'Flowers For Clunkers'? No Joke For IL Florist

Michael Tarm, Associated Press Writer

CHICAGO, Ill. (AP) — The government is giving cash for clunkers. It isn't sending flowers.

Still, a small-town florist in central Illinois has been fielding hundreds of calls a day from people inquiring about the rebate program after General Motors began advertising a national toll-free cash-for-clunkers number that's nearly identical to the shop's toll-free number.

The Flower Corner in Clinton is being inundated with more than 150 calls a day, overwhelming its staff of six and threatening to damage business because regular customers in the rural community of just 7,000 can't get through, said owner Judy Van Fossan.

"It's a horrible nuisance," she said. "And it's cutting into the productivity of my people 'cause all they're doing is answering phones."

The calls started about three weeks ago, swelling by the day as GM publicized its clunker-info number. Van Fossan fears matters will only worsen as GM continues to market the service.

Many callers appear startled and confused. Some still asking about clunkers even after they're told they've reached a flower store.

"We stop them and they say, 'Huh? What?'" said Van Fossan, 57.

The shop is supposed to pay a fee for each toll-free call to the store and Van Fossan said she could be hit with a massive phone bill at the end of the month, adding to her woes.

Only the prefixes of the numbers are different; GM's is 877 and the shop's is 800. People are more familiar with toll-free numbers starting with 800, so many potential car buyers trying to call the GM number mistakenly dial 800, said Van Fossan.

Van Fossan said she doesn't blame GM but the company that issued a number so similar to one that existed. She said she once worked on a car plant assembly line and appreciates that the ailing industry needs the financial boost that the cash-for-clunkers program offers.

A spokesman at GM's Detroit-based headquarters said he sympathized with Van Fossan. But John McDonald said there was little the company could do. He said part of the problem was a shortage of available 800 numbers, forcing companies to use 877 equivalents.

"What we try to do is make as much publicity as possible to say what the right number is," he said. "I don't know what else we can do."

There may be a silver lining for the florist, he said. Publicity could raise awareness about The Flower Corner in the long run, he said.

In the short term, the GM official said, "We certainly hope that people order flowers when they call."

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