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BUSINESS

ESTABLISH IMAGE, Let Customers Know Brand

BY ANN MEYER

THE WHOLESALERS THAT SELECT FLOWERS FOR Chicago floral design firm Botanicals know not to bring anything but the very finest specimens to principal Casey Cooper, or she will reject them flatly. "We are extremely picky," Cooper says. "We're known for the high quality of the flowers we use. They are at their peak. They are spectacular. They are perfect."

Perfection isn't a word many companies associate with their brand, because it's difficult to live up to on a daily basis. But for Cooper, who decided to start her own special events floral design firm 10 years ago partly because she was frustrated with the lackluster quality she saw, striving for perfection has helped Botanicals carve a niche.

No matter what the focus, small businesses should look for a way to set themselves apart, experts say. "If you can really create a differentiation, it becomes very engaging for customers," says Kelly O'Keefe, chairman of Emergence Brand Labs, a Richmond, Va.-based consulting firm specializing in brand strategy and brand loyalty. "It gives people a reason to care about you."

That results in a stronger brand image. "It's a question of figuring out what your niche is within your industry," says Andrew Keyt, executive director of the Family Business Center at Loyola University Chicago. "Is your brand based on quality, price or service?"

While many small companies tend to underestimate the importance of a brand, every company has a brand image like it or not, notes Tom Collinger, associate professor at Northwestern University's Integrated Marketing Communications graduate program. It's the company's personality. It's what people think of when they think about your products or services.

"The brand lives in the mind and heart of the customer," Collinger says. "Even the smallest companies have a brand. Unfortunately, what the brand stands for may not be known to them."

By figuring out what their brand is, or should be, small companies can give themselves a competitive advantage. "The hardest part is knowing this is what we stand for. Then translating that into a set of guidelines and principles that make it undeniable about how you do business," Collinger says.

At Botanicals, an emphasis on quality flowers and first-rate customer service is highlighted on the company's Web site (www.botanicalschicago.com). But it's also noticeable from the way the company conducts business. "We are ruthless about saying this isn't good enough, we're sending it back," says Cooper, who has dropped wholesalers who couldn't meet her expectations.

On the flip side, if a bride or corporate client isn't pleased with a floral arrangement, Botanicals' core staff of 15 employees knows to do what it takes to make it right. "We have a saying around here, 'it's never too late to fix it,'" Cooper says. "Even if we have to run to the Jewel and buy something to change it, or come back to the shop for new containers, we'll do whatever it takes."

Botanicals' extra efforts don't go unnoticed. "We're getting a ton of referral business, which is key," she says. "If people go to an event and are wowed by your flowers, they may call you." In addition, Cooper calls her biggest clients periodically, takes them out to dinner and casually surveys them about how her firm is doing. "It's making sure we're on the same page and seeing if they have any issues they want to share," she says.

To make sure Botanicals employees understand the importance of a satisfied customer, Cooper says she reiterates the company's emphasis on quality again and again through meetings and workshops.

What to do if a bride calls in a panic because she is short one centerpiece? "We have a whole script on how you handle an emergency phone call," Cooper says. "They know exactly what the procedure is. That has been key to our success." ■