

# Containing Results <sup>STABY</sup>

Wire service arrangements often highlight the container as well as the flowers. Are the containers being overemphasized at the expense of their content?

by Sharon Bakos

Wine goblets, nut bowls, tea kettles and colanders — wire services sometimes seem to emphasize containers just as much as, if not more than, the flowers in the arrangement. This trend is more noticeable now than ever before, as consumers have become more value-conscious. Containers that are reusable or decorative are seen as a good deal — even though their cost is more than that of a simple container — and are in strong demand.

"Before customers didn't place

that much emphasis on containers, but now with giftware containers they do," said Alean Gault, owner of Flowers by Alean, Houston, Texas. The concern is whether customers are placing too much emphasis on containers at the expense of flowers and, if so, how they have come to this point.

In the September 1984 issue of *Floriculture Directions*, floriculture marketing specialist Herb Mitchell wrote, "...I am very concerned that the emphasis wire services are placing on containers at the expense of

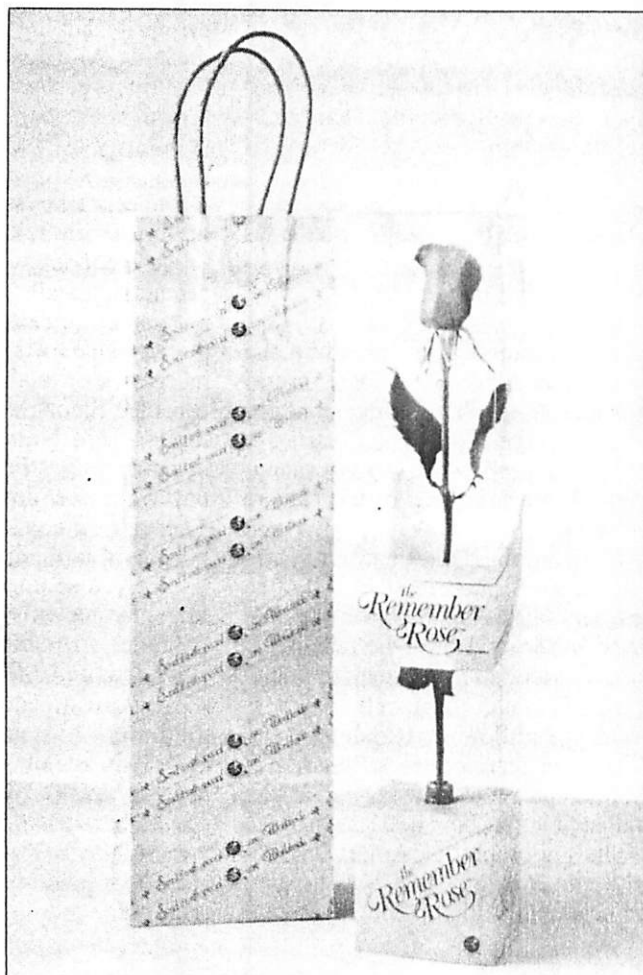
the primary product, fresh flowers, depreciates the value of the flowers in the consumer's mind. In the process, the consumer's awareness is directed to containers, not flowers. As a result, the role of the retail florist is diminished because customers are being educated through advertising that containers, which are available at many types of retail stores, are the key ingredient in the purchase. It's a basic fact of advertising that the focus of an advertisement literally molds the potential buyer's attitude about the product being advertised."

## The Keepsake Concept

FTD and Teleflora currently are the only wire services actively promoting and offering decorative containers on a regular basis. Teleflora's container concept focuses on "keepsake" containers that have other uses besides holding flowers. "They make the arrangements more expensive, but it's worth it because people like something different," said Gault. The containers are a popular item at her store.

Wholesalers usually do not offer the variety that some of the wire services do, but the trade-off is that their containers are usually less expensive. Customers who, for instance, purchase one of Teleflora's keepsake containers are seemingly also paying for the container's second purpose. Teleflora views the purchase as one for the cost-conscious. "The budget-minded consumer really appreciates having something to remember of the gift and who sent it to him," said Marge Velasquez, public relations manager for Teleflora.

Teleflora started the keepsake concept in April 1980 for Secretary's Week with a lapel pin that had live flowers in it and a place for storing water to keep flowers fresh. "The



A new everyday container from FTD removes the rose from traditional wrapping paper and packages it in a clear box, appropriate for gifts.



American Floral Services emphasizes situations in which flowers are appropriate with no promotion of containers.

lapel pin showed us what a great idea the keepsake container is," Velasquez said.

Since then, most of Teleflora's floral arrangements for special occasions and holidays have used keepsakes. The No.1-selling wire service container in the country was Teleflora's Mother's Day colander bouquet, Velasquez said. Teleflora actively promotes its containers and sells them as giftware, but Velasquez said the wire service's main purpose has not changed. "We're here to sell flowers. The keepsake containers bring florists more business." In this way, she said, the keepsake concept is consistent with the florist's need to sell more flowers.

The containers also bring Teleflora more business. Judy Pfleger, director of advertising for Teleflora, said in the July 16 issue of *Adweek* magazine that Teleflora's keepsake sales exceed \$130 million.

### Giving a "Complement"

While FTD also offers containers that are decorative and sometimes

reusable, such as the nut bowl container being offered for Thanksgiving, the containers "are not a giftware item per se," said Sheryl Randolph, corporate communications director for FTD. "The customer is getting a reusable object for mementos but it must also be A) quality, B) priced economically and C) one that will complement the floral arrangement. Flowers are most important and we don't want our containers to upstage them. The florists are making a profit on designs or bouquets. If we take that away, they're gift shops."

The container *does* matter, Randolph said, to the extent that it must be attractive and blend with the consumer's decor. As to whether or not wire services are putting too much emphasis on containers at the expense of the flowers, Randolph said, "The wire services are struggling to get an angle on the market" and their philosophies on how to do so differ.

The philosophy of American Floral Services is to be totally non-product oriented, said Jim Morley, direc-

tor of special projects. Morley does not see decorative containers offered by wire services as useful to the florist. "Decorative containers cannot increase profit. The mark-up on containers is less and you lose your individuality. Why would I go to one particular florist shop over the others when they've all got the same thing?"

"AFS is a service to subscribers," Morley continued. "We don't want to be in the wholesale business." Use of a decorative wire service container, he said, "usually gets the florist in trouble. They may be out of it so they substitute a container and then you're in trouble when customers come in and don't get exactly what they want," he said.

### "An Integral Part"

At Florafax International, Marketing Director Dan Moody said, "There is a trend that indicates that florists and wire services are going to reusable containers, a trend that Florafax is not a part of. "We're not really in the product line. The container is an integral part of an arrangement, but what people are primarily buying are floral arrangements." Moody does believe that containers are becoming more important to consumers. With the growing popularity of silks and combinations of fresh and silk flowers, the quality of the container becomes much more important, he said.

At Redbook, containers are not promoted at all. Florists receive arrangements in containers from suppliers. Decorative containers are more expensive and Redbook doesn't consider them the domain of a wire service, said Nancy Reesor, director of marketing. "For our business, it's not what we do. We're a service. There are many containers that can be used again. It makes me wonder — are you selling containers or selling arrangements?"

"One of the disadvantages," Reesor continued, "is when the public sees an arrangement they like, they might like it because of the container." This is not good for the floral industry per se, she said, although she added that "when you sell containers, you're also selling flowers."

Reesor believes too much emphasis is being put on containers. "When



Teleflora's Mother's Day colander bouquet featured a usable colander and was a best-seller among wire services last May.

you receive a promotional packet from some of them [wire services], all you practically see are containers."

### Container Cons

The wire services that do not usually promote containers believe they are giving the florist and designer more creative leeway. Marketing expert Mitchell agrees. "A retail florist's uniqueness, that one thing a consumer cannot buy elsewhere, is his ability with fresh flowers. Containers can be purchased anywhere. Expensive containers with minimum flowers require less professional and creative expense than an attractively styled arrangement featuring flowers. Therefore, as a retailer promotes items that decrease the requirement

for creativity and originality, the need for any customer to buy from him decreases. But florists who develop profitable businesses isolate their unique qualities and products, strengthen them and romance them, developing a reason for customers to buy from them instead of other retailers."

No one can deny that wire service decorative containers are popular, yet the wire services all agree that flowers still come first — that ultimately, what entices consumers to buy an arrangement is the appeal of the fresh flowers themselves, not the lasting qualities of the container. ♦

*Sharon Bakos is an assistant editor of Florists' Review.*

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