

More Flowers, Less Stress

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

New university research supported by SAF proves the positive, stress-reducing power of flowers — and SAF is giving members the tools to spread the good news.

Imagine: During the leadup to one of the busiest shopping seasons of the year — when your customers are hunting for (and inevitably stressing out over) the perfect gifts — a local reporter calls. She's heard about university research proving that living with flowers can reduce stress, and she wants to feature your shop in a story about those results.

Free, glowing news coverage?

That's the stuff of dreams for any local florist with a tight budget, right? But for Jennifer Barnard of Tillie's Flower Shop in Wichita, Kansas, that was the scenario that played out in December, when Krista Miller, a reporter with the local ABC affiliate, learned about "The Impact of Flowers on Perceived Stress Among Women," a study commissioned by the Society of American Florists and conducted at the University of North Florida, which for the first time provides empirical evidence that flowers reduce stress. The result? A nearly four-minute news story — practically a documentary in local news time — that showcased Tillie's and encouraged viewers to buy flowers and enjoy their stress-reducing benefits.

"Flowers bring a sense of calm and peacefulness to people's homes," a smiling, confident Barnard told thousands of viewers around Wichita, in a story that aired just three weeks before Christmas.

Barnard's story isn't an isolated instance. It is a recent example in a long list of public relations successes for the industry. Indeed, as of early

December, a comprehensive SAF PR campaign to promote the study findings had already generated more than 142 million consumer impressions, with stories appearing on influential lifestyle blogs, across social media and in a wide range of national and local publications and platforms, including USA Today, AOL, Martha Stewart Living, Woman's World, Southern Living magazine, and NBC National Radio. The through line connecting every single story? Flowers are an easy, scientifically proven way to make people feel better.

"That's headline-worthy news," said Jennifer Sparks, SAF's vice president of marketing. "So many consumers are looking for ways to reduce stress right now, and thanks to SAF's research, the floral industry can provide an easy, practical solution to alleviate stress and experience that desired moment of calm we can all relate to."

"This is the perfect time for the industry to capitalize on SAF's nationwide efforts and generate local visibility," added Sparks. That's why SAF recently launched its new StressLess Online Resource Center to help members spread the word. (See box below for more information.)

A Practical Solution to a Major Health Issue

Stress is a hot topic with consumers and the media, a factor that played into the strategy behind SAF's decision to commission new university research to study the effects of flowers on daily stress.

"In order to ensure credibility with research of this kind, it is a risk, because we don't know what the findings will show," said Sparks. "But with our past research on flowers' enhancement of our well-being, it was a risk worth taking, and it paid off big."

This kind of research and accompanying promotional program doesn't happen overnight, said Sparks. "It requires highly focused strategic planning and coordination of myriad combined elements."

In order to study the effects of flowers on stress, SAF had to find the right researcher with the background and expertise needed. The organization chose Erin Largo-Wight, Ph.D., associate professor and program director at the University of North Florida's Department of Public Health. Early in her research career, Largo-Wight became interested in studying stress.

"Stress is a huge public health problem," she said. "It's known to have serious, harmful effects on physical as well as emotional health; it's a major factor in heart disease and other chronic diseases." It's also extremely prevalent, and on the increase: In a recent poll, commissioned by SAF, 68 percent of Americans reported feeling stressed on a weekly basis, and 32 percent experience stress daily.

For women, the ill effects of stress on health are even more profound. A 2016 study published in the journal *Brain and Behavior* showed that women are twice as likely to suffer from severe stress and

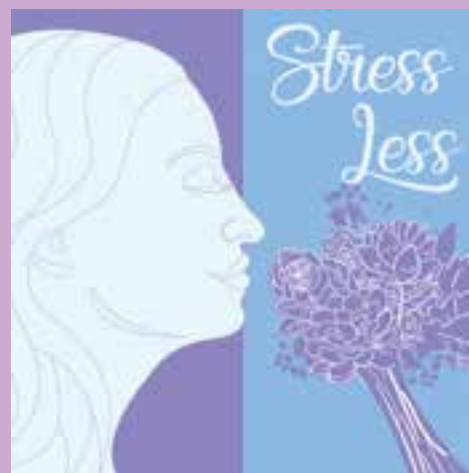
SAF'S STRESSLESS ONLINE RESOURCE CENTER

Ready to share the great news about flowers and stress with your local community? Good! The Society of American Florists recently launched its **StressLess Online Resource Center**, where members can find all the information and tools they need to do just that. Among the tools you'll find:

- Graphics, photography and videos
- Tips for timely promotion
- Social media advice, including post suggestions
- Suggestions for how to connect with the media and draft press releases



Find out more at safnow.org/StressLess.



anxiety as men; 25 percent of women in the SAF poll reported experiencing stress multiple times a day.

Healthy strategies for reducing stress already exist, and are well documented and well publicized in the \$3.7 trillion global wellness industry. The problem is that the best-known solutions (exercise, meditation, a cognitive strategy called “positive reappraisal”) take time, considerable effort, and sometimes money. As a result, attempts to use these strategies often fail.

At a certain point, “I became interested in more practical solutions,” said Largo-Wight. “I started studying nature contact.” Her approach, as she later learned, fits right in with a trending concept in public health called Health by Design; the concept is supported by, among others, the federally funded Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“It’s all about creating calming and restorative environments to improve well-being,” said Largo-Wight.

Proof Positive

In 2017, Largo-Wight’s earlier work attracted the attention of SAF, which was looking to build on its extensive library of university research — studies that have over the years proven that flowers increase productivity and emotional health — with new research that provided scientific backing to anecdotal

reports that flowers reduce stress. (Learn about those other studies at **AboutFlowers.com/research.**)

For the new study, 170 women were randomized into one of three groups. All of the women filled out surveys during a 12-day period designed to measure their levels of stress. Midway through the study, one group received a flower delivery, framed as a thank-you gift for participating in the study. Another group received a home décor item (a luxury candle) of similar value. The last group, as a control, did not receive a thank-you gift.

While all of the women reported decreased stress at the end of the study, the women who received flowers reported the greatest overall reduction of stress, with the highest positive response in terms of mood, enjoyment, and a sense of well-being, after living with flowers for just a few days.

“In the flower group, stress was reduced by an average of 5.5 points, which is highly significant — a big deal,” said Largo-Wight. “This is a very strong association. It’s not just statistically significant, it’s a clinically, meaningfully significant result.”

Getting the Word Out

Once Largo-Wight presented her findings to SAF last June, the association hit the ground running, Sparks said, creating a nationwide public relations campaign to share the good news with the indus-



HEADLINE NEWS SAF has been pushing the good news that flowers help reduce stress, and major publications have responded with glowing coverage.

try, during SAF’s annual convention in September, as well as to the general public — while also supporting floral industry members in their individual efforts to share the news in local markets.

Largo-Wight was media trained by SAF to serve as an expert spokeswoman to unveil the study findings to the public. To officially launch the promotional campaign last August, Largo-Wight conducted four hours of back-to-back interviews with television and radio reporters from 18 different media markets across the nation, all in one day.

“Our research is in a new area of public health called Health By Design, which involves creative, healthy, restorative, calming environments to reduce stress,” Largo-Wight told reporters. “In our study, we found that women who lived with flowers, just for a few days, had a significant reduction in their stress levels.”

Prior to the campaign launch, SAF also created a dedicated landing page on **AboutFlowers.com**, so busy reporters and consumers would have somewhere to go for more information. The page (**AboutFlowers.com/StressLess**) describes the study and what it means and also offers tips for the consumer on how they can use flowers to relieve stress: where to put them in your home or how to help a friend who is going through a hard time.

The PR push also included a radio interview tour and partnerships with three



SHOW AND TELL Erin Largo-Wight, Ph.D., (right) associate professor and program director at the University of North Florida’s Department of Public Health, served as a spokesperson for SAF during a media tour to reveal the study findings.



MOMENTS OF CALM SAF's latest university research proves that flowers can help reduce stress and create moments of calm.

popular lifestyle bloggers, along with customized pitches to print and digital publications. These ongoing efforts continue to result in flower-friendly headlines across the country such as “Fresh flowers spruce up your home and your mental health” and “Eight amazing benefits to having fresh flowers in your home.”

Reaction from SAF members has been enthusiastic.

“SAF took intuitive thinking, backed it up with research and data, and turned it into PR gold,” said Laura Shinall, president of Syndicate Sales and a longtime supporter of the SAF PR Fund, which funds all of SAF’s consumer initiatives (safnow.org/PRFund).

Anne Stewart, vice president of North American Floral Operations at Smithers-Oasis, a platinum supporter of the fund since its inception, agrees: “This is messaging that resonates broadly. I would like to see the industry really take hold of it on the local level as well as nationwide.”

Next Steps

For her part, Sparks said she expects the media hits for the study to continue in the new year and far beyond.

“Over the past 18 years, SAF has used the findings from our university research

to tell a positive story about flowers,” she said. “The benefits of supporting and talking about this kind of research on human emotion are evergreen, but the media is always looking for something new — so it is important to keep coming up with fresh angles and tools.”

Sparks also noted the importance of working from the outside in, and looking at societal interests where flowers might play a role. “Two decades ago, it was all about ‘How can I be happy?’ Today, there’s been a shift to ‘How can I be less stressed?’, hence the strategy behind the focus of the SAF’s new research,” Sparks added. “We knew if the findings came out positive, we would have a compelling story to tell.”

Through the development of new videos formatted for social media, SAF is also taking the message directly to consumers through paid promotion on Instagram and Facebook. The campaign began in December and is continuing in January.

Beyond reaching out to consumers nationwide, SAF is also providing ideas, advice and resources to make it easier for its members to use the research to build local visibility. SAF’s new StressLess Online Resource Center (safnow.org/StressLess) includes step-

by-step advice on how members can maximize the PR potential of the study findings, along with a media relations how-to, a press release, graphics, photography, videos, social media advice and posts, all available for use by SAF members.

“What we’re doing on a nationwide level on behalf of the industry is important,” said Sparks. “In addition, we always make sure our programs are turnkey, so that SAF members can use this information locally to build visibility for the power of flowers and bring attention back to their individual businesses.”

Meanwhile, SAF will continue to pitch to major outlets, with a big push in January at a press event sponsored by the International Housewares Association, attended by up to 90 home interior and lifestyle publication reporters, plus bloggers. This spring, SAF will seek to partner with social media influencers to carry the message to younger audiences. Then, to capitalize on the timeliness and relevance of National Stress Awareness Month in April, plans are underway to reach college students studying for finals, plus hospital patients and seniors, with the awareness that flowers can reduce stress. 🌸

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FUNDING THE FUTURE

All of the Society of American Florists’ consumer programs are 100 percent funded by the **SAF Fund for Nationwide Public Relations**. Established in 2001, this industry-wide fund supports the development of innovative public relations programs to reach millions of consumers with positive messages about the unique benefits of flowers and the expertise of professional florists. For a list of current leaders in industry promotion, or to support the PR Fund, visit safnow.org/PRFund.