

Power of flowers and family make Bartz Viviano thrive

Surrounded by the colorful tools and accessories of their floral business, three generations of the Viviano family were gathered in the Bartz Viviano conference room — and one of them was more interested in her frosted cereal treats than answering questions.

The presence of 18-month-old Paloma due to a sitter cancellation provided a constant (and smiling) reminder of the way that family businesses tend to include — well, family. And of the need to sometimes juggle priorities.

Frank Senior and his son, also named Frank, are both clear about the hard work that goes into making that juggling act successful.

“Keeping things in balance might be the biggest challenge, because you can spend as many hours as there are in a day on the business side,” says the older Viviano. “You’re still not going to get done everything you want done, but you have to set goals and priorities and realize there are more important things.”

He adds, with a fond look at his granddaughter: “Like her.”

The younger Frank, who became owner of the business in 2017, jokes, “Yeah, I can’t wait until she starts processing flowers!”

He takes up the thread: “You have to maintain professionalism, and that comes naturally to our own business relationship. Not everyone will agree on everything, but we all understand that we’re running a business, which is different from the personal side.”

The younger Frank represents the fourth generation in the floral business and the third generation of the Bartz Viviano family business, which stretches back to 1964 when his grandfather (named Sam) bought the Bartz floral shop on Central Avenue and Kenwood after its owner died unexpectedly. After the company moved to Secor Road in 1970, it became Bartz Viviano — the name that’s been synonymous with flowers in Toledo and the name that now adorns its showroom and headquarters a half-mile further north on Secor. Cut flowers, live plants, wedding and event support (handled by the younger Frank’s wife, Amanda, who also functions as creative director), and unique gift items define the business, which has made a number of internal and external transformations over the years.

“My Dad knew the flower business from running a wholesale plant business out of his own father’s flower shop,” says Frank Senior. “But he had to learn how to run his own retail business. When it became a multi-store operation, he learned the personnel and logistical challenges that went along with it. He had a trade group of florists from all over the country he would meet with.”

Bartz Viviano not only grew, but innovated, he points out: “In the 1970s, my dad was one of the first to buy directly from growers in South America. Previously, most flowers were supplied from local greenhouses, so you were limited to whatever you could pick up within a 50-mile radius. In those days, if you were out of flowers, you were out. Come Valentine’s Day, you’d taken the orders and those would exhaust your supply. When South American growers entered the industry, the supply issue went away. Now there were new issues: transportation, cold storage. He learned all that, and we have a wholesale business that continues today.”

A valued family trait is pragmatism, both Vivianos say. When it came time for succession, the Vivianos brought in an advisory team of legal, fiscal and

management experts, whose input was instrumental to the transition's success. Since then, the lessons learned continue to be applied and refined, lessening the need for an advisory board or family council.

"Executive responsibility lies with us," says the younger Frank. The trade group I'm in meets twice a year. We go over our businesses in depth, talk about our challenges. To be honest, time is hard to come by, and spending a lot of time with boards can take away from our business of selling flowers."

The Family Business Center is another resource both Vivianos find valuable, and they've been active members for years.

"I think it's the relationships I've built there that's been the most help," the younger Frank says. "Talking with members of my affinity groups is fun. They're mainly people my own age, facing succession issues, and being the first one to go through that transition, I've shared a lot. I've gone to some seminars, too. One was on leadership styles — having emotional intelligence, being honest and allowing yourself to be vulnerable, using that honesty to connect with people."

The Center's resources extend from professional development to finding someone to remove a fallen tree from the company parking lot, he notes.

Bartz Viviano continues to expand, innovate and thrive, with four locations today. The latest — in Waterville and across from Toledo Hospital — "seemed to happen in the blink of an eye," the younger Frank says. But the Vivianos' high standards remain the same. He's proud of their live-plant offerings, which have grown in popularity as science seems to support the benefits of living greenery in our homes.

Flowers are everywhere these days, but a rose isn't always a rose. "People can buy flowers in grocery stores, but those buyers tend to buy for themselves," says Frank Senior. "We tend to serve the people who send flowers as gifts, or to commemorate life events. Buying for self is focused on price and convenience. The other thinks first about quality, value and service, which are where we position ourselves: the presentation, the timeliness, the flowers fresh, long-lasting and conveying the desired message.

"If you measure the flowers by the total experience, we provide the best value in town. For events like weddings, anniversaries, expressions of sympathy, people want things to be right."

"Quality, though, doesn't have to be expensive," the younger Viviano points out. "We work with people to reach mutual satisfaction; that's our tradition. Our products are beautiful, things from the natural world."

His father might have the last word: "There's a lot of satisfaction in providing flowers that make people happy at important times of their lives. It's a great business to be in."