

Care & Handling

Why Quality is King

By Cindy Hoogasian

FOR CUSTOMERS TO HAVE COMPLETE confidence in flowers, florists need a strong product guarantee that's promoted to everyone — not just wire or Web customers. More and more florists guarantee product but many, fearful of being bombarded with returns and credits, see the practice as risky. We talked to florists who offer a guarantee to find out how they do it without losing money.

Two Florists, Two Guarantees

Dean Knight, owner of Knight's Flowers in Clinton, Tenn., offers a seven-day guarantee on all roses and an eight-day guarantee on most items promoted on his Web site. About 20 percent of Knight's Flowers' sales are exclusively roses. At Bouquets in Denver, Guenther Vogt and BJ Dyer, AAF, AIFD, offer a no-questions-asked, 24-hour guarantee on perishable products, and inform customers that flowers should last five to seven days. While there is a difference between their guarantees, both stores have procedures in place to minimize complaints, and Vogt acknowledges that a complaint received two days after purchase will result in complete customer satisfaction.

Do Your Homework

Both stores buy only the finest flowers and obtain them as quickly post-harvest as possible. For Knight, that means allocating time for research. He visits rose growers in Ecuador and Colombia to learn about new varieties and grower practices. He tests rose varieties in his shop to separate great performers from those that don't meet his vase-life and bud-opening standards. "First, we buy only the best varieties," Knight says, "Next, we pre-treat flowers properly. Third, we buy on standing order, so boxes are packed for me in box lots, often by the growers. I go to the wholesaler and pick up the flowers when they arrive, so I get them as soon as possible. Fourth, I test rose varieties to see which ones last longer."

Vogt and Knight have strong relationships with local wholesalers who supply product that meets their high standards. In addition, Vogt buys directly from select growers and brokers

worldwide and works closely with wholesalers who match his store's stringent care-and-handling procedures, which mirror those outlined in SAF's Flower and Plant Care Manual available through the SAF Market at www.safnow.org.

Keep it Clean

Flower longevity starts with sanitation. At Bouquets, buckets are hand-scrubbed in hot water with a bleach and soap compound. The cooler is inspected daily, and product that is past its peak or damaged is removed. The cooler is swept daily and mopped with disinfectant two or three times a week. It's scrubbed thoroughly every two months. Foliage is stored apart from flowers. These steps help eliminate botrytis and keep ethylene levels in check.

Both stores process flowers properly upon receipt, employing underwater flower cutting, use of a hydrator and a holding solution. At the design bench, flowers go in a flower food solution. They also make sure solutions are mixed in proper proportions.

Help Customers Stay Current

Bouquets and Knight's Flowers educate consumers about product guarantees and expected longevity of arrangements. On coasters that accompany all arrangements, Bouquets customers read about the guarantee and are reminded to change vase water every two to three days. Knight's care tags include the variety name, a photo, an explanation of how the flower should open and a description of its fragrance. The tag, which designers sign and date, includes the shop's guarantee.

You Like Me, You Really Like Me

Customers from both shops frequently remark about flowers' longevity. Complaints are few. "Out of 300 sales, we may get one call," Vogt says, "And, that may be because they don't like the color or the flower type. We get very few complaints about product quality."

Knight's Flowers sells about 100,000 roses a year, the owner says, and may receive 10 complaints in the same time period — including Valentine's Day orders. "I've had customers tell me their roses have lasted 21 days," Knight says. "When we first started with our rose guarantee years ago, customers were surprised. Now, long-lasting flowers are expected at our shop. It's well known in our market area that if you want roses that last a long time, we're the place to come to." Because of the longevity of the product, customers don't mind paying more for Knight's roses. They know they get their money's worth. 🌸

Cindy Hoogasian is co-author of "In Season," a post-harvest care book. She has been widely published in industry publications and has written numerous articles on the care and handling of flowers from the retail florist's perspective.



Info To Go

Meet the Florists

Get more detail on Dean Knight's process for ensuring flower quality and Bouquet's strategy for building its quality brand in Denver. Click on the Info to Go logo on the home page of SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or get it via SAF's Fast Fax, by calling (888) 723-2000 and requesting document #655 (Knight's) and #656 (Bouquets).