

by Lisa Carmichael

THREE'S A CHARM

Shirley's Flowers & Gifts is in its third generation of family ownership

We traveled to Rogers, Ark., to meet up with Jo Buttram, AAF, owner of Shirley's Flowers & Gifts to discuss the challenges of the economy and gain some insights and advice on how fellow BloomNet Florists can remain successful and on top of their game.

● HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

We're a third generation family florist. My mother, Shirley, started the business in 1975. I began working in the store as a manager in 1979. I earned my degree in finance and began my career in commercial decorating. I wanted to get more involved in the family business so I began working in the shop as the store manager. I purchased the business in 1985. Weddings and events have historically been a strong area for us, but when it became clear we needed a person to support this area we recruited my daughter, Shelby Shy, to join the team. She worked as a buyer for Wal-Mart. She has a keen eye for trends and marketing and is an absolute natural with brides.

● WHAT'S BEEN YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

Without a doubt the recent economic downturn has been our most difficult challenge. For the first time we couldn't depend on the same steady growth our business had experienced over the past 20 years.

Being located near Wal-Mart, we'd been isolated from some of the economic pressures faced by other retail-

ers. But this last year we noticed a shift in sales. While the number of orders was holding, the average ticket value was not. Our customers were still spending, but they were not willing to give as much of their wallet share. We started an in-depth analysis of our expenses, looking hard at Cost of Goods Sold (COGS) and payroll expenses. We made sure everyone was watching the bottom line, paying closer attention to shrinkage and "stuffing" arrangements. We performed a weekly review of fresh floral purchases vs. sales (including events) to make sure expenses were less than 30% of sales. We changed our buying habits and even stopped placing fresh floral pre-books if the sales did not support the recurring expense. While the initial impact of the changing economy was very scary, it became clear that our intense review of expenses and cost cutting measures was working. Plus, it helped us become better managers and operate more efficiently.

● DISCUSS PARTICULAR BUSINESS STRATEGIES THAT HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL.

Even though the economy forced us to cut costs, we felt we needed to market ourselves aggressively and be in front of our customers now more than ever. We've seen positive results from networking within our community and with business and charitable organizations. It's helped increase our wedding and events business and bring new customers into the shop. One of the most surprising discoveries has been social media—it's been absolutely amazing! By focusing and building up our Website and Facebook pages, we've been able to connect with brides and capture their interest at exactly the right time.

● WHAT GOALS HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED, AND WHAT WOULD YOU STILL LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH?

Opening our second store was a tremendous accomplishment as it allowed us to grow our sales and capacity. To help build goals for our design staff we encourage their participation in floral design competitions. It helps designers learn new ideas and techniques and it increases their confidence. Plus, it impresses our customers to see we have an award-winning designer on staff! But I think the most important goal we have is to always provide a family environment for our staff and to be exceptional in our business. We have to admit, we are a little competitive, (lol!) so our main goal is to continue to build on our title of Best of the Best in Northwest Arkansas.

● WHAT MAKES YOUR BUSINESS UNIQUE? We try to create designs that reflect our customers' personal styles. All of us absolutely love flowers and making people smile. I think that's why we've had such longevity with our staff. We celebrate their tenure with a special anniversary dinner. We truly feel like a family. 



Owner
Jo Buttram, AAF

Shop:
Shirley's Flowers & Gifts

Location:
Rogers, AR

Year Founded
1975

Employees:
13

Interesting Tidbit:
"We are involved with Green Plus, which is a green and sustainable small business certification and education program that gives employers affordable, practical support in succeeding financially while being good to their environment, employees and community." To find out how you can get involved with Green Plus, go to www.gogreen-plus.org.