

FLORAL DESIGNS BY BOTANICALS



BIG EVENTS IN THE WINDY CITY

BY KELSEY LOWE-SMITH

CASEY COOPER RUNS HER LIFE FROM to-do lists. With four to six weddings on the calendar each weekend, along with numerous other social and corporate events, this simple practice has become critical in her business' rise to one of the most prominent event design companies in Chicago. Careful orchestration is just what is needed for the countless events Botanicals, Inc. does every year, from the smallest wedding to the execution of the set design—created by renowned designer Colin Cowie—for The Oprah Winfrey Show's "Million-Dollar Wedding Giveaway."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS. Ms. Cooper entered the floral industry 20 years ago, working at various retail shops and freelancing for others. She caught the entrepreneurial bug in 1993 and began giving design consultations in her living room and arranging flowers on top of her washing machine in her basement.

In 1995, the company moved to a small studio in a charming, down-on-its-luck mansion and was incorporated as Botanicals, Inc. It instantly began to attract the attention of Chicago's leading event professionals. Within only one year, the studio was bursting at its seams, prompting a move in 1996 to its second location, and then, in 2002, to its current 6,500-square-foot state-of-the-art design studio near Lincoln Park. With 16 full-time employees, a number that easily doubles throughout the year with part-time and freelance designers, Botanicals handles events every day, averaging close to 100 per month.

Botanicals has several departments that cater to the wide-ranging needs of its customers. Separate corporate and wedding design consultants divide the two main types of events. Other departments include logistics, production and administration. A prop shop at the studio houses a number of custom-built pieces that staff mem-

bers have created. In addition, Botanicals works with a lighting company, a linen company and others to offer a full range of rental items.

ROOTED IN REALISM. Organic and natural is the signature style of Botanicals. “We’ve always derived our inspiration from nature,” Ms. Cooper shares. “Our style grows and evolves a little bit every year, but its roots remain extremely organic.”

When creating arrangements for most events, Ms. Cooper likes to employ what she calls “the luxury of cramming.” She explains this design concept as what happens when the arrangement has enough materials to look great, but the budget is such that designers get to add more and more product. Consequently, Botanicals’ designs tend to be quite lush, packed with top-quality product. From fruits and vegetables to mosses and grasses, anything that grows is fair game for adding to creative floral designs or using on its own.

CAPTIVATING THE CORPORATE MARKET. Corporate events account for 65 percent of Botanicals’ business. Because galas, benefits and other social soirées usually stem from her corporate clients, Ms. Cooper defines corporate business as anything that is not a wedding.

Each event varies widely. “It can be designing 10 centerpieces, or it can be designing an event to fill the entire Field Museum,” Ms. Cooper explains. (Botanicals is one of only four floral design businesses that are authorized to create floral arrangements for events taking place in the museum.)

With such a range in sizes, Ms. Cooper says it is difficult to pinpoint the average retail price of Botanicals’ corporate events. Although they have run from \$200 to \$100,000, a typical event is \$5,000.

While she is under contract not to disclose much about her experiences on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Ms. Cooper says her most challenging event so far was the set design of Oprah’s “Million-Dollar Wedding Giveaway” in spring 2004. The event was a collaborative effort directed by Colin Cowie, and Ms. Cooper says a short turn-around time and communication dilemmas made it the most stressful and difficult event she has ever done but also the most rewarding.

“Colin Cowie was in South Africa the week prior to the shoot, the producers were here at Harpo Studios and Botanicals was responsible for executing the design,” she

says. “Working via e-mail and telephone, we all had what we thought was a clear plan. It wasn’t until 10:30 the night before the taping that the plan had solidified. We had gotten a third of the way through one project, three quarters of the way through another and halfway through another, and they all had to be started over to meet the needs of everyone involved. So we pulled a brutal all-nighter. But it was an amazing experience, amazing exposure and a very unifying experience for our staff.” Another big event for Oprah, which was separate from Harpo Studios, was the production of an intimate 50th birthday party that Stedman Graham threw for her in 2004. Botanicals also produced Major League Baseball’s 2004 All-Star Gala at The Field Museum, which was met with universal acclaim.

CUSTOM WEDDINGS AND CONSULTS. Capturing 35 percent of Botanicals’ business, weddings are a key aspect as well. The average retail price for a wedding is \$10,000, and Ms. Cooper says that, like other social events the company does, its weddings are extremely custom.

One of her favorite events so far was a wedding last year at the Milwaukee Art Museum in Milwaukee, Wis. “It was drop-dead gorgeous,” Ms. Cooper confirms. “The bride and groom were both surgeons, flowers were very important to them, they had a great budget and they wanted something different, interesting, edgy and beautiful. They picked the most amazing place. I had never worked there, and I would be happy working there every day.”

Ms. Cooper says one of the best things about doing weddings is the trust brides-to-be put in her company and in her. “A lot of times, brides come in with some idea of what they want—obviously they maintain some control over the vision of it—but they often come to a point when they really give over and trust us. When they let us go out on a limb and show them things that they never dreamed of, those can be really exciting events.”

A thorough three-meeting consultation process ensures that every bridal couple gets exactly what they want. “The first meeting is for us to really get to know the client, and we ask a million questions to find out exactly what their needs are, in terms of how many bridesmaids they will have, how many centerpieces and buffet pieces they will need and what type of ceremony they’re planning,” Ms. Cooper explains. “Then we ask them where

they shop, what colors and textures are most prominent in their wardrobes, how they got engaged, what magazines they subscribe to, what their hobbies are, what they do for a living, do they have pets, etc.” She relates that no piece of information is too small for helping the Botanicals staff to get to know the couple.

Based on what the customers convey during the initial meeting, a Botanicals design consultant presents a proposal, painting as complete a picture of the event as possible, including itemized pricing, during the second consultation. Following feedback and fine-tuning, a final meeting takes place, with a full sample of what the event will look like. Ms. Cooper says she tries to give her clients as many visuals as possible in a showroom that is complete with the chosen linens, table appointments, chairs, lighting and, of course, flowers.

Each of the three meetings lasts an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Botanicals does not charge consultation fees but does require a deposit when customers book their events. “For any big social or wedding event, there’s a contract, we require a 50 percent deposit and the final balance is due on the day of the event,” Ms. Cooper explains.

Botanicals limits its weddings to between four and six per weekend. “We take a limited number of weddings per weekend because of the way we service them,” Ms. Cooper says. “The design consultant who worked with the couple since the beginning of the planning process is there to hand the bride her bouquet, and we pin on all personal flowers. If there’s a problem with a design, we fix it. If the bride forgot to order a boutonniere for Uncle Harry, we make one. We are on site to place every single centerpiece, light every single candle and relocate items from the ceremony to the reception. We want it to be perfect just as much as the bride wants it to be perfect.”

Another aspect of the personal service that goes into each nuptial event is interaction with the same staff members from consultation day to wedding day. This ensures that the couple is comfortable and familiar with Botanicals’ employees, and the employees know exactly what the couple expects.

QUALITY IN MOTION. Ms. Cooper says that when she and her staff finish an event in the studio, they are really only about 55 percent finished. The remainder of the work is packing and transporting the floral arrangements, props, etc. to the event site, setting them up, which often requires

on-site construction of things that are too large to transport in one piece; and breaking down, repacking and transporting items back to the studio once the event is over.

Although 85 percent of Botanicals’ business is in Chicago, Ms. Cooper shares that her company also does a lot of business outside Illinois’ borders, in Wisconsin and Michigan. With multiple events often happening simultaneously, this presents transportation challenges. Last year, after renting vehicles since the business began, the company bought two large trucks, which have helped with logistics issues. The company continues to rent additional vehicles on busy days. Ms. Cooper points out that Midwest weather is extreme in both winter and summer, so it is necessary to provide temperature management during transportation. This sometimes requires refrigerated trucks or using dry ice in the back of non-refrigerated trucks during the summer months or space heaters to warm up trucks during loading in the winter months.

PROMOTING THE BUSINESS. With so many high-profile events, Ms. Cooper says Botanicals has been fortunate with the amount of PR the company has received. “We also made an investment in a PR firm that has paid off nicely over the past three years,” she says, adding that the company has not run any advertisements within that period of time.

Marketing is a different issue. “We do a lot of e-mail blasts, mailings and promotional events,” she explains.

Botanicals also selects a few free events to do each year based on who the guests will be. “It’s hard to measure the business we get from these events, but we get to experiment with design concepts that we might never have been hired to do, and we do them, with strategic partners,” she says. One such event is the annual open house for the Adler Planetarium, for which Botanicals has provided floral décor since the planetarium expanded in 1998.

Last year, Botanicals was featured on ABC 7 Chicago’s “Best of Chicago.” This honor, along with exposure in *In Style*, *Elle Décor*, *Elegant Bride* and numerous other national publications, has influenced new business toward Botanicals. “We don’t do a lot of outside sales, frankly, because we don’t have time to,” she says. “And that’s a good problem to have.”