

THE GIFT BASKET WRAP



Gift baskets are a way to show people that you care about what they like. It also gives them a variety of presents to get excited about. Learn how you can add this gift-giving business to your store.

By Elizabeth Spackman

Candy Spelling (Tori's mom) has a special "wrapping" room in her 100-room mansion devoted to them. On the *Sopranos* last season, a character mugged Lauren Bacall for the swanky contents of hers. But gift baskets needn't be the purview of Hollywood excess; they can be an important part of your garden center's revenue.

Gone are the days that "gift basket" included only an impersonal corporate mug and hickory-smoked sausage. Beyond the popular fruit and gourmet baskets, stores' offerings include garden baskets, spa baskets, sympathy baskets, baby baskets and their own variations.

It pays to encourage customers to find creative occasions to send a basket; Brian Wheat of Lafayette Florist and Greenhouse, Lafayette, Colo., mentioned that his store puts together a popular care-package basket for students at the local university, which includes not only fresh flowers but a can of chicken soup for the sniffling student away from home.

Personalized Shopping

Striking the balance between showing customers what they might not know is available and letting them feel their gifts are personalized can be tricky. At Strange's Florist and Greenhouse in Virginia, Pam (Pam asked not to disclose her last name), who's in charge of gift baskets, emphasized listening to customer-specific wants as well as paying attention to detail. She looks at some traditional recipes for the store's baby, spa and sympathy baskets and combines them with her own creativity and customer feedback.

One simple way to make customers feel comfortable with what they are giving is to familiarize them with the products. Doris Cress of Bachman's, with locations throughout Minnesota, has noticed a significant increase in interest in the company's gift baskets by offering food samples whenever the stores hold open houses. She explains that by

handing out flyers pointing out their "gifts of good taste," the service has become more visible. And when customers taste the items, they "come back or remember us down the road."

Cress also shops the competition and has traveled to Atlanta, Ga., and Dallas, Texas, to see what's new outside her area. (Indeed, when I spoke to her, she was traveling for the first time to the Fancy Food Show in Chicago, Ill.) Because of the barrage of new products and changing trends, it helps to have someone responsible for the basket services affiliated with the floral department. Cress added,

"The tricky part is keeping things current, keeping a 3-month turnover of product to make sure you are not overordering."

Making your store's baskets stand out from the crowd can be another challenge. To give her baskets a distinct and beautiful look, Pam extends her attention to detail to the decoration, working with designer ribbons and staying on the lookout for new shredding and fillers. She adds that as they feature the Strange's logo, the baskets can be easily recognized.

Careful packaging and delivery are also crucial to the satisfied customer. All three stores emphasized the importance of offering delivery. Bachman's shrink wraps all of its packages, ensuring they are securely packed. If including flowers, Cress recommends a vase arrangement and said it is such a nice gift to give (and get) "because you have the flowers and the treats to go with."

Fruit baskets can provide their own complications. Cress has noticed an increase in their popularity in the last few years as the public has become more concerned with health — during the winter holidays they have even become more popular than gourmet baskets.



Top left: Offering food samples at open houses is a good way to increase interest in gift baskets. **Top right:** Gift baskets act as a way to get customers interested in your store and products. **Bottom:** Gift baskets can be personalized with any theme. (Photos: Bachman's)



Fruit baskets work well as sympathy gifts.

But Wheat mentions that, for his store, the fruit basket has been the least popular, in part because of the difficulty of eating the sheer volume of fruit delivered at one time. While both he and Cress recommend the fruit basket as a sympathy present — especially as it can be delivered directly to the funeral home and is much more manageable to consume in a crowd — Wheat warns that it is important to pay attention to delivery times; if someone isn't home to receive a basket for a few days, you may very well need to strike the basket and redo it, making them more time and labor intensive.

Cultivating New Customers

Gift baskets can also act as a way to get customers interested in the store or introduce them to products they didn't know you carried. Lafayette Florist and Greenhouse has been around for 58 years, so it's known around town. But Wheat is always wondering how to bring new gardeners, for example, from the recently opened retirement complex, into the store.

He encourages customers to consider a garden gift basket to welcome new residents or homeowners. When they receive a basket with a pair of high-quality garden gloves, a trowel, fresh blooms and a copy of the *Rocky Mountain Plant Guide*, new arrivals learn how much can grow in the climate. Also attached to every basket is a postcard letting customers know about upcoming store events — from those holidays that are a good time to send flowers to workshops on planting.

Another great suggestion for getting people into the store to get them gardening is to offer a gift certificate tucked into the basket. Wheat said, "Many times somebody will say, 'I want to get some rose bushes for my mom for Mother's Day, but I don't know what kind she has or what kind she wants.' And what I would recommend is a nice gift basket with a pair of rose pruners, a nice pair of gloves and

maybe a bouquet of roses, with a gift certificate to have her come pick out her favorite rose bush." Not only does mom get exactly the gift she wants, she doesn't just get an impersonal gift certificate on Mother's Day.

Gift basket services can be an exciting addition to your indepen-

dent garden store, by bringing in new gardeners, cultivating passionate consumers and expanding merchandise possibilities. As Cress added, "We're excited about the fruit and gourmet business because it's a happening part of the company and it's nice to see increased sales." Indeed, giving can bring its own rewards.

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