



That'll Teach 'Em

Show customers your shop is worth their allegiance and money with can't-miss classes.

BY KATIE HENDRICK



FOLLOWING THE LEADER. Designer Lauren Seaborn shows students at Tiger Lily Florist how to do basic floral design, and they show her that in-store classes secure their loyalty.

As soon as the staff of Log Cabin Florist opened doors to the sound of seven ringing phone lines one Saturday morning in March, they knew their day was about to get very interesting. For four hours, two salespeople, two designers and two drivers fielded nonstop calls. By noon, one smart salesperson knew it was time for reinforcements and called call human resources director Janie Goldberg at home.

Why the ruckus? Did a runaway bride cancel and then re-schedule her wedding that day? Did an ad on the radio mistakenly announce the shop was giving away roses to callers?

Nope, it was the desire to learn that was lighting up the phone lines.

Turns out, folks had seen a newspaper story about a design class scheduled for the following Saturday and were calling to become one of the 25 students of Log Cabin's teacup floral design workshop. Well before noon, it became obvious that not all those eager for education were going to earn a spot. Demand for the teacup class was more than double what Goldberg had anticipated.

Determined not to let that intrigue fade, Goldberg told the salesperson to add three more classes, scheduling two for a second Saturday. Then it was Goldberg's turn to work the phones. She called the wholesalers, the caterer and the teacup supplier to quadruple her orders.

When Log Cabin closed at 4:30 p.m., 100 people had signed up for the \$25 class.

Leveraging the Yearn to Learn

Log Cabin is just one of many florists turning to teaching to establish loyalty, connect with customers and flaunt their skills — in a time when e-commerce is making face-to-face customer interaction, and the allegiance it nurtures, fade into oblivion.

How they structure those classes, from the number of attendees to what they teach — and charge — is as varied as, well, two elementary schools. We found three class acts with three different learning and earning styles.

The Course: Rally the Masses with the Media

The rush to register started when Goldberg posted the class on the Bakersfield Californian's online calendar a few days earlier. Stefani Dias, an editor in the lifestyle section, saw the ad, and in it, potential for a "little human interest" story. When readers saw the half-page story that Saturday morning, accompanied by a photo of 20 giddy kids from a previous Log Cabin class, many starting calling. "While a typical classroom stresses the three R's, this one focuses on the three F's: flowers, fundamentals and fun," Dias wrote.

"That [Internet posting] in itself was free advertising," Goldberg said, still in awe that it spawned such a prominent article that was so widely read and "didn't cost us anything."



Holly Carlyle



Holly Carlyle

PROUD PROFS. (Top): Dawn Baumgarten, president, (left) and Cheri Fitton, general manager and designer, (right), have found students' enthusiasm to be contagious. (Bottom) Log Cabin Florist's design classes have added dozens of alumni to the shop's customer base in the past two years.

When the paper called again three months later, asking to cover Log Cabin's children's "ice cream sundae" design class, during National Ice Cream Month, the shop gobbled up more publicity. During the interview, Goldberg emphasized the shop's desire to nurture the next generation's love of flowers and hinted that the class was "an affordable, formal activity," appealing for parents who struggle to keep kids occupied throughout the summer.

Betting that this second dose of publicity would have a similar effect on

enrollment, Goldberg added two more sessions, enough to accommodate 150 students over two weekends. Once again, every spot filled. In the crowd of grade-schoolers: several adults "unaccompanied by a child" and a reporter from Channel 29, the local CBS affiliate, who brought along her camera crew. The news coverage spurred dozens of phone calls from customers excited to see their florist on television.

"I know everyone's always talking about the shift to social media," Goldberg said, adding that Log Cabin is on Facebook. "But, we have proof that traditional media is alive and well."

The Lesson Plan: Go Big or Go Home

The article may have created a crush of co-eds in the beginning but it's the lively learning atmosphere on campus and the staff that keep students continuing their education at Log Cabin.

"We do it big," Goldberg said, of the staff's energy and attention to detail for its design classes. "We want them to feel engaged from the moment they arrive, so they'll keep talking about us long after they leave."

A greeter welcomes every student with a themed name tag and t-shirt. (For the carnation sundae class, name tags had a Neapolitan flavor: pink background, imprinted with a floral ice cream sundae, edged with a brown and white checked border.) Once "in uniforms," students tour the shop's storage areas and get a brief lesson in care and handling, a consistent customer favorite, Goldberg said. The classroom full of flowers never fails to impress even repeat students, Goldberg said about the volume and variety in Log Cabin's 200-square-foot in-store cooler and 300-square-foot refrigerated sea train. The behind-the-scenes glimpse resonates with students of all ages "who want to feel like a part of our team," Goldberg said.

After the introductions, students finally get their hands on the good stuff in the design room. Following a demonstration of basic mechanics needed to complete the arrangement, the students can always ask for input from the lead teacher or one of the two to four assistants on hand.

When the work's done, there's a "graduation" ceremony, complete with



Janie Goldberg
human resources director

Holly Carlyle

CLASS ACT: **Log Cabin Florist, Bakersfield, Calif.**
 CLASS LOCATION: **On site**
 FREQUENCY: **Two to three sessions, two Saturdays a month**
 INSTRUCTOR: **Designer Cheri Fitton, with two to four assistants from the staff**
 STUDENTS PER CLASS: **25**
 COST PER CLASS: **\$25 to \$80**
 PAYOFF: **Connect with customers; get local PR**
 LESSONS LEARNED: **■ Get the media interested.**
■ Rally the staff and pay them to be there.
■ Tap your customers for ideas.

certificates, lots of photos and food. The Log Cabin staff takes refreshments very seriously: The holiday wreath design class — for adults — includes “Christmas-spirited treats,” including peppermint schnapps hot chocolate, while the carnation sundae class featured a full ice cream bar with three flavors and 12 toppings. The staff understands that “everyone enjoys a really good snack,” Goldberg said.

Continuing Ed: Nurture Alumni Relations

Log Cabin’s “course catalog” includes nine different design offerings a year: one theme a month, except for really busy periods (February, May and September, when the shop gives away 20,000 roses for FTD’s Good Neighbor Day). This regularity requires Goldberg and team to constantly scout for new “curricula,” by listening to friends and customers and looking up kids crafts online that they can adapt to a live audience. Her friends’ constant questioning about holiday decor led to a wreath-making class. A customer who routinely brings in a bolt of ribbon inspired a bow-making class, which, incidentally, remains the only theme she’s tried that she’s vowed to never repeat. “It’s key to set the skill level relatively low, so everyone can make the design without getting frustrated,” Goldberg said. “Bow making, we learned, is a talent you can’t teach in an hour.” Others, though, proved more amateur-friendly: hand-tied bouquets, Easter bunny baskets, sunflower topiary designs, fall flowers in a pumpkin.

Making The Grade: Expand Your Roster

The classes aren’t a direct moneymaking endeavor for Log Cabin. Adamant about

keeping the registration fee as low as possible to get more bodies in the shop, Goldberg charges just enough to cover her expenses, which she minimizes by sourcing from nearby growers and resourceful wholesalers. Most classes cost students between \$25 and \$35; the holiday wreath class, which uses more expensive product and includes alcoholic beverages, costs \$80 a head. Goldberg’s philosophy? She wants attendees to consider the class an affordable, habit-forming activity, not a one-time splurge, knowing that, once they’re in the shop, they tend to buy.

It seems to work: Log Cabin’s hosted nearly six months straight of sold-out classes, with many repeat students. One of them, so enamored with the sundae class, brought 12 friends in the shop for a private lesson for her 9th birthday party, which introduced the Log Cabin brand to even more young families.

Goldberg also emphasized one major, albeit hard to measure, benefit: word-of-mouth advertising. Log Cabin flower arranging alums give the program tremendous publicity, talking it up to their friends and gushing about it on Facebook.

When school’s out, Log Cabin employees stay connected to former classmates (or their folks) through Facebook, which elicits comments from students on photos they’ve posted and tagged, as well as additional shared photos.

Goldberg also adds the email addresses collected during class to her marketing campaigns. She aims for at least two messages a month, “enough to stay top of mind, but not so many that we become annoying.”



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And she keeps in touch with Log Cabin's press contacts. "We always send writers an arrangement as a 'thank you' after an article runs," Goldberg said. If they haven't publicized anything in a while, Goldberg tries pitching a story, again sending an arrangement, this time to say, "Look what you can learn to make with us..."

The Course: Increasing Shop Cred

Five years ago, a representative from Trident Technical College called florist Clara Gonzales. The school's floral design program, scheduled to begin in less than two weeks, was without an instructor. Familiar with the strong reputation her shop, Tiger Lily Florist, has in and around Charleston, S.C., the representative thought he'd give it the ol' college try and ask her to lead one or — he hoped, all three— of the planned classes, each with a roster of 12. Students would pay tuition directly to Trident Tech, which would pay Tiger Lily a teaching salary at the end of the session and students would pay Tiger Lily a weekly fee to cover supplies. Tiger Lily would only need to provide Gonzales' expertise.

Gonzales' acceptance of that offer has paid off "again and again" for Tiger Lily since that first night when she met 12 baffled expressions upon saying, "OK, let's learn to green a vase." But she's the first to admit it wasn't pure business savvy that made her say "yes." A graduate of the program herself, she didn't want to see the inspiration for her career disappear. "If I don't teach it, they will cancel it," she said.

Gonzales first taught the classes at the Trident Tech campus, a location that proved "a little awkward," because the classroom had no water supply and was "clearly not set up for floral design." Two weeks in, though, a student asked to "take a field trip" to Tiger Lily, situated 13 miles from campus. The outing proved to be more than a one-time venture: Seeing the students in her shop, Clara realized she could easily turn her design room into a classroom a few evenings a week. The college agreed to the change in venue and, after the necessary liability papers were signed, Tiger Lily's evening campus was up and running. Besides sparing Gonzales a 20-minute commute and the frustration of hauling flowers for a dozen people to

a place with no water supply, the shop setting has made students fans of not only flowers, but also of Tiger Lily.

The class also became a great solution to Tiger Lily designer requests for more hours and income, as Gonzales has passed on the teaching torch to her employees, including Lauren Seaborn.

The Lesson Plan: Keep 'Em Wanting More

Just one glance at Trident Tech's Floral Design Certificate Program — Floral Design I and II, Funeral Design, Holiday Design and Wedding Design, for which students pay \$169 plus materials fees each week — might have the typical veteran florist thinking, "why train the competition?"

But Tiger Lily's typical student takes the class for recreation, not vocational training, Gonzales said. Though the shop gets the occasional student who's "looking for a career change" or "thinking about designing for events as a side job," the primary demographic is "a group of girlfriends who love having flowers in their homes, love seeing the shop behind the scenes and love talking about Tiger Lily," she said. Some of the most passionate ones have such an insatiable desire for flowers that Gonzales has caught them "dumpster diving," selecting from Tiger Lily's discards before class — despite the fact that they're going to leave with their own arrangement at the end of the night. Most students are loyal customers who make legitimate purchases (supplementing those pilfered leftovers), even as their skill set grows.

Although they want to know how to do it, "people who buy from us want designs more intricate than what they could do themselves," she said. Others, wanting to practice what they learned in class, become frequent cash and carry customers. "We use quality, fresh flowers and make a point of telling them that," Gonzales said. Consequently, they say they eschew mass retailers for Tiger Lily product.

Making The Grade: Become An A+ Networker

The real payoff of teaching the classes, Gonzales said, is that they've helped raise Tiger Lily's prominence in the Charleston community. While positive word-of-mouth from students and alumni has certainly contributed,



STUDENTS=SHOPPERS. Moving design classes from Trident Technical College to Tiger Lily Florist made students fans not just of flowers, but of the retailer, as well.



Freehand Media

JUST FOR FUN.

Despite their excitement to learn how to design, Tiger Lily's students still prefer to buy more elaborate work from the experts.

Gonzales credits the classes as establishing the shop as an authoritative source in design and introducing her to a host of influential people with broad social circles.

Since she began teaching, Gonzales has become a trustee for Trident Tech, the second largest public college in South Carolina, and serves on the executive committee for the school's foundation, chairing its annual black-tie gala for 600 guests. In planning this event the past two years, she's had the opportunity to dispense her floral advice and get to know other trustees, which include executives from corporations including Boeing, Lexus, AT&T and Comcast. Thanks to quarterly meetings for the gala, her name, as well as Tiger Lily's, stay front and center with these movers and shakers, who show their appreciation for the shop's design talent as well as its community outreach by patronizing it. Tiger Lily's wedding business has likewise grown "substantially" through referrals since working with the college.

"It's really broadened our client base and helped establish us as *the florist* in Charleston," she said. "We've crossed a line," going from a local business "to an institution."

Apply Yourself: Start A Program

Want to try the Tiger Lily approach? Contact your community college to see if it has a continuing education program or ask if you could start one, Gonzales said. Or ask to partner with high schools, community centers, the parks and recreation department and houses of worship.

The Course: A Pretty Profit

Like Goldberg and Gonzales, Marianne Raub of Helen Olivia finds that offering floral design classes helps her draw in customers and connect on a personal level. But, the Alexandria, Va., florist is quick to say that she would not do the classes if they did not generate a profit.

Twenty times a year, Raub leads a sold-out class of 12 students through two-hour lessons that have them creating one "semi-complicated" design and another, less so. Class fees range from \$50 (for children's classes) to \$150 (for large-scale arrangements). The typical class is \$95. Raub spends no more than

40 percent of students' fee on flowers and containers. This keeps the average profit per class at about \$600.

"They leave with two very nice arrangements; I leave with \$600," she said of her "fantastic formula." And the total labor investment — less than four hours to set up, teach and clean up — is "hardly anything," she said, comparing it to a \$1,000 wedding, which can eat up an entire day yet yield a much smaller profit.

Determining the perfect price was a bit of a learning curve for Raub. When she started the classes four years ago, Raub set it at \$150, which didn't generate quite the crowd she'd anticipated. She ended up

CLASS ACT: **Tiger Lily Florist, Charleston, S.C.**

CURRICULUM: **A range of floral design sessions, as part of Trident Technical College's continuing education program**

LOCATION: **On site, in the shop's design production room**

INSTRUCTOR: **One of the shop's designers**

FREQUENCY: **Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings; four 8-week sessions a year**

STUDENTS PER CLASS: **12**

COST PER CLASS: **\$169 course fee to Trident Tech; \$30 for textbooks; \$25 to \$30 weekly to Tiger Lily for materials**

PAYOFF: **Additional income for design staff; expanded customer base; increased corporate and wedding work; enhanced profile in community**

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Host on site.**
- **Get involved in university community.**
- **Don't be threatened by an educated customer.**



Lauren Seaborn
lead designer

Freehand Media



CLASS ACT: **Class Act: Helen Olivia, Alexandria, Va.**

LOCATION: **On site**

INSTRUCTOR: **Owner Marianne Raub**

FREQUENCY: **One evening, once a month; Saturday afternoons in July and August**

STUDENTS PER CLASS: **12**

COST PER CLASS: **\$50 to \$150**

PAYOFF: **Average profit of \$600, instant cash flow from prepaid classes, nurture existing customer relationships, create new ones**

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Test price points.**
- **Keep it lively.**
- **Trumpet your shop's quality and brand.**

EDU 101: A HOW TO GUIDE FOR NEW TEACHERS

1. **KEEP IT SMALL.** Design classes help you make personal connections, so you want a low student to teacher ratio. Cap your class size at a number that fits comfortably in your design room and with which you can easily interact. If, like Log Cabin Florist in Bakersfield, Calif., you encounter major demand, open up another session or start a waiting list. The need to reserve a spot only adds to your allure.
2. **SCHEDULE IT DURING A SLOW TIME.** If you have too much on your mind — two weddings this weekend, a giant fundraiser next month — you ought not add to your hectic schedule. Tiger Lily Florist in Charleston, S.C., finds Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays more peaceful than weekends, when event work cranks up, and schedules design classes after shop hours early in the week. Marianne Raub of Helen Olivia, on the other hand, often holds classes on Saturday afternoons to generate foot traffic for her shop in Alexandria, Va.
3. **APPEAL TO YOUR CUSTOMERS' INTERESTS.** For cues on what would make good "curriculum," Janie Goldberg pays attention to customers' questions, requests and habits at Log Cabin Florist. When numerous people asked about holiday wreaths, for instance, she knew that'd make a popular class. Raub teaches small-scale versions of her hot-sellers, as well, including Thanksgiving tabletoppers, "fruit and flower" arrangements and "minis," seven flowers in 3-inch cubes.
4. **CHARGE ENOUGH, BUT NOT TOO MUCH.** Raub initially charged \$150 for a two-hour workshop — a fair price, she figured, for two arrangements and her time. As it turned out, many balked at the three-digit price tag. Once she lowered her average price to \$95, however, classes "sold like gangbusters," she said. Even with the registration reduction, she makes a pretty profit — on average, \$600 a class — by keeping her expenses for flowers and materials below 40 percent of students' fee.
5. **SHOW — OR TELL — THE FUN YOU HAVE.** Any visitor to Log Cabin's website or Facebook fan page sees dozens of photos of smiling students, flaunting their floral arrangements and gushing about what fun they had. Goldberg encourages participants to post their own photos on Facebook, which provides invaluable word-of-mouth advertising. She piques the press' interest by sending editors arrangements to be taught in future classes. Raub pitches the class to frequent shoppers.

filling empty seats with her friends, who suggested she try a double-digit price tag instead. Sure enough, once she adjusted the average fee to \$95, "they started selling like gangbusters," she said.

The Lesson Plan: Schedule Summer School

Except for February and May, Helen Olivia hosts two classes each month, with a few extras on the books in January and July, to serve as traffic builders and sales kindling during slower months. Students must make pay in full to reserve a space. With one mention of a "wait list," Raub convinces most prospective students to sign up in advance. (The class does actually max out almost every month.) Several even sign up for all 20 classes on the spot, "which does wonders for our cash flow," she said.

In the summer, when high temperatures and vacationing residents turn Alexandria into "a ghost town," Raub hosts a weekly "mini workshop" on Saturdays in July and August to get people in her shop. During these 30-minute, \$30 courses, 12 students make the shop's signature "mini" arrangement: a 3-inch cube filled with three roses, three complementary flowers (such as gerberas) and one accent flower (such as lisianthus) — really, whatever product she has on hand in the shop. The costs are low: "I already have the product and I'm already there, just hoping anyone will come in," she said. The payoff, on the other hand, is high: "It's an easy lesson, it gets people in the store, shopping and getting to know us, and it's an automatic \$360 dollars in 30 minutes."

Unlike the full-scale two-hour design classes, which tend to attract longtime, loyal customers, the mini class often pulls in "new faces," Raub said. "The \$30 price tag is a little easier to stomach for someone unfamiliar with floral design classes." So what started as a "sell something now!" effort has had the long-term benefit of building relationships with new customers.

Making the Grade: Laughter Brings Them Back

Industry peers have wondered why Raub would train her customers so they wouldn't need her work anymore. "That couldn't be further from the truth," she said. The design classes have only intensified customers' appreciation for Raub's talent and creativity. The phrase



EARNED RESPECT. Attending classes at Helen Olivia has raised students' opinions of owner Marianne Raub's creativity and execution of design.

she hears at every class as she circulates the room: "This is so hard." She also uses her teaching role to impress upon the class her standards for buying top-notch product, which seems to have "brushed off" on them. "I think a lot of them are addicted to having high quality flowers around the house," she said.

Having fun in class is Raub's best retention tool, too. If she wants students to sign up again and bring friends, she knows "it's all about entertainment."

Her two benchmarks for teaching: Give them one useful takeaway and "make them laugh at least once." For the latter goal, she usually offers a personal anecdote of "when I did something dumb," she said. She also encourages student interaction for a livelier atmosphere. Simply placing stations with supplies around the room "forces them to get up out of their comfort zone," she said, which in turn makes them look at each other's designs, compliment them, and get to know each other — all little things that add up to increased anticipation for future classes. 🌿

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