

This Boston business cultivates relationships while offering five-star services for affluent residents and exclusive businesses plus affordable options for all.

BY SHELLEY URBAN

Winston Flowers



FAR LEFT Located downtown, in Boston's financial district, this shop caters to business people with upscale offerings sized for desks and for easy transit by commuters.

LEFT Winston Flowers & Garden Center, in Newton, Mass., is the company's largest retail facility, at 5,000 square feet. Its two-acre garden center accounts for half of this location's revenues.

Flowers expanded from that single location on Newbury Street to three full-service shops. Then, in 1988, when Maynard passed away, two of his four sons, David and Ted, took over and continued to expand the business, with additional locations and services.

Today, Winston Flowers is known as one of the city's finest florists, serving the most luxurious hotels, chic restaurants, upscale boutiques and retailers, professional sports teams and, of course, anyone who loves flowers. "We do specialize in catering to high-end clients with cus-

2010 Retail Florist of the Year

"It all boils down to relationships. We pride ourselves on the quality of our work, but that's a given. What's more important [to our business] is our relationships with our staff, our clients and our vendors,"



shares **DAVID WINSTON** (top), who, along with his brother **TED WINSTON** (right), co-owns **WINSTON FLOWERS**, winner of the 2010 "RETAIL FLORIST OF THE YEAR" contest. The contest is co-sponsored by **FLORISTS' REVIEW** and the **WHOLESALE FLORIST & FLORIST SUPPLIER ASSOCIATION (WF&FSA)**.

This third-generation business, with five flower shops, one flower shop/garden center, and a massive central design facility—all in the greater Boston area—was nominated by **JACOBSON FLORAL SUPPLY**, also in Boston, with whom the florist has cultivated a relationship for some 40 to 50 years. "My father bought from them, and my grandfather bought from them, so this is a great example of the kinds of relationships that are important to us and to our business," David relates.

Over the years, what began as a humble venture involving a pushcart and flowers on Boston's famous Newbury Street back in 1944 has been transformed into one of the city's premier businesses, serving some of the region's most affluent clientele. And the original store, in the tony shopping district, where the Winston brothers lived and learned from the generations before them, still stands as evidence of the enduring value of relationships.

stylish finds on any budget

Founder **ROBERT WINSTON**'s son **MAYNARD** is credited with transitioning the business from pushcart to retail store that served Boston's well-heeled. Under his leadership, Winston



tomized services on the level of a five-star hotel, but we also pride ourselves on being very accessible for shoppers of all income levels," assures David, "and we treat every customer with the same care and service, even if they're spending only a few dollars," he adds.

Despite that the shops are located in wealthy communities, chic shopping districts and Boston's financial district, David assures that customers can find small plants for as little as \$5; mixed bouquets "styled nicely for cash and carry" for \$15; and arranged flowers, created by on-site designers, ranging from \$20 to \$150. Depending on location, however, other merchandise on display can run as high as \$3,000 or possibly more.

new looks daily

The retail shops "wow" walk-in customers with their modern styling and displays. Because all other transactions go to the central design facility, the shops handle only walk-in sales, which account for one-third of the company's overall revenues. Half of the walk-in sales are from an array of flowering and green plants and stylish floral accessories while the other half is fresh flowers, sold in gorgeous arrangements, bouquets and individual stems. Winston Flowers does not sell permanent or dried florals.

Each retail outlet has a regular staff

Inside Winston Flowers & Garden Center, the company's "flagship" location, fresh flowers are grouped by color. Large-scale creations demand attention and inspire walk-in shoppers.

of four to six people, which includes a manager, visual merchandiser, one or two designers, and one or two flower processors. According to David, it is on this level that the large company develops those all-important personal relationships with local customers.

"The managers and staff are in touch and in tune with their communities, so when a person comes into a location, someone there usually knows their names and knows their children's names," he explains. "It's very important to maintain these relationships, so that's why we don't move people around often and why we invest in [quality] employees." With more than 150,000 card-carrying preferred customers, who have signed up for the "Winston Flowers Preferred Customer" program, connections with clientele at the local level are imperative. (See "Connecting with Customers" on Page 31 for more information on this program.)

The stores and the products on display vary a bit according to each location and its clientele, but David notes that consistency across all locations is important to maintaining the brand image. "Each store has its own personality based on the shop's footprint and the community it's in," he explains, "but, generally, everything is presented in a similar way with some creative license allowed at the store level."

Surprisingly, none of the shops has a display cooler. Instead, David explains, cash-and-carry arrangements and fresh-cut flowers by the stem are usually displayed in the shops' showrooms in chic monochromatic color groups, so walk-in customers can interact with the stylish selections. "It's important to us that clients experience the flowers—that they touch them, smell them and can easily 'work' with them," he mentions.

At closing time, all fresh products are moved to the cooler for overnight storage. Flowers by the stem are redisplayed daily, and, according to David, any arrangements that didn't sell are refreshed and redesigned. "Nothing is put out today and then again tomorrow exactly as it was," he assures. "We're constantly changing and creating interest. The color palettes will likely be the same from day to day, but they'll be presented differently, and they may be in a slightly different location. We want people who come in today to have a different experience when they come back in two days from now."

David explains that the palettes, which change six to eight times per year according to the seasons and holidays, are driven by products on the market. "We buy to fit the two or three color groups we're working with [at a time], and we also follow what's happening outside by buying what's seasonally appropriate at that particular time of year," David shares. For example, during late spring, peonies, lilacs, cherry blossoms and other blooming branches fill the displays, and during summer, *Zinnias*, *Dablias*, *Scabiosas* and monks-hoods are favorite fare.

The garden center, which is part of the largest "flagship" store located in Newton, Mass., about five miles from down-



At Christmastime, bold blocks of scarlet florals, mingling with wintry greens, lure customers, who are encouraged to "experience" the fresh fare.

One of the company's talented designers creates a dramatic seasonal arrangement for in-store display. Internet and call-in orders are created at Winston Flowers' 70,000-square-foot Design Studio, which serves as a central design and delivery facility for the six retail outlets.



at a glance

Winston Flowers

OWNERS: David Winston and Ted Winston

NUMBER OF SHOPS: 6 retail locations, one of which includes a garden center

LOCATION: Boston metropolitan area

OPENED: 1944

SHOP SIZE: most locations average 1,200 square feet; flagship location is 5,000 square feet with a two-acre garden center; central design studio is 70,000 square feet

CLIENTELE: specializes in catering to affluent customers but serves all income levels



WINSTON FLOWERS
SINCE 1944

NUMBER OF DELIVERY VEHICLES: 45

MINIMUM FOR DELIVERY: \$60

AVERAGE FRESH FLOWER SALE: \$95

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 200, most of whom are full time

WEBSITE: www.winstonflowers.com



Flower types and colors always match the seasons at Winston Flowers, whose buyers source 90 percent of their fresh products direct from growers and buy locally whenever possible.

town Boston, employs 12 to 20 people, depending on the season. It's open year-round and accounts for half of the sales at this location.

key operational hub

Although each shop has its own designers on staff, who handle custom requests from walk-in customers, the vast majority of the company's designs, and revenues—a full two-thirds—are generated by the work at Winston Flowers' Design Studio, which is a 70,000-square-foot warehouse located in an industrial area of Boston. Most orders, both phone and Internet, are processed at the Design Studio, where 15 staff members answer phones daily. "The average phone order is around \$95," Ted confides.

"It almost looks like a telethon is going on in there," laughs **PETER KILCOYNE**, Winston Flowers' sales rep at Jacobson Floral Supply. "It's a bank of salespeople with their headphones on busily taking orders. It's impressive," he shares.

The salespeople, who often use the shop's website as a tool to guide callers, direct customers to the company's lineup of menu items, or "seasonal collections" as they're called at Winston Flowers, all of which are created with in-season favorites purchased from around the world. Developed and arranged by the 30 to 40 designers who work in the studio every day, and ranging in price from \$65 to \$350, the exquisite seasonal collections, like all deliveries, are transported from the studio. But if customers find items in the stores that they want delivered, drivers will pick up items from the retail shops and transport them to requested destinations.

Typically, deliveries are made within a 25-mile radius of the studio, but that expands as needed. "In the summertime," reports Ted, "many of our customers go to the South Shore, Cape Cod or the islands, so we'll deliver to them there; that

mutual commitment to service

When **WINSTON FLOWERS**, the 2010 Retail Florist of the Year, needs floral supplies, this third-generation Boston, Mass., chain turns to Boston's **JACOBSON FLORAL SUPPLY**, also in its third generation and with whom the retailer has done business for 40 to 50 years.

With six retail outlets and a huge corporate and event business, Winston Flowers' supply needs are never small, but Jacobson Sales Rep **PETER KILCOYNE**, who nominated the retailer for the contest, works hard to keep his company's hard goods in stock for the busy florists. "Winston Flowers buys all kinds of products from us—from ribbons to baskets to everything in between," Mr. Kilcoyne reports.

But his greatest challenge, he says, is trying to find new, cutting-edge products that Winston Flowers can use. "From the ownership down, they are really ahead of the curve—in their containers, their designs and their choices of flowers. So, as a salesperson, trying to stay ahead of them and trying to find new things that might be useful to them can be formidable," Mr. Kilcoyne confides.

While Winston Flowers' trendsetting ways keep Mr. Kilcoyne on his toes, it's also the primary reason he nominated the shop for the "Retail Florist of the Year" contest. "When I heard about the contest, it was a

'no-brainer' for me to think of nominating them," he confirms.

Located next to The Boston Flower Exchange and very near to Winston Flowers Design Studio, Jacobson Floral Supply provides quick and convenient service, says **DAVID WINSTON**, who co-owns Winston Flowers with his brother, **TED WINSTON**. "This relationship is really important to us," he confirms. "We don't have to warehouse lots of product, and when we need something, we call, and they send it right over. And we've done business with them for many years, so we have a very fair pricing setup."

Jacobson Floral Supply was founded in 1943 by **EDWARD JACOBSON** and is now under the leadership of **BILL JACOBSON**, president. The company's mission is to supply top-quality hard goods to retailers throughout New England with service that exceeds expectations. For more information about Jacobson Floral Supply, call (800) 262-0500, or visit www.jacobsonfloral.com.

To learn more about the "Retail Florist of the Year" contest, visit www.floristsreview.com, or contact us at (800) 367-4708. Visit the website of our co-sponsor, WF&FSA, at www.wffsa.org, or call (888) 289-3372.

could be as much as 100 miles." In fact, Ted says that Winston Flowers will deliver anywhere for the right size of order; after that, it's just a matter of how much customers are willing to pay for the service. "We've delivered funeral items to Pennsylvania," he adds.

As Ted points out, much more is delivered from the studio as well. Every afternoon, staff members send availability lists based on the studio's fresh inventory to the six store managers, who place their orders that evening. Orders are processed the next morning, and trucks are dispatched to every location. "Managers could be ordering just about anything—fresh flowers, foliage, 'textures,' flowering plants, green plants, containers and supplies," he says.

five-star service for all occasions

In addition to housing the company's fresh-cut flowers, floral supplies, party and event rentals, and design and sales staff, the studio is also home to teams who handle corporate and residential services, garden design, and weddings and events. Consultations for all of these services are scheduled at the Design Studio.

Winston Flowers' impressive corporate client list, which you can view at www.winstonflowers.com/about/testimonials.aspx, accounts for a sizeable portion of the studio's workload and includes daily décor in lobbies or retail spaces as well as meetings, conferences, corporate gifts, holiday parties and more. According to Ted, success with corporate customers is also a matter of relationships.

"We've worked with some of these companies for years, and the key is the relationship. If times are difficult and they want to cut back, we're flexible, and we work with them to help them [meet their objectives] whether they want to spend \$3,000 or \$50,000," he reports. "That's why they stick with us."

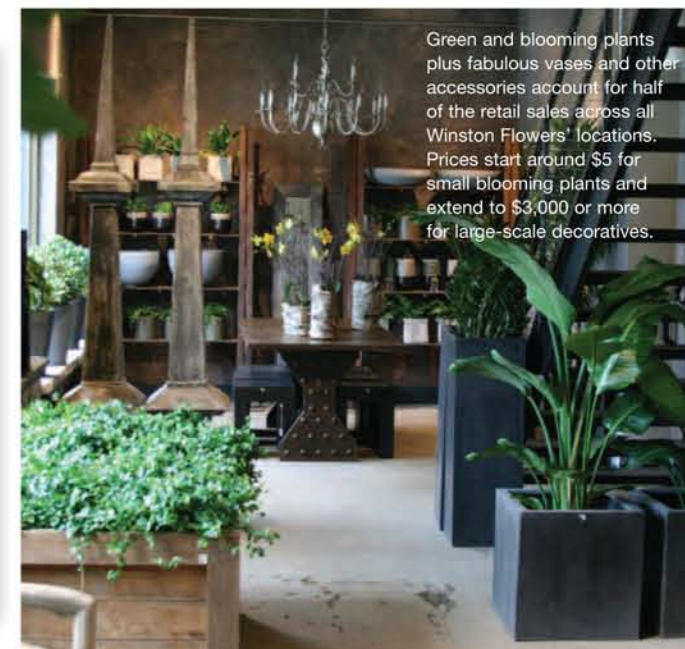
Cultivating these relationships falls into the hands of the Special Services team members, who handle all the details for each of their respective clients. "Each team member has a client list, so when a client calls, they're directed to that one person, who knows their needs, their locations and their preferences," Ted reports. "The team member might also handle a corporate client's residential needs as well," he notes.

As Ted explains it, hotels, which may require fresh flowers and/or plants for their interiors and exteriors as well as décor for their "rooms" divisions, catering departments, and concierge services, require great attention and time, so they're split evenly among the staff. That way, each hotel gets the full attention of a dedicated team member. "We visit our hotels every day—to change the water, refresh the flowers and remove pollen. And we completely replace the arrangements twice a week," he describes.

Corporate events, which Ted says can range from small luncheons to huge conferences, can cost as little as \$300 to \$500 and as much as \$50,000 or \$100,000. Most likely, events



All fresh flowers and arrangements are displayed in the showrooms, which co-owner David Winston says are kept "cool but comfortable." At night, unsold items are moved to a storage cooler and redesigned and redisplayed the following day.



Green and blooming plants plus fabulous vases and other accessories account for half of the retail sales across all Winston Flowers' locations. Prices start around \$5 for small blooming plants and extend to \$3,000 or more for large-scale decoratives.

at the high end are those for which Winston Flowers manages all the décor, which includes furniture, lighting, linens and, of course, floral décor.

Likewise, a team in charge of weddings and events manages all the personal celebrations, which are assigned to dedicated staff members based on size. "We have people who specialize in big events and those who specialize in smaller-scale events," says Ted, who estimates that Winston Flowers decorates for some 300 weddings and 200 private events annually.

Customized weddings and events, such as birthday parties, dinner parties, bar mitzvahs and other occasions, he says, have cost as little as \$500 and as much as \$200,000. Again, the larger events typically involve a full-scale décor plan utilizing some of Winston Flowers' inventory of amazing props and custom furnishings.

Another team known for its stellar services is the Garden Design team, which provides residential and corporate design customized to each client. A look at some of the completed projects on Winston Flowers' website reveals an array of striking design work, ranging from perennial beds to curb-appealing entry décor to lavishly planted patios and poolsides to rooftop flower and vegetable gardens. Maintenance—watering, weeding, fertilizing, pruning and more—is also available.

the freshest picks of every season

Judging from comments on Winston Flowers' Facebook page, it's hard to say what customers appreciate most—the service or the selection. Like its commitment to unparalleled service, the company is committed to finding the finest fresh materials that epitomize the season. "We mirror this concept after great restaurants, who make their menus based on seasonality and offer the very best of what's in season. And with

our fresh flowers," David assures, "that's the key to demand."

He also notes that even year-round favorites, such as roses, are purchased to reflect the seasons. "We have roses all year long, but we choose specific varieties by color to coordinate with the palettes we're working in. For Mother's Day, for example, we have pinks and lavenders, but in summer and fall, the colors will change," David explains.

Despite that some products are year-round staples at Winston Flowers, David says that the company's buyers, who purchase 90 percent of fresh flowers directly from growers (10 percent is purchased from vendors at The Boston Flower Exchange), excel at finding intriguing perishable fare. "We are always looking for something new that no one else has and that will be exciting to our customers," he confirms. "Our work never gets stale, and it never gets boring."

While buyers work hard to find unusual and interesting products, David points out that they're also trying to focus their purchases on merchandise that seems appropriate for New England. "We're primarily looking for new varieties or products from new vendors that we've never carried before or haven't carried for a while; we're not necessarily looking for exotic products that have to come from someplace far away," he admonishes.

Therefore, as much as possible, buyers source their cut supplies from local growers. "Customers appreciate that we buy our products locally, but they also understand that not everything can be grown in New England," David explains, "so whenever we can, we buy local, and whenever we can, we buy domestic."

Regardless of locale, fresh success also depends on relationships, some of which, says David, are longstanding. "Several of the farms that I'm dealing with—my father bought [flowers] from their fathers. And we visit the farms regularly and know their staff and their families. So we're not just looking for whoever has the cheapest prices," he relates. "We're looking for people who have high-quality flowers, high standards and a similar work ethic to ours."

only those with "people skills" need apply

Because relationships—between the company and its employees and between the employees and their clients—are so important to business, staffing is done carefully and strategically. "Not everyone needs to be a 'designer,' but everyone [who works here] needs to be able to build relationships with people, whether they're on the phone, in our Special Services department or working in a store. That's the No. 1 thing we look for," shares Ted. "We're looking for people with 'people skills,' and, to find that, we look beyond the floral industry when we hire. We pull people from the hospitality industry and other types of service industries, and we teach them the flower business," he confirms.

Despite their required relational skills, new hires must com-

space rentals

It's not unusual for a florist to hold a floral design demonstration in a retail space, which Winston Flowers often does. But what's a little out of the ordinary is scheduling it on contract for VIP clients. And perhaps what's even more unexpected is to rent a retail business out for private gatherings, complete with catered services.

For a cost of \$1,500 to \$2,500, clients can contract with Winston Flowers to conduct design demonstrations for their select groups of eight to 15 people. Workshops can be held during the workday or after hours and include a couple of staff members plus the design materials. It's a fun way for garden clubs and ladies' groups to learn from the shop's experts and socialize at the same time.

In addition, if customers want to rent one of the retail shops for a private function, like a birthday party or bridal shower, staff will transform the space to suit and reset it before the next workday. Food and alcohol must be provided by a professional caterer chosen from a list of preferred suppliers, and if candles are involved, a fire marshal has to be in attendance.

The cost for party rental varies by location but starts at \$3,000 for the small shops and goes to \$7,000 for the 5,000-square-foot floral



and garden center. According to Winston Flowers co-owner David Winston, this shop always has a wealth of beautiful merchandise on display, so it's wonderful for after-hours private events.

Winston Flowers typically hosts 10 private design demonstrations and 10 to 12 private parties every year, but they've recently begun promoting these services even more. "We've put signage in the stores, and our sales team is aware of it [and can suggest it as an option]," David reports. No doubt, getting groups, both large and small, into the retail shops has to be a win-win situation for this enterprising florist.

Container gardens are popular choices for the Garden Design team's primarily urban clientele. See a sampling of the talented team's work at www.winstonflowers.com/gardens/index.aspx.



Even the greenhouses at Winston Flowers & Garden Center are styled in an aesthetic similar to that of the flower shops. A clean, modern presentation invites browsing.

plete orientation and training before they can begin working with customers. After that, opportunities to learn the floral side of the job abound at Winston Flowers, where paid training in both sales and design happens at the stores and the Design Studio on a regular basis.

"That's one reason we're able to retain our employees, too," confides Ted. "People like working in a company where they're constantly learning, they're being challenged and they're growing." Indeed, many employees have been on the job for more than 10 years, and some have been on staff for more than 20 years.

connecting with customers

Even those gifted with customer service skills can appreciate the power of information at their fingertips, to give callers and walk-in customers the impression of truly personalized service. And that's where the Winston Flowers Preferred Customer program comes in.

At every location, when the customer card is swiped, staff members access a wealth of information about the client, including address, purchase history, payment information and more. Transactions are quick, easy and personal, and the program enables staff to easily make connections with customers.

With 150,000 cards in circulation, the program also provides a huge database for direct marketing, almost all of which is done by e-mail because, as Ted explains it, "E-mail is easy, inexpensive and targeted."

The card, which ensures regular upgrades and discounts for preferred customers, has benefits for the florist as well. "It's nice that they have us in their wallets and they're carrying us around, and there's a connection with us, too," Ted reports. So when they need something, Winston Flowers is the obvious choice. Again, it all comes down to relationships. ■

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