



# SHAKE IT UP

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PHOTOS BY DONNELLY MARKS

## Established businesses are embracing innovative thinking to chart their future.

In many ways, Scotts Flowers in New York City has had way more than one life. The original company, pioneered by the Scott family, opened in 1947 — back when the average American house cost about \$6,600 and the average worker made shy of \$3,000 a year. In 1982, Robert Palliser Sr. purchased the business and pushed it into a new era. The Vietnam War vet introduced new technology and faced fierce competition — including the intense expansion of supermarkets into the floral market. He and his wife, Silvana, also raised three boys — Rob Jr., Chris and Jonathan — who spent their childhood (like so many kids in the industry) learning about the business of flowers, even when they weren't sure if that business was for them.

**FUTURE FOCUS** The Palliser family — Chris, Silvana, Robert, Rob Jr., and Jonathan — worked together to build their company's bright future.





**MODERN STYLE** In their showroom, the Palliser family replaced furniture and fixtures that were 20-plus years old and swapped amber and mahogany tones for black and white tiles. They've also updated merchandise to suit customers' evolving taste.

And yet something about the retail operation eventually pulled all three of the Palliser brothers back. Rob pioneered the next generation, officially joining Scott's in 2011 and learning the business from the inside out. Chris took a different route, working in finance from 2011 to 2014, before Rob asked him to consider working at Scott's. By that time, their father was thinking seriously of retirement, and Rob Jr. knew he needed a right-hand

man to help keep the business on track and prep it to face a host of new challenges, including the advent of online ordering, proliferation of floral competitors — and sky high consumer expectations. When Jonathan graduated from college in 2015 and came onboard, the trifecta was complete. The brothers were ready to build on their family's hard work and leave their own mark.

End of story? Not even close.

Because while the Pallisers could thank their father and mother for a strong foundation, the job of keeping the business going, and pushing it to new heights, now fell squarely on their shoulders. And there was work to do: a brand refresh, tech upgrades, a major staff shakeup — and an overall repositioning of the business to better meet the demands of modern consumers.

"Our parents' work ethic really inspired us, and our father implemented this team spirit attitude among us as brothers," Chris Palliser said. "But we get agitated when things are complacent. We're always trying to grow and learn more."

### History Plus Innovation

The fundamental challenge the Pallisers faced likely feels familiar to many floral pros: How do you take the best of your past — your experience, the goodwill in your community, your team's knowledge and skills — and leverage it with new ideas and outside perspective? Can you create a workplace where traditions, history and founders exist right alongside novel ideas, innovations and status quo disruptors?

The short answer? Yes!

The more nuanced response?

Yes, but...

Creating that positive past/present/future dynamic requires compromise, hard work, team players, mistakes, learning time, practice, dedication and vision. Nonetheless, it can be done, according to two very different floral businesses who have embraced entrepreneurial thinking in a big way — and seen sales, website and foot traffic, customer engagement and employee morale improve as a result.

### THE LESSON: Structure is your friend.

The picture many of us have in our head of an entrepreneur/startup founder/disruptor: A freewheeling guy or gal who isn't bogged down by red tape and rules.

The reality? Formalized processes are often the not-so-secret ingredient behind the launch of a successful idea — or the continuation of a longtime business.

Building stronger structures was a focus for the Pallisers. When the broth-



**WORKFORCE WOW** At the heart of Scotts Flowers' renovation? Dedicated team members like Virginia, said the Palliser family.

ers took over in 2015, they realized their 25-person team wasn't operating from the same playbook. Sales team members were underselling. Designers were modifying recipes. Customer interactions sometimes seemed clipped and transactional.

"No one wants to see a note first thing in the morning from a customer saying that an order wasn't delivered," Chris Palliser said. "Things were falling through the cracks. We wanted to find a way to limit mistakes and keep up with customer demand and expectations."

Rob, Chris and Jonathan had a different vision — of a business that hummed along (profitably) and employees who felt empowered (and encouraged) to try new things and connect emotionally with their work and their customers. To get there, they needed to set up some guardrails to keep their team on track.

So, they started experimenting. They attended industry events and educational sessions — including several from the Society of American Florists — and hired an outside company (FloralStrategies) for customer service training. They learned to unlock tools in their POS system — they use GotFlowers — and to identify common

mistakes in the design room and among the sales team that drained profits (for example, offering price points to customers tentatively instead of making expert recommendations).

They also introduced formalized weekly or biweekly meetings for each department (sales, design and customer service). Each 15- to 20-minute session gives employees focused attention from the Pallisers and dedicated time to troubleshoot issues, brainstorm solutions and set goals. Every two to three months and before major holidays and projects, they also convene an all-staff meeting to discuss logistics.

**PREP YOURSELF FOR \* blowback.** Changes can lead to friction. Since the Pallisers began implementing these changes, they've seen many staff members move on — in fact, it's been almost a complete turnover, according to Chris Palliser. "There was no mass firing or anything," he explained. "People just realized they weren't a good match." But new hires have also brought new opportunities, including designers who are excited to share tips about mechanics and techniques — and who also are receptive to learning new things from others. "A few good eggs led to more," Chris Palliser said. "We hire for personality."

## SCOTTS FLOWERS

New York City

[scottsflowersnyc.com](http://scottsflowersnyc.com)

**Year Established:** 1947

**The Skinny:** 1 location, 25 total employees (full- and part-time)

**Turnaround Moment:** In 2015, the Palliser brothers stepped in as co-owners to lead the business into a new phase — with new branding, staff, practices, tech and a new vision.

**Recent Success:** Recent renovations online and in-store have driven up walk-in sales by 35 percent and website transactions by 65 percent.

**Bright Idea:** A little discomfort and unease in the face of change is normal — and maybe a good sign. Stay true to your vision and don't forget to have some fun (and play good music).

## THE LESSON:

### Let others shine.

Michael Schur is a celebrated showrunner and producer in Hollywood, responsible most recently for "The Good Place" — an award-winning show on NBC that revolves around intricate plot twists and minute details. But in a recent interview, members of the crew said Schur is refreshingly hands off as the show's creator: "He hires people he trusts, and people he knows are talented, and then he lets them do the work he hired them to do."

Team members find a similar style of leadership at Tagawa Gardens, a nursery, garden center and retailer in Centennial, Colorado. Founded in 1982 by the Tagawa family, the business has a reputation for community engagement, with dozens of events, workshops and classes throughout the year that feature guest educators, "community collaborators" (area businesses and organizations), local food vendors, musicians and much more. (In many ways the Tagawas were ahead of their time — creating those experience-based events before they became a retail buzzword.)

Creating and maintaining the business's education calendar, which includes more than 140 classes and 12-plus family-friendly events a year, is a big job, with lots of moving parts — but it's not a top-down job at Tagawa.

## TAGAWA GARDENS

Centennial, Colorado

[tagawagardens.com](http://tagawagardens.com)

**Year Established:** 1982

(Greenhouse operation dates to the 1960s)

**The Skinny:** 1 retail location, 64 year-round employees plus seasonal teams (full- and part-time)

**Turnaround Moment:** An unexpected schedule change in the business's busy pre-holiday calendar last fall threatened to derail sales and foot traffic goals.

**Recent Success:** Brainstorming and out-of-the-box thinking among the staff helped create a new event that generated higher than expected sales returns and many visitors.

**Bright Idea:** Look to your team for inspiration and give customers lots of meaningful (tasty, musical, unusual) reasons to linger.



**BETTER TOGETHER** The Tagawa Gardens management team includes Chuck Hoover, assistant general manager, Lindsay Squires Chrisp, community development manager and events coordinator, Jim Tagawa, owner, and Beth Zwinak, general manager.

Instead, said Lindsay Squires Chrisp, Tagawa Gardens' community development manager and events coordinator, brainstorming the best activities is an all-hands-on-deck exercise.

"Collaboration has always been something that we highly value," said Squires Chrisp, who joined the company in 2013 and was promoted to the senior leadership team in 2019. "It's something we've built our business around."

And the spirit extends to problem solving. Last November, for instance, a longtime local partner for a popular holiday event at Tagawa Gardens encountered an unexpected challenge and had to postpone their event. The change left a void in the business's pre-holiday calendar — one that would affect projected sales for the season. Squires Chrisp turned to her team for help.

"We gathered together to brainstorm ideas that would encourage our customers to come in and look forward to the holiday season," Squires Chrisp said.

Within a few hours, they'd rallied around the idea of a winter walk, a "seasonal shopping experience" that would run for about three weekends and allow the team to draw customers into areas of the 110,000-square-foot business they might not usually explore. "We created multiple points of interest throughout these spaces and ended up incorporating themed displays, demos, guest vendors, and a local guest chef with seasonal food," said Squires Chrisp. "We even had live music in a park setting in our garden supplies area."

The result: A bustling business right before the holidays and a sales *increase* for the month of November. Squires Chrisp, however, said she also benchmarks their success in less tangible ways, including employee engagement and the generation of new ideas — which is ongoing.

"The whole exercise created such momentum within our team," Squires Chrisp explained. "We could have given up or written it all off as an unfortunate inconvenience, but instead we used the opportunity to innovate. The sense of ownership among our team throughout the event was fantastic."

**BE PREPARED FOR \* one great idea to lead to more.** Ever since the Winter Walk, the Tagawa team has been thinking of their space differently — more creatively. "We're asking things like, 'How can we cross-merchandise more?' and 'Can we create points of interests in other spaces throughout the year?'" Most satisfying to Squires Chrisp is the fact that the answer to the problem of the November calendar change came from inside the business. "Sometimes as businesses, we can feel like we need to search for something we don't have or go sleuthing for that next brilliant idea," she said. "Sometimes, that's true! But in so many instances, the solutions we need are here already in our business and our team. If we get curious about people that work with us and ask what kinds of untapped talents and skills they have, we all benefit."

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—Lindsay Squires Chrisp

## THE LESSON: Look Sharp

If you want your customers to see your business as a forward-thinking enterprise, you need to look the part — online, in-store and in your branding collateral materials.

In 2015, Scotts wasn't exactly giving customers or the Palliser brothers that impression. Like many established floral businesses, the shop's branding had evolved over the years, and not always in a uniform manner. "We looked a little haphazard," Chris Palliser explained. The logo on their delivery trucks didn't match the one on their floormats, and neither aligned with the look-and-feel of their business cards.

"It was frustrating," he admitted. "[These elements] were the end-all, be-all representing our business."

The 3,900-square-foot store also looked dated — with too much real estate (about 1,000 square feet at the time) reserved for merchandise. The setup made sense a decade ago, but with more consumers buying gift items online and fewer shoppers walking in off the street, the Pallisers wanted to rethink the area, including how they might make it feel more novel and eye-catching.

To create new branding elements, the Pallisers turned to an outside company, for a logo that better represented the vision they had for Scotts. The



**LOOKING GOOD** A showroom revamp has helped Scotts Flowers attract new attention and increased walk-in sales by 35 percent.

revamped design is sleek and modern, with an elegant "S" inscribed behind the shop's full name. It's also versatile — no more variation among trucks, in-store materials or online.

"We wanted these elements to be consistent across everything that the customers see," Chris Palliser said.

Rob Palliser and the brothers' mother, Silvana, who also works as the company's bookkeeper, took the lead on the renovation of the physical store. (The family justified their substantial invest-

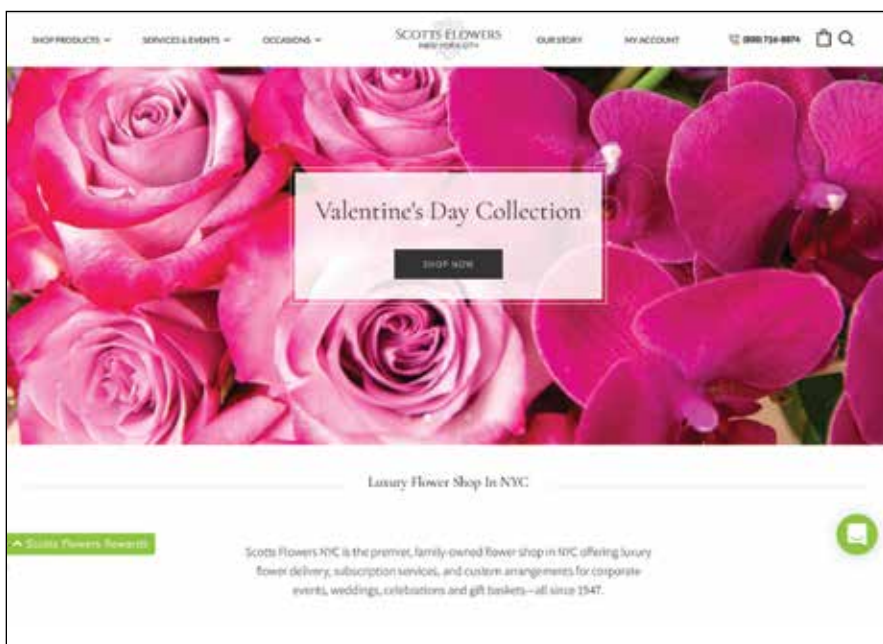
ment for the project, between \$150,000 and \$200,000 with the fact that they also signed a 15-year lease for the property.)

Working with an interior designer, they reduced the footprint of the retail showroom to around 350 square feet. The space they "lost" in the showroom is now used for storage, design and delivery. ("No square footage goes to waste in New York City," said Rob Palliser, with a laugh.) They replaced furniture and fixtures that were 20-plus years old and swapped amber and mahogany tones for black and white tiles, white floating shelving with chrome edging and installed a new lighting system.

"The showroom now is clean and chic," Chris Palliser said. "Because of the super white, high lights, if you put out flowers with lots of color, you can see them across the street. It really pops." (See additional photos in this month's Snapshot column, p. 12.)

### BE PREPARED FOR \* doubletakes.

The Scotts showroom reboot took about five months, culminating in a big reveal on January 2019, about two weeks before Valentine's Day. It didn't take long for customers to notice the changes, in a favorable way. "We've had people say, 'I work down the block. I ordered from you for years and didn't even realize you had a retail location,'" Chris Palliser said. Since unveiling the redesign, walk-in sales are up by 35 percent, with a noticeable uptick in repeat customers, he added.



**BIG NUMBERS** Since changing its online strategy, Scotts Flowers has seen web sales increase by 65 percent.

## THE LESSON: Invest in Growth Areas

Of course, Scotts' new beautiful, cohesive look needed to exist online as well, especially given consumers' new shopping habits. (A recent study found that 87 percent of people begin the purchase process online.) To make that happen, the brothers hired a local agency and spent nearly six months describing their vision for a beautiful and intuitive website, and in January 2017, they switched to a new e-commerce platform (Shopify).

"Once we implemented this, we had great results," Chris Palliser said. "It's more functional and user friendly. And it has online chat capabilities, which about 10 people take advantage of each day." The staff field a lot of silly questions ("Are you in New York City?" "Do you deliver?") but answering with a cheerful

(not condescending) "we sure are!" or "you bet!" usually converts these queries into orders.

The brothers also hired a professional photographer who told them what equipment to buy (Nikon D3400, Yongnuo flash, a lighting umbrella, white backdrop, tabletop) and taught them the fundamentals of photography. Rob Palliser comes up with seasonal collections about eight times a year, photographs the arrangements and updates them on the website.

"Some people might think this sounds like a burden, but in the grand scheme of things, it was a small investment with a big impact," Chris Palliser said.

These quality images of high-end, Scotts-exclusive designs set the shop apart and help complete the image they project.

"Collectively, all these individual efforts make a huge difference," he said. "When you have a sharp-looking shop and branding materials, distinctive designs, a website that's user friendly and attractive, great customer service exemplified with tools like live chat, and a POS system that minimizes errors, your perceived value goes up. You can charge more."

**BE PREPARED FOR \* growth!** The Palliser brothers' attention to their online presence has paid off in a big way. According to Chris Palliser, the business has seen web sales increase by 65 percent from the end of 2016 to 2018 — a mega increase they attribute to the changes they've made in the space.

## THE LESSON: Change Your Tune

Inherent in the success of any longtime business? A willingness to evolve. Of course, the need to change can seem obvious in retrospect. It's sometimes harder to identify that the time to act and change is *now* in the moment.

That's why Squires Chrisp likes having that community of big thinkers at Tagawa Gardens. "Our biggest challenge is creating relevance, to be honest," she said. "But it's also our biggest opportunity. The way people want to interact with plants and flowers is changing."

Increasingly, Tagawa Gardens customers want an experience and an emotional connection from their purchases — a trend that's present across the country as shown by studies and research from groups such as the National Retail Federation. That's part of the reason Tagawa Gardens is leaning into on-site events and community partnerships. The challenge? Making sure those events are offering what customers want and aligning with the company's other goals, including financial stability.

"Retail is changing, so we're constantly asking ourselves, 'How do we adapt? How do we serve existing customers and delight new customers, too?'" Squires Chrisp said. "How do we show people that plants and flowers aren't a luxury, but a connection to basic human needs?"

Squires Chrisp added that so many consumers are looking to "create a healthy lifestyle right now" — indeed, the wellness industry is estimated to

## 3 WAYS TO GET CHANGES ROLLING

Generating new ideas doesn't always require lots of resources or time. Here are three ideas to try right away:

**PUMP UP THE JAMS.** At Scotts Flowers in New York City, co-owner Rob Palliser Jr. is considered the brand ambassador. "He's charismatic and keeps everything loose and fun," said brother Chris Palliser. One small change Rob has made that has had positive and surprisingly wide-ranging effects: playing DJ. "He comes in early and turns on the music — something peppy and upbeat," Chris Palliser said. "Sometimes it's Enrique Iglesias, sometimes it's techno. Whatever keeps people moving. He's always changing it up and it really makes a difference in how people feel and perform each day."

**PUT ON A SHOW.** The team at Tagawa Gardens produces dozens of events every year, giving customers that many more reasons to stop by (and shop). Among the most popular attractions: demos and immersive experiences. This year, Lindsay Squires Chrisp said the team plans to build on consumers' desire for experiences by setting up areas in their garden center that show how seamlessly plants and flowers can be integrated into home décor (think: a high-end model home). "We want it to be aspirational but accessible," she explained. "The kind of beautiful space that would make someone think, 'Hey, I can do that.'" Having new events throughout the year also means that employees' work areas are never quite the same from one season — or event — to the next, which Squires Chrisp said can help everyone feel engaged and excited about the work the company is doing.

**INVEST IN EDUCATION.** Both Squires Chrisp and the Palliser brothers emphasized the importance of ongoing education for their teams. Opportunities abound. A few to bookmark: SAF's 2020 1-Day Profit Blast series kicks off with events in San Antonio, Texas (March 31, sponsored by Bill Doran Company) and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (June 7, sponsored by DV Flora). Plus, SAF members have access to a host of online, free webinars, including upcoming sessions on new concepts in delivery, Mother's Day prep and best practices in wedding sales. Head to [safnow.org/moreonline](https://www.safnow.org/moreonline) for more information.

-M.W.



have grown nearly 13 percent between 2015 and 2017, to an estimated value of \$4.2 trillion, according to the Global Wellness Institute. That's an opportunity for the floral industry — and for Tagawa Gardens, which is why Squires Chrisp said the business plans to continue tweaking its model as a “community center and gathering place” and profitable business this year and into the future.

“We are planning to reimagine a small area of the retail store to include trend features and hang-out space, and we’re

going to keep incorporating live music and food,” she said. “We want to be seen as a gathering place, a place people linger. People are looking for beautiful spaces to collaborate, to connect, to learn, even to be quiet. We can be that for them. It’s a natural progression of our business.”

**BE PREPARED \* to feel uneasy.**

Whatever the changes you make to your business this year, “You have to be comfortable with making things uncomfortable,” Chris Palliser said. “If you’ve had a system in place for years and then



**TEAM SPIRIT** Lindsay Squires Chrisp, left, says collaboration is key in developing in-store events..

try something different, some people are going to get nervous.” (And that person might be you!) His advice: Push through. Keep your vision in mind. Don’t let fear hold you back. “[Any change] can be frustrating at the time,” he added. “That’s a pretty natural reaction,” but it’s not a reason to stop moving forward. 🌿

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