

# What's Green is Gold

By Mary  
Westbrook

**Environmentally friendly  
business solutions can help  
you decrease costs, attract  
customers and — oh yeah  
— save the planet.**

Regina Cannon Trembl is not on a mission to save the planet. She is in business to do business — and because she loves the emotional connection between people and flowers — not to change the world. Still, world-changing or, at the very least, earth-friendly business practices have found their way into Belladonna Florist, Trembl's shop in Eden Prairie, Minn. A vase-recycling program. Increased energy efficiency. A delivery pool. "Used" bulb grab bags. Biodegradable products. In fact, since opening the shop three years ago, Trembl, a long-time industry member with experience in grocery floral departments and importing companies, has introduced business practices that have cut costs and increased the shop's "green" factor, all in the name of helping her business. "With everything that I've done, all of the decisions that I've made, it's been about a good business decision first," Trembl says. "But I've found that, in the end, a lot of the decisions are environmentally friendly, too." Trembl isn't alone. Across the country, small-business owners are responding to increased awareness about the interplay between individuals and the environment. Practices that were outside the mainstream a few years ago, including hybrid cars, composting on large scale and luxury reusable materials, are becoming commonplace as costs come down and consumers voluntarily pay more for products and services that complement their eco sensibilities. *Eco sensibilities? Hybrid cars? Green factor?* If none of these terms seem like your cup of (organic Ceylon green) tea, don't worry. While the modern environmental movement has its controversies and its detractors, one thing is clear: Ideas such as "green living" and sustainability along with stewardship of the earth are catching on with consumers and influencing how they purchase products and whom they patronize. Being green as a business and marketing that message to your customers is easier than ever before. "Certain aspects of the [environmental] movement are trendy, that is certainly true," says **Billie Blair, Ph.D., CEO of Leading and Learning**, a consulting firm that guides companies through transitional periods, including movements toward environmental awareness. "But, just like it has been with all other trends that have gone before, some of the aspects of this movement will endure... And, thus, will make good business sense."

## [Rethinking Vase Life](#)

It was good business sense that motivated Trembl to start one of her most popular initiatives, The Glass Roots Project, which has environmental as well as social undertones. The program began in April after Trembl realized unused vases were overwhelming her customers.

"People, mostly men, would come in for cash-and-carry orders and say, 'I want flowers, but not in a vase. We have a cupboard full of vases at home,'" she says. "That got me thinking." Specifically, Trembl began thinking about the environmental implications of all those needless vases and how she could reuse the vases for the daily work (thank you, sympathy and congratulatory arrangements) she received from local charities including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, the Children's Cancer Research Fund and People Reaching Out to Other People (PROP). "I asked a couple customers if they would participate in the vase recycling program," she says. "They said yes so I got started."

To promote the program Trembl posted information her shop's Web site, **www.belladonnaflorist.com**, printed a flier to hand out and ran an ad in Eden Prairie magazine, an upscale community publication. (Trembl's accountant helped her craft a disclaimer for promotional materials, explaining that donations cannot receive tax credits because her shop is not a charity.) The response was immediate. At press time, the shop had accepted more than 70 vases in less than three months. "I don't think anyone has brought in less than eight or 10 vases at a time," Trembl says. "They're coming in with bags full of vases. We've been getting unique pieces that are worth a lot of money — novelty, hand-blown and ceramic vases." Trembl stores the donated vase together on a shelf she cleared specifically for the program. When a charity calls an order in, the shop donates the vase and the labor, charging only for the flowers and delivery. Vases the charities cannot use, because they are too ornate or highend, are given to PROP's thrift shop for resale.

"There's no maintenance," Trembl says. "It's a basic, grass roots recycling program. I'm really surprised by how quickly it took off and how well it's been received."

## [Back to Basics: Reuse, Recycle](#)

For her part, Amy Stewart, author of "Flower Confidential," a book that explored social and environmental issues embedded in the floral industry, isn't surprised at all. "I think what this shows is sustainability is about more than just how the flowers in your shop are grown," she says. "Consumers are so wanting to support that [kind of effort]." Of course, vases aren't the only supplemental material florists can reuse or recycle, says Alicia Silva of Synergy Design Studio, an environmental and business consultant in Seattle. Many of the boxes, wrapping products and miscellaneous containers used to transport flowers from field to shop needn't end up in landfills. "Packaging is a huge issue for all industries," says Silva, who recommends that florists visit the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site (**www.epa.gov**), along with Web sites of municipal organizations, for tips on how to start an in-store recycling program. "Recycling vases is great, but there are so many things you can do," she says. "It's about going back to the basic principles — reuse, recycle." Those two principles were

behind Treml's recent decision to switch to Arrive Alive, a stem-hydration system for hand-tied and wrapped bouquets by Mac Technologies ([www.machortsupplies.com](http://www.machortsupplies.com)) and distributed by John Henry that just happens to be biodegradable — even the product's rubber band is made of dirt. "We tell all of our customers about it," Treml says. "We get a very good response, and it's less expensive than doing a dozen tubes on a dozen roses." The shop also "reuses" flower bulbs, selling leftover tulip, daffodil and hyacinth bulbs (including bulbs that didn't sell and those used to decorate the shop) in \$1 "grab bags" after bulb season. "People don't know what they're getting," Treml says. "Neither do we. It's fun."

#### The Local Connection

For a long time, organic has been a buzzword for eco consciousness, and for good reason in many cases. Still most florists agree it would be impossible to source all of their flowers from organic farms. On the other hand, locally grown flowers also can be an environmentally friendly solution that happens to help our bottom line, Treml says. Even in Minnesota, where spring and summer come late and leave early, she supplements her product selection with flowers grown, literally, around the corner. "During the summer we have beautiful, locally grown flowers — from places that are smaller than mom-and-pops," says Treml, adding that she also takes full advantage of Len Busch Roses, a well-known, larger company with "incredible locally grown product." "At first, I questioned the durability of the product and the [smaller] growers' ability to fill our needs," she says. "But we brought in samples and the quality level was very high." Stewart agrees. "Local is a big thing to consumers, whether that means buying local flowers from the farmers market, selling dried lavender products or locally made candles in the winter," she says. "I'm talking to a lot of florists who are joining up with local merchants' associations to get consumers to buy locally." (To read about a florist in Butler, Pa., doing just that, see Info to Go.) While it would be impossible for most florists to stock their shop with only locally grown product, the environmental and social benefits of buying local, when possible, are multi-faceted, experts say: Money stays in the community, supporting small growers; less fuel is used in the transportation of the product and smaller growers often use traditional, organic growing methods, even if they aren't certified. "I've worked as an importer, and I love Colombian roses, but whenever I have local flowers, I point out that it's 'Minnesota grown product,'" Treml says. "[Customers] love to hear that. They just love it."

#### Smooth Operations

When Treml took over Belladonna three years ago, she operated two coolers, a medium-sized display and a large walk-in. The system provided ample storage, but that luxury came at a high cost. After analyzing her buying strategies, Treml decided to carry less product, turning it every 48 hours. Suppliers' delivery fees increased but Treml was able to unplug the walk-in cooler, reducing her energy consumption — not to mention her electric bill, which dropped by \$20 to \$25 a month (an 8 percent savings). "It's a management choice," she says. "You have to manage what you're buying, what you're designing with and where you put it. Now, we only use the walk-in around the holidays." Treml didn't stop there. Instead of letting the water from her water-cooled cooler slide down the drain, she configured a PVC pipe to carry the excess water into a bucket. The shop uses the water to fill vases and water plants. (It's the same water that they get from the faucet.) Consequently, "We never have to turn on the water faucet, except for around Valentine's Day," Treml says. "That's amazing to me." (Because her shop is part of a common area maintenance, and she does not pay her bill directly, Treml cannot estimate savings on the decreased water use.)

"These were good business decisions for us that happened to be environmentally friendly," she says. "But the strategies have really helped us in the end." Similarly, while Treml didn't join the Tonka Pool to make an environmental statement, the move has helped her shop reduce its fossil fuel consumption, a praise-worthy result by any standard. "We talk to customers about our use of the pool," she says. "It's really fun to tell people about these things," and, with any luck, those conversations bring the customers back or at least keep them. All this talk of energy savings isn't smoke and mirrors, says **Blair of Leading and Learning**, who insists that being green "could be as simple a thing as re-coordinating the delivery trips that are made so that the routes are more tightly scheduled, geographically, and without a great degree of wandering around and repeating the same routes several times a day."

#### Cause for Optimism

Wherever you fall on the eco spectrum, tell customers your story: "People love stories and they will tell your story to other people," Stewart says. Silva, the consultant, agrees, adding that florists also should call reporters, who are often hungry for a local angle on a national story. "So many consumers are now happy to support businesses that have environmentally friendly practices," she says. "Advertise and market your environmentally friendly practices. You won't be disappointed."

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