



## Floral transportation / What's our problem? What can we do? /

-BY ELIZABETH PERVEILER

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research, in 2004, more than 2.8 million fresh cut flowers (1.2 million of those were roses) were imported from across the globe, into American florist shops-and then into the hands of U.S. consumers.

Fast-forward to 2005. The numbers aren't in just yet, but Mother Nature threw a wrench or two into the gears of the transportation and shipping segment of the floral industry. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita diverted both air and ground traffic, and destroyed countless floriculture and horticulture businesses. But if there is one thing that the industry excels at-something essential to continuing business in the face of disaster-it's adaptability.

With or without natural disasters, the shipping and transportation segment of the industry is not without flaws. According to David Armellini, executive vice-president of sales & marketing of floral transportation specialist Armellini Industries, Inc., Larry Landry, global account manager/perishables for American Airlines Cargo Division, and Wayne Castleberry, president of MAC Technologies LLC, a leading supplier of horticulture and agriculture supplies, solutions are in the works.

Armellini explained, "Obviously, the industry has been affected by the increase in cost of fuel. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of all trucking companies have implemented a surcharge to cover these costs. A bigger issue that is having a stronger impact on the

industry is driver shortage. For example we spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to recruit and retain quality drivers; but we are forced to use more and more lease operators to cover loads. Simply put, there are more loads than available driver resources, and by all industry indication, it will continue to get worse."

He continued, "Because of the shortage, drivers can now go to another company, make as much and sometimes more money, and never get out of the cab. Floral industry drivers are unloading each box by hand sometime with no materials, handling devices or dock height warehouses.

"One thing the industry can do is work to improve the environment that drivers deliver to. In a perfect world, we'd say to build a dock, but we understand that can be cost prohibitive. If that's not in the cards, what about making the doors drivers deliver into wider? Have pallet jacks and pallets available or carts available for utilization. Make sure delivery areas are clean and well-lit since most deliveries are made in the dark, and make sure coolers are ready for receiving by clearing boxes and carts."

Landry states, "The biggest issue we have faced as an industry is the dramatic increase of the cost of fuel. With prices more than doubling in the last year, it presents a challenge to all of us to provide quality transportation services at reasonable rates. From our perspective, perishable cargo represents a key component of our business, whether it be moving domestic product across the

country to bringing in fresh flowers from Holland, Central and South America."

"American Airlines Cargo has specific products tailored to the shipment of perishable goods. By providing value-added services to our customers, we are especially effective in hitting markets beyond Miami, coming in from Central or South American and Europe," according to Landry.

Landry continued, "The AA Cool Perishables™ Program provides pre-cooling, Customs and USDA clearance for fresh floral products coming into the USA. This way, the product is not delayed when it arrives at its final destination. It's been cleared, cooled and is ready to be sold. Additionally, the Expedite FS™ Program allows customers to choose the flight they want, and provides priority boarding, handling and faster connections with a 100 % flown as booked guarantee. This service costs a bit more, but it can help our customers control their inventory more carefully. All of our flight-specific products are supported by on-line tracking technology; so shipment status and location are always available."

Castleberry added, "As an industry, we fall short in the areas of logistics and cooling. Not totally, but in some areas, like proper care and handling-keeping flowers at the proper temperature-and with airlines and trucking."

Castleberry said, "Our ultimate goal is to give consumers a quality product. We want to furnish the end consumer with the value

of the hard-earned money they paid. They are looking for a product with a shelf life, for their home or office, or wherever they would like fresh flowers, for at least four to five days. Right now, that's just not happening. The research has been done: If flowers would last those four to five days, people would continue to buy them on a regular basis. Bottom line is that the product needs to deliver value to the consumer."

The customer receiving a proper value for their spent dollar is what is important, and that assurance must trickle down from all segments of the industry, including transportation and shipping. Castleberry explained, "There's a difference between perceived value and scientific value. Perceived value is the one the customer feels when they enjoy the product, and are satisfied when it lasts a sufficient length of time. The scientific value is of the biological sense: Did the vascular system shut down? Was there an oxy block? Were the stems cut down properly?" Without crying over spilled milk, action needs to be-and is being-taken. Besides consumer education, Castleberry noted that there are other options. "Another solution is for flowers to be transported and shipped with hydrating devices. Eliminating the hydration, dehydration and re-hydration process- simply keeping flowers continuously hydrated- could dramatically extend the life of the product. MAC Technologies is

involved in R&D with universities and other contractors to solve those logistics problems. We're not just selling products-we want to protect the industry with innovation."

Armellini concurred with the idea that operations need to be smoothed out for transportation to become more fluid. He said, "More than anything else, as an industry, we have to find ways to keep the cold chain from being broken for it to be truly successful."

The obvious fragility of the floral industry's precious cargo makes rapid movement and properly refrigerated facilities an absolute necessity. Quite possibly, the best move for the industry is for companies to reinforce what needs improvement in order to protect the market. We can't stop looking for change.

### Author's Profile

*Elizabeth Perveiler is a writer and editor based in Chicago, IL, and is a former editor for Cenflo Publications. She can be reached at [eperveiler@yahoo.com](mailto:eperveiler@yahoo.com).*