

## Strategy

### On the Hot Seat

# The unsentimental business behind saying it with flowers

Robert Winston founded Winston Flowers in 1944 as a pushcart on Newbury Street near the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Today, several of Winston's grandsons, including David Winston, operate the \$25 million company with eight stores and a retail website, WinstonFlowers.com. Winston spoke with Globe reporter Chris Reidy about Valentine's Day and the flower business.

**Q.** How important is Valentine's Day?

**A.** Valentine's Day is 10 times busier than our average day, our highest volume day by far. We'll do about \$700,000 of business that day. Mother's Day is next; it's six times busier than a normal day. December is our best month, but with the holidays, business is spread out. With Valentine's Day, it's got to get done on that day or you're in trouble.

**Q.** Have Valentine's Day fashions changed?

**A.** A dozen red long-stem roses, which cost about \$100 this year, is traditional. But every year we do less of that. Twenty-five years ago, it was 80 percent red roses. Currently, it's a little less than half.

A dozen roses doesn't exactly say that a lot of thought went into this on the sender's part. A dozen roses is one of the more profitable items for a florist. Most other arrangements require more flowers, and that means a lower profit margin. But our thinking is, if the recipient is blown away, we'll be your florist going forward.

**Q.** What are some other Valentine's Day options you're offering this year?

**A.** For \$300, we have something we call "the Modern Romantic." It's an arrangement of roses, hy-

drangea, and calla lilies with foliage. For \$200, there's the "Calypso Romance Deluxe." The idea is to get an arrangement of eye-popping colors like tangerine, fuchsia, raspberry, and purples. Flowers include mokara orchids, roses, and anemones topped off with the stem of a phalaenopsis orchid.

**Q.** What prompted those choices?

**A.** It starts with demand and style, and you want something that's vivid and colorful. Can I get what I need in quantity? And it has to be long lasting. People expect flowers to last up to five days after they receive them. And if we're going to make arrangements in advance, we have to start working before Valentine's Day.

So I would never use poppies because they don't have a long shelf life. Basically, we made a lot of decisions about what we'll do this Valentine's Day by mid-January. One thing you need to do is to make sure the website is ready. Our featured designs will go up on our website about a week before Valentine's Day.

**Q.** How has the flower business changed?

**A.** We've definitely become more of a gifts and special events business. There are so many more outlets where you can buy flowers. Twenty-five years ago, you had to go to a florist if you wanted flowers. Now you can go to supermarkets or big-box stores. A lot of big chains use flowers as loss leaders. So we've evolved into more of a service-oriented business that's about quality, design, and same-day delivery.

**Q.** What are some services you offer?



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/MICHELE MCDONALD

**A.** We have a department set up to handle home decor when you're organizing a dinner party. We'll deliver flowers to a restaurant where a man is proposing. Depending on the flowers, this can cost \$500 or more. We once went to the Four Seasons Hotel for a customer who wanted rose petals strewn all over the room.

That cost a couple of thousand dollars.

**Q.** That must have been quite a proposal.

**A.** I don't think that was a proposal. That was a doghouse situation. A lot of what we do is to see if we can help get you out of the doghouse.

# Discovering the freedom of wireless technologies

By Sandra Gittlen  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**W**hen Alison Fillmore decided to move to Chatham and start her website graphic design business, Vervaine, she worried that keeping in touch with clients in Boston would be difficult and that she would be tied to her desk.

"It used to be that you needed to be in the city to be close to your clients," she says. "As a small-

**Small Biz** business owner, I need to be accessible all the time not only for clients, but for Web developers and writers and other contractors I work with."

But a few strategic moves to incorporate wireless technologies into her business have given her a distinct advantage over competitors while allowing her to enjoy the Cape Cod lifestyle.

Fillmore relies on the WiFi capabilities of her Apple iBook at home and in Boston. She has a wireless network set up at home, and she searches for WiFi hotspots around town when she visits clients with her online portfolio.

Fillmore is just one of a growing legion of small-business owners relying on wireless technology to compete against larger companies. They employ combinations of cellphone/PDAs, BlackBerries, laptops enabled with wireless LAN cards or cell-service cards, and GPS devices.

For Michael Oh, president and founder of Boston-based Tech Superpowers, wireless is the linchpin of his organization. His firm of 12 employees, who help companies with their telecom and computer networks, is equipped with WiFi-enabled laptops, pagers, and Nextel "push-to-talk" phones. In fact, Oh says it is so well equipped that the employees rarely have to come back to the office, which keeps them close to the customers

and creates more business.

Steve Hilton, analyst for Boston-based Yankee Group's Small and Medium Business Strategies Group, says the investment in wireless technologies is well worth it for small businesses. It lets them accomplish two key goals: enhance employee productivity and improve customer relationships. Small and medium-size businesses "don't have large amounts of cash sitting around so they're not going to buy technology for technology's sake. There's got to be a clear benefit."

Arif Osmani, a data solutions consultant at Cingular in Boston, says he's seen some unique applications of wireless technology that have allowed small firms to steal business away from larger rivals.

One example he points to is companies that rely on having trucks in the field to make customer calls. Rather than saddling a customer with a six-hour window, a company can outfit its trucks with GPS devices that feed information to a website and let the customer track the location and estimated time of arrival of that truck. Osmani says GPS devices also let small-business owners, such as laundry delivery firms, closely track the use of their number one asset: their trucks.

But Oh, who has seen successes and failures around GPS implementations, warns of its downside. He says gathering data about your assets only works if you have someone to sift through it. He says he tried using GPS to track technician calls in his own business but was quickly inundated with too much information.

Oh also says the trend toward flexible workspaces could backfire in some instances. "People like to have a desk and a place to put up their photos. There's also the danger that you might create a workforce that is too mobile and managers only communicate with them over the phone."