



FIND YOUR FINISH LINE

BUILD YOUR TEAM, IMPRESS CUSTOMERS AND KEEP PACE WITH TRENDS AT SAF AMELIA ISLAND 2019

BY MARY WESTBROOK

Sometimes, running a floral industry business can feel like racing through an obstacle course. Just when you get a steady team of employees, a key worker quits. As soon as you hit your groove with digital marketing, Facebook changes its algorithm. The minute you launch a service or product, a new competitor crops up. And then, of course, there are

those longtime obstacles that you never quite clear: the demands of providing outstanding service (every.single.day), the importance of e-commerce, fierce competition from *everywhere*, the need to stay relevant with customers and update and educate yourself. On and on and on. The bad news: We don't have all the answers. The really (really) good news: Roughly 60 experts and hundreds of your

peers will come together this September during SAF Amelia Island, the Society of American Florists' 135th annual convention, to talk best practices, solutions and to share information that you can put into practice right away to help ensure your business grows and thrives. Because for every hurdle or obstacle you face, there's an expert — or a trusted peer — ready to help you find and master your course.

ILLUSTRATIONS: ARCHETYPE/SHUTTERSTOCK & COLORATION: ELDORADO/SUPERVECTOR/SHUTTERSTOCK



OSCAR FERNANDEZ



BARRY GOTTLIEB



HEATHER WAITS

The Hurdle

Building and keeping a great team when unemployment is historically low and younger generations job hop like crazy.

Pacesetters

Barry Gottlieb, Heather Waits, Oscar Fernandez

Training Tactic

Zero in on onboarding. According to Equifax Workforce Solutions, **more than 40 percent of turnover happens within an employee's first month**; another 10 percent of workers leave before their first anniversary. Those disruptions sap your time, energy and team morale — and they can hurt sales and profits, too. Gottlieb, author and founder of Coaching the Winner's Edge, will lead a fast-paced panel discussion with industry members (representing businesses from different segments, both large and small) who have implemented successful onboarding programs.

Think that sounds too corporate-y for your freewheeling business? Waits of Bloomtastic in Columbus, Ohio, used to have a similar mindset. "Back in 2015, I nearly left the industry," she confessed. "I'd hired the wrong people, and they were draining me of my love for flowers. It took two years, but I created a **solid onboarding program that now sets new staff up to succeed in their position and lessens the stress on me.**" Today, Waits and her team rely on **standard operating procedures and key performance indicators** to ensure the team is working well together toward those common goals.

Five years ago, Fernandez, Equiflor's director of sales, had a similar realization: The Miami-based company needed to spend more time on those crucial first weeks after a new employee is hired. "We now have a very **extensive training program for each hire that lasts two weeks,**" he said. "Each person **trains in every department,** so that they understand what every department does, and how we all work together." Fernandez complements that training with **one-on-one meetings and lunches that don't involve managers** (so the new employee can talk candidly with their peers and ask questions they might otherwise feel too intimidated to broach). The company's onboarding process also gives managers time to **identify hiring mistakes.** "Someone can interview really well, and then when they hit the ground, they are just not what you thought they'd be," Fernandez said. "The training period gives us **immediate insight** into how they'll perform."

Finish Line Swag

A more structured approach to employees' first weeks — and potentially, team members who stick around longer. That's no small thing. "There's a big expense to bringing in any new hire," Fernandez said, which is why that early period is critical. "**You want to give any new hire all the resources necessary to succeed.**" Waits agrees. "**Your staff want to learn and grow,**" she said. "They want to do a good job and make you happy."

A COACH FOR EVERY CHALLENGE

The tips outlined in this story represent just a fraction of the information attendees will have access to during SAF Amelia Island. Over the course of the four-day event, dozens of speakers from inside and outside of the industry will be sharing their experiences, advice and perspectives on some of the biggest challenges your business is facing. Other highlights:

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Challenge: You're overwhelmed with updates to algorithms and have no time to create a social media strategy.



Coach: Learn best practices in Instagram from Jackie Levine, a fourth-generation florist from Central Square Florist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a dedicated (and growing!) following online.

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Challenge: Morale in your business is low and tension is running high.



Coach: Popular return speaker Glenna Hecht of Humanistic Consulting will talk about creating a drama-free workplace — and how to reboot a dysfunctional team.



PLANNING FOR YOUR FUTURE



CLARA VARGA-GONZALES



SHIRLEY LYONS, AAF, PFCI



PAUL GOODMAN, CPA, MBA, PFCI

The Hurdle

Setting yourself and your business up for the future you want — while you are simultaneously running that business.

a buyer, or a lender, say, 'Wow! I want that business'? If you aren't at that "wow factor" yet, no worries. The pair will also discuss how to get there, including how to handle a **physical refresh in-store** and ways to improve your **brand reputation** ahead of time.

Pacesetters

Shirley Lyons, AAF, PFCI; Paul Goodman, CPA, MBA, PFCI; Clara Varga-Gonzales

In a separate session, Varga-Gonzales of Fleurish Consulting will reflect on the lessons she learned from running Tiger Lily, a successful, two-location flower shop in Charleston, South Carolina, that she and her husband, Manny, sold last year after owning the business for more than 20 years. Varga-Gonzales will talk candidly about the times the shop almost went out of business, and the dramatic changes they implemented to right their course — including overhauls to how they handled **branding, leadership and staffing**, and their **deep commitment to understanding, tracking and taking control of their financials**. "Numbers are not the sexy part of this business but failing to account for costs properly is the No. 1 reason a lot of us can't stay in business," she said. "We all know what our numbers should be, but what tools do we have to start the process of getting there?"

Training Tactic

Clarify your goals — and start taking action. We know, we know: You love your business. You love this industry. (We do, too!) But one day in the future — whether it's five, 10 or 25 years from now — you're going to want to retire, or step back, or pass the business on to the next generation. To do that effectively and (ahem, relatively) seamlessly, the time to start planning is now, says Lyons, a former SAF president who will be joined by Goodman, a longtime industry accounting pro and Floral Management contributor, to talk best practices and practical strategies. "One of the important goals of business ownership is the **ability to pass it on or sell it and eventually retire**," said Lyons, who sold her longtime flower shop in Eugene, Oregon, last year. "In the busy day-to-day we put those thoughts on the back burner. We want to **give owners ideas and tools to make that eventual day easier and the sale more profitable**." Lyons and Goodman will dip into practical tips, including **how to value your business** and the steps you should take to **get your financial statements in order**, along with advice on **organizing processes and paperwork** to make for a smooth handoff. "You have to put on your buyer's hat," Lyons said. "**What would make you as**

Finish Line Swag

A plan on how to get your business and yourself in shape for the next phase — and in a better position today. "The nice thing about getting your business ready for sale is that, done right, it will become a very **profitable business in the interim**," Goodman added. "It will become a business that runs smoothly and is a joy to work at and manage."

Challenge: You feel under attack with bad reviews on Yelp and Google — and have no clue how to turn those negative experiences around.



Coach: Sam Bowles will share ideas on how to protect your brand and deliver outstanding customer experiences, based on

his time coaching flower shops for Floral Strategies LLC and his personal experience as the manager of Allen's Flowers in San Diego.

Challenge: You want to grow into high-volume fulfillment — but you don't know how to do so profitably.



Coach: Skip Paal, AAF, and the team from Rutland Beard Floral Group, in Maryland and New Jersey, will walk you through the steps of this business model — and talk about the

factors to consider before moving into the space.



DUSTIN GARIS



SALLY KOBYLINSKI



JODI MCSHAN

EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING

The Hurdle

How can the floral industry capitalize on the radical consumer mind shift — from buying products to investing in experiences — and get more customers buying more flowers more often?

Pacesetters

Dustin Garis, Jodi McShan, Sally Kobylinski

Training Tactic

Think bigger. Garis, a consultant who has worked with multinational corporations including Procter & Gamble and Coca-Cola, takes issue with anyone who says brick-and-mortar retail is dead. As evidence, he points to a grilled cheese sandwich. "I was at this small restaurant not long ago and grilled cheese is all that they do, but these aren't your normal sandwiches," he explained. "You can pick from a range of really wild ingredients — doughnuts instead of bread! — and then they'll create this special sandwich, exactly as you imagined it, just for you." Try getting that ooey-goey goodness from Amazon. Garis argues the floral industry is especially well suited to capitalize on this new focus on **experiences over products** ... *if* individual business owners start thinking bigger about the case they're making to customers. "This is a powerful trend and a chance to **reposition flowers from an occasion product to an everyday experience** people crave," he said. "Florists need to think more broadly about that experience of giving and receiving flowers and how they can **craft, accelerate or redefine that experience**. When you figure out how to do that, it's a fantastic service to monetize."

In a separate panel, McShan, of McShan Florist in Dallas, and Kobylinski, of In Bloom Florist in Orlando, Florida, will give real-world florists' perspectives on how they use experiential marketing to grow their businesses. "**Offering people experiences gives us a reason to exist**," said McShan, noting that her shop's Christmastime events draw hundreds, in part because McShan's team works hard to offer something new every year. "It's something competitors who only sell flowers can't do." Kobylinski takes a similar approach. "We can give our community the ability to interact directly with our products, which sets us apart from other retailers," said Kobylinski, who has hosted **in-store workshops**, turned the shop into a **venue for speakers**, hosted **pop ups** and played a lead role in **organizing customers and neighboring businesses** for charitable causes.

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Ideas galore and a new way of thinking about the services you offer. Garis argues that consumers' clear interest in experiences proves that some facets of human nature haven't changed, and that's good news for the industry. "At our core, **we are still social creatures**," he said. "We used to gather around the fire, or in front of the radio. Now people also gather around digital devices or in digital spaces. But most people still aspire to the same things: **a memorable life, meaningful connections**." When you help people create those things — and show them the role flowers can play in making them happen — your customers remember, he added.

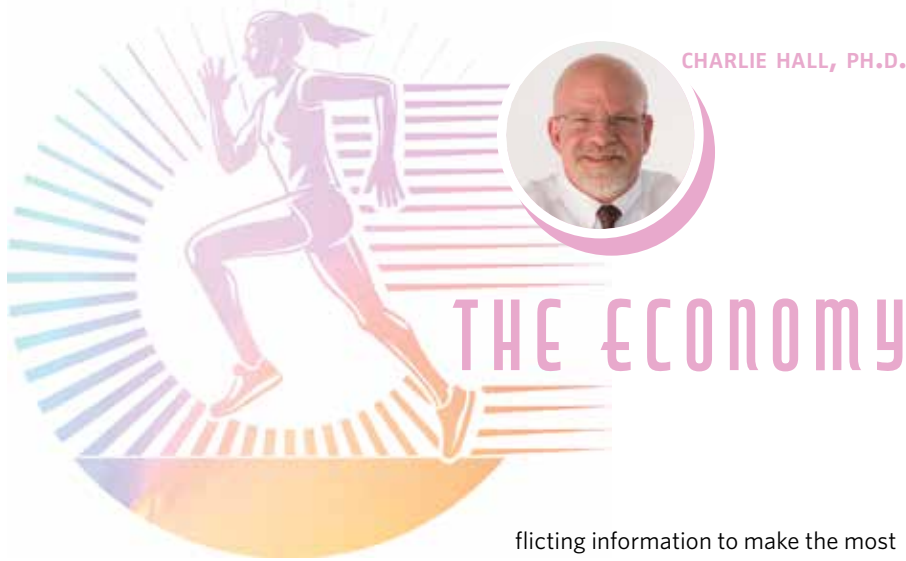
Challenge: You're ready to dip your toes into something non-floral — say, prop rentals — but you could use a mentor (or two or three) before you get started.



Coach: Zoë Gallina of Botanica International in Tampa will be joined by other industry panelists to talk about the successful ways they've discovered additional revenue streams.

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Head to safnow.org for a full listing of convention programming, including information on experience zones (for quick tips on practical topics), peer-to-peer roundtable discussions, new book club sessions, and much-loved convention staples such as SAF's Outstanding Varieties Competition, Supplier Expo and Premier Products Showcase, and the 51st annual Sylvia Cup Design Competition.

—M.W.



CHARLIE HALL, PH.D.

The Hurdle

The U.S. economy is strong now — but how do you prep for the future?

Pacesetter

Charlie Hall, Ph.D.

Training Tactic

Learn what you need and then stay focused. Short of a crystal ball, SAF’s conventions are the best place to learn about and discuss economic trends that affect every industry segment. Hall, professor and Ellison Chair at the Department of Horticultural Sciences at Texas A&M, will walk attendees through some of the leading economic indicators and how to examine sometimes con-

flicting information to make the most informed decisions possible. “The most common mistake is that business owners in the industry let the mainstream media shape the strategic vision of their firm,” he said. “I always tell folks to pay attention to what experts are saying, but don’t just take their word for it. Some basic knowledge about key topics such as **consumer confidence, the jobs report, interest rates, housing starts, trade, and immigration** can go a long way in knowing what is really going on.” As for a question Hall fields often — “When will the next recession take place?” — Hall said a better query might be, “What can I do now to get ready for the next downturn?” (A downturn that is inevitable at some point, as Hall pointed out.) “Most businesses, in the floral sup-

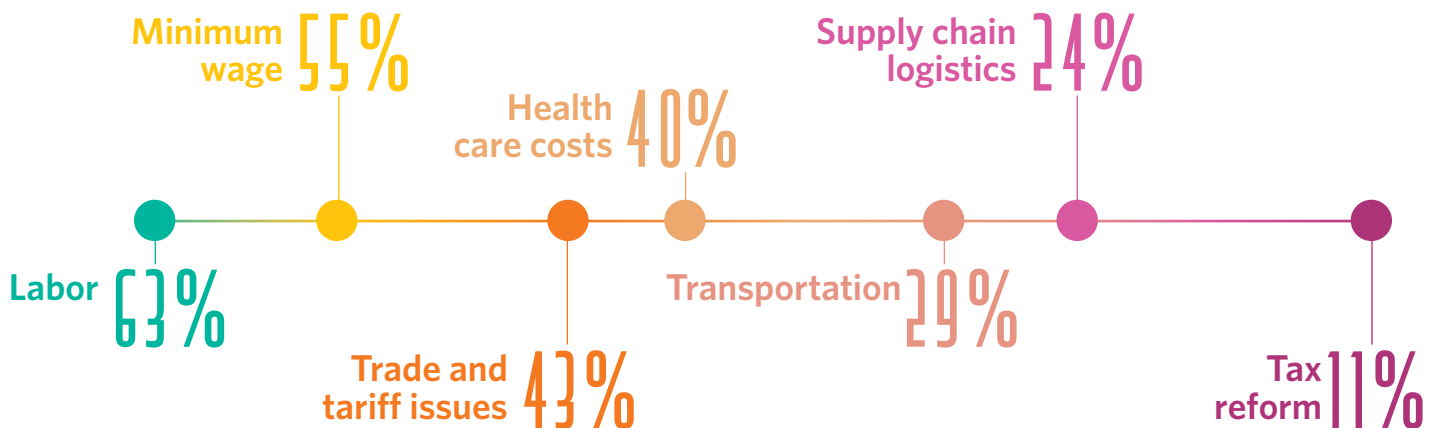
ply chain that struggled or were forced out of the industry after the last recession, did so because they were **over-leveraged** and the bank had more skin in their business than they did, or because they were **managing their working capital incorrectly**,” Hall said. “They also were not conveying their **value proposition** to their customer base. Make sure your business is addressing these three areas and you will go a long way in recession-proofing your business.”

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More peace of mind, and a greater understanding of economic forces that affect your customers and your business every day. “In practicality, all of us are amateur economists in that we **make decisions every day on how to allocate our hard-earned dollars when we spend**,” Hall said. “In a sense, we are voting to keep those businesses alive — those we don’t shop at, not so much. The economy affects those decisions by influencing our thought processes about risk and uncertainty. Sometimes we are aware of those cognitive responses, but often they subconsciously influence our spending — so **the ‘economic state’ of our minds at the time of purchases is critically important.**”

KEY ECONOMIC ISSUES AMONG SAF MEMBERS

SOURCE: SAF ECONOMIC OUTLOOK SURVEY (JANUARY 2019)



DEREK WOODRUFF, AIFD, PFCI



DESIGN TRENDS

The Hurdle

Customers who spend hours on Instagram want the latest and greatest in design. How can you clear the field and position yourself as their go-to expert?

Pacesetter

Derek Woodruff, AIFD, PFCI

Training Tactic

Get deep into trends. "Show, don't tell," is the mantra Woodruff, owner of Floral Underground in Traverse City, Michigan, plans to use when he presents trends and ideas from the International Floral Distributors' Flower Trends Forecast. "I'm a practical designer — I'm not only studying trends every day, I'm actually **putting them to use with real customers, with real money on the line,**" said Woodruff, a former SAF Sylvia Cup Design competition champion. "So, when I talk about the trends we're seeing, I'm going to be talking about how to actually **use those trends in your business to increase customer engagement.**" Woodruff's presentation

will focus primarily on **weddings and events**, because "what happens in those spaces, design-wise, tends to trickle down," he explained. (One trend he can share ahead of time: "**Dried botanicals**, incorporated into designs of all kinds, are going to be huge in your market, if they aren't already," he said.) The biggest shift Woodruff sees, though, is **how trends move through the market.** "It used to be that big companies set the pace, but now, often because of social media, it's a reverse dynamic: **Consumers are the ones driving trends.** They're telling us what they want to buy."

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The confidence and info you need to present yourself as an expert to customers. If you're thinking that design trends are a soft topic — the kind of thing your designers chat about while on break — think again, Woodruff said. **Having a modern aesthetic and knowing what your customers want, before they know it themselves, will set your business apart** in ways that show up on your balance sheet. "You can't get complacent or comfortable about these things, or the rug will be pulled out from underneath you," he cautioned. "**Brick-and-mortar florists who are surviving today are staying on top of trends related to design, consumer buying habits and consumer wants and needs.** You always need this information." 🌿

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SAF TODAY

A NEW VISION, A STRONGER FUTURE



KATE PENN,
SAF CEO

In August 2018, the Society of American Florists began an existential journey, embarking on a transformation that challenged the association's board of directors and staff to answer fundamental questions such as: Why does SAF exist and why should anyone care? What role must SAF play in the floral industry? What problem is SAF uniquely positioned to solve, and for whom?

Since that time — and with guidance from a third party with extensive experience in strategic planning — the SAF team and its dedicated volunteer leaders have done a deep dive into some of the key challenges facing the floral industry, and we've asked tough questions about how we can best provide thoughtful, effective solutions. We've also engaged in one-on-one interviews, surveyed our members and sought answers and examples outside of the industry.

The result: One year later, SAF has a bold mission and vision that unifies and energizes the organization and our industry and positions SAF as the provider of indispensable value to its members. During SAF Amelia Island 2019, SAF CEO Kate Penn will talk more about the journey SAF undertook and — most important — the exciting new places the association and its members are heading.

—M.W.

GO DEEPER

 SAF
Amelia Island
2019 Sept. 18-21
135TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

SAF Amelia Island 2019 takes place September 18-21 at the Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island. Early Bird registration ends Aug. 23. Find out more at safnow.org/annual-convention.