

Florists today are using information technology to streamline business, increase profitability and reach out to customers. It's time for you to get on board.

By Renato Cruz Sogueco

I



If technology were a bus, where would you be? Up front, giving the driver directions? Somewhere in the middle, trying to figure out your next stop? In the back, goofing off?

Would you even be on the bus?

Every day, new technologies become available — things that can instantly make your business more efficient, optimize your workforce, automate your point-of-sale (POS) and accounting and, at the same time, help you connect with customers, capture new ones and make more money with the ones you have. Technological innovations enable you to sell beyond your walls and extend your geographic boundaries, letting you stay open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and sell your products to a world-wide market to specific demographics.

The best part is that much of this technology is affordable and easily implemented. Your business should be booming, right?

Don't worry. Even florists with a genuine love of new technology say keeping track of technological innovations is a challenge. Still, in an age where delivery confirmation and

tracking, electronic reminders and automatic gift suggestions are the norm, can you afford to let new technology simply pass by?

The Society of American Florists' (SAF) Technology Committee recently took a hard look at technologies available to floral businesses now and those that will be available soon. To tackle that job effectively, the seven-member volunteer group representing all industry segments identified key systems, strategies and procedures — ideas and concepts that, once implemented, will help ensure the fast-moving technology bus doesn't leave you in the dust.

The Bus is Here

The Technology Committee quickly reached consensus on one point: There are some tools and resources that all florists should be using, and if they're not, they're likely losing money, even if they don't realize it. (For that list, see *The Bus is Gone*, p. 24.) With other technologies, however, the bus has arrived and you still have time to jump aboard — just don't expect the opportunity to idle in front of you for long.

In the Shop

A point of sale (POS) system is a must: Every florist Floral Management talked to for this story expressed bewilderment



Illustration by Mark Gutierrez

IT

over florists who haven't yet made that investment (see "Tech Cost Tally," p. 50, for financial and productivity implications of POS systems). Once your POS system is in place, reliably taking and processing orders, it's time to safeguard and secure all this data by **implementing redundancy technology in your backend operations**. To guard against data loss due to system crashes or natural disasters, look into **using a redundant array of inexpensive disks (RAID)** in a RAID 5 or 1 configuration. RAID 1 mirrors any data copied to the main disk onto another hard drive. RAID 5 uses at least three hard drives to safeguard the system from failure of any one drive. RAID 5 also allows the system to continue working as you replace the defective drive.

"I believe in a son, father, grandfather backup; that is, you never overwrite

your last backup," says Walter Knoll III of Walter Knoll Florist in St. Louis, who was profiled in the June 2005 issue of *Floral Management* for his tech-savvy. (To read that story and more about Knoll's take on backups, see Info to Go, p.30.) Knoll prefers RAID I because it's the fastest configuration and, with the cost of drives constantly dropping, more cost effective than ever.

Knoll also uses Lone-Tar to back up Linux servers, Vertias to back up Windows servers and Norton Ghost by Symantec to backup PCs. The Tech Committee recommends **backing up data onto external hard drives**, such as Maxtor's OneTouch series, Western Digital's My Book series or drives from Seagate or Lacie — or use a **USB flash drive with encryption** if you have less than 2 gigabytes of data. Remember, time is money and external and USB



drives provide faster and more reliable access to backup data than tapes.

"Another consideration is security," Knoll says. "Your backups need to be kept locked up because there is credit card and other personal data on them... You don't want to be on the news as the florist that let 50,000 credit card numbers out."

Technology in your shop also can streamline human resource logistics. Employees can now clock in using a **biometric thumb scanner** (something Knoll was testing at press time) or **electronic timecard**. Both systems eliminate the use of passwords, which are easily forgotten or carelessly shared among employees. **Equipping employees with headsets or portable telephones** will also make your staff more efficient, allowing them to take orders as they perform other tasks.

"For the most part, we use bin-aural headsets (two ears)," says Knoll, adding that he uses a wireless headset, as do several other management-level

employees. “We find they allow the employees to hear better and cut down on the fatigue level. We also specify they are noise cancel-

ing” so employees don’t pick up ambient noise.

Another tip from Knoll?

Keep costs in check by having employees

sign a contract that

stipulates a \$100 liability if the headset is lost (Knoll does not charge them if the headset breaks).

“(Otherwise), soon they are all missing and no one knows where they are,” Knoll says. “When an employee leaves we send the headset off to be refurbished and then give it to the next employee.”

On the topic of phones, check with your POS provider to see if you can integrate a phone system for **call-center capabilities**. Most call center systems let you track and monitor incoming calls for training purposes and even route them to specific personnel, such as your best salesperson. That’s something Technology Committee Chair Maris Angolia of Karin’s Florist in Vienna, Va., has been doing for nearly three years through TeleVantage and McShan-Abner Systems (MAS), with profitable results.

“You can find customer accounts quickly — they pop up on the screen,” she says. “It cuts down on search time and confusion.”

Angolia also uses TeleVantage to train and review staff members. “We have the ability to monitor calls as well as record them,” she says. “We can just monitor, let the agent hear comments from us or join the call, but we’ve found that just monitoring is the best — that way you hear both sides of the conversation.”

On the Street

Consider **enhancing your POS system with delivery routing and reporting functionality**, along with the ability

The Bus has Left

Grab your sneakers because if you have not implemented these technologies, the bus has left you behind. Traditional ways of doing business (print and radio ads, four-part order forms, delivery tickets, paper maps for drivers) don’t cut it in today’s market, where the Internet has made instant gratification the norm. If you aren’t equipped to handle new business and tap new electronic markets you’re in a precarious position indeed.

Professional **e-mail addresses** have become a must-have tool to receive and answer questions from customers, as well as a **Web site capable of securely taking orders**. An 800 number posted on your site with an online catalog is not enough: Many customers won’t call.

Likewise, **antivirus** or **spamware** are mandatory installations on your computers, required to protect valuable customer data from being lost or stolen. Also, **paper is passé**. At minimum, you must have a **computerized POS register**, which collects accounting and customer data processed with a backend accounting program such as Quickbooks.

All of your PCs should have their own **uninterruptible power supplies** (UPS), and that data should, at the very least, be backed up onto tapes, which are taken off-site.

Another point? In the broadband age, **a single telephone line is the bare minimum**. To effectively manage Web orders and update your site, you should have a **broadband connection** to the Internet and be talking with your delivery crew using **cellular phones**.

A final note: Remember your phone lines are still used to take orders and transmit credit orders via a **Zon machine**, but “knucklebusters” (also known as manual imprinters) should have been trashed long ago, as they leave a messy paper trail of customer information which must be shredded. 🌀

— R.S.

to **send e-mail confirmations and a photo of the recipient to senders**. Your drivers will need a **digital camera** or, even better a **cell phone with a camera built-in**. In addition to confirming delivery, they can transmit the photo as well via the cell phone. (Of course, with a good digital camera, you also can post arrangement and event photos on your Web site — but more on that later.)

Speaking of delivery, with **global positioning system (GPS) tracking devices installed on your vans**, you can keep tabs of speed and routes of your drivers. Complementary Web sites and software even allows you to manage maintenance and mileage.

In March, Chris Drummond of Plaza Flowers outside Philadelphia started

using a **micro GPS tracking system** by LandAirSea to track his vans. (He usually has about five out each day.) The system lets Drummond place a magnetic tracker — smaller than a computer mouse — on vans. The next day, he downloads the information from the tracker onto his computer and reviews the van’s activity from the day before. He can see, for instance, if a driver wasted time in a specific neighborhood — either because he or she was lost or simply goofing off. That information helps Drummond train his driver and, at the same time, keep an eye on procedures.

“I wanted an inexpensive way to track and train drivers,” he says, adding that each device runs about \$200. “My drivers make really good time, but now

Help if You Need It

If much of this technology sounds too overwhelming to quickly implement, your best bet is to ask an expert. And, don't settle for someone who can't communicate in plain language. New waves of technological innovation have also ushered in a new generation of experts — just ask Bob Aykens of Memorial Florist and Greenhouses in Appleton, Wis.

"Brian Wruck (who heads up our information technology) started working for us in the late '90s in our growing department, when he was a junior in high school," Aykens says. "One day he came to me and showed me a Web site he'd developed for us. It blew our socks off. A lot of times you get tech people who are, well, techy. How else can I say it? But with Brian, you sit down for five minutes and he gets everything — the tech aspects and the business angles."

Another resource? Take your questions to your peers. SAF members can post myriad topics online through SAF's Online Forum. Check it out:

www.safnow.org 🌸

— R.S.

they do know that, at any time, I can review where they were the day before."

Drummond also uses Streets on a Disk, by Klynas Engineering, to run customized maps that integrate with RTI on laptops in vans. He's also tested Garmin nRoute, which has voice-command capabilities. The possibilities, he says, are endless, with new innovations a constant in the world of mapping and GPS. "If you're still using push pins or book maps to chart your routes, you're missing out," he says. "You don't have to spend much money, and my maps are more accurate than anything you can find online or in print. We're updating them all of the time."

Consumer GPS

devices from makers such as Garmin or Tom Tom can be retooled to download route information from your shop system and provide

drivers with **turn-by-**

turn instructions. In addition, with this system in place, you can also start being creative on how you charge for delivery, such as add-on prices for farther delivery zones and rush deliveries.

"We have both GPS for drivers to use and tracking devices so we can

see where they're at," Angolia says.

"We can download entire routes [to Garmin]. It really helps the drivers find the streets and it cuts down on looking at maps or 'mapquesting' everything."

Online

If your Web site is a growing part of your business and you'd like to attract even more customers, especially consumers using a search engine, such as Google or Yahoo, you may want to consider **paying for clicks using key words** associated with your delivery area (for instance, "Alexandria, Va., florist") or by opening an **Adwords account** with Google and **optimizing your Web site for search engines**, says Paul Brockway of Conklyn's Florist in Alexandria, Va., and a member of SAF's board of directors. (For more on these topics, see Info to Go.)

"We are constantly optimizing our site for search engines," Brockway says. "We tweak the optimization whenever we see opportunities because people find us under search terms that we often hadn't anticipated. We've been doing this for three, maybe four years, and our Web business keeps increasing."

Another area of your Web site you can easily improve: **product photos.** With the high quality of consumer digi-





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tal cameras and their ever-decreasing price (\$200 and up for a reliable point and shoot), taking professional-grade photos of your products to post online is more cost-effective and easier than ever. Some florists and wholesalers are setting up inexpensive mini-photo studios in the corners of their shops to keep photo content fresh. Cut Flower Wholesale in Atlanta did just that after realizing customers were craving high quality photos of product. The company launched an extensive online photo catalog earlier this year at www.cutflower.com.

"We were always getting questions from customers like, 'Can you get orange callas in July? White ranunculus in May?'" says Rene Streng. "We'd talked about an online catalog and about five years, and we thought, OK, let's do it, even if it's just a tool for us — something employees can use."

Many florists are taking a step beyond and using digital cameras to **capture photos of every arrangement** the shop produces to create an easy-to-reference **photo archive**, capturing photos of every event to share with future customers and, as mentioned, take photos of recipients with product in hand. (To read about florists who are using photos specifically to target brides, see Info to Go.)

Of course, the days when a florist's online strategy began and ended with a Web site are over. Welcome to the age of e-mail marketing, where collecting **your customer's e-mail addresses** is standard. Once you have those addresses, **regularly correspond** with these folks to notify them of special sales or promotions. Or, invite customers to subscribe to your **weekly e-newsletter** of floral tips and information. A service such as SAF's own Magnetmail provides professionally designed templates with fresh content in an easy-to-use format. At press time, David Boulton, AAF, of Flowers by George in Arlington, Wash., had launched three e-newsletters using Magnetmail, a new service for his shop. "It's quick and easy," he says. "It's

taken me no more than 30 minutes to do each newsletter."

Tina Stoecker, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Designs of the Time in Melbourne, Fla., agrees. For about two years, she's used Constant Contact for e-marketing — newsletters and reminders — and calls the system "cost-effective" with a "high response rate."

"Mother's Day and Valentine's Day have the highest response rates," says Stoecker, who has 5,500 e-mail addresses on file. "We get the most responses to our e-newsletter, which has coupons and a how-to section." (For information on how SAF can help you jumpstart your e-marketing campaign, visit SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org.)

The Bus is Coming

If you can easily say, "been there, done that," at this point, then you are truly a floral industry tech geek, able to drive the bus, not just ride it. Give yourself a pat on the back. In this section, we'll explore some technologies that are here, but still cost prohibitive or available only on a limited basis, and those that are coming soon.

In the Shop

Let's get back to shop operations. Remember those backups that used to be done to tape, which you now do onto external drives and USBs? You may want to consider forgetting about physical media and just **transmit all your backup data to an external backup service over the Internet**. If you have lots of data (more than 2 gigabytes), you'll need the fastest possible broadband. If it's not already available in your area, it's certainly coming soon. Check with your cable provider to see if they have **business-class broadband plans** that deliver upwards of 15 megabytes per second (Mbps) or check whether your local telephone company

is installing **fiber optic cabling** that delivers an astounding 30 Mbps (To put those figures in perspective, 30 Mbps is the same speed as 20 T1 lines or 250 integrated services digital network (ISDN) lines bundled together and acting as one line.) Most of these plans range from \$100 to \$400 a month. Do a keyword search in Google for “online backup” to check out various vendors.

Isn't all this bandwidth overkill? Not if you plan to also install a new phone system based on **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP)** technology. Most phone systems today are considered “analog,” with sound converted to electric frequencies. VoIP uses the same networking system as computers and turns calls into digital signals. As long as a phone is configured to tap your unique VoIP network, the phone can literally be anywhere, including at the home of your sales agent who lives in another state (or country).

A call comes into your shop, the system routes it over the Internet to the sales agent, and he or she picks up. The customer never knows the difference and the employee can connect to your shop POS system via the Internet over a **Virtual Private Network (VPN)** — an encrypted Internet connection — to input the order.

Walter Knoll has been leveraging VoIP since November 2002 to accommodate the shop's branch locations and telecommuters, including one employee who is in France temporarily for medical reasons.

“The surprise has been that we do not lose good employees,” Knoll says. “When (employees move), they can still work for us. We also have been able to tap additional before untapped human resources such as new employees that have physical handicaps.”

Another use of this broadband? Imagine scrapping the server hardware along with all the maintenance headaches and support calls required to run your POS system. With the emergence of the **Application Service Provider (ASP)** model, your POS can now run at

Dream Schemes

We asked some of the biggest industry technophiles we know about the technologies they're most excited about. Here's what they said.



Walter Knoll III, Walter Knoll Florist, St. Louis: “We're using **Session Initialization Protocol (SIP) wireless phones**.

They look like cell phones but work on our system as extensions, accessing the network via 802.11 ethernet. This is done through low-cost access points, with the phones switching to the closest access point.”

Chris Drummond, Plaza Flowers, Norristown, Pa: With GPS and mapping, “I want to be able to go to a secure Web site, where I can get **real-time data and maps** for all of my drivers. I think that's where we'll be in about two years.



Bob Aykens, Memorial Florist and Greenhouses, Appleton, Wis.:

“We're trying get a grasp on how **YouTube and podcasts** can help us get more sales. I haven't figured that out yet, but I think when someone does it will be huge for our industry.”

Rich Dudley, The Bloomery, Butler, Pa.: “It's tough to say what the next big thing will be. Who could have predicted **Flicker.com** or **Facebook.com**? But in the next two or three years, **rich media is going to be very accessible** to people. If you go to Honda.com or LandsEnd.com today, you can customize your car color or bathing suit color. I think that's going to be something florists will get into because it's tough to translate a 3D image onto the computer screen. Being able to rotate some of these arrangements would be cool, and I think it's coming along. **SecondLife.com**, and other virtual worlds, are other things to watch. Do you have time to be a florist in SecondLife? Ten years from now, who knows? The only constant is change.”

Did we miss a new technology that you love? Tell us about it. E-mail your story to rsogeco@safnow.org. 🌿

— R.S.

the POS provider's location — you connect to it via PCs at your shop over the Internet. The advantage to florists is the elimination of patches, dicey upgrades, missed backups and expensive server hardware. The ASP provider updates the application when needed and provides guaranteed backups of your data.

New wireless technologies also can drastically change your floor plan and the way you manage inventory. Through

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), manufactures can apply super tiny chips to products to track them via a wireless handheld device. Here's how it works: Say a pallet arrives on the dock, the receiver walks by the pallet, allowing a wireless handheld device to automatically read product inventory and transmit the information to the computer system, instantly updating its records. RFID devices also can track

temperature and time, an attractive incentive in an industry that depends on cold chain management. Another application? Retailers will be able to do away with check-out counters, if they like, and instead use handheld devices to process purchases anywhere in the store. Many of the devices include a tiny printer, which allows you to hand the customer a printed receipt on the spot.

Online

Have you wondered how Web logs (blogs), online communities and forums first came to be? What powers most of this technology is **open-source software**, developed for free by volunteer programmers across the globe. Sound strange? In fact, the model has proven quite resilient and reliable. The open-source Linux operating system powers

many Fortune 500 backend IT operations and, if you check, is the platform for a few floral-specific POS systems including FTD, RTI, MAS. Since open-source was developed for free and is free to use, you just need a savvy programmer familiar with these technologies to work on your Web site. So for the cost of programming time, your Web site can leverage open source to provide massive functionality like publishing a regular blog, customer-review driven shopping system like Amazon.com, automated e-mail newsletters, in-house system for e-mail marketing, reminder systems and online chat capability to instant message with customers through your Web site — just to name a few.

Where Ever You Are: Get on the Bus

You now know what it takes to be on the technology bus. If you find yourself in catch-up mode, remember it's a much easier jog knowing which technologies you will need to focus on and implement in the coming months. And it is worth the effort. And it is worth the effort.

"Every time we have added some kind of technology to the company, it's always been a positive move," Boulton says. "It always saves time or money in some form or fashion. It streamlines the business."

That said, there is a limit, and business owners who carefully weigh the pros and cons of investing technology are doing the prudent thing, Brockway says.

"Technology has made many functions of a retail flower shop much more efficient, but there is a cost," he says. "Maintaining the technology, training the staff and keeping PCs secure tap valuable resources of time and cash. I think we are temporarily at a point of diminishing return for future technology. Unless you have mastered the currently available technology, and few of

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us have, focusing on the next best thing will not necessarily increase profits.”

Into the future, you can certainly rely on SAF to help you keep tabs on technology. SAF's Technology Committee plans to review the three “bus” lists at every meeting twice a year, adding or deleting relevant technologies as they see fit. This feature is the first publication of their feedback and will be published every two years. Check out the bus list online at <http://www.safnow.org/technologybus>. 🌿

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Info To Go



Know More About Knoll

Read more about Walter Knoll's extensive use of technology and his tips on backing up by clicking on the Info to Go logo on www.safnow.org. Or call SAF's FastFax, (888) 723-2000, and request document #918, (shop profile) and #919 (backup tips).

Google for Gold

Ready to dive into the world of keywords and Adwords? Before you start, read Floral Management's recent Plugged In series on the topic or by clicking on the Info to Go logo on SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or call SAF's Fast Fax, (888) 723-2000, and request #920.

Photo Flair

Florists are using Web sites filled with photos to market specifically to brides. Find out more in “Weddings 2.007” from the March 2007 issue of Floral Management or by clicking on the Info to Go logo on SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or call SAF's Fast Fax, (888) 723-2000, and request #921.