

Business Partnerships Can Turn Into a **Flowering Friendship**

BY ELLEN FROST

O ON ANY GIVEN DAY, you may see a vintage blue pickup truck stopping in front of my shop. That's Maya Kosok from Hillen Homestead in Baltimore, Md. She might be delivering flowers and foliage. She might need to borrow bulb crates, go to the bathroom, or cool off in the air conditioning. She might be stopping to share freshly harvested figs. Maya has a key to my shop, so she can come and go as she needs to if I'm not there. We have that kind of relationship and trust with one another.

In the last *Quarterly*, I shared some feedback from growers and designers on how to nurture a win-win attitude when working together. I think Maya and I are both immensely proud of the relationship that we have built through the last decade and we feel like other growers and florists can learn from it.

HOW WE MET

Ellen: Seventeen years ago I started Local Color Flowers with the goal of sourcing all of my flowers locally. Then and now, local to me means as close to home as possible. When I first started out, there were no local flower growers in Baltimore City. The closest one was about

20 miles away. I daydreamed about having flowers growing in the city. Logistically, it would make my life much easier if I could get flowers more conveniently. I also loved the idea of Baltimore being at the forefront of urban flower farming. It would be so cool if there were florist-quality flowers growing in our city. While I loved flowers and being a florist, I knew that I was not going to be the one to bring flower growing to Baltimore. I had tried farming and knew it was not a good fit for me. That's where Maya came in.

Maya: When I first moved to Baltimore City I was working at a nonprofit educational urban farm and then helped start the Farm Alliance of Baltimore, a cooperative of farms in the City. As I was busy supporting other farms, I started itching to grow more than I could cram into my row home's backyard. I had the idea to grow flowers since everyone I knew was growing vegetables. Before moving to Baltimore, I had interned at a mid-sized organic farm in California, where a more experienced apprentice had introduced me to cut flowers and basic bouquet building. My initial goal was growing flowers for friends and neighbors, but as I started spending money on compost and seeds I set a new goal of covering my costs. Around this time I met Ellen (I honestly don't remember who first introduced us!), and she was actively looking for more



Above: Ellen Frost (L) and Maya Kosok (Photo: Ellen Frost) **Right:** Maya's vintage blue pickup truck full of flowers is a common sight at Ellen's shop. (Photo: Maya Kosok)



grower sources. Note: this was before the current flower farming fad really took off. She said she would buy anything I grew, and between that and a friend's farmers' market stand I had a modestly successful first season.

WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING SO CLOSE

Ellen: Maya's farm is less than a mile from my shop and her house is just a few blocks away. She actually has to pass by my shop on her way to and from work every day. The physical closeness of the farm is the first thing that makes our relationship unique. That physical closeness motivated us to build a relationship that works for both of us.

In the beginning, I ordered anything Maya had. I wanted to encourage her to grow more, and I wanted to prove to her that I was committed to her success. Her success was my success. The more high-quality, beautiful flowers that were available in our community, the more flowers I could share with my customers, while also differentiating myself from other florists. Sharing the story that the flowers I was selling were grown locally in Baltimore was a hit with my customers. People were always surprised; I might even say shocked. Customers were thrilled to support two

local, women-owned businesses. They were also excited by the reduced environmental footprint created by growing and selling flowers in a one-mile radius.

Maya: Every time I leave my house to go to the farm, I literally drive within one block of Ellen's shop. Some weeks we deliver once, but most weeks we deliver two- or three-plus times. If I forget something, I can drop it off later. If she has an influx of orders, I can swing by to drop off more flowers. If I need to siphon off part of her order for another delivery but I know I'll have what she needs a day or two later (and she's fine with the delay), I can swing by then. During Covid when I was building my first walk-in cooler, she lent me half of her cooler to use. On occasion, when my cooler is overflowing I have stashed excess blooming branches in hers. But beyond sharing physical space and delivering a zillion times a week, our community is so close that we can also support each other's businesses in very direct ways. When I promote her flower shop, my friends

and neighbors are all potential customers who live nearby. When she promotes my farm, her customers are excited because I'm growing right near where they live, and I'm deeply invested in their city. I have built incredibly close relationships with many florists I sell to, but the proximity of her shop to my house and farm makes it especially easy.

COMMUNICATION AND LOGISTICS

Ellen: If I'm being honest, it often feels like Maya is part of our LoCoFlo team. Even though she doesn't work at LoCoFlo, we are on the same team with the goal of getting as many local flowers into the hands of our community members as possible. We use regular modes of communication that most florists and farmers use. Maya sends an availability list each week and I order by sending an email. We also have determined together that flexibility in communication works for both of us. Some farmers and florists would be aghast if they saw how many text messages, Instagram DMs and phone calls Maya and I send to each other each day. For us, it works. This flexibility allows me to make last-minute orders or for Maya to alert me to something blooming unexpectedly that she knows I'll love. Deliveries are flexible as well. Maya has a key so she can deliver whenever it is convenient for her.

Maya and I also meet a couple of times a year in person to review how things are going with our relationship. These check-ins are to review how our communication is working. One topic that always comes up is, "Is there too much texting?" We also talk about what flowers we love to buy, what flowers we don't love, what we'd like to see more of, etc. Besides just "work" we also talk and plan all of the other fun things we do together including travel to ASCFG conferences, talks and presentations, fundraisers for nonprofits we're both passionate about, and more.

Maya: We have known each other for more than 12 years, and our relationship has evolved over that time to meet our needs and our growing businesses. When I text her to offer random additional stems, it's usually because I know it's a flower she loves or a color she needs that week. We even have one team member, Brittney, who works with both of us. When

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— Ellen Frost

we're in the field harvesting, Brittney will often share things like "Ellen is desperate for pink this week, you should offer this to her."

Over the years Ellen has also been a bridge for me to connect with other flower farmers. When I am struggling with a new crop, I can ask her who grows that crop best and then reach out for advice. I can also offer insights to her on what I'm hearing from other florists about color and style trends, busy and slow periods, norms around ordering and payments, etc. All of this didn't happen overnight, but by prioritizing each other in our respective businesses we have been able to grow side by side. I often tell other growers that you don't need to sell to every florist around, and that you're better off investing your time in building deeper relationships with fewer customers. The same goes for florists—they don't need to buy from every farmer around, and if they can concentrate their orders with a few quality growers, they will benefit from getting priority treatment for years to come.

WHAT'S BEEN CHALLENGING

Ellen: Like with any working relationship, there are challenges that come up. On occasion, I'll have to share with Maya about a quality issue like a flower or foliage wilting or being too short. It's never easy to share constructive criticism, but I feel comfortable sharing these concerns with Maya because she knows that the feedback is so that we can both improve. Maya in turn, will share feedback with me about something I wrote in my weekly newsletter or something I said on a podcast. I appreciate the feedback because I always want to improve and serve our flower community better.

Another challenge we face is that Maya stops selling for six or eight weeks in the summer. It's not a huge issue because our summers are pretty slow, but it does mean that during those weeks/months, I have to rely on growers that are further away. This usually means more logistics or cost to get my flowers. Maya does try to help smooth that summer lapse by connecting me with other growers who have product then, or by telling me to go to the farm and harvest things that she thinks might be ready/available, even if she's not there.

Maya: In general, our goals align, and our communication styles gel. Working so closely has been a huge boon to my business, and I don't honestly think I would be a commercial flower farmer if I hadn't met Ellen. But of course, no relationship comes without some challenges. In the hundreds of thousands of stems I have delivered to Ellen, there have occasionally been issues with something wilting or not being up to snuff. Fortunately, we both appreciate constructive criticism and the opportunity to learn from issues that arise.

One issue we overcame together was when I began selling mixed bouquets through a collective stand at the farmers market around the corner from Ellen's shop. She approached me about being uncomfortable with that because she was selling my same flowers at the same time (but with a markup, of course). I'm sure that deciding to have that conversation with me was difficult for her, and ultimately I decided I would rather skip the market if she was able to buy a bit more of my excess product each week. Baltimore is a small city, the local cut flower market is even smaller, and our neighborhood is a tight-knit community where word travels fast. I choose not to view any of my florists or frankly fellow farmers as direct

competition, but Ellen and I do have to be conscientious about how our business decisions impact one another. She is a huge customer that I rely on, and I am a significant supplier that she relies on. And at the end of the day, she's not going to tell me if I'm undercharging for something—she's still my customer after all!

WHY IT'S SO FUN

Ellen: Building a community of flower people in Baltimore and beyond is the best part of the work I do. Local flowers are the bridge to friendships, celebrations, learning, activism, travel, family fun, and more. Maya and I have celebrated weddings, baby showers, new team members, new neighbors, and just about everything in between. We have taught together at big events like national conferences and small events, like when we hosted a Girl Scout troop at our shop and taught them about flower farming and floristry. One of the things I enjoy most is being at a farm somewhere with Maya, touring around, learning together, and scheming about what we can bring back to our own little flower community in Baltimore.

Maya: As much as I love the textures and colors and beauty of fresh-cut flowers, I am really in this business because of how much I love farming in the City and because of the relationships. By running my own urban flower farm, I get to be my own boss, work outside, build an amazing team of people I enjoy spending time with, and collaborate with lots of incredible people like Ellen and her team. Some of the moments that bring me a lot of joy are: spontaneous chit-chat when I'm dropping off at her shop, 5:30 a.m. texts about how we are losing our minds, stopping by her shop on Saturday mornings with out-of-town visitors to show off this funky neighborhood spot, bringing my kids by to see whatever weird toys her husband, Eric, has lying around, and so on. I didn't wake up one day with a plan to build a flower farm and make it my full-time job; it truly grew and evolved gradually over the past 12-plus years, and a big part of that success is thanks to the close relationship we have built over these years.

Ellen: In conclusion, I'm grateful that Maya and I share a win-win attitude when we work together. We know that for each of us, much of our success lies in the hands of the other person. For that reason, we strive to make a relationship that works for both of us. ■



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