

more party-planning advice from the pros

More about events with Rick Davis and Carol Caggiano, AIFD, PFCI.

FR: *What techniques do you use to effectively manage your prop inventory?*

RD: That is basically the luck of the draw. There is no recipe. We go to market twice a year to buy new props, looking for new trends and things we think our clients are going to want. We start selling the new equipment right away, but I'm looking at a piece right now that's been here for three years, and we have yet to sell it to one person. We're lucky that we're in a situation where we're able to buy and sit on things.

CC: It's very important that your staff is trained in how take-down should be conducted. When the props get back to the store, all of them have to be cleaned and then properly cataloged and stored. It takes almost as much labor, sometimes more, to put it back as it does to take it out.

Also, you need to know when to get new props and when to get rid of old ones. There's nothing worse than having rickety, taped-together, messed-up props.

FR: *How do you keep good relationships with party planners, who can be the link to additional jobs?*

RD: No matter how many events we have in a given day—which has been as many as 10—we *always* have people on site to troubleshoot anything, change anything, do anything that the event planner or the client needs us to do.

CC: The reputation you have with [party planners] will determine how much work they give you. Most party and event planners work with more than one florist.

Also, be familiar with the venues. Explore them, make contacts there, and learn what their rules and regulations are because every place has its own set. Make relationships with those people so they will know you and respect you. Then when a client, who usually picks a venue first, asks for recommendations on florists, you'll come to mind.

FR: *What tips would you give to other florists wanting to expand or improve their event work?*

RD: Be willing to be creative and take risks. When you're doing a wedding or a big party, it's always about the "wow" factor, and that's how we've made our mark. People walk in and they're like "Wow, who did this?" You don't get that from conservative centerpieces. So it's risk-taking.

It's a very difficult business to be in and to make money in, and that's why so many event people go out of business. They're good at the "wow" factor, but they're not good at the business part. Or they're good at the business part, but they're so conservative that they don't expand. I can't tell you how many people are doing beautiful parties but aren't making any money and are not paying their wholesalers.

That's the part that makes me crazy because it hurts everybody in the end. A client will hire another company because they're getting twice as much as what we can offer them. When somebody comes to us and asks, "Why are you so much more expensive, and why are you charging all this labor?" I say, "Because this is how you do it."

CC: Look at your operation from within first. How's it looking physically? Do you have the proper amount of storage? Are your props in good condition? Then look at your policies, your procedures and your pricing—all the paperwork part. How's that looking? Do you have a good contract that you can use to put the details between you and your clients into writing?

Then look at your staff. Do you have too many people full time? Do you need more contract people? Do you have good contract people who are available when you need extra staffing? Is everyone uniformed? Do your logo and brand need an update?

Your appearance at a venue is so important, so that you're always identifiable. Your equipment and vehicles should be clean and well-identified also. It really makes a difference.

Once you make sure you're doing well from within, then look at your marketing and promotion. What can you do to promote yourself more?

FR: *How do you avoid stress when working an event?*

CC: You have to keep your cool no matter what happens. Panicking rarely has any positive return.

It goes back to organization and communication. If you're organized, you're in a better position to handle an unforeseen event or a problem. If you're in chaos all the time and problems come up, it just adds to the confusion and makes the stress level even higher.

There's always something, though. I don't think I've ever worked an event yet in more than 40 years where something hasn't come up.

FR: *How can event florists garner more business?*

CC: Do something different than everybody else is doing. That's challenging, but it's important. If you're just going to knock out what everybody else is doing, you're constantly going to be beat up on price. You've got to step up, especially for clients who are willing to spend a bit of money.

You're always going to have price shoppers, however, who don't care what they get as long as it's the lowest price. That can be good, too. I know people who make a lot of money doing that sort of thing also. They're always the lowest price, and they've got everything reciped, with no creativity involved. They do the same thing over and over, week after week, and they can produce it for the lowest price.

I don't want to knock a budget situation, because that, too, is fine. But you can't be all things to all people. You have to decide where you want to be in the equation and do that.

Charity work can be a good way to do it, too. It can provide a wonderful opportunity to meet a lot of people in your area and to get them to know what you and your company can do.

Almost every successful party and event company I know has done charity work at some point. The big thing is reputation, and that helps with reputation also because it can expose you to lots of people.

FR: *If you're providing more than just florals, how do you find the other supplies and vendors needed to get the job done?*

CC: One of the keys to being a good party and event florist is to have good resources. You don't have to own every prop in the world, but you have to know where to get them.

You also need to know the other vendors in your area and nationally. For example, you can get linens shipped in from almost anywhere. Resources are very important, and you should have them at your fingertips. Good resources—you can never have too many.

FR: *Are there other areas event florists should think about?*

CC: Anybody doing event work has to have proper insurance. Some venues will demand that you produce evidence of insurance before they will allow you on site. That's one reason it's so important that you find out exactly what's expected before you go to any venue and what its policies and procedures are. You don't want to find out the morning of a wedding that you won't be allowed in because you don't have proof of insurance.

No matter what a venue requires, you should be properly insured for anything that might happen to you, your staff, your property or the venue. In some cases, a special rider is necessary for certain things, but your insurance carrier can tell you about that. Sometimes you can get a one-day rider for something. Ask your insurance company if you're doing something unusual or in a different place than usual.

All this is not difficult if it's taken care of in advance. It is difficult and can be costly if it's done at the last minute. And that has a lot to do with the success or failure of being an event florist.

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