



Making a Difference

Smile Farms

An Interview with Jim McCann,
 Founder and Executive Chairman, 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc.



Kevin McCann (left) and others (above) working at Smile Farms

EDITORS' NOTE In 1976, Jim McCann bought his first of many retail flower shops in the New York metropolitan area. As his company expanded, McCann focused on innovation and being an early adopter of new technologies that enhanced customer engagement to grow his business. As a result, 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc. was among the first to offer 24-hour service through an 800 phone number and to use the Internet for direct sales to customers, becoming AOL's



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first merchant partner of any kind in 1994. The company's own website launch came the following year, followed by a long list of industry firsts, including recent successful launches into the fast emerging areas of social and mobile and A.I.-driven "Conversational Commerce."

COMPANY BRIEF For 40 years, 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc. and its family of gifting brands has been helping deliver smiles for customers with gifts for every occasion, including fresh flowers and the finest selection of plants, gourmet foods and gift baskets, confections, candles, balloons, and much more. 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc. was recently selected as one of Internet Retailer's Top 300 B2B e-commerce companies as well as being named to their 2016 Top Mobile 500 as one of the world's leading mobile commerce sites. The company's BloomNet® international floral wire service (mybloomnet.net) provides a broad range of quality products and value-added services designed to help professional florists grow their businesses profitably. The 1-800-FLOWERS.COM multi-brand website features premium, gift-quality fruits and other gourmet items from Harry & David®, popcorn and specialty treats from The Popcorn Factory®, cookies and baked gifts from Cheryl's®, premium chocolates and confections from Fannie May®, gift baskets and towers from 1-800-Baskets.com®, premium English muffins and other breakfast treats from Wolferman's, carved fresh fruit arrangements from FruitBouquets.com, and top quality steaks and chops from Stock Yards®.

With the goal of delivering smiles for special occasions, are you already attracting people to the company who have that desire to give back?

Yes. This business does tend to attract people who have a different sensitivity. When 9/11 happened and we put out the call that we were doing the flowers at the memorials at Yankee Stadium and for Mayor Bloomberg and his team, our florists came from our design facilities and worked throughout the night. Our florist suppliers were shipping all of the product they harvested from their farms all over the country to help with those memorials. It really drove home for Chris (President and CEO) and I the idea

that people who work in this business are generally very giving.

As a company, are you looking to support areas that in some ways align with the business, and is it a part of business strategy?

We're in a value creation business, but we can only create value if we're paying proper attention and proper service to all of our constituent audiences – our team members, their families, the communities we work in, the vendors we interact with.

When we look at the involvement that we promote, it primarily comes from our team members. My brother Chris, who is our CEO now, and I have always been struck by the grassroots efforts and the things our people do with their own time, and we try to follow that.

While we felt it was nice to continue to attract and support these wonderful, talented people, we didn't have a single philanthropic cause that spoke to our corporate mission, which is encapsulated in our "delivering smiles" mantra. Over the past few years, what emerged is an idea called Smile Farms – a local-community-based program that evolved from our family's very personal experience.

I'm the oldest of five, my brother Chris is the youngest of five, and we have a middle brother Kevin, who was born developmentally disabled. We are fortunate that the five of us siblings are very close and the next generation is very close, and one of the reasons is Kevin. He has been the centerpiece of our family, and our parents made it so. When they were alive, they were concerned about what would happen with Kevin after they were no longer around.

The four of us siblings stayed local and we all embraced Kevin and his care. He moved into a group home on Long Island 20 years ago, run by an agency called IGHL. A college professor

on Long Island named Walter founded this group home because there was a need for it.

He now takes care of 3,500 adults with developmental disabilities every day. He and I have become very good friends and we're blessed that Kevin was admitted into the IGHL program and has been living there for 20 years.

About 15 years ago, Walter called me and said he felt Kevin was high enough functioning and should be working in the community. However, he could not find a job for Kevin or many others like him in his group home system, so he asked for my help. The idea we came up with was something "close to home" for us – we would build a greenhouse in a separate not-for-profit organization that would employ developmentally disabled adults to give them gainful employment while doing things that are good for the community, the environment, and for themselves.

Fifteen years ago, my brother Chris and I funded the efforts to build the first of these greenhouses, and my brother Kevin has been working in them with 30 other developmentally disabled adults all these years. It has become a very successful program.

About three years ago, Walter called back and said the program was working very well but he was now handling more people, and he asked to double the size of the farm. On reflection, Chris and I said we would help out.

Chris, Walter, and I had a conversation saying we should put our arms around this Smile Farms idea and employ as many people as we can – that's when Smile Farms became a reality. We plan to grow more and better quality products – flowering plants, produce for local restaurants – all grown locally, so we don't have to truck that plant or micro-green or vegetable from across the country – the product and the work will stay right here in our community.

Our involvement, as a company, includes, the 60 to 80 volunteers – friends, family, and associates – who work on Smile Farms events along with all of the 1-800-FLOWERS.COM staff who have embraced the organization so much deeper than Chris and I could even have hoped. What we have found is that Smile Farms has cultural benefits, recruiting benefits, and retention benefits for our business that continue to grow. People just like to help people – go figure! We are working now to expand Smile Farms nationally and we are extremely excited about the reception we are getting to the concept from other communities and cities. ●