

2016 RETAIL FLORIST OF THE YEAR

Blumz by JR Designs

Owners Jerome Raska and J. Robbin Yelverton, who excel at responsive service, savvy marketing, and creative design and event work, win our 14th annual title.

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Jerome Raska, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, CAFA, MCF (left) and J. Robbin Yelverton, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, MCF, opened Blumz by JR Designs in 2002.



Blumz by JR Designs has three locations in Michigan. The primary locations are in downtown Detroit and suburban Ferndale, and an appointment-only shop for bridal consultations is in Ann Arbor, Mich. The Ferndale location, shown above, has an artsy, eclectic feel that is in tune with the rest of the neighborhood.

Passion for the floral industry and commitment to customers led Detroit's **Blumz by JR Designs** through challenging economic times in a city that was the largest in the country to face bankruptcy.

Owners **Jerome Raska, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, CAFA, MCF**, and **J. Robbin Yelverton, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, MCF**, take a focused approach to their business—an approach that has evolved from experience, education, the ability to think creatively and the willingness to work hard.

The creativity and talent required for Blumz to not only survive Detroit's challenges but also to thrive led to the business's designation as **2016 Retail Florist of the Year** in the annual contest co-sponsored by *Florists' Review* and the **Wholesale Florist & Florist Supplier Association (WF&FSA)**. WF&FSA member **Nordlie, Inc.**, which has locations in Michigan, Ohio and Florida, nominated Blumz for the honor.

distinct locations

Blumz has two primary shops in the Detroit area, one downtown and one in a suburb, along with a bridal consultation location in Ann Arbor, Mich., that is open by appointment only. In addition, Blumz has an in-store tuxedo business, Tux on Nine, and an event space that hosts parties, networking events, showers and more.

The two primary locations have their own distinct client base and vibe. The downtown Detroit store has a big-city feel, and the location in the Detroit suburb of Ferndale is more artsy. Adapting to and meeting each location's customer needs is critical, and the visual merchandising reflects that, with the business being careful to complement each store's neighborhood. "Our Detroit store is set up like a city loft," Robbin says. "It's a shotgun—14 feet wide and four times as long. When you stand in the front, you can see all the way to the back."



Blumz's Detroit store is in the heart of downtown, a revitalized area that attracts young people to its hip living spaces and shops. To get this youthful clientele into the store, Blumz has a do-it-yourself terrarium bar. The store offers cool containers and small plants, including cacti and other succulents, for customers to create their own personalized looks. "We hit a gold mine," co-owner Jerome Raska says of customer response.

Blumz by JR Designs *at a glance*

OWNERS Jerome Raska, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, CAFA, MCF and J. Robbin Yelverton, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, MCF

LOCATIONS Three in Michigan: Downtown Detroit, Ferndale and Ann Arbor

ESTABLISHED 2002

ANNUAL SALES Close to \$2 million

WEBSITE www.blumz.com

"A lot of our clients live in downtown Detroit. We want to give an idea of how our products can be used in their lofts and bring a bit of the organic beauty of flowers and plants to a hard city surface."

The Ferndale shop "is 10 times as big" as the downtown location, Robbin remarks. "It's more suited to the suburbs, but at the same time, it's in Ferndale, which is a very fun, eclectic, quirky, artsy town.

"So you get a bit of both worlds there. We have our tuxedo store there, we have an event space in which we can do seated dinners for 80 people, and we host events and classes in that room. It's very much geared toward that community."

Both stores appeal to the owners' personalities. "We like our stores to be eclectic because that's the way we are personally,"

Robbin remarks. "I like things from different eras and movements. We love classical architecture. We live in an English Tudor house with a limestone front, hardwood floors and all that, but at the same time, we also like the clean, urban loft look as well."

successful events

The owners' eclectic tastes and ability to adapt to client needs serve them well in their event and wedding business. Blumz organizes hundreds of events every year, including weddings, corporate events and charity fundraisers. Their strong event business is helped by the fact that both men are actively involved in the floral industry on local and national levels. "It keeps us connected and informed and on the cutting edge," remarks Jerome, who recently won the **2016 Epic Award for Event Professional of the Year**.

Blumz especially shines in the Detroit-area bridal market, and Jerome attributes part of the business' success to the way the florist communicates with customers and meets their specific needs. "We're one of the few floral providers in this area that really works with consumers to create their visions," he shares. "After we book weddings and events and receive deposits, we create mock-ups of designs to show the clients our concepts, at no charge."

When wedding or event customers return to see the resulting floral designs, Blumz goes all out with the intent of creating



At the terrarium bar in the downtown Detroit store, chalkboard signage provides instructions for customers to make their own designs. The final step, “Have Fun!!!” adds to the bar’s irresistible appeal to millennials.



The downtown location’s sophisticated combination of urban and rustic elements, showcased at the popular terrarium bar, hits the right note with the area’s hip clientele.

a scene or feeling the customers will love. “We set up a table with linens, chargers, paper products, etc.,” Jerome explains. “That’s the way we make additional sales. If a bride-to-be brings in Grandma or the mother-in-law, and they see how beautiful everything looks, they often say, ‘If you want that, I’ll help you pay for it.’”

“The bride gets help that she didn’t have before and gets the event she wanted but couldn’t afford. At the same time, it enables us to create events that when the guests arrive they say, ‘Oh my gosh! Who did this? It’s phenomenal!’”

reaching new customers

The team uses that type of experiential marketing to reach other potential clients, making sure to adapt to local preferences. “Know your customer base,” Jerome urges. “Not necessarily the customers you already have but the ones who walk by your door and don’t come in. What would make them stop and come into your store? What would make them think they need to come to you? Downtown Detroit is absolutely booming right now. There’s no place to live downtown—all the living spaces are full, with waiting lists—and all the young people want to live downtown.”

To reach those potential customers, the Blumz team asked themselves, “How do we get them to come into our store?” Jerome recalls. “That age group usually doesn’t have the appreciation for flowers that older consumers have.”

Then, Jerome remarks, “We hit a gold mine. We put in a do-it-yourself terrarium bar. We bought some cool containers, and we set up an area with all kinds of small plants, especially cacti and succulents. Customers can come in and make their own terrariums. It’s been crazy, all over social media, people are just buzzing about it. My point is, how do you reach people in today’s marketplace? You need to listen and react to the world around you.”

Blumz began doing the same kind of thing a few years ago with the corsage and boutonniere business. The stores set everything up to be individually priced, and customers come in and pick out each accessory, such as rhinestones, ribbon and decorative bracelets. They advertise that the price of labor is included in the items. “Our corsage sales have gone from an average of \$20 to \$30 to \$35 to \$75,” Jerome reveals. “People pick items because they like them, and they don’t worry about how much it costs.”

professional online presence

In order to continue attracting new business and retain repeat customers, Blumz must appear up to date and be professional at all times, Jerome comments. That includes having a digital component, he continues, pointing to statistics that show today’s brides find their vendors online 90 percent of the time.

“You need to have a great online presence,” he confirms. “A couple of years ago, in order to be in that arena, we developed



Blumz's Detroit store, in the booming downtown area, is across from the Detroit Public Library and next to the Library Street Collective, a well-known gallery of modern and contemporary fine art. The store is set up like a city loft and complements the area's modern sensibility.



The business's other primary location is in Ferndale, a suburb of Detroit. Co-owner J. Robbin Yelverton describes Ferndale as "a very fun, eclectic, quirky, artsy town," and the business has merchandised the store to reflect the artsy vibe.

an exclusive wedding website. When bridal customers go to our website, they don't have to wade their way through smiley mugs or casket sprays to find an icon that says "Click here for wedding flowers." The wedding site includes an online consultation request form that brides can fill out and request appointments.

Blumz's marketing and promotions efforts led to the company's selection last year as winner of the "Outstanding Marketing and Promotions" category in the 2015 "Retail Florist of the Year" competition. In the November 2015 issue of *Florists' Review*, Robbin and Jerome shared the importance of their digital presence as well as their commitment to marketing and promotions. That commitment included the hiring of a full-time director of marketing and social media, **Sadie Quagliotto**.

the importance of education

With more than 30 years in the floral business, Jerome has seen a lot of change, especially in consumers' floral knowledge. "One of the biggest trends that all of us in the industry need to be aware of is that consumers are far more educated than they ever have been, or, at least, they think they are because of Pinterest and the Internet," he says.

Florists' task is to educate consumers that just because they see something online doesn't make it true, Jerome reminds. "Recently, three customers called in one week asking for blue callas," he shares. "I explained, 'Well, they don't grow naturally that way.' They each said, 'Yes, they do. I saw them on Pinterest.'"

Jerome says he had to explain that he could stem-dye the callas or tint them with a floral spray, but they do not grow blue in nature. He encourages florists to make sure they are educated about flowers and products so they can be their clients' go-to experts.

"Because I travel and teach all around the country, I know not all florists are equal," he says, referring to his work teaching classes nationwide for **Teleflora**. "Some of them may not be as educated as they should be," Jerome comments. "We not only encourage but we require our staff members to go out and do things and be involved in the industry so that they stay current and on the cutting edge."

business know-how

Understanding customers, knowing the business and marketing all fall apart if the business isn't run professionally. Although



Inside the inviting, natural-light-filled Ferndale location, flower lovers can find a wide range of blooming and foliage plants as well as cut flowers and arrangements. Customers also enjoy perusing the shop's selection of jewelry, home décor items, gourmet candies and more.



A vignette in the downtown store beautifully showcases an eclectic selection of candles, incense, permanent blooms and accent pillows.

both he and Robbin are talented designers, Jerome shares that the business side of things, from human resources to accounts payable, tends to be his purview.

"You can't be just creative. So many retail florists are one or the other; not many are both," Jerome reminds. "If you are strictly a creative individual, you need to hire someone to handle the finances, and if you're strictly a financial person, you need to hire the creative individual. You can't afford not to."

That's especially true in today's tendency toward consolidation. "The trend in our industry is the successful shops are getting bigger and the small ones are going away," Jerome states. "I don't know if that's good or bad; it's just different than it used to be."

"In the 1970s and early '80s, we joke there was a nail salon, a hair salon and a florist on every corner," he adds. "Those days are gone. Consumers today gravitate toward bigger operations because of the value they can provide."

Larger businesses have more buying power. "We do almost \$2 million a year in sales, which gives us the buying power to give our customers good value," Jerome shares.

making clients happy

Like all florists, Blumz has its own style, but Jerome and Robbin are careful to adapt it to their clients. "Not all customers come to us and say, 'You guys have the best designs. Here's my color palette. Just make it,'" Jerome expresses. "A lot come with predetermined ideas. We just try to foster their knowledge and taste. We're not proud of every event we do, but we are proud that all of our clients are happy."

That happiness translates into references and repeat business, and Jerome and Robbin know it goes back to simple customer service. "We live it; we all speak of customer service daily," Jerome comments.

Customer service today is all about ensuring customers have a good shopping experience, and if an issue comes up, turning it into a positive situation. "At the end of the day, we never have problems or issues," Jerome explains. "We have opportunities to create loyal customers for life. We believe that when people take time to respond to us, even if it's negatively, it means they care that we survive."

finding the right employees

Finding employees who can offer exceptional service and truly understand the



A sympathy consultation area in the Ferndale store offers a quiet spot for the staff to meet with grieving family members. The consultation room is filled with merchandise that is appropriate for celebration-of-life tributes.



The sympathy area includes remembrances for animal friends, too.

company is challenging. Staying active in the community allows Jerome to meet people he might want to work with and to hear when someone is available. Sadie came to Blumz when she applied with an organization he worked with, but that organization wasn't able to hire her. He jumped on the opportunity, after clearing it with the organization first.

As a midsize business, Blumz is not able to offer partially paid health insurance and some other employee benefits that larger companies can afford, Jerome shares, but the company does provide paid vacation and holidays for full-time employees; 50 percent off fresh-cut flowers; and flexible schedules, which is important for many in today's work force. For example, the company's sales manager left a job at Macy's to work at Blumz, after tiring of extraordinarily long retail hours during the holidays and missing time away from her family, Jerome says.

"This past holiday season, she teared up because she was able to be at home to help her children put up the Christmas tree, she was at home to have Thanksgiving dinner and she wasn't working on Christmas Eve afternoon," he shares.

The younger generations have required Jerome to adapt how he manages and works with employees. "They grew up with computers their whole lives, and they want everything immediately," Jerome comments. "So, when we say, 'Oh, there are some classes, and you need to go be trained on how to become a floral designer,' no one's interested in that. It's not immediate. Now we look for people who have an artistic eye such as interior designers and art students from Wayne State University."

He has even adapted the wording in his "help wanted" ads. "If I run an ad today that says we're searching for an experienced floral designer, I will get no responses," Jerome reveals. "But if I say, 'Seeking an individual who loves gardening and flowers, has a passion in dealing with people, has a creative eye, and knows and understands color,' I'll get a lot of résumés."

The younger employees often perceive a flexible work schedule as more important than higher pay. Jerome says their apparent laissez-faire attitude used to make him crazy. He'd get calls from employees 15 minutes before they were due at work at 10 a.m., saying, "Oh, the dog got out, and I won't be in until 11."



The Ferndale store has more space than the downtown location, giving Blumz room to provide a large selection of merchandise. Ferndale even has event space for parties and classes.

"It's frustrating to those of us who didn't grow up that way," he admits. But he and Robbin have adapted, and they work with employees to create schedules that fulfill both their needs.

taking flowers to the people

There are a lot of moving parts in a floral business, and Jerome says success comes down to a pretty simple outlook. "Our philosophy when we started our business was to give good value and good quality, and we did just grass-roots marketing," he recalls. "We didn't have money to spend on marketing. I teach programs and talk to people about marketing who say, 'We just don't have money for that.' I ask, 'Do you ever throw any fresh flowers away?' I tell them that if they have surplus or slightly aging flowers to make them into something beautiful and hit the streets.

"People love what we sell. We take a single rose in a water tube to the bank teller when we make deposits. We even take flowers when we go to the gas station and fill up our delivery vans.

"In the floral industry, we use the phrase 'The power of flowers,' but we don't do anything with it," Jerome continues. "We get so caught up in what we're doing that we forget that what we do is so powerful. We forget to use it. That's how we built our business. We took flowers to the people."



Tom Figueroa, AIFD



Wholesale florist Nordlie, Inc., lauds Blumz by JR Designs' vision

Blumz by JR Designs was nominated for the **2016 Retail Florist of the Year** award by Nordlie, Inc., a wholesale florist with six locations in Michigan, Ohio and Florida.

Tom Figueroa, AIFD, general manager of the Nordlie Detroit branch, has high praise for Blumz's owners, **J. Robbin Yelverton, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, MCF**, and **Jerome Raska, AIFD, AAF, PFCI, CAFA, MCF**. "Robbin and Jerome have a vision for their business, and they share that with their employees," Tom

comments. "They get their message out to consumers with a strong social media presence and back up their marketing with quality products and unique designs.

"They also are strong proponents of education, and not only do they serve the industry as educators but they also

encourage their employees to participate in numerous industry events."

Nordlie, Inc., founded in 1928 by the Nordlie family, merged with Chicago-based **Kennicott Brothers Company** in 2014 and became 100 percent employee owned. The company's ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan) adds a new facet to the company's culture, namely pride of ownership, while it discourages a possible buyout from a competitor or other business. The ESOP is another feature of the company's retirement benefits that include a pension plan and optional 401(k) plan.

Kennicott Brothers Company has 16 wholesale locations throughout the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Minnesota and Wisconsin) as well as Atlanta, Ga., and Tampa, Fla., six of which carry the Nordlie name.

Through the company's **Holland Order Express** subsidiary, Nordlie/Kennicott customers can buy fresh floral products direct from the Dutch flower auctions. The products are shipped to the company's various wholesale locations and delivered direct to retail florists' shops. This buying option gives floral retailers lots of additional product choices. ■