

## Counter Intuitive: Smart sales and service tactics

By Tim Huckabee



### Let Abusers Loose

If a customer behaves inappropriately, using abusive language, threatening employees or consistently demanding order replacements on a regular basis, it may be time to fire that customer. Keep in mind, you should only do this in extreme situations — if a customer disrupts your shop or offends employees at least three consecutive times. During my five years at a New York florist, the owner only fired a customer twice, but in that rare situation, it's helpful to know how to handle it professionally.

#### 1. Set the Criteria

I see many working environments in the shops I visit, from prim and proper to near locker-room familiarity. Decide what language and actions are unacceptable from customers. Set guidelines to guard against things such as profanity, shouting/yelling or verbal abuse.

#### 2. Make it Official

Prepare guidelines and review them with your staff. Include instructions for appropriate employee reaction to inappropriate customer behavior. Explain how an incident should be documented and to whose attention it should be brought.

#### 3. Take Action

If it is impossible to deal with a customer reasonably, send a letter remedying the situation. A letter is more effective than confronting the customer in person or via the phone if you're dealing with an irrational person who argues when confronted. Your letter should say something to the effect: "Mrs. Jones, it has been brought to my attention that you've repeatedly berated my employees, using profanity, when requesting a replacement order four consecutive times. I have reviewed all the orders and know that my experienced sales staff did its best to find out exactly what you were expecting and took detailed notes for the designers. Unfortunately, we can't seem to meet your needs. We pride ourselves on giving wonderful service and beautiful design but, in light of this situation, I suggest you work with another flower shop in the future. Thank you."

**The Bottom Line:** If the situation is dire, let the abusive customer go. You'll save money in the long run and improve store morale.

**Tim Huckabee** is president of Floral Strategies, a one-on-one sales and customer service training company exclusively for florists. Got a customer service challenge? Tell Tim and he'll tackle it in an upcoming column. E-mail [tim@floralstrategies.com](mailto:tim@floralstrategies.com) or call (800) 983-6184.

## Just Browsing Online Sources for the Floral Industry

### [www.aggiehorticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/Cornell\\_Herbaceous/](http://www.aggiehorticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/Cornell_Herbaceous/):

The Web address may be a mouthful, but this site will make you a perennial expert. Launched by a Cornell University masters student and horticultural professor, it includes pictures and growth characteristics of more than 150 perennials. Wondering how much water a Peruvian Lily requires or when a Pasque Flower blooms? Use the site's search function or browse by scientific name, common name or photo to find the answer.

**Don't Miss:** The "additional comments" in each perennial's profile that include important details such as "deer love to dig and eat lily bulbs" and "bitter root requires well-drained soil" — good information to share with customers.

### [www.Edmunds.com](http://www.Edmunds.com) and [www.KBB.com](http://www.KBB.com):

In the market for a new delivery vehicle? Check out these sites for price quotes on new or used vehicles, vehicle history reports and consumer reviews. Select "advice" on the Kelley Blue Book site for helpful buying information. Learn the true cost to own a particular vehicle by clicking "tips & advice" on Edmunds.com. By plugging in a car's model, make, year and trim, you can find out how much a vehicle will cost including depreciation, interest on your loan, taxes and fees, insurance premiums, fuel costs, maintenance and repairs.

**Don't Miss:** Car comparisons. Select "compare new cars" on KBB.com and Edmunds.com to weigh the pros and cons of a GMC full-size van versus a Toyota cargo van.