

Fifteen doses of fresh air for floral merchandising

PUT SIMPLY, merchandising takes place when merchants do something more than offer merchandise for sale. Previous to the late 1950s, little merchandising took place in floriculture. Its beginnings can be traced to the occasional labels that identified plants on the benches in retail greenhouses. The legitimacy of identifying identification as a merchandising concept should be obvious to all now that supermarkets have multiplied (in fact, made omnipresent) those informative tags. Now plant names, price and care information have turned colorful and have become apparent as merchandising.

In 1964 or '65, when the Bachman European Flower Market concept came along, the professional experience and resources of a leading retail florist and grower were linked, for the first time, with merchandising expertise. Since that time, the goods and services of floriculture have become more available. They're now merchandised the length and breadth of this country. Whether that merchandising has relied on price, convenience, new forms of flower selling or all three, the consumer has received it enthusiastically and propelled the sale of flowers through non-florist outlets at a greatly accelerated

MERCHANDISING EVOLVES—The '70s saw far fewer merchandising innovations than the decades previous. It may be that a bouquet is a bouquet is a bouquet and a plant is a plant is a plant, but the refinements that are taking place seem to refute that.

The package is more attractive today than it's ever been. There are classic ceramic containers with utility features, watering cans, cups, bowls, etc., and all available in formats ranging from novelty to high fashion items. Frequently, flowers and plants are adorned with tastefully designed miniature figures. Candles, ribbons and potliners belie their relatively low cost. Any retailer or grower who wants to prepackage his product can find any form, shape or substance in which to deliver it.

Florists' lines are expanding. In the past few years, I've seen everything from angeworms to furniture, greeting cards to hunting licences. The availability of price and care information in florists' shops is catching up with that available in nonflorist outlets. Displays are becoming more organized (by horticultural product) and are of a better quality.

The quality of the product itself—

also a merchandising tool—is improving, too. This is so true that I've even seen a supermarket in California that advertises, "Florist-fresh flowers." Now, why the hell should a supermarket be telling its customers what good flowers are available in florist shops?

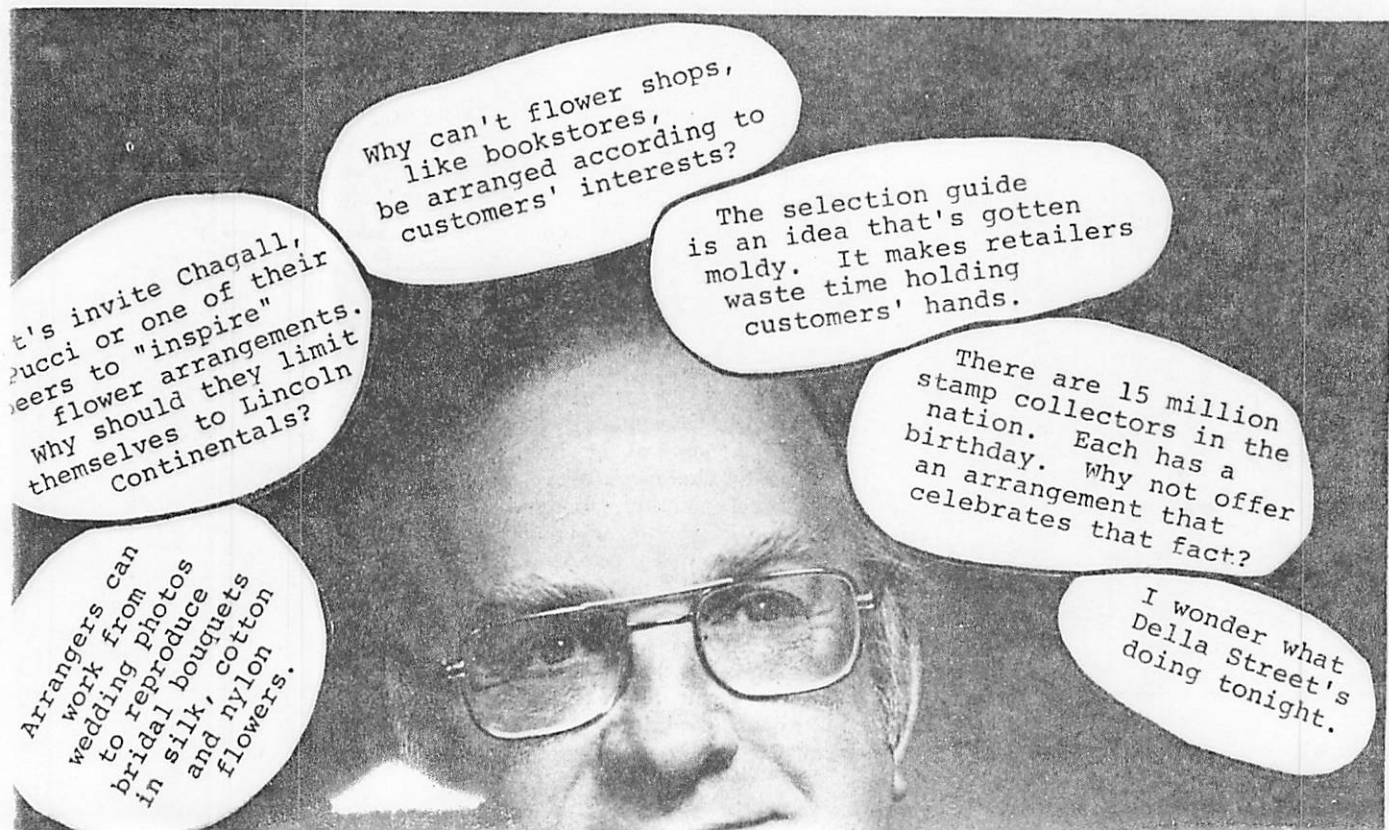
I am concerned, though, that florists—retailers—don't have sufficient control over product quality. That's why, when things like the Chain of Life program, the test-order programs and the Ohio State florist short course encourage communication among industry segments, I'm delighted.

Window displays in florist shops have improved, too. As the flower children of the '60s become an increasingly important part of the consuming public (and the business community), that change will be more and more apparent. The heavy, heavy windows that we used to see—loaded with bridal things, flowers, giftware—will disappear. In some of those old windows, no theme was visible. Today's consumers want a simple message, a simple arrangement, nonarrangements. The window display must convey that florists have what the public wants.

Convenience as a merchandising tool hasn't impressed florists at all. It's beginning to dawn on florists who are located in shopping malls. They're surrounded by examples of what's needed—the simplicity of kiosks. But, outside of the malls, I don't see florists responding.

In short, floral merchandising has become more respectable in the recent

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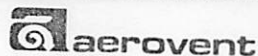
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Bodette

(Continued from page 30)

past, but it's got a long way to go. Not until the industry is able to tap the great artistic talent that's present among our designers and turn it to merchandising artistry will the vital new era arrive.

THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE—The following are meant as stimulants. They're not in any sequence of importance. Agree or disagree.

(1) We must stop listening to each other and find out what consumers want. They *should* want flowers and plants, and merchandising can effect this. As in the Chain of Life, this merchandising is something that must be done by all segments of the industry, but it begins with the growers. At the moment, for example, the kalanchoe is a sleeping giant: It can bring satisfaction on an unheard of scale. I'm an authority, because I've had kalanchoes in my home for the past four or five years, and I've seen them blossom over and over again. They bring a lot of discussion from everyone who sees them. I'm afraid, though, that kalanchoes will have the same problems that poinsettias had when the Eckes and the Mikkelsen brought them out six to eight years ago. The public had to be informed about them. Unless there's a mechanism in the industry to tell the people what's going on, florists are going to be unable to merchandise the new products. Retailers will continue to sell the same old things.

Some new possibilities: Merchandisers could have a field day with a Christmas spray of red orchids; a new, relatively unrecognized plant of the month, or, possibly, new materials we may see coming out of China now that that country is opening up.

(2) Can you merchandise money? You betcha! The best cash flow is a daily, in-hand one, and the successful merchandiser of the near future is going to take the giant step of stopping individual charging. "Cash or major credit card" (except for commercial accounts) is going to be a concept florists will have to sell the consuming public. That's a must for any business that would be healthy.

(3) This may be heresy, but fabric and giftware flowers may create a new kind of flower power. Giftware News says, "Happy is the retailer who knows how to market this new brigade." Obviously, florists have long been aware that French silk flowers are a high-quality, top-price item. What's new is that many opinion leaders have been claiming that these are superior to fresh flowers. That challenges florists: They must be able to apply the avalanche of ideas being put forward for using artificials. One of the more interesting applications is the use of fabric flowers for brides. Not in wedding flower bouquets, but in duplicate sales: A bride's bouquet can be reproduced in silks so she'll have it as a remembrance. A designer might even offer to do the reproduction from a wedding photograph. I mentioned this possibility recently at a florists' meeting, and suggested the combination of silks with fresh flowers. Everyone looked askance at me. "Dried, maybe, but not fresh," was their opinion. I feel that, if fresh flowers are kept in proximity to any new introduction, a retailer can expand his offerings without endangering sales of his basic stock.

(4) The army of gainfully-employed women who are now more interested in making a buck than in homemaking wants convenience. Small arrangements, varieties that require little care and varieties that effortlessly provide their apartments with color are what's needed. Florists must not only provide such merchandise: They must let it be *known* that they provide it. Worthwhile practices and goods fail when not *merchandised*.

(5) Observe (some of the aspects of) what's going on



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in the bedroom. And the dining room and the kitchen. Bedsheets, pillowcases, napery, wallpaper. . . . White was replaced by solid colors, solid colors were replaced by geometric patterns and, today, pictorial themes are in. Jungles, forests, animals and flowers adorn dinnerware, lampshades and clothing. Progressive floral merchandisers will suggest arrangements to match bedroom or dining room themes.

(6) Why should Pucci or Blass be designing in every area but floral designing? Why must they be confined to clothing, leathers and the interiors of Lincoln Continentals? Some floral merchandiser of the future is going to ask a Chagall or a Picasso to design a floral product and let it be known that "This piece of merchandise was inspired by a great artist."

(7) Merchandise plants and flowers to all age groups, from the young-at-heart to the senior citizens. Merchandise to different interests. Next time you're in a bookstore, look at the way it's organized by reading interests. Can flower shops be similarly organized?

(8) Merchandise every day, every week, every month. There must not be overreliance on occasions. Mother-in-Law's Day is fine. Everyone in the industry was pleased, and FTD and its agency should be congratulated; but, a florist can't rely on such events to the exclusion of the everyday life experiences. Births, anniversaries. . . . Add 'em up.

(9) By including spare parts, the merchandiser is acknowledging the fact that parts break, that the item is not infallible and that he wants a happy, satisfied customer. Why can't this industry maintain a spare parts deal that would start with growers, include the wholesalers and retailers and end with the consumers? The venerable Z. D. Blackstone, since he was a kid, has offered a baker's dozen of roses, and he's merchandised that successfully. The consumer knows that, if there's a bullhead or a broken rose in the bunch, there's been an effort made to compensate for that. There's been an effort made to guarantee pleasure. That saves time and money for the florist, because he doesn't have to service a complaint. He's anticipated the fragile nature of his product.

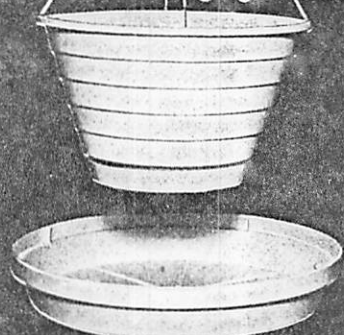
(10) Florist shops are insulated against the public; they have to open up. In California, I see flowers and plants spilling out of the stores and onto the sidewalks. I see people stop and browse; I see cars actually stop and back up because they've been attracted. The magnificent color displays make that "Hey! Take some flowers home!" unavoidable. The customer should walk into a garden—not a sterile environment that hides the nature of

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what florists have to sell.

(11) The floral merchandiser of the future is going to have to be more aware of the convenience factor. In convenience stores, 48 percent of the customers are in and out in less than three minutes. Seven-Eleven stores are a good example. I visited a retail florist shop recently that seemed to take seven to 11 hours to wait on me. Customers must be allowed to come into florist shops, do some selecting and make their purchases efficiently. They shouldn't have to wait for a clerk to make up a box, they shouldn't have to wait in long lines.

(12) Color merchandising coordinated with growers—Boy! What a challenge! Why should all the white sales and yellow sales and pink sales be confined to the bedding business? Properly coordinated, our industry can grow, promote and sell a color through a whole season. The growers would have the advance information they need, and the retailer would have a merchandising hook. The public would be pleased at being made color conscious. Don't think you don't have to remind the public of the features of flowers that appeal to them.

(13) A major breakthrough will occur in this industry when growers, not retailers, set the design pace. Why should retailers, simply because they have the designers, pace the promotion of new varieties through their determinations of design acceptability? The promotion of new varieties should begin where the new varieties begin—with the grower. I'd like to see, somewhere in our industry, a grower panel set up to underwrite, or encourage in some way, a creative panel of designers that would set the pace from two to five years ahead. Again, growers would be informed, retailers would be given direction and the promotion of new varieties would become an orderly process.

(14) There are 15 million stamp collectors in the nation. I never heard of an arrangement for stamp collectors. It might be something a florist could really merchandise to a segment of his clientele. Stamp collectors have birthdays, but I never heard of a stamp collector's birthday floral arrangement. Multiply that by all the hobby groups in America.

(15) Probably the most important merchandising tool that's found its way into the florist shop in recent years is the selection guide. It's a proven tool, and all the wire services have it in some form. But it's become stereotyped. It's a loose-leaf notebook with a lot of pretty pictures. It contains between 75 and 180 arrangements, and it takes the customer a good deal of time to thumb through. Perhaps a

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clerk hovers around the customer as the customer thumbs and thumbs and thumbs and finally asks, "What d'ya think I oughta buy for this occasion?" This old sales aid needs to come alive. Perhaps successful merchandisers will use permanent flowers to create a more immediate "selection guide." The customer will be a lot more likely to come in, make a quick selection and be out of the shop in three to five minutes. We can't afford 30 to 40 minutes.

AND THAT'S JUST A SAMPLE—I hope I've conveyed the idea that there are many untapped flower and plant merchandising techniques. These are but a few. What the industry really needs is a body that will serve as a continuing mechanism to assess the future—a group that will continually investigate methods of merchandising and share discoveries with florists. One-shot occasions for thinking don't get the job done effectively.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is based on comments made at the Ohio florist short course, January 8-11, Columbus.

catalogs received

RAYMOND A. FLECK INC., 1139 Street Road, Southampton PA 18966; Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day catalog; prices, order blank and business reply envelope included; 8½x11 ins; 4pp

CUNNINGHAM GARDENS INC., Waldron IN 46182; 1978 garden mum list and keynoters; price list and order blank included; 8½x11ins; 6pp

MELLINGER'S INC., 2310 West South Range Road, North Lima OH 44452; 1978 spring catalog; prices and order blank included; 8½x11ins; 84pp

safe roundup

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