

FLORISTS' REVIEW

DESIGNED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY BOTANICALS, INC.



PARTY FLORISTS Bring Enthusiasm To The Table

BY JAN LANDON

DESIGNING FLORALS FOR LUSH weddings and corporate events means coordinating not only the flowers but also many other details, like storage, transportation and staffing. But big events don't have to be overwhelming, say three florists who specialize in weddings and corporate and celebrity functions.

Learn how Mark Held, owner of Mark's Garden in Sherman Oaks, Calif.; Casey Cooper, owner of Botanicals, Inc. in Chicago, Ill.; and Dawn Kelly, owner of Soiree Floral, with locations in New York City, Rowayton, Conn., and Nantucket, Mass., handle large events with ease.

BUILDING A CLIENTELE – Ms. Kelly recalls her first big event—a wedding with 250 guests in a tent. Word soon spread, and she started designing

for many weddings, which then led to corporate events.

A Web site is essential to a business just starting out, Ms. Kelly says. While word-of-mouth is important, the people who hear about you must have somewhere to find more information. Also, a Web site allows your business to appear bigger than it really is, she remarks.

Mr. Held says the key to his success has been word-of-mouth from a satisfied clientele, which built his reputation. He advises those hoping to build their wedding and event business to take as many bookings as they can professionally handle, “because your work is your best advertising.” “You have to deliver what you promise, however, and hopefully more,” he says. “Events can be

your best advertising vehicle. At a wedding, for instance, you have 250 people who are potential customers looking at your centerpieces for four hours. Events are great opportunities to display your work.”

Ms. Cooper’s first solo event was a neighbor’s wedding. She had worked in a floral shop for several years, and the wedding was her first try at going it alone. “I got three clients from that first wedding,” she says. “Each event leads to other events.”

Getting to know event planners and getting your company name on as many Internet resource lists as possible is also important for drumming up additional business, these florists say. But the most essential item for getting clients is having photographs of floral design work to show them—whether at face-to-face meetings or via e-mail or a Web site.

NOT GOING IT ALONE — The ebb and flow of event scheduling can make staffing difficult. Mr. Held has 50 employees, so most of his needs can be covered, and because he is in Los Angeles, he says finding temporary employees isn’t difficult.

Over time, Ms. Kelly has assembled a cadre of part-time workers who help with events. When additional help is needed, she has posted listings on Craig’s List, an online classified advertising service.

In Chicago, in addition to Botanicals’ 15 full-time employees, Ms. Cooper turns to freelance designers to help with big events or during especially busy times. There is a large and well-respected freelance pool in the city, she says. In addition, for labor-intensive jobs like setting up and tearing down at event, Ms. Cooper hires students from a nearby college.

MOVING AND STORING — To store Mark’s Garden’s large inventory of props, many of which are custom made for clients, Mr. Held rents storage units adjacent to his store. And because there is little space at his business to store a fleet of vehicles, he says that renting vehicles as needed makes sense.

Despite having a 6,500-square-foot facility, Ms. Cooper doesn’t want the space to become cluttered, so she is happy to rent items from other companies when necessary. And until the past

few years when she began buying large trucks for her business, she rented vehicles as required.

Ms. Kelly rents storage space in New York City for some of her equipment and props, which can be extremely expensive. So rather than buying a lot of equipment and renting space to store it, she frequently rents the equipment and props instead. Transportation is also a challenge. On occasions when the vehicles she owns are not large enough for an event, she rents them as well, including refrigerated trailers when more cold storage is needed.

CONSULTING AND BILLING — Mr. Held has no formal rules for how many times he consults with clients. He meets with them initially to find out what they want, and then he follows that up with meetings including full table presentations—from linens and dinnerware to draping samples—everything the clients need to see. A deposit is required when a date is booked, and full payment is required two weeks before the event.

Ms. Kelly says her consultation and payment policies depend on the client, but she generally requires a \$500 deposit, a 50 percent down payment and the balance paid in full prior to the event.

Ms. Cooper has a three-meeting process for wedding consultations: an initial meeting, where she or her employees get a sense of the future bride and groom and their hopes and dreams, a second meeting, where the clients are offered a proposal, or blueprint, for their wedding, and a third meeting, when the clients see sample centerpieces, linens, chairs and china.

Corporate events are much less time consuming, Ms. Cooper explains, and designs often can be decided with a phone call. Wedding and event clients are different, one involves a lot of emotion and meshing together diverse styles, and the other involves the more dispassionate, non-emotional style that comes with the corporate world.

None of these three event experts charges by pricing out the materials used. Mr. Held, for example, has a set price for bridal bouquets, attendant bouquets, centerpieces and so on.

A SATISFYING CAREER — Regarding how to decide if large events are right for your business,

Ms. Cooper advises deciding what you want your lifestyle to be like before getting started. For example, she says, if you don't want to work weekends, focus on corporate events, not weddings. Another thing to consider is that if your business grows large enough, you might become more of a boss and less of a designer. It is essential that you be able to delegate to employees.

Soiree's Ms. Kelly stresses the importance of being able to take time for oneself. "It's important to recharge your battery," she says. "If you don't, you can become negative and get stuck in a rut. Then it isn't any fun, so why do it?"

And Mr. Held emphasizes that a great attitude goes a long way. "Get excited, and try to make everything original. People notice that."

MORE ABOUT CASEY – Casey Cooper, owner of Botanicals, Inc. in Chicago, Ill. Ms. Cooper started her business in 1993 and is well known for high-end weddings and corporate events. Botanicals, Inc. has designed and produced events including an intimate birthday gathering for Oprah Winfrey's 50th birthday and Major League Baseball's 2004 All-Star Gala. Ms. Cooper has collaborated on television projects with lifestyle expert Collin Cowie. www.botanicalschicago.com 