

Surprise Successes at Local Color Flowers

Unexpected results, bigger sales, better work life and
dumb luck from business decisions.

Reduced Weddings

At our most frantic, overworked, and chaotic, our small shop designed and delivered over 110 weddings in one year. I ran the team ragged. I called in friends and family and hired more help. I coordinated multiple crews from a venue where I was installing a wedding myself. I took early morning trips to pick up rental vans after spending a sober late night retrieving centerpieces among drunk party-goers. The business was thriving but I wasn't. It was too much work and too much stress. It wasn't fun.

I decided to only book one full-service wedding per date for the next year. The result turned out to cut our wedding bookings in half! Obviously, I knew there would be a revenue decrease, but to our surprise (and lack of previous analysis) our profits increased. We made more money doing less work!

As a start-up, we got into a mode of focusing only on growth. Turning down a job seemed crazy. We were growing so quickly and working so hard we did not realize the costs until we started to feel overworked and burned out. Due to the seasonal nature of wedding schedules, we were able to catch our breath in the winter and evaluate what we were doing. The cost of all the extra rentals and staffing ate into profit. We also had not considered the opportunity costs of missed products and services (see our next Surprise Success). Capping the number of weddings made our lives better and our business more profitable.

Lesson learned: Work smarter, not harder. It's a cliché, but the smart choice isn't always apparent.





Sat@LoCoFlo

Local Color Flowers started as a floral design business for weddings. That was all we did. Retail was the last thing we wanted to do. Retail florists were declining due to the wire services, grocery stores and other cheap bulk options. Space for retail was expensive. We did not want a retail shop to dictate our schedule or hire a worker to sit behind a counter at an empty shop. We thought, like Kramer, that “retail is for suckers!”

We bought a small warehouse and converted it into design studio a few years into our business. Coincidentally, it was just a block away from a weekly year-round farmers market. We thought the only benefit of that would be easy access to one of our growers who had a stand at the market.

When the weather was good, we opened the bay doors of the warehouse while prepping and packing up weddings. We started getting visitors and interest. After some thought, and approval from our grower at the farmers market, we hired a worker to sell flowers from the shop when the neighborhood was full of market shoppers. At first, it was simply to meet the needs of a few customers, and we made sure it did not interfere with our wedding business.

Sales gradually grew from our once per week pop-up retail shop. Nancy, the woman who ran Sat@LoCoFlo, was a super networker and built a customer base that turned into group of regulars who made a trip to our studio a weekly routine. As we reduced our weddings, Sat@LoCoFlo became our signature event. It took a life of its own and is now a joyous community gathering and reliable source of revenue.

Lesson learned: Listen to your customers, give them what they want, and take advantage of opportunities available to you. (obvi)

Limiting Deliveries

Not unlike our wedding reduction, limiting deliveries was a quality of life decision, and also resulted in an unexpected alternative new service. Single order deliveries were an unpleasant, time consuming and low profit service. Most delivery customers simply found us online and were usually not among our valued, regular loyal community of flower lovers.

The orders for single vase deliveries did add up over the year and it is always hard to turn away business, but driving long distances, frustrating traffic, and unproductive time in the van for little reward was a total drag, man. We limited our delivery area to just a small perimeter around the shop. We excluded downtown and hospitals which were particularly time-consuming. (High-rise elevators and the maze of hospital corridors were the bane of our delivery boy.)

We thought: If we reduced delivery of flowers to people, maybe we could increase delivery of people to flowers. We flipped it and promoted a new pick up service with discounted advanced subscription orders. To expedite the service, all orders are the same bouquet for the same price. The pick ups are only available during times when we have other regularly scheduled services in the shop.

While not a big money-maker, this business pivot reduced an undesirable service, brought more people into the shop during our limited retail hours, and created more opportunity for sales and awareness of our other services.

Lesson learned: Like Ozzie Newsome (Baltimore's NFL Hall of Fame executive) would say when drafting an athlete, "Right player, right price." We say: Right service, right price. Do what is important to you, your values and your bottom line.



Intro Class

We started offering floral design classes as soon as we had the space to do it. And the classes have been a success for us for years. The topics had always been project based: Spring Centerpiece, Holiday Wreath, Hand-Tied Bouquet. Or they had been focused on designing with a particular variety: Spotlight on Peonies, Designing with Dahlias, etc.

The classes are expensive. We knew that. They have to be to cover the cost of the materials, the instructors' and assistants' time, set up and break down, and the overhead. There has been, admittedly, a narrow audience for our classes. And, despite varying the topics, over time the number of students willing to pay \$100 or more for a few hours of instruction and an arrangement of flowers they designed themselves dwindled.

Addressing the declining numbers of sign-ups for classes, we decided to create a different type of class: less expensive and skills-based. We created an Introduction to Floral Design class for \$45. The audience was the neophyte, and the price included taking home the arrangement. We would make \$0 on this class. In addition to the \$0 we made on this class, we offered a 20% discount to the student on their next flower purchase with us.

The first class sold out immediately and we got requests for a waiting list! We added another Intro Class. Sold out. Another, Sold out. This went on for months. The Intro students returned and used their discounts. We were not making money, but we were developing new customers.

We added Intermediate and Advanced skills classes which do make money. We have brought over 100 new customers into the shop through the Intro class. Some of those contacts turned directly into other business: a private rental of the studio, a speaking engagement, a private class. We have introduced flowers, floral design, and our business to a new group of customers who have the potential to become a member of our valued community of recurring flower buyers.

We are still selling out Intro classes.

Lesson learned: Not every benefit of a product or service needs to be profit - at least have fun and a plan for profit later.

