

Q&A: How 1-800-Flowers Has Shifted Its Business to Meet Consumer Needs amid Pandemic

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The pandemic and ensuing shutdown has forced many businesses to pivot their strategies and consumer offerings. We recently spoke with Amit Shah, CMO of 1-800-Flowers, about how the company has adapted—and continues to adapt—during the pandemic and how it navigated Mother's Day amid social distancing.

What have the past few months been like for 1-800-Flowers?

We have seen an increased demand in both sending gifts and customers self-consuming more. The occasion graph has also changed. In the past, maybe you'd go out for brunch with [your mom] every so often, but now you can't. You want to acknowledge that relationship, so "just because" occasions have become very important. We have seen an increase in people wanting to let others know they are thinking of them.

Customers are also ordering items to be delivered or revealed as part of a virtual gathering amid our more 'Zoomified' existence. The plant category has accelerated, too, as people set up their home offices and spend more time indoors.

Additionally, we have been sending customers notes to check in and share tips on how to stay connected with their friends, family and co-workers during this difficult time. These are not marketing messages; there's no link to buy something. We understand the power of connection and expression.

How have you connected with customers during this time?

Our philosophy has always been to be where our customers are, and many have embraced social media. Whether it's Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, there has been a deeper level of engagement, and then an amplified level of the audience engaging with us during this time. Right now, people are looking for a beacon of understanding, relationships, motivation and something of substance.

Can you tell me about your new initiative, Connection Communities?

Connection Communities is focused on engaging with customers and helping them build relationships, share with others, express and celebrate. We teamed up with an app on iOS called Wisdo. Connection Communities is a free, peer-to-peer support network that allows members to seek guidance and deal with some of the vexing [issues] around the pandemic, including self-care and loneliness. Two in five Americans say they feel relationships are not meaningful, or they are isolated. As an engagement company, it was very important to amplify our involvement in how customers can feel connected.

So our first foray in this—and we will have many more as the year progresses—is creating eight communities about everything from the coronavirus to self-care to coping with loss. Community members can meet people who are going through similar circumstances. It gives them a place to feel more connected and ties back to our mission—if people feel more connected, and we can help with those connections, it leads to better human expression.

How did you navigate Mother's Day this year?

We've been doing this for more than 40 years; it's our biggest occasion. So, we spend a lot of time making sure our supply chain and network can support this increase in demand.

Most mothers I spoke with are doing many jobs right now—they are the teacher, they're helping out with housework and obviously doing office work. A lot of our customers felt it was important to acknowledge that this year.

All the stakeholders in our ecosystem—from suppliers to network florists, colleagues and team members—came together this year. There's always a few wrinkles as you go through a large national holiday, especially now. But we were very happy that we could help so many customers celebrate. We delivered roughly 21 million [stems] and more than 200,000 plants.

We were also able to innovate with the kind of products that we offer customers, such as Farm Fresh Flowers bouquets that are cut at the height of their freshness.

What are you focusing on for the remainder of the year?

We are a public company, and we have very strong momentum and desire to make sure that our essential stakeholders—shareholders, customers and Connection Communities members—are taken care of. So we are [doubling down] on the work we do to make sure customers can trust us to get them to the outcome they want, and that we are not losing sight of why we exist, and why our mission is so important right now.