative sessions for new designs.

labeled and grouped by color, so that designers can work through like-designs more quickly. Those changes have led to more efficiency: While late Fridays were common in the past, the 2013 prom season saw very little overtime.

In 2012, Hall and her team also started naming each design, creating standard recipes and assigning each design a specific SKU, for more effective, post-prom analysis. “The names have been really popular” with students, Hall said. (Among the recent standouts: Divalicious, a silver-accented white lily wrist corsage, and Prom King, a boutonniere with gold leaves and white spray roses.) The new website made it easy for Hall to include detailed descriptions of the designs, along with easy upgrades (including fashion bracelets, lights and feathers). Website users can also request color and flower changes in a “special instructions” box (Hall and her team will follow up on the rare occasion that requests become too specialized or complicated), and teens can choose to pick up their orders, or have them delivered, which has proved to be a surprisingly popular option for some customers in outlying areas. Thanks to the improved website and original photos, communication with customers has dramatically improved. Before, the shop might get a same-day request for a terra cotta lily boutonniere, even though no such flower could be found in the cooler. Now, what customers see is what they can get.

Naming the designs also helped build on Hall's identity as *the* place to go for prom flowers, with orders coming in from around metro Atlanta. By 2013, Hall was in a much better position for prom — and on track to realize significant increases in sales — through the “magic” of hard work and stick-to-it-ness.

“We aren't in the trendy side of town and we can't sell in our local schools,” she explained, so becoming a hot spot in town among teens was something of a (hard-fought) miracle, and the direct result of Hall's vision. “It wasn't that the sales weren't there before, or even that the customers weren't happy,” she said, “but we weren't leading them where we wanted to go.”

### Step Three: Push It

When Hall uploaded the pictures for the 2013 prom catalog, she also began promoting the offerings through the shop's social media channels, including the shop's blog, Google+ page, Facebook and Pinterest. She'd made similar efforts in the past, but last year, the high quality of her photos, and the procedural improvements in-store, gave her more confidence. Last fall, she also revamped her social media process, to make the work more efficient, and to ensure that she was directing traffic back to her site. “Our blog is now at the center of all we do,” said Hall, who writes most of the entries herself and then posts them to her different channels. “This year, we'll post independently to Facebook and other sites, but the blog is the cornerstone; that's what drives our social media.”

With an eye always toward the following year, Hall also hosted a Facebook contest last year; prom customers who posted a picture of their prom flowers and reviewed the shop on Facebook were automatically entered into a raffle for a Mother's Day arrangement valued at \$75. The effort generated chatter on the page and ensured that customers in 2014 will see plenty of (positive) reviews when they start shopping for their flowers this year.

Year-round, Hall also invests in Google AdWords and email blasts as part of her overall marketing strategy. (At this point, she said, she doesn't feel that it makes sense to segment out a separate email for prom customers, since they are generally done with prom flowers after one or two seasons.) Her multi-faceted approach worked wonders last year, when Hall also estimated that 60 percent of the shop's roughly 670 prom orders came in via the website solely, or via a phone call with a customer who had already thoroughly perused the catalog online. Most of those transactions were completed in seconds, no hand-holding required.

*The Northeast leads the nation in prom spending **\$1,528** per family*

FOLLOWED BY: THE SOUTH (\$1,203); THE WEST (\$1,079) AND THE MIDWEST (\$722).

SOURCE: VISA'S 2013 PROM SPENDING SURVEY

While Hall loves the fact that so many of her orders now come in online, and require so little consultation time, she also wants to make sure teens know they are valued. Beginning in early January, Hall calls the schools to get their proms on the shop's calendar, so she can mention the dances online, through social media and in-store, where a cheerful chalkboard greets the week's prom-goers ("Welcome, Stone Mountain High School!"). She also still

puts together a corsage bar for teens who need the tactile experience of seeing the ribbon and bling options.

"You have to make your store look great for the students, and make them feel significant," she said. She and her staff also communicate with teens on the students' terms. "We're more than happy to email or text pictures as orders are done," she said. "They love that."

### Step Four: Do It All Again

By the end of the 2013 prom season, Hall had proof her diligence had paid off. Overall, prom sales rose 11 percent from 2012 to 2013 and average transactions increased, too: from \$9.99 to \$15.99 for boutonnieres and \$24.99 to \$39.99 for corsages. Waste and inefficiency were also down. In fact, in 2013, the shop had just one do-over design, down from about six the year before.

**Incorporate**  
for as little as **\$99**

**Visit [www.incorporate.com](http://www.incorporate.com)**  
**or call 800-643-6583**

— THE —  
**COMPANY**  
CORPORATION®

INCORPORATING WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU



**Save \$25 by scanning this code**

# HONOR SOMEONE

## WITH AN SAF AWARD NOMINATION







**March 21, 2014 is the deadline to submit nominations for SAF's top honors.**

- Floriculture Hall of Fame
- Gold Medal Award
- SAF Paul Ecke Jr. Award
- John H. Walker Award

- Alex Laurie Award for Research and Education
- Century Award

**Add valuable professional credentials to your name!**

- AAF

**Share the excitement as this year's winners are announced!**

**Join us in Florida on Aug. 13-16 for SAF Marco Island 2014.**



**SAF** | SOCIETY of AMERICAN FLORISTS

Visit [www.safnow.org/awards](http://www.safnow.org/awards) or contact SAF at 800-336-4743 or [awards@safnow.org](mailto:awards@safnow.org).





**POPULAR MECHANICS** Inspired by a prom design workshop just after Valentine's Day last year, Patti Chandler brought back new ideas on mechanics and products to the design team, including Dodie Stien.

"2013 was really the year that we hit our sweet spot," Hall said. "We turned an individual, specialized item into a kind of everyday item for us" with the standard pictures and recipes, and "took our pain and suffering out of the process."

That process is ongoing. Hall and her team have spent the last 12 months updating their technical skills and photos whenever the shop has downtime. In fact, Hall said, a renewed focus on design education has been crucial to the transformation. Last February, Hall sent Patti Chandler, a designer and the flower shop's general manager, to a prom workshop put on by Fitz Design and hosted at burton+Burton in Atlanta. Chandler came back inspired; she immediately shared her new skills with the rest of the design team, including new techniques for gluing dendrobium orchids and new products such as

gold and silver leaves. These "creative sessions" have become part of the routine at Hall's, where you're likely to find designers playing, brainstorming and helping each other with mechanics on slow afternoons throughout the year, not only for prom but also for holidays such as Valentine's Day. (Hall also hosted a design workshop in her store in October 2013 with the Midwest Floral Group; Fitz Design produced the event.) "On quiet Saturdays, we'll just get out the glue and practice," Hall said. "Mechanics can be a little tricky... you don't want to be working on skills while a student is standing in front of you, tapping her foot."



**REAL SIMPLE** Mistakes are margin-suckers, according to Betsy Hall. That's why all prom accessories — from feathers to ribbon — are now labeled to prevent mix-ups and costly redos.

Parents pay for  
**59 PERCENT**  
of prom costs. Teens  
pay for 41 percent.

SOURCE: VISA'S 2013 PROM SPENDING SURVEY

## IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

When the team at Hall's Flower Shop started to reimagine their prom work in 2011 and 2012, they weren't positive their teen customers

would go along with some of their wilder (and more expensive) design ideas. Guess what?

They did. That's another lesson Betsy Hall has learned: For the right item, teens are more than willing to spend money. "I never thought I would sell a corsage with lights on it, but once the kids saw it, they loved it." General Manager Patti

Chandler was also dubious about

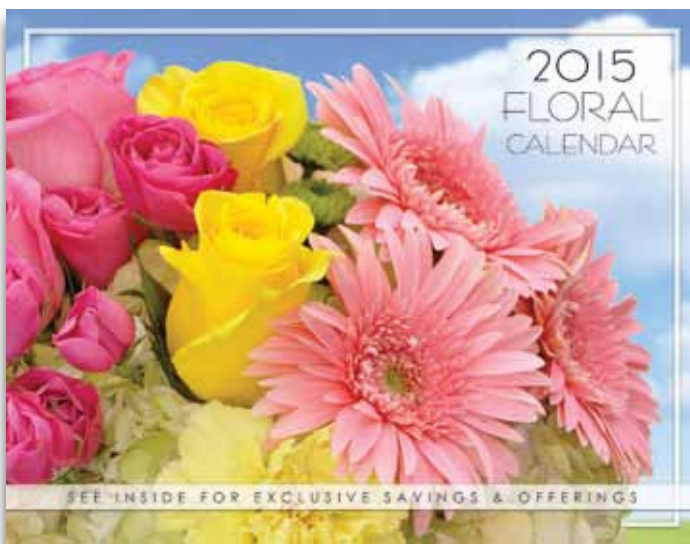
Divalicious (photo), a super-sized wrist corsage with a large Casablanca lily and ribbon that was "wider and heavier" than the shop had ever used. She loved the look of the design right away but worried petite high school girls might balk. Not a chance. "It sold hand over fist," she said. "The mothers loved it." **M.W.**



The sessions are also a great way to encourage creativity and discover new scalable, profitable and — of course — unique designs for the coming prom season, said Hall, who has been known to take out her camera and capture a new design during the sessions, for use in the next season. They also keep morale high and help staff set goals. This year, for instance, Chandler is hoping to focus on getting more customers to three upsells (instead of one or two) with add-ons such as hair clips, shoe clips and fashion bracelets.

In the last year, Hall has also hired a former staff member as a work-from-home contractor to support her web efforts, including updates to the prom catalog, freeing Hall to focus on other issues within the business. For all the challenges that prom can present, Hall said that, to her store, the hard work has paid off, not only in terms of sales but also loyal customers. Former prom customers will "come up and say, 'Hey! You made my first corsage,' and they're usually really excited about that," she said. "All florists are struggling with order-gatherers, big boxes, Sam's and Costco, but we're still the people who have the bling for prom. This is our chance to show them how much we can do." 🌸

**Mary Westbrook** is a contributing writer and editor for the Society of American Florists. [mwestbrook@safnow.org](mailto:mwestbrook@safnow.org)



Order your 2015 Customizable  
**Wall Calendar**

today for as  
little as

**99¢** each

**Stay in front of your customers all year long!**

*Your* Logo • *Your* Brand  
*Your* Calendar!

• **CUSTOMIZABLE** coupons • **FREE** web images •

ORDER TODAY: **( 8 6 6 ) 2 2 5 - 1 1 7 3**



**NEW FOR 2014**

**Customizable Floral Boxes,**  
available to order all year long.

Also coming soon in 2014, POS forms.

**BENEVA**  
SOLUTIONS  
[WWW.BENEVASOLUTIONS.COM](http://WWW.BENEVASOLUTIONS.COM)



# Red, White and Color Block?

Wondering what to expect from your local teens this year? Hollywood’s glamorous award season offers some clues, said Theresa Colucci, AIFD, PFCI, of Meadowscent in Gardiner, N.Y. She noted the many coral and red dresses at the Golden Globes, on Jan. 12, and plenty of eye-popping, colorful jewelry, which for teens, could be replaced with custom floral pieces. (The Academy Awards ceremony — sure to provide even more inspiration — airs March 2.) Overall, “bling is still very hot,” Colucci said. “We display all of our bracelets, ribbons and add-ons out on the floor and give girls a sheet where they can check off what they want.” To translate some of that Hollywood glamour into prom chic, we turned to TeenPROM Editor Jane Fort, who helped us create a look book of popular trends.



**Red.** Colucci isn't alone in predicting a wave of red dresses among teens: Fashion editors were delighted with the crimson, cardinal and cherry shades at the Golden Globes on stars such as singer Taylor Swift and actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

DRESS BY BLUSH, BLUSHPROM.COM



**Black and White.** America's latest sweetheart, Jennifer Lawrence ("American Hustle"), accepted her Golden Globe in a black and white ball gown (with green drop earrings and a cropped haircut); Harper's Bazaar called the color combo, also sported by Allison Williams ("Girls"), "the height of chic."

DRESS BY MAGGIE SOTTERO, FLIRTPROM.COM



**Color blocking** also was a fashion movement of note at the Golden Globes, with stars such as Sandra Bullock ("Gravity"), in pink, black and blue, and Julie Bowen ("Modern Family"), in red and purple, making use of creative color combinations to stay on trend.

DRESS BY MIGNON, MIGNONFASHIONS.COM



**Embellishments.** In a trend that seems made for florists to capitalize on, hipster sweetheart Zooey Deschanel and Michelle Dockery (“Downton Abbey”) shimmered in ensembles with plenty of texture and decorative trimming — spangles, sequins and beads; the gurus at Harper’s said that the paillettes and appliques provided “the power of something extra” to the night’s dresses.

DRESS BY COYACOLLECTION.COM



**Lace.** Actress Leslie Mann and Cate Blanchett (“Blue Jasmine”) were among the stars sporting lace at the Globes. That’s a versatile trend for prom this year — both sophisticated and, on a crop top for instance, playful, said Fort.

DRESS BY ANGELAANDALISON.COM



**Capes.** Note to shops in colder climates: Outerwear for prom might be decidedly in this year. Amy Adams (“American Hustle”) and Lupita Nyong (“12 Years a Slave”) set the fashion world abuzz with capes at the Golden Globes; Nyong’s frock was actually a cape dress (reminiscent of a white dress worn in 2012 to the Oscars by Gwyneth Paltrow). Nyong’s gown was made by Ralph Lauren and retails for \$7,000, but Fort said a more prom budget-friendly version of it has yet to hit the runway.

CAPE BY SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

## Gentlemen Only

For men at the Golden Globes — and younger men following in their style footsteps — classic is still a winner. Several pubs named Bradley Cooper (“American Hustle”) the night’s best-dressed man, in a perfectly tailored midnight blue tux. Fashionistas also liked the textures and colors worn by Matthew McConaughey (“Dallas Buyers Club”), in a forest green, velvet, three-piece, one-button tuxedo, and presenter Mark Ruffalo, in a brown and gray, three-piece, two-button, tux with a subtle, broken-weave texture. Still, it was Usher Raymond who kept the fashion experts talking the day after the Globes: The singer accessorized his oxblood tux with a vintage diamond brooch. “This is a real breakthrough in man jewelry,” promised the editors of The Cut fashion blog on New York magazine.



## Statement Pieces.

Stars such as Emma Roberts (“American Horror Story”) and Sofia Vergara (“Modern Family”) chose a relatively muted backdrop — black or dark navy gowns — to showcase colorful jewelry: turquoise earrings for Roberts and a mega-watt turquoise necklace for Vergara.

NECKLACE BY GLENNETHB.COM



THE ALL-NEW  
RAM PROMASTER  
RUN THE TOWN



ON THE  
JOB

BUSINESS   
The best lease for small business.

1) Based on Class 2, single rear wheel axle cargo vans, when properly equipped. 2) Based on 1500/150 series large commercial van segment. 3) Comparisons based on standard condition. 4) See dealer for details and a copy of the powertrain limited warranty. Ram is a registered trademark of Chrysler Group LLC.





LEAVE YOUR



# RESUME

ALL  
OVER

*The* CITY

BEST-IN-CLASS

**PAYLOAD**

**4,430 LB\***

BEST-IN-CLASS

**CARGO**

**CAPACITY**

TALLEST STANDARD

**INTERIOR**

**65 INCHES\***

5-YR/100K-MI

**POWERTRAIN**

**WARRANTY**

CITY STREET MAP



[RAMTRUCKS.COM/COMMERCIAL](http://RAMTRUCKS.COM/COMMERCIAL)