

Exploiting the sweet scent of success

Janine Perrett meets a couple whose shop is filled with fragrance and beauty.

"FLORIST of The Year again and no one sent flowers" read the catchy billboard.

But this wasn't simply an effective marketing ploy; it also reflected the main challenge facing the flourishing small business of Sydney couple Jodie McGregor and Stuart White.

Their Jodie McGregor Flowers has won a host of prestigious awards but they are not sure how to best capitalise on it. Their popular but tiny florist shop is in the inner-west village of Annandale but they want to grow further.

"I feel like I'm in a little pocket of the world in a little shop and how do you reach beyond that?" McGregor ponders.

While they might be tucked away in a local neighbourhood, their reputation stretches far wider thanks to the quality and artistry of McGregor's floral work and White's dedication to running a professional and innovative small business.

It has helped them twice win the NSW Florist of the Year industry award and late last year take out the florist category in the Champion of Champion Small Business Awards.

"How do we leverage these wins into increased sales and customers through marketing and promotion?" White wonders.

The "Florist of the Year and no one sent flowers" billboard on their local main street was one answer.

"There was a lot of reaction to that one, a lot of people turned their car around and came back so that did work," he says.

The billboard cost about \$1000 to make and a minimal leasing fee so he finds they provide value for money.

"They do work for us as we try to be a bit quirky and put a smile on your face. For example, for Mother's Day we had one that said 'Mum knows if you got the flowers from the servo'. Another one, for the blokes, read 'Flowers today, fireworks tonight'.

It's part of their effort to get people through the door of their well-presented shop, which is the best ad for their lush arrangements and inviting flowers. Once through that door they try to keep the customers with a generous loyalty program under the Flower Addicts banner, which already has some 4000 names.

They are now considering more traditional forms of advertising in the form of radio and even off-peak television.

They have also been active in sending out complimentary bouquets to a leading radio station which helped pick up business and they are looking to do more high-profile functions and corporate events.

They are keen to get their message out to



Bloomin' marvellous ... Stuart White and Jodie McGregor are keen to branch out following the success of their flower business in Sydney's inner west.

Photo: Wade Laube

people like executive personal assistants, as word of mouth is vital for any florist.

Of course, selling over the internet is the other main outlet for florists, even though the customers cannot be sure exactly what they are buying.

White and McGregor are still working on launching their new website, having taken their time in an effort to ensure it reflects their desire for quality and differentiation.

"We want to have a presence, it's an added service but we need to get a feel for it and see what to do with it," White says.

McGregor adds: "The internet is less personalised by nature so hopefully it will be a site that's different to others. We want our customers to have the confidence that we will choose what's best for them on the day."

Then there is the problem of training a non-technologically proficient staff in this new area.

"The girls here are artistic and relationship oriented, not technical or computer literate," White says.

He cites a recent case where a customer wanted an image scanned and sent by email which involved a bit of a panic at the

CHALLENGES FOR JODIE MCGREGOR FLOWERS

- Taking advantage of awards
- Expanding to new site
- Establishing internet presence while maintaining personalised feel

shop as everyone tried to work out the logistics.

"They rang me and suddenly I'm the IT help desk," he jokes. "We're not like big business but the corporates expect it."

Unlike many other small businesses, the pair say staffing is not an issue as they have a very low turnover among their four full-time and two part-time employees, who have all been trained to "replicate" McGregor.

This is crucial given the increasing pressure on her as the business grows. McGregor lists "finding enough hours in the day" as her main challenge, which is hardly surprising given this 35-year-old also manages two daughters under three.

Since 2003 she has been helped by White

working full time on the administrative side of the business after he took paternity leave from his job in the banking and finance industry.

However, both he and the business have reached a crossroad: if the business stays the same, turning over about \$1 million a year and growing at about 20 per cent a year, then 37-year-old White feels he will need more challenge and will go back to his old job.

So the pair feels it is time to expand and have been scouring sites for a second location.

While they see advantages and economies of scale in having another store, they also recognise the challenges.

"If we could get this site somewhere else that would be perfect," White says wistfully.

"We're happy with our formula here so the issue is how do you establish a new site while maintaining the existing feeling of this shop?"

McGregor admits to having "big, big, big concerns" about expansion and moving the same culture to the next shop and having the same feeling.

"I wonder with the second shop can we do it the same way? I was able to drop everything and come into this shop when needed but we would need someone to be me," she says.

Conscious that she doesn't want to seem to be complaining about her success, the upbeat McGregor adds "It's a good problem to have, of course".

"You have to grow - you can't just maintain, maintain, maintain."

There will also be another smaller issue about what to call a second shop. When they opened their modest operation in 1999 she simply called it Jodie McGregor Flowers and while that now has plenty of cachet, they are wondering whether a second store might need a catchier title.

"Jodie McGregor was a great idea to start but in hindsight it probably should have been the name we've picked for a new shop," White says.

Again it's a good problem to have, they concede readily.

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