



"We try to respond to every communication from any customer in less than 10 minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year."

HOWARD HURST



BY MARY WESTBROOK

Superlative service is the new normal: faster, smarter, smoother. Can you deliver?

BEYOND IMPRESSED

It was the brunch heard around the world. Or, at least, around the Internet.

In March, Cat Deeley, an English actress, singer and model, ate at Tom George in Los Angeles, and the swanky hot spot did not live up to her expectations. Deeley did what disgruntled customers everywhere do these days: She took to Twitter to complain about the food (“terrible”), the manager (a “moron”; an “amateur”) and the overall restaurant (“disgusting”; “the worst”).

Since Deeley is a celebrity — she co-hosts the TV show, “So You Think You Can Dance?” — media outlets, including People and Glamour, picked up her Twitter rant, amplifying her complaints. In a matter of hours, Tom George, which the foodie website, Eater, described last October as “seriously beautiful” with “dapper Italian flair,” became linked in the minds of millions of people with Deeley’s single disappointing meal.

And maybe the brunch was a bust — the food overcooked, the waitstaff frazzled, the manager in a surly mood. (Her waiter, for his part, pushed back against Deeley’s version of the story.) The truth is, what actually happened during that two- or three-hour period doesn’t matter. Deeley, the customer, was disappointed, and she let lots of people hear about it, fast.

Celebrities may not walk through your door (or navigate to your website) to buy flowers, but all of your customers have platforms aplenty to air their grievances should you disappoint them. When something goes wrong, a miffed customer can tell family members, friends, co-workers and strangers all about that experience in a matter of seconds. What’s more, customers today are comparing you to every other business, not just other retailers, ac-

cording to Shep Hyken, an expert in customer service, and frequent contributor to Forbes magazine.

“Someone goes to a luxury hotel and has an amazing experience, and then she heads to her local florist and she expects the same level of service,” he said, subconsciously or not. “Florists aren’t competing anymore against other florists or gift providers. They’re being compared to everyone who delivers any kind of service. Period.”

That includes places such as Amazon (vast warehouses and one- or two-hour delivery) and Nordstrom (high-end offerings and generous return policies), along with Zappos and Zara’s (high-tech inventory systems a local florist can only dream of). Gulp.

And yet, florists know how to provide great service. The industry is built on a foundation of service: helping people express emotions, making them comfortable, providing support in times of joy and sorrow. New tools and new tech may heighten consumers’ expectations (and certainly, make them less patient), but these shifts, say customer service pros and many seasoned florists, also provide new opportunities — chances to dazzle and overwhelm, to seal a deal and turn a fair-weather customer into a lifelong loyalist.

There’s real money to be gained from being the business that does the dazzling. Hyken pointed to a NewVoiceMedia report that found that some \$62 billion were lost in 2015 because of poor customer service. A flawless customer experience or mistakes that are quickly corrected not only increase loyalty and sales, but ultimately compel today’s consumer to “share” and gush online. This month, we talked to florists, along with experts from outside the industry, about how to get more raves from your customers.

GANG’S ALL

HERE At Tipton & Hurst, there’s a 10-foot rule. As soon as a customer steps inside, any employee is empowered and expected to say hello. Pictured l to r: Howard Hurst, president; Ann Gunti, controller; Chris Norwood, vice president; Freda Rice, flower manager.

OFF THE CLOCK

Frank Gallo, of Frank Gallo & Son Florist in upstate New York, offers extended hours for delivery and tightly edits his website offerings, particularly around the holidays.

Bob Aykens, AAF, of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses said that he's constantly rethinking policies and procedures, looking for inefficiencies that can drain profits and create pain points in the buying process.

RANT GETTER: Slow service

RAVE EARNER: Streamlined processes, new options

Let's return to that \$62 billion figure for a minute. That number, Hyken pointed out, is up 50 percent from 2013 (when NewVoiceMedia conducted a similar study).

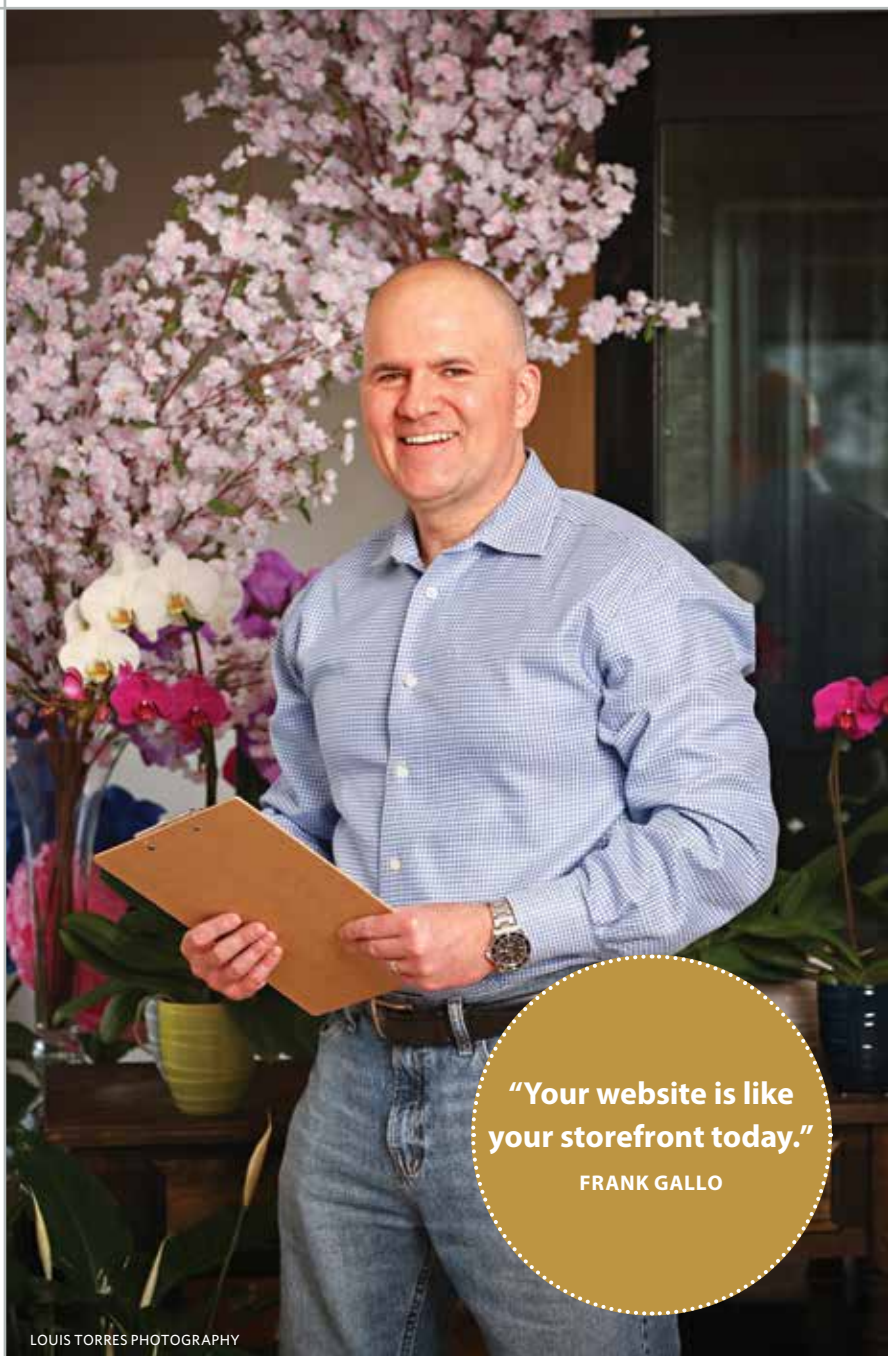
"I don't think that [increase] means customer service is getting worse," he added. "I think it means that the bar is getting higher and higher."

In other words, customers expect more. Chief among those expectations: They want the buying process — every step of it, whether they're shopping in-store, online or by phone — to be easy.

That means that websites need to be edited (and optimized for mobile), showrooms have to be organized, team members must be cross-trained, and policies that force you to say no to a customer should be changed so that you can say "yes" more often. (Compare: "Sorry. We can't get that design to your daughter today," to "Sure! We can get that design to your daughter today through our rush delivery, for \$XX.")

In Appleton, Wisconsin, Bob Aykens, AAF, of Memorial Florists & Greenhouses said that he's constantly rethinking policies and procedures, looking for inefficiencies that can drain profits and create pain points in the buying process.

"Any system or procedure that is complicated for our staff is going to



"Your website is like your storefront today."

FRANK GALLO

LOUIS TORRES PHOTOGRAPHY



ALWAYS IMPROVING

In Appleton, Wisconsin, Bob Aykens has been working on a draft document that fully captures his philosophy on customer service. He's also engaged help in the past year from a third-party to improve his online brand and social media presence.

be complicated for our customers," Aykens explained.

Recently, for instance, he's been revamping the business's delivery department, significantly streamlining the fee structure and reducing the overall number of zones.

Aykens, who plans to have this new system fully implemented by Mother's Day this year, said that his own goal has been twofold. He wants to make delivery more profitable, but he also wants delivery procedures to be easier for staff — and, therefore, customers. (Though, admittedly, there is a learning curve for staff with the new system, he said.)

"It's always a balance," between profitability and customer service, he said. "We've been profitable in delivery in the past, but I know we can do better," while providing in some cases faster service.

In fact, many florists say they've adjusted delivery practices to provide better service — easier and, often, faster. Call it the Amazon Prime and Prime Now effect: Consumers around the country are growing accustomed to finding items online, buying them and having them in their homes in a matter of hours. Aykens, for his part, has been experimenting lately with using Uber drivers for late-in-the-day deliveries, rush orders that come in after the main work is done and Aykens already has sent his drivers home.

For an additional fee, Frank Gallo, of Frank Gallo & Son Florist in upstate New York, offers delivery before 9 a.m. and after 6 p.m. In the past five years, he's also added two delivery vehicles to his fleet, and invested in updated GPS tech-

nology, so that orders can get out faster and more efficiently.

Online, Gallo — and many other florists — are working to create tighter edits and narrow selections so that customers aren't overwhelmed with options, particularly in the run-up to a major holiday such as Mother's Day. That's a good idea, said Hyken, who added, "A confused customer doesn't buy." (He's also quick to add, "That doesn't mean a typical customer doesn't like options." Be sure to allow customers who *do* want to browse to see other pages on your site and your social media platforms.)

"It's become a cliché to say this, but your website is like your storefront today," Gallo said. "Having a concise menu of items is crucial. At holiday time, we go in and edit the amount of items that we have available. It makes it much more streamlined and more efficient." It also makes the buying process less complicated for the customer.

At Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co. Inc., Princeton, New Jersey, Georgianne and Kevin Vinicombe have started placing more emphasis on employee cross-training, to ensure that each member of their 14-person team is equipped to field just about any customer concern or need.

"For a while, our employees were becoming more specialized," Georgianne said, "but [today] we need our team members to fill different roles, so that customers aren't sitting around waiting for me to come out of a wedding consultation." (Read more about Vinicombe's approach to employee management on p. 16.)

RANT GETTER: Unresolved mistakes

RAVE EARNER: Prompt, public responses

One trend that's very clear in customer service: Customers now have the ability to reach out to businesses through an untold number of platforms, not only via phone and email, but also social media messaging, texts and independent apps. And those messages aren't coming in exclusively during business hours.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, Tipton & Hurst's eight-member management team takes an all-hands-on-deck approach to fielding customer inquiries and complaints. Messages sent to the company's primary email (comments@tiptonhurst.com), voicemails, social media pings and online review notifications are automatically delivered to all eight people. During business hours, the person who sees the message first responds to it (and sends a note to the other team members, alerting them that the situation is under control). Outside of work hours, one manager is always "on call" to respond.

"We try to respond to every communication from any customer in less than 10 minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," said Howard Hurst.

When a customer thinks that Tipton & Hurst has goofed, the company goes above and beyond to try to make things right, Hurst added. The company's guar-

HANDCRAFTED At Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co. in Princeton, New Jersey, designs include special tags designating which team member created the arrangement.



Eight Ideas to Try Now

Customer service is a big topic, its finer points hard to pin down. (Really, *everything* you do relates to service, right? Florists are in the service industry.) In that spirit, here are eight ideas florists have implemented to improve service — practical, tangible ideas — that you can borrow and put into place right away.

- 1 Be Generous.** Don't put yourself in the position of haggling with customers who already feel wronged. In Little Rock, Tipton & Hurst offers a generous guarantee on all designs. "A lot of times we'll give customers a gift card of equal value," explained Howard Hurst. If they redeem that gift card, the shop can shine (and recapture what might have been a lost customer). Still, research shows that few customers ever redeem gift cards, Hurst noted — a stat that adds more fuel to the "be generous" argument. (What do you have to lose?)
- 2 Reward Positive Behavior.** Customers who provide you with feedback are doing your business a huge favor. Reward them, Hurst said. His company, for instance, enters customers who complete surveys into a drawing for a gift card. Last Valentine's Day, Tipton & Hurst received 300 responses.
- 3 Mind your Greetings.** Do your employees greet customers who come into the store? Before you roll your eyes and say, "of course," consider another question: Have you trained all of your employees to greet customers? At Tipton & Hurst, there's a 10-foot rule, Hurst said. Once a customer sets foot in the door, any employee who is within 10 feet of that customer needs to offer a quick greeting — it doesn't matter if the employee is a part-time worker, manager, or design or sales team member. "Customers need to be greeted and need to feel welcome," Hurst said. In a similar vein, all Tipton & Hurst employees wear lo-

goed clothes, so customers can quickly identify who is on staff.

- 4 Meet, Train, Repeat.** When it comes to delivering great customer service, don't take any lessons for granted, Hurst said. He and his team meet regularly to talk about new services, products and complaints. Training requires that repetition, he argued, especially in the lead-up to a major holiday, when things around the store can become frantic. "My son's a college golfer, and his coach told him you need to hit the same shot 100 times every day so that you can hit that same shot under pressure," Hurst said. "It's the same thing with service; it needs to be automatic."
- 5 Focus on Details.** Hurst also trains his sales team to confirm every detail for phone orders. "We train them to review the information and say, 'Does that sound good, have I got everything correct?'" he said. "Ninety percent of the issues related to complaints come down to communication. If you get all the details right, you are 90 percent done." Again, this may sound like common sense, but unless you are reinforcing the importance of double-checking to your staff, you can't be sure that critical task is happening.
- 6 Personalize Every Experience.** Florists have a huge competitive advantage when it comes to making gifts personal, said Jen Rodstrom, of the Temken Group, a research, consulting and training firm specializing in customer service. Never miss an opportunity to flaunt your local roots, or to remind customers that you are a local, family business, staffed by real people. In Princeton, New Jersey, Georgianne Vinicombe sends a letter to new customers, welcoming them to Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co., and includes a "designed by" card with the designer's name and photo for each

arrangement. Her shop also sends follow-up letters to recipients ("We hope you enjoyed your gift and we'd love to help with your future gift-giving needs."), along with "we miss you" letters for customers who haven't ordered in nine months. The shop also uses personal phone calls for delivery confirmation.

- 7 Start with a Smile.** In upstate New York, Frank Gallo trains his staff to answer the phone with a smile. It makes a difference, he insisted. "For florists, face-to-face interactions with customers are a pretty small percentage of business," he said. "Our rule is: You answer the phone with a smile and an upbeat tone. Customers can tell."
- 8 Be a Big Thinker.** Articulating your overall philosophy on service probably falls pretty darn low on your to-do list; but in Appleton, Wisconsin, Bob Aykens has been dedicating more time to putting his thoughts on paper. Inspired by the book, "Kemo Sabe Wisdom: Practical Ways to Help Your Business Succeed," by Tom Yoder, Aykens is currently putting the finishing touches on a comprehensive document that addresses corporate culture and standards. The document will cover his mission statement, along with things that every employee needs to do (greet customers, use people's names, walk people to products, rather than pointing them in a general direction, etc.). Aykens said that he hopes that document helps him address a challenge that many floral industry members face: high turnover. "Ten years ago, 70 percent of my staff had been with me with 25 years or more, but that's not the case anymore," he said. "Now, if you get two years out of somebody, that's pretty good." The manual, he said, could help instill more consistency across his team, and build up the workplace culture. **-M.W.**

Georgianne and Kevin Vinicombe send a letter to new customers, welcoming them to Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co., and includes a “designed by” card with the designer’s name and photo for each arrangement.



KYO MORISHIMA PHOTOGRAPHY

ALL THINGS, ALL PEOPLE

Georgianne and Kevin Vinicombe of Monday Morning Flower & Balloon Co. cross-train employees to help provide better, more consistent service.

antee policy promises 100 percent customer satisfaction, and Hurst also wants all of his employees, not just the managers, to feel “empowered,” to take ownership of any mistake and any correction, he explained. Indeed, the company’s tag line, prominently displayed online and on marketing materials reads, “Guaranteed satisfaction since 1886.”

“I tell everybody that comes to work for us, ‘I am giving you full authority and responsibility to do whatever it takes to satisfy the customer,’” he said, including refunds, gift cards, new designs and, occasionally, all of the above. “I want raving fans, customers who feel indebted and amazed. They’re going to be the ones who tell other people about us.”

Responding quickly is especially important when it comes to online reviews, said Jen Rodstrom, of the Temken Group, a research, consulting and training firm specializing in customer service. She recommends that companies respond to all reviews, positive and negative, and “indicate if they’ve made any improvements based on that [customer] feedback.”

“That way, anyone else who comes to check out the reviews can see that the florist is invested and taking [the comment] seriously,” she said.

Hyken agreed.

“Every comment should be responded to, and responded to quickly, preferably in minutes,” he said. “If you have a negative review, reach out [to the customer] and say, ‘Wow, it’s obvious you weren’t happy. I want to fix this for you.’”

Once you’ve made things right of-fine, he added, return to the thread and thank the customer in that same forum for allowing you to fix the problem.

“Ideally, the customer will close the loop and thank you,” ensuring that any future customers who happen upon the initial negative comment will also see that happy resolution.

By the way, Hyken added that there’s no need to fret over a less-than-perfect star rating on Yelp, Google, Facebook, or any other site. In fact, a study from Northwestern University found that consumers tend to see businesses that have perfect ratings as less than credible — many consumers are even suspicious of businesses with only raves. (They wonder if the business might be paying for

those glowing reviews, in violation of site policies, or asking friends/neighbors to weigh in with fake reviews.) The “ideal” review, the study found, is closer to 4.2.

“People want to see complaints,” Hyken said. More to the point, “they want to see how you respond to complaints.”

Yelp, in particular, has been a thorn in the sides of many small-business owners. (Google “Why do small-business owners hate Yelp?” and you’ll see pages of results, most of them very familiar to florists.) Chief complaints about the site: a process that some say makes removing fake reviews cumbersome, an algorithm that can feel downright mysterious, and an over-emphasis on bad experiences. (Customers who are miffed are just more likely to post.)

Aykens said he’s experienced the headache of Yelp firsthand, which is part of the reason he engaged a third-party to help manage his shop’s online presence and brand. (Keep reading for more on that.)

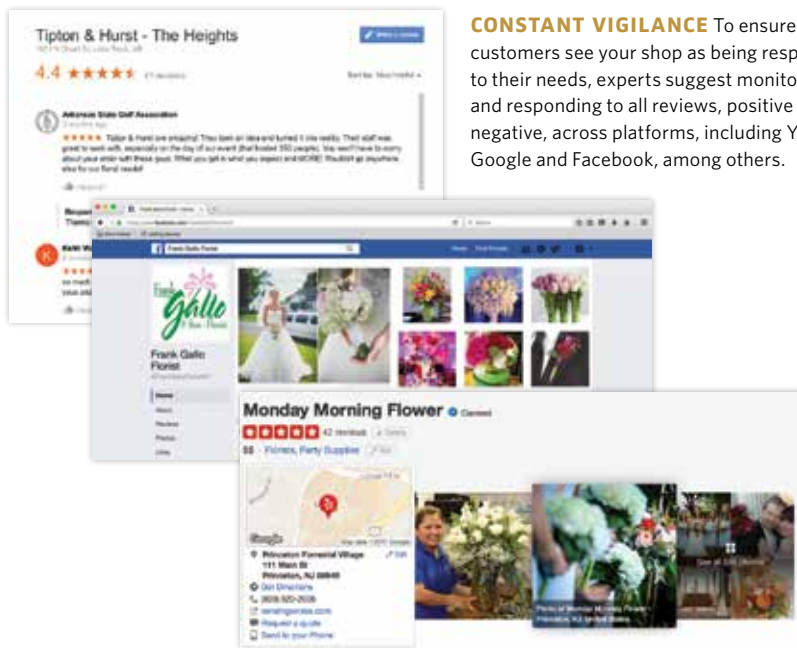
“I think, like a lot of florists, we were doing a subpar job with social media for a while,” he said.

Caught up in the rigors daily work demands, online reviews would go unanswered for days or even weeks. Aykens knew that situation was unsustainable, which is why the business has a more proactive approach today.

“Next to quality, customer service is the most important thing,” he said. “So when we weren’t handling [online complaints] well, that’s the kind of thing that was keeping me up at night.”

Moreover, Yelp receives about 145 million unique visitors a month, according to DMR, which tracks digital marketing stats. Small-business owners ignore or writeoff the site at their peril, said Rodstrom, who urges retailers to take a two-pronged approach with Yelp: Respond to every comment, and encourage customers who are happy with your business to take their compliments and post them publicly.

“Our research shows that consumers are much more vocal about bad experiences than good experiences,” she said. “So we’d encourage florists to actively ask their customers who have a positive experience to post on Yelp, because [those customers] might not even be thinking about it, but would be delighted to when asked.”



CONSTANT VIGILANCE To ensure that customers see your shop as being responsive to their needs, experts suggest monitoring and responding to all reviews, positive and negative, across platforms, including Yelp, Google and Facebook, among others.

Create a ‘Customer-Centric’ Culture

Shep Hyken, a bestselling author and expert in customer service, said the letter D may conjure images of near-failing grades in school, but, for retailers who want to create a “customer-centric culture,” there are six “D’s” to remember. He recently shared those points on his website hyken.com:

Define it. “Customer service is part of your brand promise,” Hyken explained. “It is what you want your employees to deliver. It is what you want the customer to experience. Make it clear and make it simple.” For example, he added, “Ace Hardware, known for their customer service, is known as the ‘Helpful Hardware Place.’ They have defined customer service as being helpful, and in their hiring, training and customer interactions, they make it clear that helpful is what they are all about.”

Disseminate it. “Don’t keep it a secret,” he said. “Just because you’ve defined the customer service experience, at this point, it’s just lip service. Now you must train your employees on how to deliver it. The Ritz Carlton hotel chain has laminated cards with their ‘credo’ and several other important core values, printed on it. Each employee carries the card with them, and in many cases, has memorized it.”

Deploy it. “It’s time to execute,” Hyken said. “The employees have been trained. Now it is time to implement and act on the customer service initiative. Everyone must know it and be on board with it — even people who don’t have any contact with your customers. They have internal customers whom they support. Customer service is everyone’s job.”

Demonstrate it. “Now that everyone knows it and has been trained, everyone must demonstrate it,” he explained. “Leaders must, through their actions, show everyone how it’s done. And everyone else should do the same. Everyone becomes a role model for how to deliver amazing customer service.”

Defend it. “If you see someone doing anything contrary to what you want the customer to experience, you step in to help,” he said. “This isn’t about reprimanding or calling someone out for doing something wrong. This is a teaching opportunity, and treated as such, creates a culture that comfortably empowers employees to deliver great customer service.”

Delight in it. “Take pride and delight in the success you have with your customers,” he said. “Celebrate the success of the company, and individuals who have demonstrated amazing customer service.” — **M.W.**

Hyken advocates a similar approach. “Don’t buy [a positive post]. Don’t beg for it. Don’t grovel,” he said. “When people say, ‘You guys are so friendly,’ you should immediately say, ‘Thank you so much! Can you please mention that on Yelp?’”

Yelp, for the record, discourages business owners from asking directly for reviews but doing so is not a violation of the site’s Terms of Service, according to Brian Patterson of Marketing Land, who investigated the issue last year. Paying customers to post or remove a review is a violation.

Many experts also suggest asking customers to consider removing negative reviews, or amending them, once a complaint has been resolved.

And, if monitoring and responding to online reviews constantly feels like too high a bar for your business, remember that third-party companies are available to help lighten the load. About a year ago, Aykens signed on with one such company (Bloomerang Solutions, founded by former florist Art Conforti, PFCI), a decision, he said, “made a world of sense,” considering the potential investment of time and energy all the platforms require.

“It’s like having a police officer to manage the flow,” Aykens said, noting that he has worked closely with the company to shape responses, and still frequently responds on his own to specific complaints.

RANT GETTER: Business that’s taken for granted

RAVE EARNER: Asking for feedback — and showing thanks

Want to know what customers *really* think about your business? Ask them.

“Small businesses have a huge advantage as far as knowing who their customers are,” Rodstrom said. “They know their customers personally, can develop a real rapport with them, and can truly understand their needs. They can make the extra effort to know customers’ preferences, special occasions, favorite flowers, etc. Especially in an industry like flowers, those extra niceties can make a big difference.”

Customer surveys, through companies such as SurveyMonkey or InstantSurvey, also can help retailers capture more realistic views of customers' experiences, said Hyken. The catch? They need to be conducted correctly.

"Surveys need to be sent as close to the purchasing event as possible," he said. "And they need to be really, really simple. It should never take longer to complete the survey than it did to complete the order."

Hyken recommends using a simple numeric system, from one to five, or one to 10, to rate the overall experience, along with one or two follow-ups. ("What would it take for us to raise our rating by one number?" is a question he likes.) Open-ended questions ("Why?") also can encourage customers to share detailed feedback.

Hurst has been sending out customer surveys for about two years, and says he's come to rely on them. Customers receive a survey link with every purchase, and those who respond are entered into a monthly drawing for a \$100 gift card. The shop has had 2,300 surveys returned since it started using the program; on Valentine's Day 2017 alone, 300 people completed surveys, out of the roughly 3,000 who received them.

While the vast majority of responses—"99 percent"—are positive, Hurst said that the surveys provide additional opportunities to make mistakes right, and to have meaningful, memorable conversations with customers. He, for instance, regularly calls customers to thank them for positive survey responses, and for taking the time to pass along kudos regarding his staff.

"I'll call a customer up and say, 'Miss Jones, that was so nice of you recognize Barbara,'" he said. "'I've shown her your comment, and I just really wanted to say we appreciate you recognizing that good service.' Customers tend to remember that, and the staff likes the recognition."

Both Vinicombe and Aykens take a similar approach: Vinicombe sends out surveys weekly, and Aykens sends them out at the end of every month.

"I always gain something that we can improve on," Aykens said. "Or I'll get five or six things that we can share with staff as compliments." 🌸

Mary Westbrook is the senior contributing editor for the Society of American Florists. mwestbrook@safnow.org

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