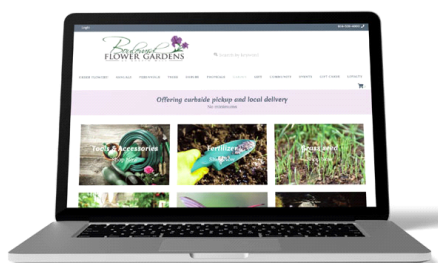


## Features

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## Boulevard Flowers is on a Mission

Katie Elzer-Peters



By now you've read and attended lots of webinars or virtual conferences, all explaining what you should do to make next spring better. You might have thought to yourselves, "Is anyone really doing any of this, though? How?"

*Pictured: Boulevard offers a multitude of products online, from live plants to seeds, grasses, tools, birding and more.*

They are. Here's how one garden center, Boulevard Flower Gardens in South Chesterfield, Virginia, rose to the challenge. They're not huge (in fact they downsized from a 30,000 to a 2,000-sq. ft. indoor facility two years ago), nor are they in a big city. Here are key takeaways from their success.

### Open Your Mind

Your mindset is your superpower to tackle what's coming in 2021. If your mindset isn't working for you (you make decisions based on fear, exhaustion, confusion or "but we've always done it this way"), you can change it.

Boulevard staff got a head start on a mindset shift when they downsized their interior space. Madison Williams, co-owner of Boulevard Flower Gardens, says, "We had taken on a lot, filling the building for the sake of filling it. We realized, 'We don't need to be that big and we don't need to offer that many choices.' It was too confusing for customers.

"As our buyer, I'm always asking 'Why?' Why are we selling this? Why are we doing this? Why are we catering to this audience over that audience? Are we doing it because we've always done it that way? Are we selling something because we like it or we've always sold it, or are we listening to our customer base?"

She says downsizing allowed them to get out of the tunnel vision mindset and separate emotional attachment from business decisions.

"Now that we physically look different, we're trying to keep that perspective," she adds. "Every time we are about to re-order something, we're asking, 'Is this worth it? Could we use this square footage for something more profitable?'"

The garden center's mission is to "educate and grow," Madison says. "We're not too connected to one platform over the other as long as we're meeting that mission."

In the age of COVID, it helps that Boulevard has more outdoor retail space, but what's really working for them is

knowing their “why?” and combining it with a mindset of flexibility.

What that combo looks like right now is a focus on convenience and safety, with more online options and additional activities and experiences to bring back the new audiences captured in the spring, and to take the garden center out to people closer to home or at home.

“I have three kids under the age of 4 and I definitely do things based on convenience, based on curbside pick-up. I try to think in that mindset—what will be the most convenient for people and what are they looking for?” Madison notes. Increasingly, that looks like online options.

### **Nail Down Your E-commerce Organization and Processes**

“Online selling is not going anywhere,” says Madison. “In the first year we offered plants on our e-commerce store, we got about 25 orders that included plants. In March 2020, we received 750 orders.”



*Pictured: An example of the Field Trip Kits offered at Boulevard Flowers to get kids involved in gardening. Madison Williams and her family at one of several photo ops set up at the pumpkin patch this fall.*

They continued to have steady online plant orders throughout the summer, as well. “It has become a new normal for people,” she says.

Like everyone, they learned a lot—fast—while rapidly scaling that aspect of the business. Madison says, “We wouldn’t be able to do it if our POS and our e-

commerce system were not linked.”

(This isn’t necessary if you have a very low volume of online orders, but it’s imperative if you’re trying to fill more than about 15 to 20 orders per day.) She likes it that her platform allows her to update stock levels from an app on her phone—something to look for when shopping around for software solutions.

During the high volume of spring, they successfully offered garden packages to their customers to make fulfillment easier.

“Nobody complained,” she said. The packages retailed for between \$39 and \$59, and some included add-ons. The “Porch Sittin’” package included a citronella plant and all-natural bug spray along with plants. A shower kit came with a fresh bundle of eucalyptus. They also offered a pollinator package with a flat of mixed annuals, two 1-qt. perennials, a gallon perennial and a hanging basket—basically a garden ready to go.

“By far the best sellers were our ‘Suntastic’ and ‘Shade Loving’ packages,” Madison said. “Everyone knows if they have a sunny area or a shady area.”

To answer customer questions about the packages over the phone, Madison suggests leaving a list of what’s in the packages on offer so that everyone gets consistent information. She also stresses it’s important to have a meeting or discussion when you’re about to launch a new initiative so everyone’s on the same page when it’s busy.

### **Spark Joy**

“As a business owner, you have to do a lot of things you don’t like,” she says. “But it’s also really important to do things you really love. Otherwise, it’s going to be a long career.” Her answer to that in 2020 was to offer field trip kits.

They offer eight kits at a time targeted mostly to the pre-K through 6th grade audiences. At \$5 to \$10 per kit, families

can afford to buy more than one.

“Try to hit the vocab words and main lessons and life cycles that your local schools cover,” Madison recommends. “The kits contain a cover sheet that explains what’s included, other supplies you might need (such as a pair of scissors), the objective, the vocabulary words and a step-by-step guide.”

While the kits aren’t a huge moneymaker, creating them reinvigorated Madison, and brought new audiences to the store and to their Plant Pit Stops.

### **Expand Your Reach**

The “Plant Pit Stop” is Boulevard Flower Gardens’ answer to a food truck. “In the spring, we spread the word to neighborhoods outside of our regular delivery area that we’d bring a Plant Pit Stop for an afternoon or evening. My sister and I would load the truck up with garden flags, spring veggies, pansies and more. People could pre-order items on our website, as well, and we’d deliver.”

They continued through the end of September, adding the field trip kits to the merchandise mix. “Some people came just to purchase those,” she said.

She says that most homeowners associations have someone who regularly works with food trucks and those are the people to connect with.

“We’ve also made a lot of contacts with the food truck owners themselves and gotten some leads on other festivals or locations to visit,” said Madison.

One of the biggest surprises, she says, was when they set up at a neighborhood fall festival just 10 minutes away. “It’s a bit of a yard sale mentality and they enjoyed picking through everything. I think sometimes people enjoy looking at our elaborate in-store displays, but are afraid to shop from them. This was comfortable and easy for them.”

### **Create Alternative Experiences**

The New York Times reports that U-Pick farms are busier than ever, with some people visiting three or more per season. As you read this, Boulevard will have just finished welcoming visitors to their traditional fall pumpkin patch, with a few changes. Instead of hands-on activities (other than picking out pumpkins, the playground and animal feeding), they created lots of cool photo ops.

“Our customers include lots of families with young children,” said Madison. “While I was working last weekend I heard a lot of dads say to their kids, ‘You can get a pumpkin, but please just take some pictures for your mom.’ Multiple other people said, ‘I saw on Facebook they have the pumpkin wall now! Let’s go see that!’”

It’s an experience families are enjoying that also results in marketing. “We’re getting more buzz from those photo stations than any paid advertising we do.”

She adds, “If next year looks different, then we’ll try again with something else.”

See? It really is all in your mindset. Know your “why?” and then work toward it. Switch directions when necessary. Repeat. **GP**

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