

Local florist warns of scams used by online 'tele-florists'

By Tabitha Wells

When it comes to shopping, we are being told in a more fervent and loud manner that shopping local is best.

We know why 'local businesses create a strong economy, and a strong economy creates a sustainable, strong community.

But there are other reasons for shopping locally as well, and as Valentine's Day approaches, there is one very large reason one should shop at home.

'There is a scam going on out there which is designed to fool you into thinking you are buying something you are not,' explained Chris McCoy, owner of Parsons Florist of Orangeville. 'It is the busiest time of year for them and we don't want anyone to fall victim to their misleading advertising and unrealistic promises.'

This scam involves online and tele-florists, who take orders for floral arrangements, then send them to local florists. Only, the image you are presented with when you order, the price they present, and sometimes even the ability to deliver the arrangements are fabricated.

According to McCoy, the 'florists' being contacted are call centres and websites based in the U.S. that do not have actual floral shops, and charge all arrangements in U.S. dollars. Clients are also charged a \$20 service fee, but even the original cost of the design presented isn't what goes to the florist.

'One of the orders we've received was for a vase with roses and cut flowers,' McCoy said. 'The customer paid \$74.95 USD online, but we were given the order value of \$59.99 to fill including the delivery. The value of the design they ordered would be \$89.00 to start with here in Canada. So as a consumer, there is no way you will get what you ordered.'

She added that they've even had customers bring in their bills to show what they had been charged by the sites and call centres.

Since speaking with the Citizen Tuesday morning, McCoy has confirmed they've already received another three orders from the site, and none of them are in Parsons' delivery area.

'Yet again yesterday, we received another three orders from 1-800 for towns over two hours away,' she said. 'Vases of roses with only \$30 to fill the order including delivery! Sad to know the sender is expecting the flowers to arrive as they were ordered.'

If you Google 1-800 Flowers, a large number of 'sponsored links' fill the first page, as well as numerous 'work from home' ads on a variety of websites, burying the articles and reports that have surfaced about the company.

In a report listed by the New York Times in March 2012, 1-800-Flowers is listed as a defendant in a lawsuit with multiple other online retailers where they were accused of having participated in a cynical and longstanding scheme to cheat their customers out of millions of dollars. The report also stated that a legal filing by lawyers in the case asserted that the company 'was well aware that its customers were getting defrauded.'

One of the online companies that has caused problems as an 'order' centre is called Just Flowers. If you search them, it's a little confusing 'the .ca version of the site takes you to 'listings' of florists you can contact when you click on different categories. The .com version however, proclaims to allow you to make international orders.

'At one point, they actually had our company listed with a link above it, which took them to the website Justflowers.com,' McCoy said. 'Customers would naturally assume it was a link to our website. It's really quite a scam.'

And those international orders they promise? Don't expect them to end up at the right florists. This week alone, Parsons has received orders from Conestoga, Elmira and Cambridge, despite Parsons not delivering there. Because florists won't take the companies' orders any more, they are sending them to florists outside of the area in hopes they will get delivered. But with the cost customers are paying, sending it to a florist that far away will get them even less than what the money would have gotten them locally.

'The pricing online is only made up to look attractive, and in no way reflects the actual pricing of flowers where you want to send them,' McCoy said. 'Many of these companies use something called 'drop shipping,' where the flowers are left to freeze on a doorstep, while others use wire services to send the orders to local services.'

After a quick visit to justflowers.com and selecting a floral arrangement priced at \$49.99 on the site, this reporter created a dummy 'order,' then took screenshots for McCoy. The order included a full bouquet flower arrangement with roses in a pink vase, and a small teddy bear added on for \$10.

But the floral arrangement itself is actually a \$59.99 starting rate, and McCoy confirmed that while the image shows a full bouquet, the pricing is actually for that of a flat bouquet (only visible to the front, not all sides). And the bear? Parsons doesn't even have bears that small. Had the order been completed, Parsons would have received less than \$50 CAD to do the arrangement, and that would include the delivery cost.

'If you want to send flowers to an actual town, do not use search engines to find a florist,' advised McCoy. 'Call your local florist

first and ask who they would recommend sending it to.?

She added that if you do need to do a Google search, grab the address listed for the florist and enter it into Google maps. Some of these companies have caught on, however, and rent building space or put their call centres out of these locations.

?Use Google Maps and search ?florist near' or ?florist in' and the name of the community,? she explained. ?(Then) check out the Street View on Google Maps to see the shop itself. Read the reviews, and call if you can to make sure you know the area. We have had 1-800 Flowers claim to be us to a customer in the past, which we addressed immediately.?

In one consumer complaint online, a gentleman in the U.S. had ordered a \$200 bouquet to be sent to his wife for Valentine's Day, as well as took the option to pay an additional fee for a guaranteed delivery by 7 p.m. Only, the flowers never arrived. He received a notice the next day after 6 p.m. that the flowers had been delivered, but there were no flowers. Later, the company told him they could not guarantee delivery on Valentine's Day.

?They are really not out to take care of the customer,? said McCoy. ?Last year, we had some Valentine's Day orders being delivered three days late! That was because they kept taking orders for Valentine's long after florists were accepting new orders for deliveries. The truly best way to order flowers is to find a brick and mortar store, call and speak to a designer. Get ideas from their actual website of what you like, but give the designer some creative licence to make something perfect and the freshest.?