

# THE BIG RETHINK

Florists share strategies on  
reinventing business for a  
new retail environment

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PHOTOS BY  
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**H**ow will consumer behavior evolve in the near- and long term as Americans wrestle with what it looks like to shop, socialize, congregate, work, play — and, well, live — in the age of an ongoing global pandemic? What do these changes mean to floral industry professionals from all segments?

Good questions, says author, speaker and retail consultant Jim Dion of Dionco Inc. “We’ve heard the word ‘unprecedented’ used a lot to describe the pandemic, and so part of the challenge is defining that idea and what’s happening, so that we can all start to understand the full impact this event is having on our society,” said Dion, who has helped lead legacy brands such as Harley-Davidson and The Ritz-Carlton Company through periods of change. “What does it mean to be a consumer now — and what are the full spectrum of reactions? What are the psychological issues — how are people coping? How do those strategies tie into the floral industry?”

In the past five months, Americans have experienced new-to-them technology at record rates: People are video conferencing more than ever and ordering more goods, including groceries, online. How many of these new behaviors will stick once stores, schools and workplaces fully reopen? It depends, said Dion, one of five keynote speakers at the Society of American Florists’ recent Reinvention Summit. (Read more on p. 10.)



**SIGN OF THE TIMES**

Jennifer Morris puts the finishing touches on designs at Rockcastle Florist. Like flower shops around the country, the business has communicated new and evolving safety protocols with staff and employees.

"The routines we had before the pandemic were routines for a reason," he explained. "Human beings take an awfully long time to change." He added that history could provide some lessons. "If we look back to the 1918 pandemic, that was a pretty devastating time. People were dealing with World War I and they were also social distancing. But by 1922 — only four years later — the country was pretty much 'back to normal' in terms of consumer behavior and economic activity."

That's not to say that florists shouldn't be bolstering their online presence right now as more consumers shop online, Dion clarified. Instead, he said the challenge is to decipher which behaviors are temporary responses and which are more permanent adaptations. "A lot of the new tools and [online] services consumers are experiencing now are novel and cool, but we as humans have this

muscle memory for the way we used to do things," including shopping in person and dining out with friends, he said. "Those memories are burned in deep."

The big unknown: When will a vaccine or other virus-mitigating technologies be available? Americans' sense of safety and well-being will continue to be a challenge to retailers until those advances are developed and widely available. (And with cases rising in hotspots across the country at press time: Will scaled-back reopening plans throw more industry members into additional chaos?)

This month, Floral Management editors talked with leaders from four brick-and-mortar retail shops in different parts of the country and asked them to highlight one area they've reinvented in response to the pandemic. We also detail some of the challenges they're facing and some of the opportunities they're finding.

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*—Wendy Rockcastle,  
Rockcastle Florist*

## **THE LESSON: Right now, efficiency rules**

### **THE REINVENTION STRATEGY: Cross-train**

Many hands make light work, but that's not an option right now for most florists, including Wendy Rockcastle.

In the early days of the pandemic, Rockcastle, co-owner of Rockcastle Florist in Rochester and Canandaigua, New York, laid off her entire 30-person staff, and attempted to run the business alone with the help of her husband and co-owner, Keith, and daughter, Mary. The plan: Close their two retail locations and continue to fill website and phone orders from their centralized design center, which is in a large warehouse.

"We told our team to file for unemployment, that the three of us would be the heartbeat of the business until things calmed down and everyone could come back," said Rockcastle. "We thought, with a plummeting economy, we wouldn't be that busy and could manage the load alone. We were wrong."

After a few days, the Rockcastle family decided they couldn't continue without support. But they couldn't just bring everyone back — they had to be strategic.

"Our decisions became about efficiency," Rockcastle said. "Who has the best skills to help us right now — and who is comfortable returning?" For instance, in late spring and early summer, they faced a backlog of wedding-related emails as couples anxiously tried to shift wedding dates. "Our wedding stylist/designer, an experienced sales associate, a driver and one junior designer were all willing to come back right away," Rockcastle said, making the decision-making path about whom to bring back first clearer. "We were so grateful for their skills, personalities and willingness to go beyond our expectations daily. Together we solidified as a small but effective team quickly," working from the design center, which they good-naturedly called "the bunker."

Which is not to say the roles the team members stepped back into were anything like the jobs they'd been doing in January 2020. Instead, the focus



was on cross-training and helping each other. The sales associate jumped in with admin work, the driver helped with flower processing, and the junior designer had to be ready to pitch in with customer service. The approach is one Rockcastle says she intends to keep, to help address the current realities brought on by the crisis. "When bringing someone new into the business [in the future], they might need to handle multiple areas," she said.

Rockcastle also hired a college student to make deliveries. "In the process of getting to know him, we learned that he was a business and accounting major and, because of COVID, had lost his summer internship," she said. "Now we have him working in the office, helping out with QuickBooks. Of course, he'll also do deliveries when we need him."

Rockcastle's daughter, Mary, an alumna of Parsons School of Design, pointed her to a demographic that's ideal to bring into a flower shop: artists. "People come out of art school and have a hard

time finding work. Or they have a studio and work for themselves, but they need something to subsidize that income," she said. "They're talented and computer savvy. And the young people today tend to be very into plants and flowers."

Rockcastle added that she and her family are keeping an open mind as they bring on any new team members. With so many online orders, for instance, employees who have skills in photography and design are especially attractive — as are candidates who come from backgrounds where "multitasking and people skills" are key and customer service is prioritized, she added, pointing to the restaurant and bar industries, along with luxury retail companies. Workers in these hard-hit areas might be looking for a new path and career now, creating an opportunity for floral industry owners who take the time to recruit and hire them.

"A floral background is not a must," Rockcastle said. "It's really about skill-sets. And, as a bonus, people completely new to the industry don't have bad habits you have to retrain."

**PUSHING THROUGH** Keith Rockcastle, his wife, Wendy, and their daughter, Mary, have banded together with their employees to shift roles and priorities for their business.



**NEW WAYS OF WORKING** Wendy Rockcastle said that in the pandemic, many decisions are now about efficiency.

**And remember... Focus on employee skills, potential and attitude.** Rockcastle recommends looking beyond job title and scrutinizing your employees' personality and strengths. "We have a woman who is a real detail person who usually takes on prom work fiercely," she said. While that business disappeared this year, the employee's passion for managing details and numbers remained. "We put her in charge of holiday production numbers [on Mother's Day], which was an amazing shift for her"—and a boon to the business, she said.

**THE LESSON:**  
**Focusing only on one sales area can leave you vulnerable**

**THE REINVENTION STRATEGY:**  
**Diversify products and services**

Like many longtime florists, Georgianne Vinicombe found herself reflecting on the Great Recession and lessons from 2008 as she and her husband, Kevin, led their team through the early days of the pandemic.

Springtime is usually a robust period at Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co. in Princeton, New Jersey, with a steady stream of work tied to area universities and community colleges, not to mention holidays, corporate work and weddings. Overnight — as schools sent students home early from spring semesters, ahead of commencements and spring formals, and businesses transitioned to remote work and canceled in-person events — much of the Vinicombes' planned revenue disappeared. Because the shop had been focused for years on diversifying its income, however, expanding its product line into new areas and putting energy into its online presence, they were able to adapt, Vinicombe said, noting that sales are down by about 25 percent year over year so far — a scenario that's far from ideal but also manageable. (The Vinicombes, who applied for and received a PPP loan, were at about 80 percent of their pre-pandemic payroll at press time, with five full-time team members, including Georgianne and Kevin, and three part-time workers.)

"I've always thought that I did not want any one area of my business to be the bulk of my sales and that has really saved me this time," said Vinicombe, who estimated that, before the pandemic, daily work made up about 45 percent of floral sales, corporate work 15 percent, weddings and events 10 percent, sympathy 5 percent, and 25 percent to nonfloral goods. "If I was doing mostly weddings or events now — or if all my orders came from hotels and corporate entities — I'd really be hurting."

Instead, the Vinicombes had other established product lines to promote, including balloon bouquets and food baskets that proved to be high-demand purchases during months of physical distancing among consumers, when customers were looking for safe ways to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and more. "If I only sold flowers, I would have seen a much larger decrease in sales and would have missed out on all those balloon bouquets, food baskets and gift item sales," said Vinicombe, who credits about 38 percent of her sales during the pandemic to nonfloral goods. "Diversity in products and services helped me survive the recession, and it's helping me again."

In fact, the shop launched a new, separate website in May (<https://monday-morning-flower-and-balloon-co.myshopify.com>), specifically for its nonfloral offerings. "It's a good way for people to see everything we have available in the shop, without actually coming into the store," said Vinicombe, adding that they've also started to experiment with shipping select items (food, gift items) via FedEx to customers, a service she sees growing. "I believe that will pick up in the future, especially with the new website," she said. "I think concentrating on online sales is even more necessary than ever and will remain so." (Read more about some of the shop's online strategies, including tactics related to social media, on p. 30.)

Like the Rockcastles, Vinicombe said she too is focused on keeping her team small (and filled with people who can multitask) in the future. "I don't think I will tolerate an unproductive employee ever again," she said. "Everyone needs to pull their weight. That's my biggest regret for the month prior to the emergency. I had some 'hangers-on' that

should have gone sooner. It's not personal, it's business. And in order to survive, we need the very best staff that we can afford."

Moving into the fall, Vinicombe added, she's feeling hopeful, for her business and the industry, in large part because there are opportunities to be problem-solvers for consumers who are feeling the effects of the pandemic's months-long grind. "I think a well-run flower shop is well positioned for this period," she said. "While other businesses had to figure out how to deliver, we do it day in and day out. Our product helps lift people's moods, we are affordable, and we help people express themselves. That's what people have needed [in this time], and we have been here to help them."

**And remember... keep yourself on customers' radar.** The Vinicombes decided early in the pandemic to maintain their hours and availability to customers as much as possible — and to continue their investments in marketing. "It was important to me that we be here for people, especially because many other florists were closed or had reduced hours," she said. "In those early weeks, we saw three times the normal level of new customers." Those are all important leads for the future, said Vinicombe, but she wouldn't have them if they hadn't been open.

## THE LESSON: Community matters

THE REINVENTION STRATEGY:  
Add a personal touch  
whenever you can

For the team at Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse in Waukesha, Wisconsin, one of the big takeaways of 2020 has been: The personal has never been more important. Going into the year, Jane Lopnow and her husband, Marty, had planned for a strong 12-month period, including sales related to high-profile events such as the Democratic National Convention and the Ryder Cup. The pandemic has forced the cancellation of both and turned sales trends on their head at the longtime floral business.

"Every category is completely opposite the trends we were experiencing up to the COVID crisis," Jane Lopnow said. "Cash sales are down. Credit card sales are up. Outgoing wire orders are down, but incoming wire orders are up. Store walk-in traffic is down, but deliveries are up. Curbside pickup is up — because we never offered it until this year. Business is definitely unpredictable."

**"I don't think I will tolerate an unproductive employee ever again. Everyone needs to pull their weight."**

—Georgianne Vinicombe, Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co.



That reality has underscored a principle the business always has valued: Make every sale count.

"We keep remembering that every order is so important to us, as they always have been," Loppnow said, adding that the business is hyper focused now on adding those personal touches to every customer interaction. In practice, that means texting order delivery information, including pictures, and being transparent with customers and employees about the new safety and sanitation measures in place to help keep the community safe. Loppnow includes a thank-you note with every bill — "It takes a little extra time, but it's important to remember who is keeping us in business," she said — and the team has learned that some customers just need a bit more TLC, and time, right now.

"[We try to keep] the customers' needs in the spotlight," she explained, adding that a formerly routine pleasantry ("How are you doing?") "may turn into a counseling session from florist to customer."

"Sometimes it's what is needed at that moment," she said. "Some of our senior customers get lonely and need the reassurance of a listening ear. Moms need to talk with an adult instead of their kids, and guys always need help picking out flowers. We take the time to really thank people for their orders, and thank those businesses that have stepped up to help us with more orders than usual."

The Loppnows also are purposefully including themselves and staff in communications, including emails with embedded videos of Marty talking about plant and flower trends and care. "We want to be sure people know there are 'real people' behind every message," Loppnow said. (The shop has a long-time history of taking this personalized approach in marketing, too. Read more about some of their past efforts at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).)

**"We're putting more of the budget towards online avenues because people are increasingly shopping from home, and that may give us more bang for our buck than ever before."**

—Brian Kusuda, Jimmy's Flowers

**And remember... Build on what you've always done best.** The Loppnows have also found that some of their most successful initiatives and community-building partnerships in the past don't need a complete overhaul. Instead, they just need an update for the crisis. "Instead of presenting to the garden club, we filmed a YouTube video to send to their members," Loppnow said. "Instead of holding a container garden class, we made up container garden kits with instructions and pictures of us, delivered to their doorsteps." The feedback has been just as personalized as the outreach. "We have been given hand-sewn floral masks, donuts, treats and scads of thank-you notes," Loppnow said. "We try to meet each customer where they are at this time, and everyone is in their own different circumstances. It's truly all about relationships with other people, and the more we are made to distance from each other the more we come together to support one another in new, creative ways." (Find more advice for creating digital events and hosting workshops from afar at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).)

**THE LESSON:**  
**Every crisis brings opportunities**

**THE REINVENTION STRATEGY:**  
**Stay agile — and open to new ideas**

The pandemic also has led to some major rethinks at Jimmy's Flowers, which has three locations in Utah. "The areas of our business that [were] affected the most this spring were corsage and boutonniere work for the several high schools in the area for proms and dances and also the lack of funeral work due to the restrictions of no viewings and large gatherings for funerals, but our everyday bouquet sales have actually been up," explained Brian Kusuda, a member of SAF's Retailers Council. "That increase has helped offset some of the losses."



**STRONG MESSAGING** The team at Jimmy's Flowers is focused online on streamlining options and pushing messages about the power of flowers.

But the Jimmy's team knew they had to come up with some additional strategies to move through the crisis. An advantage they were keen to tap into: consumers' positive feelings about flowers, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty. "The value that flowers bring happiness and spread cheer combined with the fact that we can deliver that product safely for them makes us a great gift option during these challenging times where lots of people are down and struggling," Kusuda explained.

This spring they tapped into some of that goodwill when they teamed up with several flower farms and other local florists to run print ads in local newspaper promoting flowers. "We really pushed the message that flowers are proven to bring happiness and joy to people and to support their local florists at the same time," he said. "We listed all the local florists who wanted to participate and saw an incredible response."

Through that collaborative effort, the Jimmy's team was able to support farms with surplus flowers and leverage shared investments in marketing and advertising, while promoting flowers. Customers responded positively, and so the approach also helped the participating shops keep their staffs engaged and busy. The most popular ad approach, which ran for about a month, was 50 percent off a dozen or more roses. "I spoke to several customers who were sending them to all of their friends that they couldn't visit and also buying some for themselves," Kusuda said.

Like many florists, Jimmy's also has seen a serious spike in online orders, which have increased by 42 percent in terms of volume and 50 percent in terms of sales, year over year. The shift means the Jimmy's team is closely evaluating where they invest time and energy, and the product mix they want to offer. "We're putting more of the budget towards online avenues because people are increasingly shopping from home, and that may give us more bang for our buck than ever before," Kusuda said. "We're also looking at the amount of floor space and money going toward carrying various gift and home décor items. Some people are still coming into our stores, but the overall foot traffic has obviously decreased, and gift sales are way down as a result."

**And remember... promote what you want to sell.** One of the biggest lessons the Jimmy's team learned from Mother's Day: Customers were just fine with fewer options to choose from online, and having a streamlined menu proved better for the business, too. "We decided to only offer a select number of bouquets, and customers were required to choose from that list," said Kusuda, who saw holiday sales up by 40 percent this year. For the first time in their history, they didn't accept custom holiday orders. "I know many shops across the country have done that for years, but we were always hesitant because we try really hard not to ever say no to customers. This year went so smoothly because of this change." The approach also meant simplified ordering for both hardgoods and fresh flowers, reduced inventory, reduced waste and more efficient production overall. "We're going to implement a similar strategy for future holidays," Kusuda said. 🌸

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**ON THE JOB** Tim Parr of Rockcastle Florist readies designs for delivery.

## A BOUQUET OF HOPE

With a global pandemic, fractured economy and nationwide protests on every American's mind — the country could use a shot of hope right now, and Jim Dion of Dionco Inc. said that gives the floral industry a unique advantage over competitors.

"Hope is something every consumer needs right now," he said. "America is emerging from the virus in very different ways, on very different timelines. People are overwhelmed by the news. They need something positive to hold onto, in products, service and messaging. Because of its product — flowers, plants — the floral industry is in a position to deliver that hope."

SAF has a catalog of university research on the health and emotional benefits of flowers available to association members, along with local marketing materials to help you spread messages such as:

- Flowers reduce stress and create a moment of calm.
- Living with flowers can provide a boost of energy, happiness and enthusiasm.
- Flowers have an immediate impact on happiness and a long-term positive effect on moods.

Find out more at [safnow.org](https://safnow.org).