

Sell 'Em Before They Hit the Water

by Ginny Smith

When **Russ Ferrelli** gets to work at 3 a.m., he's greeted by a warehouse that's brimming with about \$25,000 worth of fresh cut and boxed flowers.

His mission — and the overall mission of **David L. Jones, Inc.**, wholesale florist — is to make sure those flowers are sold before they have a chance to be put in water.

"If you don't sell your merchandise on any given day in most businesses, you just leave the items on the shelf and wait until the next day," says Ferrelli, 41, who is vice president, cut flower buyer and salesman. "But when you're dealing with something as perishable as flowers, your primary goal is to sell them — *fast!*"

David L. Jones is the largest wholesale florist in the Pacific Northwest and they carry an abundant variety of cut flowers — some flown in from all over the world — along with potted plants, silk flowers, dried arrangements and an extensive line of floral supplies.

Some of the merchandise is sold to local retail florists, chains like Safeway and drug stores and gift shops, while other merchandise is shipped throughout Washington state and to Alaska.

A typical day at David L. Jones begins during the wee hours of the morning when refrigerated trucks roll into the firm's parking lot, delivering boxes or buckets of cut and potted flowers from Canada, California, Oregon and Florida.

A driver is at the airport every morning at 2:15 or 2:30 to pick up all the air shipments as well, and he plans his schedule so he'll be back to the warehouse by opening time.

The firm's 45 or so employees work staggered shifts, starting at 3 a.m., and the first people on the job start checking on the shipments that have been delivered during the night and unpacking them. "It's kind of like getting your fruit stand ready for business in the morning," says Ferrelli.

Next they start the reshipping process, filling orders throughout Washington state and Alaska and getting those flowers moving. "One truck leaves here at 5:15 a.m. or so to get the flowers on a 6 a.m. Greyhound bus," says Ferrelli. "Another driver leaves for the airport at about 8 a.m. with the shipments that are going to Alaska."

Retail customers begin dropping by and phoning at 5:30 or 6 a.m. to select their flowers for that day, and "they buy anything from a bunch or two of flowers to a number of boxes. It just depends on what kind of business they expect that day."

About that same time, the firm's salespeople begin calling the chain and retail stores, getting orders for the day, while other employees start filling those orders.

One of Ferrelli's responsibilities is to

make sure the company has just the right number and the right kinds of cut flowers for the day's business. He says that floral imports from Europe and Canada have made a real difference in his job in the last few years.

The industry now basks in an endless summer of sorts, he says, where "nothing is ever out of season, and air service can get the flowers to us overnight."

What's more, foreign competition has inspired domestic growers to dive into producing European blooms — "they're not taking the competition lying down!" — so now there are more varieties available right here in the U.S.

Many of the flowers Ferrelli imports come from Holland, which is the largest growing area in Europe and also serves as a collection point for flowers from South Africa, Italy, France and Germany. He also buys from Canada and uses domestic growers in Oregon, California, Florida and Hawaii.

Where he buys, of course, depends on what's in season in a given area, and where he can get the best price. "We were importing daffodils from England before the daffodil season got underway in the Pacific Northwest," he says, and gladioli come from Florida between November and the end of May.

A Pacific Northwest location is a real advantage in the floral industry, according to Ferrelli. For one thing, "a lot of Dutch growers are now working in Canada," he says, and "the Canadians are the same type of growers as the Europeans."

There's also the fact that Mt. Vernon's **Washington Bulb Company**, the largest bulb farm in the U.S. (see page 13), is right in our backyard, and growers in California and Oregon offer top quality products as well.

Ferrelli says competition in the wholesale floral business is tough — David L. Jones' key competitors include **Northwest Wholesale, American Wholesale, Evergreen Wholesale and Seaflo** Wholesale — because "we're all dealing with perishable products, we're all buying on speculation, and our customers are very price-conscious. It makes for some very exciting competition."

Accurate speculation is obviously the name of the game and it can get pretty technical and tricky, according to Ferrelli. Take the holidays, for example, when florists need lots of roses. That means David L. Jones — and Ferrelli, more specifically — has to plan accordingly without overdoing it.

Meanwhile, the growers have to create their own minor miracles. "Anyone can plant a rose bush and pick the roses when they become available," says Ferrelli. "But our growers have to know how to bring on a crop all at once, to give us roses when we need them, and how to cut back on their production when the demand is low."

"If a guy misses a holiday like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day by being a week late, or two weeks early, he loses a big portion of his income. It's a very technical job, and we work with very competent people." □



Russ Ferrelli: "With the increase in floral imports, nothing is ever out of season, and air service can get the flowers to us overnight."