

THE  
ULTIMATE  
Guide  
to

HANDCRAFTED

Success

Bruce Baker



# The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success

# The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success:

How to Build and Grow a Thriving  
Craft Business in Any Economy

By Bruce Baker  
Jones Publishing

## *Copyright Page*

Copyright 2014 © Jones Publishing. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Publisher info.

Copyright statement.

## Dedication

Welcome! You are here because you have a passion for making and selling your handmade goods. You're excited about the prospect of making a living doing what you love to do, or supplementing your income by maximizing your talents and turning them into profits.

As you well know, there is no such thing as guaranteed success in any business. However, adhering to tried and true advice from someone who has successfully navigated the business of handmade is, without a doubt, a huge step in the right direction toward your long-term success in the handmade arena.

For nearly a decade, Bruce Baker has been one of the key contributors and writers for *The Crafts Report* magazine (now known as *Handmade Business*). The knowledge Bruce shares in the pages of this book are a compilation of articles and teachings that Bruce has been sharing with people in the handmade industry for years. This isn't a book filled with theory. It is, plain and simple, a book filled with practical advice on how to make a living in the handmade business.

If you have been in this business for years, you know how difficult it can be to sustain your business year after year. The teachings in this book could very well be the refresher course that you've been needing to get re-energized. If you're brand new in the handmade business, take the words of this book to heart as the true "insider's secrets" to fulfilling your dreams. This is your roadmap to success.

Welcome to *The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success*. Your journey begins now!

Travis Manney  
Publisher and Editor  
*Handmade Business* magazine

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Part 1: Setting the Stage for Success</b>	
Telling a New Story: Embrace the power of positive thinking	11
What's New is Hot: Pay attention to emerging trends	12
The Historical Pattern: What it means for the future	15
Effective Trade Names and Signage: The power of identity	16
Beyond the Product and the Price: Tell a story to sell your art	19
Product Development: A road map to better sales	22
<b>Part 2: Top Tips for Marketing</b>	
Six Simple Tricks to Make Money and Beat the Economy	27
Five Fundamental Trends You MUST Embrace	29
Hot Tips for Success	31
National Trade Shows: A how-to guide for playing in the big leagues	34
<b>Part 3: Boosting Your Booth</b>	
10 Tips for Creating a Custom Booth on a Shoestring Budget	41
Maximize Your Show Space	43
Start Your Booth Display with a Floor Covering	46
Making the Atmosphere in your Booth a Sensory Experience	48
The Art of Hanging Your Art	51
Low-Budget Dazzle: Inexpensive ways to boost your visual merchandising	53
<b>Part 4: Problems are Opportunities</b>	
Stuck in a Rut?: Four questions that will revitalize your business	57
Your Slides and the Jury: The current issues surrounding the process	60
Knock-Offs: Gifts in disguise	63
Selling to Parents with Children in Tow	65
Change is Necessary	68

## Introduction

For the past 16 years, Bruce Baker has been a premier crafts business teacher, having taught over 500 workshops throughout the United States and Canada.

Bruce lives with his wife, Nancie, in rural Middlebury, Vermont. They opened their first retail store, Sweet Cecily, in 1987. The store sells handcrafted items with a focus on folk art and is a favorite for tourists in the area. They also sell nationwide in their online retail store.

Two years later, they opened Great Falls Collection, a jewelry and nature store that features items for the home and garden with a focus on the environment.

Bruce served on the board of directors for the American Craft Council for three years and was a founding member and vice chairman of the American Craft Association (a division of the American Craft Council, a membership organization to provide services and benefits to craftspeople).

Bruce is the past president of the Downtown Middlebury Business Bureau, and currently serves on its board and has also served on the board of directors of the Addison County Chamber of Commerce and the Vermont State Craft Center at Frog Hollow.

Bruce teaches workshops on marketing, sales, customer service, booth construction, jewelry displays, slide presentations, visual merchandising, and trends that affect the craft and gift business.

## PART ONE

# Setting

## THE

# Stage

## for

# SUCCESS

## Telling a New Story: Embrace the power of positive thinking

I was once asked, “What do artists need to do in order to secure a better future for themselves and the future of the craft business?” The question took me by surprise, and I don’t recall how I answered it at the time. Later, however, I could not get it out of my mind. What is the primary thing artists need to do to ensure a bright future?

Having thought it over for some time, the answer became quite clear. Artists need to tell themselves and their customers a different story. The story I hear when I visit shows and conduct workshops is that business is dwindling. Some artists are questioning how much longer the craft business will survive. I meet so many people who are discouraged with their business, wishing the ’70s or ’80s would return. I hate to be the one to break the news, but the buying habits of those two decades are not going to see a revival anytime soon. Many of the difficulties we experience are self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, they are the result of telling each other and the world how bad the economy is. Propagating the myth of the “starving artist” or “the artist as a dinosaur” will not help your business, improve your mental health, or lead to sales.

On the other hand, I meet a lot of people who are doing quite well with

their art/craft businesses, with many reporting the best sales of their career. What’s the difference between those who are experiencing success and those who aren’t? The artists who are successful exude attributes that are missing from those who are struggling, with the most significant attribute being a positive attitude.

Too many artists tell themselves and others a story of gloom and doom and receive more gloom and doom in return. The universal law of attraction dictates, “What you dwell on, you get more of.” You’ll have a brighter future if you train yourself to think more optimistically. This is known as the power of positive thinking. I admit that the craft business isn’t as easy as it used to be. However, the best strategy to change your business will cost you nothing. It simply requires you to change the way you think.

It’s not just artists who are facing changes: bookstores, travel agents, and music stores have also endured enormous changes. The industries that continued conducting business the same way they did in the ’90s are struggling or are already out of business. But the ones that have reinvented their business are generally experiencing growth. The art and craft business has gone through several changes in the past decade, but it doesn’t mean business is over. The same transforma-

tion that's working for other industries can be applied to our industry as well.

If you're doing the same things over and over again, chances are you're struggling. Certain crafts aren't as popular as they used to be. If you're making art in a style or genre that's no longer desirable to customers, you can't blame them for not buying it, but you can reinvent yourself. There's so much opportunity for those who allow themselves to think differently about the future. I am not saying this is easy, but anything is possible if you believe you can do it.

Artists often tell me that the middle class is disappearing. In America this certainly seems to be true. But China and India (thanks to our spending) are building a middle and upper class in numbers that make the United States' middle class pale in comparison. I don't expect everyone who reads this to start selling their art to the new millionaires of India, but I guarantee the first artists who do so will be highly rewarded. I present this as an example of how artists are going to have to think creatively about where, what, and how they market to buyers.



## What's New is Hot: Pay attention to emerging trends

It's amazing how few artists pay attention to current and future trends while making design and marketing decisions and material choices. Trends drive the marketplace, and if something is selling, it's generally on-trend. All too often, artists stumble onto a trend, meaning it happens by accident and not by design. In my consulting work with artists, I find that those who pay attention to trends have better businesses as a result. If you don't use the market forces available — which dictate customer desires and buying habits — you're squandering a valuable resource.

Trends determine what various groups of people buy and, as a result, are born out of events in world culture. Magazines, mail-order catalogues, websites, and other media show customers a style with which they can identify. Then the desire to buy, own, and display that style is set in motion. If your work and display don't project this style, customers won't buy from you. This is true of wearable art and fashion as well as home décor.

Paying attention to trends will yield a big payoff. Trends are the friend of creative people, not the enemy, as so many artists think. Everyone who designs and creates merchandise needs to stay informed about current and future trends by subscribing to several magazines that speak to their customer base. Get on the mailing list of mail-order catalogues and attend national gift shows. Pay careful attention to the colors and style trends that reveal themselves to you from these venues. There is so much information available to be used for creative innovation that it amazes me that everyone doesn't use these tools.

Don't be intimidated by the fact that most of the merchandise in these publications and at gift shows is mass-produced and low priced. Just because the retail price of an item is less than what you could buy your materials for doesn't mean valuable information can't be gleaned from it. Paying attention to advertisements in print and on television will also expose you to information, helping you to

make design decisions and to talk about your work in a way that will increase your sales.

Here are some trends you should be aware of to make the most of current buying habits:

### *Aging Boomers*

Over the next decade, 78 million baby boomers will retire. They're concerned about the future and the amount of stuff they own. They want to downsize and simplify and are not as likely to make frivolous purchases. They will, however, buy objects that have meaning or items that are functional.

### *The Shrinking Middle Class*

The middle class is disappearing, and many of those individuals also belong to the boomer generation. They are concerned about their future and the future of the planet. In the past they were major buyers at art and craft shows. Like aging boomers, they are impressed by function and value. Adding value to your art and being "green" is one way to appeal to this group.

### *The Rise of the Upper Class*

As the middle class shrinks, some of those individuals are moving into the upper class. One of the things this growing demographic has done with its wealth is acquire multiple residences. Many of these homes are rarely used, but they become a great showplace for art and craft. Selling to this demographic is possible, but it requires out-of-the-box marketing. Working in a larger scale is one way to appeal to them. Is your work large enough to be in a trophy home?

### *Internet Shopping*

Many artists have websites, but they are not as consistent as they could be. Upgrading your website and promoting your work online can help add sales to your bottom line and bring a younger customer to your brand. Are you taking advantage of online shopping?

### *The New Simplicity*

The clutter of the past is giving way to a simpler, more elegant look. Any magazine you pick up will show cleaner design lines. Does your merchandising reflect this trend, or does your look appear cluttered, fussy, or overdone?

### *Food*

Have you noticed how many celebrity chefs there are on television? The list is extensive, with more added every season. They're creating a huge interest in food preparation, presentation, and consumption. This trend offers more opportunity for anyone willing to create functional cooking or kitchen-related items. Are you aware of what Rachael Ray, Bobby Flay, and Jamie Oliver are telling your customers they need?

### Gardening

Gardening is next in line to cuisine when it comes to opportunities for artist's product development. Millions of people are gardening for many reasons, including eating organic food, getting exercise, and finding sanctuary. The garden is ripe and full of abundance, from the practical (garden tools and bird feeders) to the decorative (lawn sculpture and kinetic art). Many products can be created to fill needs for those with outdoor spaces.

### Pets

This trend is for anyone who has cats, dogs, horses, or other exotic animals in their lives. As "empty nest" boomers fill their lives with pets, Generations X and Y are postponing childbearing until their late 30s or 40s. These patterns are creating explosive growth, and experts estimate that pet accessories will become a 40-billion dollar industry over the next few years. Many artists have introduced pet-related products — cat and dog toys, pet funeral vessels, etc. — into their line with amazing success.

### The Green Movement

The green movement is here for the foreseeable future. Artists who incorporate green thinking in everything they do — from the materials they use to the marketing methods they employ — will find a new enthusiastic customer base.

### Globalization

Americans aren't the only consumers on the planet. Our culture is creating a millionaire every day in countries like India, China, and some Middle East oil-producing nations. Many foreign nations have a respect and desire for American style. Savvy and forward-thinking artists will explore these markets, gaining an advantage over other artists who think U.S. citizens are their only customers.

The preceding trends are by no means a complete list, but offer the most obvious opportunity for artists at the moment.

### Thinking Into the Future

I had an opportunity to sit in on a trends session sponsored by the Kentucky Crafts Marketing program, a division of the Kentucky Arts Council. The brilliant speaker, Keith Recker, is a guru of trend forecasting. He wowed the audience with his candid and informed presentation about trends that affect artists and designers.

During the question and answer period, someone asked, "What's new and hot?" Keith quickly quipped, "What's new is hot." Since I heard those words, I've noticed that anything new in the marketplace does indeed receive extra customer attention. How much is new in your line? I know many artists who have had the same work in their booth for the past decade, yet so much has changed in our culture.

I was eager to get more insight from Mr. Recker, so I contacted him and asked him to elaborate. This was his reply:

*What is new is hot, for three reasons. First: "What's new?" is the big question always on the lips of a repeat buyer. They've shopped your line at least once, and probably purchased their first choices. If they're back, it's because the investment they made in you paid off. So what happens the second time around? The strongest possible answer to "What's new?" is to show some strong new ideas that represent your artistic take, what's beautiful and desirable right now. It will showcase your skills and give you a chance to talk about your creative process.*

*The second reason has a lot to do with the competitive market we live in. Even the best ideas have a life cycle of introduction, growth, maturity, and decline. And often, the faster the growth and the juicier the maturity, the faster the drop-off once your customers have enjoyed the product. Keeping yourself committed to newness means you will always have product ready to flow through the curve.*

*Last, but not least: One of the real advantages artisan-driven businesses have over major corporations is nimbleness. You can move from idea to final product to market introduction in a fraction of the time it takes a corporation to cover the same ground. Take advantage of your agility in translating inspiration into sales by constantly thinking about new ideas.*



## The Historical Pattern: What it means for the future

After both World War I and World War II, the craft and art business surged. The end of the Vietnam War spelled the beginning of the Craft Movement as many of us know it. During this era, craft shows flourished, with most continuing to this day. But the market continues to evolve and, as it changes, artists will need to find new ways to market their wares.

Television programs like the PBS special *Craft in America* are a great help in getting historical perspective. If you haven't seen these three-hour specials, I strongly suggest you watch them. They cover notable artists who helped build the craft/art business over the last four or five decades. The shows delve into the creative ways they think, and this is what makes each episode so brilliant. The artists are a living testament to the power of positive thinking.

Individual states are taking up the task as well. Vermont has a massive effort underway, assembling a traveling retrospective show about the history of Vermont craft from the early 1900s to present. Education is a large component in turning the state of the industry around and shining light on all that we as artists do.

These are only two examples of a new awareness for the visual arts; hitch your wagon to this new energy and leave the negative stories behind. The last thing our customers want to hear are exhibitors complaining about business, or how tough it is to be an artist. Yet this is the most common story you'll hear when artists gather. This is a turnoff to your customers. They will keep looking until they find someone who tells them a positive story about their wins and successes. Everyone wants to back a winner, and in business nothing breeds success.



like success. When you project positive energy, you'll see more people in your booth. Humans herd around those who have a positive outlook and positive internal and external dialogue.

If what I have written is unsettling, annoying, or disturbing to you, this is good. It means you may have what it takes to start thinking differently about your business, to reinvent yourself, your work, and your marketing strategies. Those I meet who are experiencing success aren't doing the same old thing repeatedly. They aren't afraid to create new products and seek new markets. Again, this is not meant to belittle the tough situations artists are finding themselves in, but rather to let artists know it is possible to overcome adversity by having a vision, staying optimistic, and making choices to support their direction.

Harnessing the power of positive thinking and embracing change are key elements to developing better business. Start today by training yourself to have more positive internal dialogue and make sure what you say is upbeat. You will quickly see that you hold the key to success.

There are more resources than ever today to help you think positively about your future. *The Secret*, *The Four Agreements*, and *The Artist's Way* are just a few of the dozens of books, videos, and programs available to assist artists in generating more positive thoughts and internal dialogue. The success of your future will start with your thoughts. Fretting, worrying, complaining, and avoiding problems are all anchors that will drag your business down. Imagine a future that is bright with new ways to market your work. Then, make choices to get yourself to that goal. You will see almost immediate returns.



## Effective Trade Names and Signage: The power of identity

Trade names and trade signs are the best tools you have to build a brand and stand out from your competition. Your trade name creates your identity and sets the tone for your business. For that reason, the trade name must match the merchandise in your inventory, or it'll create a disconnect for your customers.

Put a great deal of thought and care into your trade name, as choosing a name is akin to choosing a tattoo. When you were young and had "Mary Jane" tattooed on your arm, you may have found it a liability in a relationship with Donna Sue years later. So it is with trade names. Just like a tattoo, your trade name must be something you can live with for the rest of your life. The good news is that it's a lot easier and cheaper to change your business name than it is to change a tattoo.

### *Names That Just Don't Work*

In my travels, I have encountered some of the worst trade names you can imagine. Some were so distracting that I couldn't concentrate on the products displayed. The names don't work because of the negative emotions and imag-

ery they evoke. For example, the following fictional trade names illustrate the strong reactions they are likely to generate.

- **The Diva Queen:** The owner is going to be very hard to deal with!
- **Stink Hollow:** Does the store have a sewage problem?
- **Bite it:** Someone is angry and has an attitude.
- **Cuts and Lacerations:** This conjures up images of bloody Band-Aids.

Although these are made-up names, they are close to the actual names. I know this is a sensitive topic; whenever I question someone's trade name, I'm usually met with defensiveness and resistance. Yet I know the names above don't work.

When I'm conducting workshops on this topic, I often quiz the audience about the effectiveness of these particular trade names, and they always come out on the bottom. The individuals who made a poor choice naming their businesses aren't objective. They are blind to how many sales they're losing due to their poor choice of a business name.

### *A Few Guidelines*

Avoid "cute" or "country style" names like "Bears and Such," "Candles and Things," and "Lil' Dollies." These crafts have taken a significant plunge in sales in the past few years, showing no signs of recovery.

Also skip plays on words. They're common, but aren't always effective because some people won't get the underlying joke. The following three are all fictional names, but reflect the principle of poor use of plays on words:

### **WO Man of La Mancha**

### **Yam Dankees**

### **A Stitch in Thyme**

Some sayings and phrases are regional; once you leave the region, the joke is lost. Other names become dated. When they're out of date, it's time to change them. Those who grew up in the '60s can remember when the word "dig" was popular. That slang is long gone, but was later replaced by the phrase, "It's all good." A client I was advising was considering using "It's All Good" for a business name. It's not the worst name, but what will it sound like in fifteen or twenty years? Like the word "dig" does now?

Choose a name you can grow into as your business matures. Keep it inspired but general enough to allow room for growth. Diligently search for a business name that's upscale or upwardly mobile. The future of the art and craft industry is increasingly slanted toward the upscale customer who has the disposable income to buy art. And don't forget to research your prospective trade name online to make sure it doesn't mean something offensive in another language, as that could severely limit international sales.

A trade name with a simple byline works best. For example, the following would be an effective combination: LampWorks (the trade name) / Light up your life (the byline). This is a strong business name with a byline that suggests

lifestyle. It's a trade name you would never outgrow, as it's open-ended. A solid trade name and byline are the one-two punch of marketing. For inspiration, consider the trade name and byline combinations of some of the big brands like shoe and food companies.

Don't rule out using your own name. One of the best ways to build a brand is to use your name if it has a ring to it. Any name will do, as long as it doesn't create a strange connotation such as "Paul Bearor Fine Woodturning" or "Emma Hogg Quilted Inspirations."

If your trade name is wrong, change it now and build a public relations story around it. People generally resist changing their business name, but if you didn't get it right the first time, change it now, and use the change as an opportunity to reinvent your business.

I have changed my business name several times over the years, each time getting closer to the essence of what the name said about my business. The name of my first business was "Lasting Impressions." I loved the name at the time, only to find someone else had already taken the name after we had invested a lot of money in business cards and promotional materials. Be sure to check with your secretary of state's office and register your business name, ensuring it is exclusive to you, so no one else can take it from you. There will be a small charge in most states for trade name registration but it's worth the cost.

I operated my jewelry design business for years as Baker and Baker. (I had a business partner at the time who shared the same last name, but we weren't related.) At the end of that business, I created Great Falls Collection. This was an eclectic nature store located near a huge waterfall. When I moved from its back alley location to Main Street, the name Great Falls Collection no longer made sense. As a result, I adopted the name Middlebury Jewelry and Design because I wanted to emphasize the fact that I designed custom jewelry. I sold that business in December 2005 after 17 years, and now operate as Bruce Baker Studio: Jewelry for your lifestyle. Each time I changed the name, I used the change as a platform to build a story and received ample media coverage as a benefit. Trade and local media are interested in these types of changes, and people pay attention.

### *The Importance of a Trade Sign*

Once you have the right name for your business, you need a trade sign. The name and quality of the sign must match the quality of your merchandise, so be willing to make an appropriate investment in a good sign. Cheap plastic or canvas banners aren't a good option, as they look like a carnival attraction. Make sure your trade sign is as professional as the art on your shelves.

I recall seeing a booth filled with the most wonderful contemporary glass art, yet the wood-burned trade sign was on a slab of rustic timber that looked like it came from the Wild West. These disparities are not lost on your customers. They'll notice, and if the merchandising doesn't match the merchandise, you may lose them. The sign doesn't have to be fancy, just professional and appropriate. There are many companies that make incredible trade signs for very low cost and will also do the graphic design for you. One I have used with very good results is Ad Mart (trade name) Custom Signage (byline) in Danville, Kentucky ([www.admart.com](http://www.admart.com) or 800-354-2102).

### *First Impressions Matter*

Carefully evaluate your trade name and the look of your trade sign. Remember that your customers' first impressions come from the message and the appearance the sign is sending. Is the look of your sign and its message consistent with your product line? If it isn't, change it now. There's no better time than the present. I know people resist change, but your trade sign could be tarnishing your professional image and losing sales.

By changing your business name and the sign that advertises that name, you'll not only have a more effective marketing identity, but an interesting story for local and regional media. Use the story to create a press release; it could do far more good for your business than a block of paid advertising. But if the story brings you business, then you owe it to that publication to advertise your business to help it in return.

Your past and future customers will be interested in the reasons you're making these changes, so be sure to include your story in your sales presentation. Ironically, people hate change, but they love something new. With a press release, you'll be able to capitalize on this trait of human nature. Concentrate on what's new about your business and what's coming in the future. Learn to articulate how you're changing, evolving, and growing; this alone will boost your sales. You may find a new burst of energy and creativity from the transformation as well.



## Beyond the Product and the Price: Tell a story to sell your art

Every year I attend a dozen or more shows ranging from wholesale and retail art/craft shows to trade-only gift shows. While there I see many sales transacted and multitudes of orders written. But for every sale closed, countless sales are postponed or missed altogether. This is primarily because many artists fail to tell their customers what they need to know or want to hear about their work to motivate them to buy it. Good sales skills involve effective communication. Every good salesperson is a master of both spoken language and body language and uses them to get results.

Most artists are visually oriented: they expect their work to sell by just putting it out in front of customers. Customers, on the other hand, may need words to get involved in your work. Sales will soar when you learn to tell fascinating details and stories that add meaning to your work. This principle is important for both retail and wholesale selling; if you get vital information about your work to the sales floor, you should see a dramatic increase in reorders.

When a customer sees something she likes, she'll generally say so. If the price isn't clearly marked, the customer will typically ask for it. At this point, many art sellers will give the customer the price, quit talking, and wait. Unfortunately, a high number of sales are lost during this waiting period.

If this scenario sounds familiar, chances are you haven't discovered the power of a story. You are trying to sell your work through only the product features and price. That's only half of an effective strategy. The other half involves telling a potential customer a meaningful story. The story behind what you make and why you make it will whet the customer's appetite to buy your art for either personal use or resale.

### *Everything Has a Story*

The more you can link the story of your work to current trends or how owning the object will benefit the customer's life, the more likely the story will help close a sale. Keep in mind that the story must be sincere and true. Don't say anything to a customer you personally don't believe, or they'll see through your lack of integrity.

Generally, customers don't buy things they don't understand. This is particularly true for an item intended to be a gift. If you give someone a gift, you want to be able to tell the recipient about it. Think about what happens during gift giving. Don't you usually explain why you thought it would be a great gift for that person?

It's part of your job as a salesperson to be able to relate to your customers and communicate the purpose and function of your creations in a warm and friendly manner. The story of an object is also important to the person who is buying something for herself. While you are communicating this information, encourage the customer to touch the object. Getting multiple senses involved will heighten interest.

When telling a story about your work, don't get too technical. Artists often struggle with this. Technique and technical information aren't as interesting to customers as how the object will benefit them. For example, ceramic artists who talk about firing their pots to "cone ten" or who dissect the ingredients of their glaze formulas are missing the point. But if they say to a customer, "You can take this serving piece directly from the freezer to the broiler," this is a benefit they will understand and appreciate.

To say, "this dish is a brie baker" is insufficient. Add interest by explaining, "This brie baker is wonderful because it will keep your brie soft and spreadable throughout hors d'oeuvres time." Supply the dish with several different recipes for baked brie as an added value and you've created a story that clearly communicates all the benefits of your product.

Here's a list of some common themes for stories that grab customers' attention:

- Explain how the item will benefit the customer. How will a piece enhance their life and bring joy, tranquility, or peace? Will it make it easier to entertain guests? Will it add value to the décor of the home? Many people buy objects to impress other people, so take the opportunity to subtly hint that others will notice and admire the piece.
- Functionality is an important part of the story, but is often downplayed or overlooked. It might be quite obvious to you what an item is for, but it might not be to a customer. Pointing out its versatility will help increase its perceived value and help you sell it.

- Style also generates a compelling story. You can pique interest by saying that a piece is "transitional," meaning it can go into either a contemporary home or a traditional home.
- A story about the inspiration for a piece can stimulate interest, especially for nonfunctional art. Explaining your motivation as an artist and relating that to what you want your customer to feel can boost sales.
- The composition of an item can also heighten interest. Explain where the materials are from and any special meaning associated with them. For example, if you're using clay in your ceramic ware from the region in which the show is located, that's worth mentioning.
- Color can create a story. Be aware of color trends and explain them to the customer. If, for instance, she is hesitant to purchase a glass necklace, you may help her overcome her reluctance by letting her know that she may be the one of the first to wear a necklace in the newest color trend.
- Create bodies of work or collections, and talk about them like they're a family. Items that are nested together, like bowls, create a relationship, which encourages people to buy them all together and not leave orphans.
- Connect your work to the past. If you're keeping a tradition alive, say so. Explaining why your pieces are an important piece of history will endear you to the customer.

The list above features just a few of the many stories you can bring to your sales presentation. Practice with these and then learn new types of stories. Keep in mind that for a story to be effective, it must communicate strong, relevant benefits.

### *Product, Price, and Story – Three Legs of a Stool*

The product, the price, and the story are like three legs of a stool; with only two legs the stool will fall over. Use all three elements of a sale — product, price, and story — to create better business.

When customers talk, be sure to listen. They'll tell you what you need to hear. You must be able to respond to their objections (if any) before you're able to close the sale. If you frequently hear your customers comment, "Well, I'll have to think about it; I'll be back," it's a clear admission that you didn't tell them enough story. They couldn't make up their minds on their own; either they talked themselves out of it, or they postponed the sale, as you didn't give them enough incentive to buy now.

The next time you hear these words, say something like this: "Allow me to tell you a bit more about this piece before you go." Watch what happens . . . they'll tune back into the object if you tell the right story, and if there are other people around, they'll be listening, so you can pique their interest, too. Fascinating details are what fuel the sales machine.

Those artists who know how to communicate the benefits of their work with a good story always have better sales. This process takes practice for sure, but it'll be worth it.



## Product Development: A road map to better sales

Product development is essential to marketing crafts because creating new merchandise generates larger markets for your work and makes it easier to sell products. Product development can involve creating an entirely new item, but it can be easier than that. You could take an existing piece or ware in your line and tweak it to reach a broader audience. It can be as simple as changing the color of an item so it fits in with current color trends, or changing the scale for placement in a larger home. Here are a few pointers to consider:

### Scale

Sometimes artists don't consider current trends when making design decisions. This can result in people visiting their show booth and saying, "I love your work" but leaving without purchasing anything. What these customers are saying is, "I like your style or your talent, but you have nothing that fits my current needs."

Most artists are creating items too small in scale these days, even though their consumers are trending toward larger items. When I go to shows, shops, and galleries, people tell me that the "big stuff" is what's selling. For example, when I walked around a show in upstate New York evaluating individual booths, I frequently overheard customers say, "You have nothing in your booth for a large home; everything is for the modest, middle-class customer." I heard artists respond repeatedly, "Well, I did have larger items, but I sold them all on the first day of the show!" I wondered if that told the artists anything. Many are simply not selling large-sized products. Think of the missed opportunities!

The needs of a customer who can afford fine, handmade items are very different from the needs of the customer from the shrinking middle class. People with disposable income don't generally live in small homes. They need big art to fill their big walls and large living areas. So this is an instance of the need for product development with regard to scale. Make the same item you have been making, but make it bigger — much bigger. Make a statement with this large art — don't just create one isolated piece.

### Style

A new trend has taken our culture by storm. This trend is called the "new simplicity" or "simple elegance." This trend is a quieter, less cluttered, more Zen-like than in the past. If you aren't aware of this trend, you aren't paying attention. You should be, as paying attention to trends is the first step in product development.

You can see "simple elegance" in the influential interior design and fashion magazines, in TV commercials, and in store merchandise. In an issue of Real

Simple, Ralph Lauren was advertising paint — 63 colors of white. You can't get more simple than off-white (but with 63 choices, how do you make up your mind)?

The reason off-white is so important is that with "simple elegance," backgrounds are intended to virtually disappear, and the art and accent pieces are made to "pop." Your booth must also reflect this look if you're going to sell your products. If your booth looks cluttered or overstocked, you won't attract modern consumers.

Another development was emphasized in the publication *Home Décor Buyer*. An article highlighted a variety of stores showing positive business growth for the year. The survey results stated that 63 percent of the stores reported most of the merchandise in their businesses was "transitional." If you have never heard this term before, pay close attention — it is a trend with staying power. "Transitional merchandise" is merchandise that can fit into a traditional home but also works equally well in a contemporary environment. Fashion and wearable art will follow the same trend.

The craft/art style I see struggle the most is the "country look." People making items that fall into the "cute country" category are reporting sales figures in double-digit decline. Why? A couple of reasons: the country look goes against the trend of "new simplicity," and many of the items in the country category are now available at low-end retailers. American artists simply can't compete with the low-cost production capabilities of China and India.

### Color

Go to any upscale mall and look at the color palette that mass merchandisers favor. As of this writing, four colors dominate the marketplace: cream, gray-green, gray-blue, and subtle orange. They have fancy names like tundra, amber, jade, quartz, desert, and jungle. While these colors are currently in vogue, they will eventually be replaced by others, as the fashion landscape is ever-changing. But whatever the current colors are, you won't have to travel far to see them. A window-shopping mission to an upscale market or even a trip to Kmart to visit the Martha Stewart Collection will bring you up-to-date on color trends.

The bottom line is that if you're making hippie brown pots of the 1970s, your sales will suffer. If you keep your finger on the pulse of color palette trends, however, your sales can soar. Most artists don't want to deal with this aspect of art marketing, but it'll pay big rewards if you consider trend-watching a part of your job.

### Trend Tracking

Some readers may be upset with my observations, but they're the truth, and the major business magazines back them up. Don't think of this as the voice of gloom and doom, but consider it an opportunity to get out in front of the rest of the industry. Embrace cultural trends as business tools — not as the enemy. Trending your art takes a willingness to accept change.

How does one find out about current trends? Trend tracking takes intense observation. Go shopping in any metropolitan area, subscribe to the magazines that are trend-savvy and actually help to establish trends, and research commercials on television and in print to evaluate and understand the messages being sent to

your customers. Visit a large gift or stationery trade show. Nowhere are trends more obvious than at one of these wholesale events. Go online and you'll discover thousands of websites dedicated to trends and trend tracking.

Paying close attention to current trends and how you display your work in the marketplace is crucial to attracting customers who will not just compliment your work, but actually buy it. It's much easier to accept the necessity of designing for trends once you realize it is a major factor in determining your future business success.

## PART TWO

# TOP Tips for Marketing

## Six Simple Tricks to Make Money and Beat the Economy

Since the financial collapse of October 2008, artists have been more challenged to sell their work than any time since the Great Depression. The financial collapse was a blow to all businesses, but was particularly damaging to art businesses. Unfortunately, this happened in combination with the first wave of aging boomers deciding to downsize. Many of these boomers are moving into smaller dwellings, while others are ridding themselves of their acquired possessions from the last four decades.

These factors alone would bring the sales of art objects to an all-time low, but add the lethal punch of the annihilation of the middle class. This is the demographic that has carried the U.S. economy for the past 40 years, and with its demise comes dismal art sales, mostly because consumers have been forced to shift their spending away from art purchases to pay for basic necessities. Many middle-class people are more concerned with hanging on to their home, putting food on the table, paying for healthcare, or funding a retirement plan. All of these priorities trump buying art for the home or personal adornment.

As if all these factors combined weren't enough, add in the news media telling millions of viewers to be frugal and not conspicuous consum-

ers. We were told to simplify, downsize, go green, and recycle. While I support taking care of the environment, this "new frugality" has hurt art-based businesses. Yet I keep meeting and consulting with artists who are doing surprisingly well and posting increased sales despite the condition of the economy. How is this possible? Here are six secrets of success:

### 1. Exhibit only at shows that are worthwhile

There are many shows across the county, but they don't all produce the same results. Some shows draw customers that buy, while others draw crowds that attend just for entertainment. Shows are expensive, require a great deal of energy to set up, run, and pack up, and take time away from making product. It takes the same amount of work to do a show where you lose money as it is to do a show that makes money, so it makes sense to be selective in attending shows.

### 2. Refine your jury submission photos to get into better shows

You need an impressive product line with a theme and focus, as well as exemplary photos that project your professionalism. It is tragic to see how poor most artists' photos are. Sadly, it is the exception rather than the norm to see jury photos that

are professional and impressive. Submitting inferior photos is not the way to get into good shows.

Designing work that has a “visual impact” and having a professional photographer create excellent photos can be a challenge. Unfortunately, even good art that is badly photographed will get rejected — a huge lost opportunity for the artist. One of the first ways to create a better business is to produce better work and have it photographed well to make a solid impression.

### 3. Make what the customers want

Once you get into a good show, you need to go well-armed with an inventory of saleable merchandise. By saleable merchandise, I mean the kind of merchandise that customers want to buy. Too many artists are creating work that customers might admire, but do not necessarily want to own. Herein is the key: make art that people want to own and your sales will increase. This is what separates the wheat from the chaff and is the key factor in creating a successful creative business today.

Creating work that customers want to buy is a lofty challenge for sure, but it can be done because I encounter artists who are having good sales every week. A bit of trend research can help you get to the core of what people are buying and will help you make art that is easier to sell.

During the height of the craft movement, American consumers wanted art and objects of adornment so much they were willing to buy just about anything we made. At the Rhinebeck Show in New York (the first American Craft Council show), customers would go to the show office and have us paged if we wandered away from our booth for too long! That’s unlikely to happen today.

Throughout this period, many artists thought they were entitled to make anything they wanted and customers were obligated to buy it. And at the time, there were enough customers to make that paradigm work. Of course, artists are entitled to make anything they want. But if they want to sell it, they need to consider market forces or they’ll end up with a huge inventory of unsold work.

### 4. Create functional products

Items that have a use are easier to sell than items that purely decorative. Evaluate your inventory and be able to clearly articulate to your customers the benefits and functionality of your art.

If you take a hard look at what you make and find an implied function in that work, look your customer in the eye and say, “When you hang this on your wall, I hope it brings you the peace and joy it did for me when I created it!” Or, “When you see the light sparkling from that amethyst, it will make you happy.” Or, “This sculpture will be the focal point of the living space you place it in!” All of these are implied functions that have a benefit to the customer.

For items that have an apparent function, you need to be very clear and verbally communicate that information to customers. Don’t just tell the cus-

tomers, “This is a Brie cheese baker.” Instead, say, “A Brie cheese baker keeps the cheese contained so it doesn’t run all over, and it keeps the cheese warm throughout cocktail hour.”

### 5. Impress your customers

It’s easy to find function in functional objects, but it’s a much bigger challenge to find function in decorative ones. People buy art because they love it and it makes them feel good, but an underlying reason why people buy art and handmade things is to impress other people. If your art is not impressive, it’ll be much harder to sell. When the quality of your art is impressive, it’ll be easier to sell and attract more people to your booth. And whenever you have customers in your booth, they draw even more customers in.

### 6. Learn from what works

Here’s a short list of the kinds of objects artists are successfully selling:

- Large-scale art
- Impressive products
- Handmade products created or sold in sets, such as nesting bowls or groupings of objects
- Calming, serene and natural art
- Kinetic art (art that moves)
- Products related to food or food preparation
- Pet-related items
- Crafts that are for or relate to children or grandchildren
- Simple, elegant works
- Brightly colored art that incorporates jewel tones
- Functional products

Study the list and consider how you can incorporate some of these product types into the art you create. Make what you love, make it “on trend,” and use these tips to help you sell.



## Five Fundamental Trends You MUST Embrace

In my travels around the country doing workshops on craft marketing, I often find that artists are reluctant to use trends to their advantage. Rather than get behind a trend, they say, “I don’t do that.” Others reject or ignore the trend, citing excuses like, “I don’t have the time to...”, or “I can’t afford to...” If you’re making excuses rather than getting on board, you’re missing valuable opportunities to help grow your business.

While it’s not likely that we’ll ever return to the days of conspicuous consumption of the ‘90s, the economy is getting better, and opportunity abounds for those who have vision. Here are a few major trends guaranteed to help you

increase your sales and get you closer to your personal goals — but don't wait, take advantage of them now.

### 1. Accept credit cards

I'm amazed by the number of artists doing retail or wholesale shows who don't accept credit cards. I rarely meet a craft maker or artist who tells me they want to sell less. Most want to sell more. Yet many of these same people don't take credit cards. Sure, they accept personal checks, but what they don't realize is that customers aren't carrying checkbooks with them anymore.

If you want to sell more and sell faster, the credit card is the first payment method you should add to your business. It's how your customers (particularly younger buyers) want to pay. Plus, they'll often buy more and at a higher price when you accept their cards. Most artists tell me they get a 20 percent or more bump in their sales from the moment they post the credit sticker in their booth.

It's never been easier to get merchant status to accept your customers' payments. Using a smart phone and a digital credit card reader like Square, you can go from applying for merchant status to taking credit cards in your booth in less than a half hour! It's easy and affordable, so there's really no good reason to refuse credit cards.

### 2. Invest in "pocket technology"

If you don't have a smart phone, you need one. Pocket technology is probably the biggest trend available to help any business. The time savings and organization options that these devices provide are phenomenal.

My smart phone not only processes credit card sales, it tracks receipts, reads QR codes (more on this in the next tip), gives directions, and performs a multitude of other useful tasks. If you choose the right device, you'll also get one of the best cameras you've ever owned. I can't believe the quality of photographs (and videos) that can be taken with an iPhone. My entire website was shot with my phone — while I was on vacation!

The flexibility this technology offers is amazing. You can send photos or a video of yourself working on a piece to potential customers and convince them it is "just right" for their living room — all from your phone and without a computer. You can even do it on the road.

For those of you already using smart phone technology, congratulations! You've made a great business decision. I know some people are put off by the price of smart phone technology. Others are intimidated by the learning curve. To that, I agree that there is a learning curve, but you'll find it much easier and more intuitive than you think.

### 3. Use QR Codes

Like all technology, smart phone capabilities are always evolving. Quick Response (QR) codes are an exciting result of such evolution. You've undoubtedly encountered QR codes popping up everywhere. A QR code looks like a postage stamp with a tiny quilt pattern and is usually displayed as part of an advertisement. In fact, there were at least 16 in the airline magazine in the seat pocket in front of me when I wrote this article.

QR codes are free and can be placed on ads, catalogues, business cards, etc. When a potential customer uses a smart phone to read the code, she can be directed to a specific website, a "YouTube" video showing your product, or anywhere else you want her to land.

I encountered my first QR code several years ago on a potter's flyer. I read the code with my phone and it took me to a recipe for the blueberry cobbler that was featured in his handmade pie dish. My second encounter was with a waitress in a diner. On the table in front of me was a tent card with a QR code. I scanned it with my smart phone, and it took me to her website. She was also a potter and had her entire line of wares in front of me in a split second. I was able to shop her line as I waited for my food!

### 4. Be creative

More artists are doing wholesale shows farther from their studio base. With the high cost of gas, you can fly to a show for less than it costs to drive if you live 1,500 or more miles away. This trend is giving rise to a whole new method of marketing that I call the "glorified tabletop display."

If you simply put lay your work out on rented tables, your sales will certainly suffer. I am seeing more people being creative about the way they are designing and implementing lightweight, condensed displays. Such displays can go on an airplane or ship via Greyhound bus in just a few cartons. When set up, they create a professional display that leaves the old tabletop display in the dust.

### 5. Embrace social media

Social media is a dominant marketing force and is certain to continue evolving and expanding. Many people want to ignore it, hoping they can successfully run their businesses without it. However, the evidence shows that if you're unwilling to embrace social media marketing, your business will not thrive.

A friend who just opened a gallery posted a few photos of my jewelry on her website. In just a few hours, three of my high school classmates saw the photo and two requested catalogues for holiday shopping. As a result of this experience, and many others like it, I've recently hired an assistant for my social media marketing.

Yes, it takes time, but like learning another language or skill, it gets easier every day, and the opportunity to have the world as your customer is a compelling motivation.



## Hot Tips for Success

### Cost Comparison

One of the best ways to cut costs in your business is to trim expenses on the things you buy regularly. These include the materials and supplies to make your art and operate your studio — even the fuel to heat your space. In the manufacturing business, this is referred to as sourcing. Big business pays close attention to the money spent on materials. I find that artists pay little attention to this outflow of



cash and often source materials based on habit instead of getting the best quality for the lowest price.

Getting the best price does take a bit of work, but the effort can have a big payoff. Play hardball with your suppliers to get the best deal, or change suppliers. I learned this lesson the hard way years ago. We were buying 14 karat gold posts from a local jewelry supply company at a dollar each. We paid the cost, marked up the materials, and really didn't think too much about it. But over time, as our business grew, we started to use thousands of posts annually.

We continued to buy our posts from the same company without really thinking about it. Then one day it dawned on us — maybe we could get those posts from the manufacturer rather than a distributor. After a bit of research, we found we could get identical posts for 17 cents each. This change of suppliers resulted in thousands of dollars in savings for our business annually. Our discovery motivated us to take a more in-depth look at how we supplied our entire business. It's amazing how much money you can save by comparative shopping and buying in quantity.

### *Unused Materials*

Another way to free up cash for your business is to take a close look at all the materials you have stockpiled over the years. If you have materials that you haven't touched in years, it's unlikely that you're going to unless you make a special effort to get the value out of them. If you have a quantity of materials that you're not using, you have two choices: make something saleable or sell them.

Selling this type of merchandise used to be quite difficult and time-consuming, but with the Internet, it's now easy to move these goods. Sites such as Etsy have categories where you can sell supplies and materials. Thousands of people go there looking for supplies.

Teach a class, and have your students use these materials. Charge a fee to recoup the value. Turning unused materials into cash flow is a great way to find operating capital and clean out your space at the same time. Your unused materials will have more value to you if you think of them as a savings account rather than a burden.

### *Attending Shows*

Cut costs and save money for your business by doing fewer shows. For those you do attend, however, be sure they're the ones with more customers or with customers that have more disposable income. Work smarter, not harder. It's more profitable to do one tried-and-true show where you'll make money than to do three lesser shows. Too many shows will increase your expenses and eat up your profits.

Get into better shows by showing better photos to the jury. Most professional artists are vying to get into the better shows, so competition is fierce. The key is to have the best slides. (The word "slide" is a carryover term from the days in which the projector slide was the standard format for jury photos. Now, even though digital images are predominant, the term "slide" is a generic term for photo). I look at thousands of slides every year in my consulting work, and the majority of them are pretty bad. The people accepted into the premier shows have great slides.

So if yours are mediocre, better ones can only help your business. Great slides of innovative work will get you into better shows.

Slides presented to a jury always get more favorable reviews when there's a theme and a controlled palette of colors. It's best to emphasize your unique style. If you have a look that's unique to you and not derivative or trite, you'll get into better shows.

Also consider getting a better booth shot. Many people get kicked out of shows or wait-listed because they don't take the importance of their booth shot seriously.

Compose better descriptions of your work, especially if you're applying to juries that use services like Juried Art Services or ZAPP. In the old days, the only time a jury would hear your description would be if one of the jurors asked a question, which wasn't very often. Now with these services, all the jury has to do is pass a cursor over one of your photos to make the description pop up.

Artists often tell the jury the wrong things. Don't get too technical and don't sound like a mail-order catalogue. The phrase, "truly unique, goes with any décor," is too much like an advertisement. Keep your descriptions straightforward and simple. The power of your words can't be underestimated. Choosing the right words is an art — just like creating your work.

### *Wholesale Shows*

If you attend wholesale shows, offer a show special with real benefits for you and your customers. One example is a "point-of-purchase display." This type of display is a container that merchandises your product in a store. If well designed, this will give the customer more information and "romance" about your product and make it sell better. Point-of-purchase displays work great for items like soap, mugs, jewelry, and other small items similar in size, shape, and style. You'll sell more because of the product information presented, and when the display starts to look sparse, it tells the storeowner that the product needs to be reordered. This type of display isn't for every line, but if it's right for yours, the advantages will outweigh the costs.

### *Functional Work*

If your art is functional, consider showing at farmers markets. Though they aren't a good fit for every product line, if your work is functional and fits the venue, you may find a hot new market. These markets are popping up everywhere across the nation. They typically have very low booth costs and you're likely to find a smaller but more affluent customer base there. Farmers markets occur regularly, with your work able to be shown weekly for a whole season.

### *Easy Tips with Low or No Cost*

Ask your loyal customers to promote your work. Many are more than willing to tell their friends about you, but you may have to ask them to do so. If a regular customer gives you a compliment, ask them to tell their friends about you and your work. Make it easy by supplying them with brochures and promotional materials.

Follow up all leads after a show, especially after a wholesale show. Leads go cold quickly, so make sure your follow-up happens within a week after the contact. To aid in follow-up, keep good records of what customers are interested in.

Don't focus on the problems; rather, put your energy into the solutions. Don't fall victim to negativity — so many people are negative. Turn it around and make it positive, especially when dealing with customers. Negative dialogue will not serve you well. Everything you say when you're promoting your art should be positive and upbeat. Smile and be happy when you're selling because being positive is contagious. People are drawn to those who exude these qualities. When you put the power of positive thinking to work for you, it goes a long way to creating more sales and repeat customers.



## National Trade Shows: A how-to guide for playing in the big leagues

Do you take your art-based business seriously as a business? So many individuals I meet when I'm on the road are neglecting this important mindset. Everyone wants their business to run smoothly and return a profit, but if you aren't taking your business as seriously as a "big business" does, your profitability will be marginal at best. This includes your design inspiration, marketing plan, product catalogue, visual merchandising, banking and credit card services, and sourcing your materials.

### *Glean Valuable Information*

If you don't make the right choices, either you won't achieve your sales goals, or your business will be leaking valuable cash. There's no better way to get the best and latest thinking on these topics than to attend a major trade show. These shows are filled with a wealth of ideas and information that will help propel your business forward. All the major players in big business attend shows and study their competitors' strategies.

The information is there and ripe for picking, and all you have to do is show up with an open and observant mind. I encourage you to attend a trade show that services your part of the industry, either as a guest or as an exhibitor. The information you will glean from this experience will return rewards many times greater than the cost of attending. You need to understand the importance of justifying this expense to your business, and then just do it.

It used to be that no craftsman would even consider the idea of attending a trade show for inspiration. After all, what could giant manufacturers of imported merchandise teach a "studio professional?" But believe me, after both exhibiting and buying at some of the biggest trade shows in the country, I can honestly say that valuable lessons abound on how to improve your business right there on the showroom floor.

### *Attending as a Guest*

If you would like to attend a show, you'll need to register with show management well in advance as a "guest" and explain that you want to see the show as a potential future exhibitor. This should be done at least a month ahead of the show date. You'll also need a copy of your tax resale certificate, business cards, and a photo ID to get your badge to enter the showroom. The shows are for wholesale buyers only, so getting in is serious business. If you don't register in advance, it's likely you'll be turned away.

Even if you have no intention of wholesaling your work, what you can learn at a trade show will be valuable information for your retail art business. One of the first things you will notice is the superb visual merchandising. The booths make fantastic use of color and product display in their limited space and are masterful at capturing the customers' attention.

### *Color Trends*

Most artists pay little to no attention to current color trends, usually because they don't know what the color trends are. Color trends are hues that drive the sales machine for products in homes, garments, and accessories. When your line follows color trends, you'll find it easier to sell your products to a broader customer base. Companies at the big shows have their finger on the pulse of current and coming trends.

A few years back, the most popular colors were jewel tones: amethyst, turquoise, jade, and lapis. More recently, citrus, coral, and blues (colors of the sea) and a variety of greens have dominated the market. If you alter the palette of your work or your display based on the color trends, you'll see your sales surge. There's no better way to find out what the up-and-coming colors are than to attend a trade show and see them firsthand. Also learn what the colors are called because when it comes to marketing, the names are almost as important as the hues.

### *New Products*

Trade shows will also reveal a world of new, cutting-edge products. Pay attention to what products are being developed. Not only can you see, feel, and touch them, but you can bring this insight and inspiration to your own line. You can see what products attract attention at the show and what products are getting ordered. If you hang around a manufacturer's booth for even a short time, you can observe and overhear valuable information.

### *Show Specials*

Another thing to observe while attending a show is how manufacturers use show specials to draw customers in and get them to buy on the spot, rather than postpone their purchases. This method can also work for you at retail venues to increase the dollar-spent-per-customer ratio and create more impulse buying.

Show specials are incentives to get customers to buy when they're in your space. Your deals might include offers to buy five items and get the sixth free. Or they might provide special add-ons or benefits that they'll get only if they purchase right then. Or you can offer customers an enticing discount. For example, you

could offer matching earrings at half price if they buy a necklace. These specials will generate more excitement in your booth to increase sales.

Watch closely how manufacturers use show specials and see how you could translate these offerings to your customers to gain an advantage. For those of you who already wholesale your work, specials such as free shipping for orders over a certain dollar amount can persuade buyers to place larger orders to get this benefit.

### *Functional Products*

There's no better way to learn about product development than to attend a trade show and see the best and brightest new products being introduced to the marketplace. Functional objects are some of the best-selling items available. I know this because I have been attending tradeshow where every salesperson on the floor has stressed to me the importance of functionality.

### *Marketing*

Notice also how the companies market their lines through catalogues, line sheets, price lists, and branded packaging. Every marketing tool — from the business cards they pass out to the hang tags on their products — holds valuable information to use in your business. Most of these companies have mailing lists of their current customers whom they notify by email or postal mail about their upcoming shows and specials.

This is certainly something individual makers can do as well. When my business started doing mailings to our past customers, our business improved over the previous year by 20 to 30 percent. If you plan to exhibit in a city where your customers live, send a postcard indicating when and where you will be, perhaps even suggesting they bring the card for a 10 percent discount on their next purchase.

### *Sales Techniques*

Listen to the language of sales; the people working in the booths at a trade show are professional salespeople. Notice how they use language effectively to answer their customers' objections to get them to order on the spot. Your mission at the show is not only to be stimulated visually, but also to engage in some espionage to learn how to be a better salesperson and marketer.

### *Sourcing Supplies*

Another benefit of attending a trade show is that many shows have areas where booths are set up with vendors who supply art and shipping materials. Attending the New York International Stationery show as an exhibitor for several years, we were exposed to suppliers that we never knew existed. In this section of the show called "the supply side," exhibitors sell printing services, envelopes, paper cutters, shipping supplies, etc. These vendors have excellent, hard-to-find products. They also have their own show specials, which are wise to take advantage of while you're attending the show.

If you can find a supplier with a superior product at a reduced cost, this one source alone can pay for your trip with increased savings to your business

throughout the year. Not only are the suppliers to the industry present at the major trade shows, but so are the media. Almost every magazine and newsletter that services that industry will be present with their own booth, all holding valuable information that you can put to work in your business.

So far, I have talked about many of the benefits that can be gleaned from attending a trade show. What I have suggested above is only a just a sampling of the wealth of information you can gather. But how do you know what shows to do? Here again, a bit of preparation is in order to help you make the most of the experience.

### *Trade Show Seasons*

Trade shows take place twice a year for the general retail and gift market. The winter show season occurs in January and February, sometimes extending into March, and the summer season runs from July to mid-August. You must determine what type of show is right for you. This will be determined by what you currently make and what direction you want to take your business in the next three to five years.

### *Types of Trade Shows*

For every store on Main Street there's a trade show that supplies that sector of the industry. Choose shows wisely so you get the most information possible for your investment.

For example, if you're thinking about moving your line more into gardening or home décor, the Atlanta Gift Show would be a good choice. The Atlanta show is the epicenter of the gardening movement. Entire floors of the enormous gift center complex feature booth after booth laid out like a garden path winding in the most delightful maze. One note: if you decide to attend a show like Atlanta, you'll not only need to preregister for the show but arrange lodging months in advance. These shows draw huge crowds, and if you have not reserved your hotel room early, you might have to stay miles away from the show, eating up valuable show time.

If you want to go in a more artistic direction, attending a show like ACC Baltimore, or The Buyers Market of American Craft would be an excellent choice. In fact, The Buyers Market makes it easier than ever to attend their venue. They run a "visiting artists program," in which you not only get access to the show but you can also attend educational classes on a variety of topics, such as how to wholesale your work and how to sell and display it to those who attend. For more information on the variety of trade shows and their dates, visit [www.biztradeshows.com/usa](http://www.biztradeshows.com/usa).

Once you make a commitment to boost your business this way, every aspect of it will surge. You'll want to attend shows again and again to keep up with the latest strategies and learn from industry giants. Who knows? You may find yourself in the aisle one day as an exhibitor at one of these major events. By attending the New York International Stationery Show one year, we found ourselves in a booth at that show two years later launching Nancie Dunn Cards ([www.nancedunn.com](http://www.nancedunn.com)). We went to our first show with two wholesale accounts. Two years later we

had 18 reps on the road selling the line, which is now available in more than 118 stores across the country. It all started with a dream and a trip to a trade show. Step out into the trade show adventure and see where this path may take you.

## PART THREE

# BOOSTING

## Your

# BOOTH

## 10 Tips for Creating a Custom Booth on a Shoestring Budget

**S**uccessfully selling at shows or in galleries involves three important factors:

### 1. Innovative, impeccably crafted products.

Products have to have the right look, scale, color, and weight, and need to meet other trend and design criteria as well, for them to be desirable. Functionality, whether real or implied, also plays a major factor in what people are buying. You're more likely to sell a customer something if it has a practical use. If that use is only to make the customer feel good, it must be made obvious to them.

### 2. Excellent salesmanship.

You must be a skilled salesperson to make the most of a sales venue. So many sales are blown in the "greeting" stage because so many artists don't know how to sell their work. To close a sale, you need to employ both verbal and nonverbal communication skills effectively.

### 3. Visual merchandising.

Your goal in creating displays is to capture your customers' attention, draw them into your space, and sell your work. But when it comes to display, it isn't about how much money you spend, it's about how creatively you showcase your work.

I find it interesting that even though artists are creative with their work, they often lack creativity with their displays. Many just tell themselves that they're not good at display

and give up. But if you use shows to market your work, display is a part of your job.

The Pros and Cons of Commercial Display Systems

Some artists use commercially available display systems, which can be quick and easy to set up, but then too many booths look exactly alike. This makes it hard for the customer to distinguish what is compelling about your product line, and hinders you from building a recognizable brand.

Your booth should project a brand identity. When customers see you at the next show, you want to connect with them immediately through a distinct and memorable display, unique style of work, and a well-defined image. I'm not criticizing commercial displays. They're right for some. The displays that grab the customer's attention the best, however, are almost always custom displays.

Displays that employ conscious design decisions to complement the product line go a long way to creating a vibe that resonates with customers. Effective custom-built displays not only create a mood and look unique to your line, but they also clearly distinguish you from your competition. A thoughtfully designed custom display will create a sales tool that works better than any commercially available display. It can also be much cheaper than a commercial one, so it can save money that you can invest in your product line instead.

To be effective, your display must complement your merchandise and vice-versa.

The two shouldn't create discordance or a mismatched message; they need to work in harmony. Also, the display must speak to your ultimate customer, who will buy the product. Sales will suffer if the demographic you are trying to sell to can't relate to the colors or the look of your booth. Remember that your display should stimulate the senses.

An effective booth must get the customers to stop, take notice, and step into your space. It must entice them into crossing the imaginary line between the aisle and the front of your booth. Your display should also encourage customers to engage with your products by touching them. Then you can let your well-honed sales skills take over to close a sale.

Too many booths send the nonverbal message, "Look but don't touch." And sometimes items are displayed in such a way that they can't easily be accessed. This can happen when shelves are too deep or tables are too wide. In most cases, you can't change the depth or width of a shelf in a commercial system. It's designed to be a one-size-fits-all unit.

Custom displays have so many advantages over commercially available systems that it only makes sense to create your own. Creating a display isn't rocket science, so there's no need to be intimidated. If you attend several shows, stores, or galleries to observe what creates visual magic, you'll have all the information you need to know to be a display designer. By analyzing your findings and asking a few questions, you'll be able to determine what works and what doesn't. Then incorporate all your observations into a design that works for you, your product line, and your customers, and helps to build your brand.

Here are a few guidelines to follow when creating a custom booth:

1. Don't forget to measure your vehicle's cargo area before you begin your design. Your disassembled booth must fit into your available cargo space. I can't tell you how often someone creates a booth that will not fit into their car or van.
2. Keep smooth clean lines in all wall coverings and table treatments. Simplicity is the key.
3. Don't use materials for display that will distract from your product line.
4. Make sure your booth opening is at least 6 feet wide (7 to 8 feet is even better). You need people to enter your booth before they will buy. Narrow openings say, "Don't come in!," resulting in fewer customers entering your booth.
5. Use multiple levels in your display. The more levels you create to display your work, the more interest you create from the aisle, prompting more customers to enter your space.
- 6 Remember that "a picture is worth a thousand words," and put this principle to work for you. Use large photos to show, for example, how your functional pottery will look on a Thanksgiving table.
7. Make sure that your booth is well illuminated. If customers can't see something easily, you'll quickly lose their attention. Be creative with your lighting. You can buy a commercially available system, or you can light up your booth using an inexpensive custom lighting system.

For example, I bought several small LED flashlights on sale for just \$1.99 each.

You could illuminate a 10-by-10-foot booth quite well with 10 of these lights attached in the right location with Velcro. Fifteen would be even better. These flashlights burn brightly for about four hours using three AAA batteries and burn even longer with fully charged rechargeable batteries. They yield brilliant white light that travels a great distance before washing out. Two sets of rechargeable AAA batteries and a battery charger will cost some money, but compared to what rented lights cost in a typical convention hall, it will be much cheaper in the long run.

Convention halls charge \$50 to \$75 per bulb for rented lights. You could bring your own, but you can't hang them without paying a licensed electrician to supervise, which is very costly. Skip this expense by using a battery-powered system to totally illuminate your space both indoors and outdoors without electricity and without generating unwanted heat. This is just one example of how being creative can yield a superior solution at a very low cost.

I know of an artist who took similar LED flashlights and rewired them, using low voltage. He ran the entire system with a battery for a cordless drill. He used the battery recharger with two battery packs. While one battery was being used, the other was charging. When the lights dimmed, he simply switched batteries. So simple, so effective, and so affordable. A comparable commercial system would have cost \$1,000.

8. Consider used merchandising equipment. Look for businesses going out of business for display pieces that cost just pennies on the dollar compared to new fixtures. Don't let scratches or other minor damage deter you. It's amazing how a coat of paint or another surface treatment can give new life to an old display. The good display equipment goes quickly, so don't delay. Be sure, though, that they'll work well for the products you want to display and that they're lightweight and portable enough to work for a traveling booth.
9. Make your booth comfortable to encourage your customers to stay longer. If it's overly crowded, has hard, uncomfortable flooring, or is claustrophobic, they'll move on before you have a chance to connect with them. The longer someone stays in your booth, the more likely they are to make a purchase.

Another benefit to retaining people in your booth is that it makes other customers want to enter and find out what they're missing. Holding a customer's attention in your space is an art determined by the physical space you've created and the energy you're projecting.

10. Have fun and make shopping fun for your customers. Everyone wants to be a part of that kind of positive energy.

Give some thought to how you can employ low-cost merchandising techniques in your display. It's a great exercise in creativity and everyone will admire you for your ingenuity.



## Maximize Your Show Space

Every artist encounters unique challenges with the work they display at shows. For example, fine jewelry needs proper lighting and display cases to allow for easy

viewing and ensure security. Ceramic and glass pieces need to be displayed on shelving that not only looks upscale but is easy to set up and take down. However, no medium presents more display challenges than items like large furniture, paintings, photos, or sculpture.

One issue with displaying too many large items in a 10-by-10-foot booth is that the space ends up looking more like a storage unit than a well-merchandised environment. An obvious way to solve this dilemma is to use more than one space because a larger space may make a bigger impression on customers. Large booths tend to draw customers in as they walk by. And, while a larger booth will certainly cost more, sales will generally increase when you display in a larger space.

### *Sharing Booths*

Two or more artists may share a booth if their work and personalities are compatible. By sharing their two spaces, they are implementing the power of cooperative marketing. They're not increasing their overhead, but they are increasing their attraction by creating a larger opening to the booths. The goal of your display is to draw customers into your space. Larger openings tend to do just that. Customers generally don't buy while standing in the aisle, but make their purchases when in your booth and close to your work. Of course, if you share a booth, it takes a lot more planning.

### *Equality*

If you choose to share a booth space, make sure there is equality among all artists in the space. With that in mind, a space shared by an artist doing two-dimensional art and one who makes furniture can be a winning combination. Specifically, furniture and other home décor items (both 2-D and 3-D) can be an exciting blend. So if you know someone whose work complements yours and your personalities seem to mesh, consider this a way to create a space that doesn't seem so cramped.

Ironworker David Little ([www.ironable.com](http://www.ironable.com)) and woodworker Steven Hayden ([www.haydenarts.com](http://www.haydenarts.com)) have shared a booth, and the results create a dynamic presentation. Little commented, "I believe that it is essential to create a home-like ambience in the booth so that the potential client can envision the work in their own homes."

I have met several other artists, including some husband-and-wife teams, who have had excellent results showing their work with this method. However, wedding vows are not required to make this collaboration successful.

### *Alternative Setups*

Another option is for two artists to each rent their own booth and split a third between them. This gives each a 10-by-15-foot space rather than the standard 10-by-10. This practice is already quite common at trade and gift shows and is starting to cross over into the art and craft realm.

Yet with all these possible setups, some artists still try to cram too many large works into a small space. Worse still, they display too many works of very different styles. To remedy this, some artists have used large-format photography to show

oversized pieces in an interior environment. This allows work to be seen without actually being present at the show. Little and Hayden also use this method to show and sell beds and tables. Rather than take up a huge booth footprint, Little employs the wall space to display such items. This translates the quality of his work to customers, and he is able to sell large items without crowding his booth space.

This is a smart way to merchandise large items for sale and cut down on the work and time required to set up and break down the booth space. Large-scale work requires an enormous effort to transport, pack safely, unpack and set up, break down, repack and reload. A well-styled photo of a piece of furniture will save a lot of time and prevent potential damage. Consider using this method to show your larger work. You'll be amazed at how well it works and how much conversation it will generate between you and potential customers.

### *Put Technology to Work*

The most cutting-edge way to create visual merchandising magic is to use digital technology. Increasing numbers of artists who work in large scale are turning to digital technology to show large items in a small space. Digital photography can be projected onto a wall or into a corner of your booth. In this way, not only do you put the magic of large-format photography to work for you, but the constantly changing portfolio of your work creates an effect that mesmerizes customers and keeps them around.

Many 2-D visual artists have also put these methods to work in their display. They can literally show hundreds of canvases to customers but only need to transport a dozen or so pieces. When projecting images, you have the added advantage of showing your work in an interior environment, helping customers imagine how it would look in their space. For example, you might have a piece of art photographed in a contemporary environment and in the next slide have the same piece shown in a traditional environment. This method of merchandising is the wave of the future, and you'll see more and more of it cropping up at shows. I recently saw a jewelry and accessory line projected on models in a booth. It was like a fashion show portraying different types of women wearing the artist's designs.

An added bonus of digital projection is that it has come a long way in the past few years and the prices are falling drastically. You can now buy a projector with twice the brightness and size for a third of the cost. Also, don't rule out the possibility of purchasing a secondhand projector. Like most technology, it won't cost nearly as much after it's a couple years old, but it should still be good for many years of service. You'll need a projector with at least 2,000 lumens to do the job, and the darker you can keep the projection area of your booth the better. However, don't sacrifice adequate lighting on the other products you're displaying.

By adopting one or more of the methods mentioned above, you'll cut down on the work required to transport and set up large-scale items. Better yet, not overcrowding your booth will draw more people into your space, creating more opportunities to engage them in conversation and make a sale.



## Start Your Booth Display with a Floor Covering

Flooring can make or break your entire display. It's potential to attract customers into your booth and keep them there can't be overestimated. When I do booth evaluations at both outdoor and indoor shows, I frequently see someone who has meticulously crafted their work and gone to great effort to build a fantastic display, but has omitted a floor covering. Usually when I tell someone that they need a floor covering, they say, "I have one, I just didn't bring it." This is a big mistake. The floor is so important that it should be a top priority.

### *Aesthetics*

The floor is of vital importance for two reasons. The first is aesthetics; interior design of any kind isn't complete without floor covering. At an outdoor show, if there's grass under your feet in your booth, you're creating a yard sale atmosphere no matter how well you dress up the rest of the booth. Cleanliness is important too. Grass becomes worn out with a lot of foot traffic and, if it rains, you'll have mud. People won't stay in your booth if they have to step through mud.

At indoor shows, a booth without a floor covering always looks unfinished; a properly chosen floor covering will look more professional. This is particularly true if your work is high end.

### *Comfort*

The aesthetics of a floor covering is important, but comfort is even more important. A visually pleasing floor will attract people to your booth, but comfort will keep them there. When people get tired, they move more, because walking is easier than standing in one spot. As a result, many customers move on to the next booth not because they're bored, but because their legs are telling their brain to keep moving. And that's exactly what they do; they move on before you have a chance to sell to them. When you give customers a soft place to stand, they'll stay longer and give you more time to engage them in conversation. Don't miss this valuable opportunity; make your floor a combination of pleasing looks and comfort.

### *Flooring Choices*

The rule that merchandising must match the merchandise is also true when it comes to choosing the right floor. Many people don't use floor covering because they don't know what to use or where to find it.

### *Carpet*

Carpet is by far the most common booth floor covering due to its availability and relatively low cost. Plus, it offers an endless choice of color, texture, and price. If you buy a remnant, you can get excellent carpet for only a few dollars per square

yard. Keep in mind, though, that you will have to bind the edges for a carpet, and this can cost as much as the carpet itself.

If you only do indoor shows, carpet can certainly be an excellent choice, particularly if it has a high pile. This will provide the comfort that customers appreciate. Carpet can also work at an outdoor show if the weather is dry, but a lot of rain can turn carpet into a soggy disaster. If you're using carpet at an outdoor show, put down a layer of plastic first to keep it dry.

An easily transportable carpet will be no larger than 8 by 10 feet. If you want to carpet your entire space, consider two 5-by-10-foot pieces that fit together. But be aware that there will be a seam running down the center of your booth.

One issue to consider when using carpet is the potential tripping hazard it can create. To avoid this problem, always roll the carpet with the pile side out, so it will lay flat when you roll it back out.

Storage is another issue. Make sure the carpet is dry and stored in a dry area. If your carpet is damp from an outdoor show when you roll it up, it's likely to mildew. Then the next time you use it at a show, it will fill your whole booth with a bad odor.

To transport your carpet more easily, can make an inexpensive rug-carrying handle using basic materials. Tightly roll your carpet pile side out and measure the diameter of the roll. Cut two pieces of nylon or cotton web strapping (the kind used for tote bag handles) two feet longer than the roll diameter. On each piece of web strapping, sew a foot of the hook side of heavy-duty Velcro on the outside of one end. Sew a foot of the loop side of Velcro on the inside of the other end. Secure the web straps around the carpet one third of the way from each end of the roll. Then hook the ends of an old luggage strap to the webbing straps. This will allow one person to carry the carpet, which is particularly helpful if the parking lot is a long way from your booth space.

### *Rubber Matting*

Rubber matting is another excellent choice for both outdoor and indoor shows. It's impervious to moisture, so there's no problem if it rains. Plus, it's easy to hose off and will last for years. Weight is the biggest issue with rubber matting, but there are lighter foam alternatives.

Many rubber mat choices fit together like puzzle pieces. Some even have beveled-edge pieces that prevent tripping. Foam floor mats generally come in 12- or 24-inch squares. I prefer the 24-inch squares because they reduce installation time.

Foam squares hold up beautifully, complement artwork, are comfortable, and are easy to store and clean. Also, because they're only 24 inches square, you can transport enough to cover your entire booth. They're available in many attractive colors and cost as little as \$1.59 per square foot.

The squares are available from many companies, but check online at [cartwheelfactory.com](http://cartwheelfactory.com). Or search "modular portable flooring" or "temporary flooring for trade shows," to find a variety of other sources. Cartwheel Factory also carries plastic tiles. These interlocking, perforated tiles work well on both grass and concrete.

Don't forget about creating a comfortable area for yourself. There are many



good anti-fatigue mats that will do the job. When you have a soft place to stand, your feet and legs will feel much better at the end of a long day. Anti-fatigue mats are available at many retail locations and at websites such as [kofflersales.com](http://kofflersales.com).

Many artists use roll-up wooden flooring to create a dramatic atmosphere while maintaining comfort, using a thin carpet pad underneath. The mats vary widely in price depending on country of origin, so shop around. Some artists have told me they were able to purchase a 9-by-6-foot mat for around \$80.

Be innovative and creative with your floor. I experienced a novel, eye-catching floor at the National Stationery Show in New York. The exhibitor, a business from Holland, created its floor from 25 huge bags of multicolored rubber bands purchased from a dollar store. They sprinkled the bands all over the floor until there was a layer about a quarter-inch deep. This created a wonderful creative effect and was very comfortable. For only \$25, they had a floor like no other that was perfect for their funky Euro card line.

### *Final considerations*

1. Keep flooring simple. Good floor covering finishes a space but isn't busy, as this will detract from your work. A solid-color floor covering generally works best.
2. Rubber mats are an excellent choice, but it's best to avoid alternating colors. While they can be attractive and may get positive feedback, people should be looking at your work and not your floor.
3. Another hidden advantage of a floor covering is that it can save inventory from damage if it is dropped or if you deal with small items. Fragile objects will break if they fall on concrete but may survive a fall onto comfortable floor covering. And a dropped earring back will be easier to find on a floor covering than in the grass.

A floor is one more thing to carry and an additional part of setup and breakdown, but you'll find that more customers will be attracted to your booth because of the professional look and will stay an extra few minutes because they're more comfortable. Attracting and keeping more people in your booth will give you more opportunities to sell your work and will help pay for your new investment.



## Making the Atmosphere in your Booth a Sensory Experience

When it comes to merchandising, an artist needs to appeal to all his customer's senses. The mood your booth projects is a culmination of many things, including sight, smell, sound, and your personal aura. Sight, of course, is the most important sense, but you'll need to use more than just sight to draw customers in and convert them from just lookers to buyers.

### *At First Sight*

You have just three to five seconds to capture your customers' attention. How effectively does your display arouse their curiosity and draw them in? And how well does your merchandising relate to the objects in your booth?

### *Into the Light*

A major factor that influences mood is light. If a customer can't see your merchandise, they won't buy it. Light is the key to a successful booth, especially with older customers. Equally important is the size of fonts you use in signs and promotional materials. If the typeface isn't big enough, your potential clients won't be to read it and learn your story — a story that entices them to buy.

### *Touch*

Touch is another key sense to put to work. Encourage your customers to pick up your work. Be sure to display it so it's easily accessible and inviting to touch. For appropriate products, no display technique works better than hanging. When you hang your work, you'll create an almost irresistible urge to touch it. But be sure not to overcrowd your booth, as buyers will hesitate to touch out of concern that they'll knock things over.

Don't put merchandise on the floor, as that acts as a barricade to work displayed above it. Make sure every display is within easy arm's reach to make it comfortable and secure for customers to touch. If it's work that can't be touched, you need to have customers touch it in their imagination by creating alluring descriptions like the ones used in catalogues. Or provide a sample or fragment they can touch. How important is this to sales? Statistically, you're four times more likely to sell a customer something they have touched.

### *Sound*

You can use sound in several ways to create the right atmosphere in your booth. Your voice is one the most important sales tools you have. Is your voice projecting energy and enthusiasm? Energy provides an amazing boost, and when you have it, other people around your booth generally pick it up. The result is a contagious reaction from your customers. Make sure you're projecting energy and enthusiasm with appropriate dialogue as you talk about your work; it will go a long way to demonstrate your pride. This will make people want to share it with others. When they look at the art, they'll see you and what you brought to the piece.

Consider background sounds of nature, like wind chimes and water fountains to make your booth stand out. The sound generated must be appropriate to your product line, but when it fits, magic happens.

I remember seeing a booth that displayed ceramic birdhouses. They were displayed on natural, lush green grass sod used as a table covering for risers and pedestals. Emanating from the booth were bird songs at a low, peaceful volume, so they didn't go much beyond the booth. It was magical. The natural grass and the sound

in the air made customers look at the birdhouses more closely and enjoy the tranquil mood. I have one of the birdhouses in my home, and every time I look at it I remember that booth.

### *Taste*

Taste can also have an amazing effect on your customers. Giving them a tasty treat can pay off generously. It doesn't need to be fancy or expensive, just appropriate for the venue. Chocolate is rarely a bad choice. My wife uses Hershey's Kisses in her store to get customer email addresses. The sign reads "a kiss for your email address." The kisses disappear and email addresses appear on the sheet.

At seasonal shows, use offerings appropriate to the holiday, like candy corn for autumn, peppermints for the winter holidays, or cinnamon hearts for Valentine's Day. A glass of water once converted me from a looker to a buyer. As I walked by a booth, the exhibitor asked me if I would like a glass of Vermont Spring Water. The offer sounded good, so I said yes. As I took the water, I thought to myself, I can't leave now, that would be rude. As I drank, I began looking closely at his line and found it interesting and a good value, and before I knew it, I was writing an order. He had turned me into a buyer with just a glass of water. Use the lure of food or drinks to get your customers to engage.

### *Smell*

The sense of smell is another great mood enhancer. Our culture doesn't give much credit to the sense of smell, but it has great power over customers. We associate smells with events and emotions from the past. Sometimes these associations are subconscious, but you'll discover that if you use an appropriate scent in your booth, it will have a positive effect on your sales. Light, delicate, and natural smells are the key. If you use an overpowering aroma, either in the booth or on yourself, customers will not stop, no matter how great your work is. But delicate fragrances like vanilla, cinnamon, or lavender can create an amazing ambience in your booth. The seasons can also play into this sense. A bit of balsam at a holiday show can be wonderful, evoking the holiday spirit within. Do keep in mind that smell can work for or against you. If carpet or booth materials smell stale or musty from being stored in a damp place, they'll hurt your sales.

### *Your Aura*

The aura that surrounds your business is intangible and subjective, so it's difficult to analyze and describe. It comes mostly from you, so make sure the image you're projecting is positive and energetic. If you aren't satisfied with a show and how it is going, this often leads to bad vibes, which customers can sense. Declare your booth a "happy space" and do whatever it takes to project positive and upbeat energy.

Your aura will affect how the customer feels about you. Unless customers like you and can identify with you, they won't buy your art. That's one of the reasons people go to art shows — they want to meet the artists face to face. If they think you're arrogant, judgmental, or desperate, they won't buy your art. It's very important to project a positive image through both your words and your body language.

If you're too pushy, you'll turn customers off, and they'll walk away. If you're too passive because you're shy, you'll lack appeal and they'll leave and find an artist who is appealing. Remember to be friendly, informative, confident, and available.

An exhibitor projecting a bad mood or frustration about unmet expectations is the kiss of death; expectations really are one of the keys to your attitude. Once you start to fret about not making the sales you hoped you would, or start thinking about anything negative, for that matter, you cut yourself off from the positive mood that's the key to your success. Negativity and worry can permeate a space of 1,000 square feet or more! Most art or craft show booths are only 100 square feet, so the bad vibes are cranked up tenfold. Make sure you have the self-discipline to transcend negative vibes.

### *The Big Picture*

Think of the wonderful emotions you experience when you arrive at friend's home for dinner and are greeted at the door by enchanting aromas, soothing music, and people excited to see you. This is the warm, welcoming experience you want to create for your customers. By applying these merchandizing strategies, an effective sales presentation, and a positive aura, you'll create an enticing atmosphere, attract more customers, and increase sales.



## The Art of Hanging Your Art

The most effective way to display your work is to hang it. It generally takes less time, equipment, and cost to hang work. Plus, hanging displays have many other advantages over work that is resting on a shelf or table. Not all work is appropriate for hanging, but I have seen some hanging displays with amazing results.

When designing a hanging display, think outside the box. Most people think they need solid walls for a hanging display, but all that's needed is a piece of wood that extends from the floor to the top of your wall frame. You can attach it to the crosspiece of your display or outdoor canopy using sturdy cable ties, or you can hold it in place with hook-and-loop or similar fasteners. Once you get your wooden uprights in place, you can attach your fabric or matchstick blind wall treatment to them. Then drill drywall screws through the fabric or blind material and hang your art from the screws. You can hang all manner of art, from clothing and pottery to wooden articles and greeting cards. If you exhibit at outdoor shows, it may be necessary to stake the wood upright to the ground for additional stability.

Beyond the easy set-up and low capital expense, there are several good reasons for employing hanging displays. Hanging your work allows you to take maximum advantage of the space you're paying for. Many artists ignore the space above them (at eye level and higher) and focus only on tabletop height.

### *Mugs*

Dangling merchandise — such as mugs spinning in the breeze suspended on monofilament — can attract attention because they are unexpected. When you

create a visual experience for shoppers, they'll likely step into it. A mug display works best with 9 to 12 mugs hanging at eye level (or just above) with another 12 to 24 on a shelf below. The hanging mugs draw attention and pull the customers out of the aisle into the booth, which is a must for a sale to take place. They'll most likely buy the mugs on the shelves. However, if you use a fishing swivel or similar piece of hardware so a customer can quickly remove a mug from the monofilament, they can easily buy a hanging mug too.

Hanging displays result in movement, either turning or swinging, depending on how you suspend the work. Movement makes items alluring, and it makes people want to touch them as well. When people touch your work, they're more likely to buy it! Of course, suspending work in your booth might not be the only way you display, but using this technique, along with a variety of other display formats, will increase interest.

### *Hats*

One of the best, yet least expensive ways to attract attention to handmade hats is to decorate them with balloons. Balloons are intrinsically fun and light-hearted, so they're bound to draw customers.

### *Scarves*

A scarf display can create an opening in a booth that could be used to hold a mirror for customers to try the scarves on. Some items aren't appropriate for hanging, but look for every opportunity to use this display strategy. So many products can create an amazing space, particularly if you hang them on multiple levels. When customers are finished touching your hanging displays, the items will stay in motion for a minute, inviting the next person to come along and repeat the process.

Monofilament is readily available wherever fishing tackle is sold. It comes in different strengths to support various amounts of weight, from a few pounds (which can be supported by a nearly invisible line) to nearly 100 pounds (which will require more visible deep-sea fishing line). When booths are spaced adequately at outdoor shows, it's possible to hang work on three sides of your canopy, using your merchandise to create walls. This will allow customers to enter and leave your booth from all sides. I once saw a wind chime booth created this way. It attracted a lot of attention and had a high sales volume. Many people were standing around ringing the chimes because there was so much space to accommodate the customers. Keep in mind that this will only work if there's at least 10 feet between the booths on all sides.

Hanging items is a great and innovative way to create aisle appeal, which will draw customers in. Remember, customers don't buy from the aisle; they only purchase when they have been drawn into the booth and become engaged with the work.

Of course, you can employ other merchandising methods along with suspending your merchandise. The more creative and exciting these displays are, the more attention they'll attract. The more that people are responding to your work by playing with it or calling over friends so that they can share the experience to-

gether, the more items you'll sell. Use your suspended work to get customers' attention and to draw them into your display.



## Low-Budget Dazzle: Inexpensive ways to boost your visual merchandising

I'm amazed at how many artists don't use lighting to its full advantage. At the shows I attend, most artists simply don't have enough fixtures and bulbs to do the job. You need about 1,000 watts of bright white light to illuminate a 10-by-10-foot space and make your art dazzling. Even though you may have 300 to 400 watts from the overhead lights in the exhibit hall, or natural light from nearby windows, you need more to make sure your art is displayed to maximum advantage.

### *Show Lighting Issues*

Some shows are bright and well-illuminated, while others are as dark as a tomb and you need to rent or provide lights to lighten up your booth. Many shows use low-cost lighting, the quality of which will distort the colors of your creations. To alleviate this problem, consider adding an additional white light in your display to keep your colors true.

### *Light Placement*

Another common problem I see at shows is the placement of the lights. Light from most bulbs does not travel well, so the farther the bulbs are from the objects you're trying to illuminate, the darker the objects will be. Getting bulbs closer to your merchandise will yield a brighter, more attractive display.

A general rule is to place light fixtures directly overhead to reduce shadows caused by customers' heads and bodies blocking the light. This will also prevent bulbs shining into their eyes. When you look into your booth, there should be no blinding bulbs visible.

Properly illuminated booth spaces are not something the customer really notices or comments on, but if there aren't enough appropriately placed lights, it will have a negative effect on your sales. If customers can't see your art, they won't buy it. Don't make them work to see it.

After you have set up your display, walk out into the aisle and see what the customers see. Are you blinding them as they walk by, or are your lights properly focused so the art is shining back at them?

### *Quality Lighting*

Good lighting makes me want to pull out my camera and take a picture. That's what happens in the customers' minds; they want to remember what they're seeing. To do so, they'll usually pick up the items for closer examination. When customers touch what you make, they're much more likely to buy it. Touch is the first step toward owning something. If you can lead your customers to this step, your sales will go up.

Good lighting renders your products so alluring that customers can't resist touching them. This, in turn, gives you subliminal permission to talk to them. Customers with your work in their hands will listen more intently to what you're saying about it.

During a visit to the One of a Kind Show and Sale in New York City, I met a delightful group of artists. I was specifically looking for examples of good lighting and I found some excellent ones.

A superb example of low-cost but highly effective booth lighting was in the booth of Lemon Park. Using simple under-lighting, they dramatically displayed their amazing art/fashion jewelry line.

Another example of their excellent display and lighting choices were their bottom-lit low pedestals, in multiple levels on their tables. These low-tech risers were created with a ring made of cardboard, metal, or plastic and painted to give a finished look. A piece of frosted glass or Plexiglas was placed on top, with a simple light source underneath the glass inside the ring.

If electrical power isn't available (as is the case at many outdoor shows), these lights could be low-voltage halogen, LEDs, or even inexpensive battery-operated lights. This under-lighting technique made all the transparent gemstones in the lovely necklaces glow. Each of these boxes had a light inside it to make the jewelry visually "pop." The lighting was stunning and drew almost everyone who walked by into the space. So alluring and accessible, this was one of the best booths I had seen in years.

Another fine lighting example was used in the display created by Bruce R. MacDonald of Burlington, Vt. He used both white and colored light to make his arresting stainless steel wall art come alive. His work is large and impressive — just what art should be in these times. MacDonald used ample overhead white light and employed a spectral colored battery-operated LED device, which was also available for installation in the clients' home if they desired.

His lighting wasn't as low-tech as Lemon Park's, but it gave the art a lot of bang for the buck. His cold silvery grey stainless piece came alive when accentuated by the colored lighting. Examples of his fine lighting can be found on his website at [www.brmdesign.com](http://www.brmdesign.com).

Lemon Park and Bruce MacDonald both had fantastic booths that displayed their art to its best advantage, each method being just right for the art it was illuminating. When I stood back and evaluated it, I was once again reminded that good display and lighting have nothing to do with how much money you spend; they're the result of creativity.

Be as creative with your lighting and your display as you are with your work. Any effort you invest in lighting will increase the number of people who visit your booth, which will boost your sales.

## PART FOUR

# Problems Are Opportunities

## Stuck in a Rut?: Four Questions That Will Revitalize Your Business

One of the best things you can do for your business is to give it a shot of creativity. The more creative your product line, the more desirable your products will be. The fact that customers frequently ask, “What’s new?,” is evidence that they’re eager to see innovative new designs. Creativity gets your art noticed and encourages customers to be loyal, repeat buyers. And now more than ever, creativity in all aspects of your business is necessary — from your product line to display and merchandising to your blog and social networking. Being creative is a key to success. Most of the businesses that are doing well have set creativity high on their priority list.

So how can you find the inspiration, time, and money to make choices that stimulate your energy? Here are four questions you can ask yourself to help you uncover the factors that will help you succeed.

### 1. What conditions inspire your creativity?

The conditions are different for everyone. Have you made an assessment of the conditions necessary for you to get into the creative zone? How can you reconstruct these conditions so you spend more working time in a creative environment?

Some artists say they need peace and quiet, while others need to remove all financial pressure. Still others say they need the pressure of a deadline to jumpstart the creative process. No matter what conditions

are necessary for your inspiration, the more time you choose to spend under these conditions, the more fulfilling your output will be. Don’t beat yourself up if you planned to get a lot accomplished and it didn’t happen. Realize that creativity can’t be forced, and sometimes it just will not come when called. When that happens, it’s best to turn to another task.

### 2. How do you find the time to be creative?

Do you give yourself permission to experiment, take a chance, and explore? So many artists don’t allow themselves to do this. Most of us are so busy and working so hard that there always seems to be more to do than there is time to do it. Allowing yourself to have a “creativity date” with yourself on a regular basis is crucial to your success. You can schedule the date twice a month, one day a week, several hours a day or, in my case, three weeks a year. The choice is yours, but success depends on the discipline to keep your commitments and hold your creative exploration time sacred.

Here are some suggestions to help you get started:

- Work in a different medium than you normally do. Create in a different scale, using different techniques. If your regular work is non-functional, make it functional. Use different colors or styles than you are accustomed to, etc.

- Find an environment that is most conducive for your creativity. Do you need it to be quiet? Do you need to listen to music? Prepare food in advance to make sure hunger doesn't interrupt your creative flow.
- If creativity is flowing, let it come. Stop negative internal dialogue. Don't get bogged down; overworking a piece is the bane of most creative sessions. If you commonly overwork your art, consider placing a time limit on a piece you're developing.
- Develop goals or you'll waste time or lose focus and not follow through. Avoid the temptation to start a new endeavor until you have finished your last one. This must be a hard-and-fast rule.

### 3. What is your internal voice telling you about your art?

If you have negative internal dialogue, you need to have the discipline to shut this destructive voice down. If a destructive voice comes from your mind every time you make an artistic decision, this will undermine your productivity and creative process. Where is the voice coming from? If it's your voice, work to change the tone so it's free of judgment, so it contributes positively to the experience. If the voice isn't yours, analyze whose voice it is. Is it your father's or mother's or a professor's? Why are you giving these external forces so much power? If you do, it will snatch your power as a creative individual.

### 4. What holds you back from being the creative artist you want to be?

Many artists have barriers that aren't grounded in reality. They are rooted in excuses that they repeat over and over again. "My husband doesn't appreciate what I do," or "With my kids, I never find the time to create art." "I am too busy, too poor, too unworthy," etc. Only you can give yourself permission to take the time and make the choices to make it happen.

As my work changes more from earning my living as a studio professional to a consulting capacity, I long for more time to be creative. I decided to tackle this quest by taking a three-week "play-cation" to Mexico. My wife, who has a greeting card business, has used this time to create the majority of her new card designs for the past three years.

I set a goal of creating 100 pieces in a three-week period. It's a big undertaking, but I thought it was an achievable goal. I decided I would work in polymer clay rather than my normal medium of jewelry but would use many of the same techniques. I made a conscious decision to work in a larger scale. Because I would be using polymer clay, I could lower the cost of the finished items. I wanted the freedom to create something that didn't have to fit on the human body, and by not using precious metals, I could lower the price dramatically.

To reach my goal of creating 100 pieces in three weeks, I had to develop some new production techniques. I built a solar oven to bake the clay, but wasted three days trying to modify it to get up to temperature. Realizing that precious time was slipping away, I bought a toaster oven and went into full production on the fourth day.

I spent my first days sculpting faces of various sizes and variations out of plasticine (children's modeling clay). I made molds of these faces with room-temperature vulcanizing mold materials. Then I began production. With these one-sided molds, I was able to create multiple faces out of clay and bake them in the toaster oven. Now they were ready to be painted while I was relaxing on the beach. The concept for the final product is that these faces (each with a pin back or a hanging device) would be sold in small bird's nests (manmade and available from a floral shop). The faces were painted with the pattern of wild bird eggs to create a relationship with the nest.

Then my mind sparked as it does when creativity is flowing, and I created beak masks for the faces. These three weeks of creative outbursts were only possible because I allowed myself the time and gave myself permission to be creative. I am not sure this would have been possible in my home or studio because of all the interruptions and distractions.

Now that I'm back home and 45 or so of these face nests are ready for the market, I'm working on creating faces in silver, and the beaks are being cast in silver to be worn as pendants. This is only the beginning. Much more is coming as a result of allowing and justifying this time to create. This experience of taking a three-week creative "play-cation" has filled me with enthusiasm and given me a burst of creativity that I haven't experienced in years.

Maybe running away to nowhere isn't what would make you creative. If that's the case, consider finding creativity in another form. Attend a professional development conference of some sort. I just returned from the SNAG (Society of North American Goldsmiths) Conference in Houston. It was an amazing event. So many people from all over the world were there networking, learning, and sharing so much information. There were the most amazing shows going on at local galleries. The experience and learning made me want to get home and start working on all the new ideas forming in my mind.

Every craft medium has a conference that services that segment of the industry. For example, the Glass Arts Society, the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, the International Society of Glass Beadmakers, and the Precious Metal Clay Guild all hold professional yearly conferences around the country. If the conference is well organized and delivers pertinent information, you'll find the tools not only to bring creativity to your product line but also to the marketing and business side of your enterprise.

These conferences do cost some money to attend, but the highly successful businesses that I work with find that attending workshops and conferences is an excellent way to gain the edge over the competition. If money is tight, consider setting a percentage from each sale aside for a creativity bankroll.

When you have saved up enough money, reward yourself by exploring a new creative endeavor. Your first step toward this challenge will be to define what experience will be right for you to jumpstart your creative muses. Then you must allow yourself to justify the expense and the experience. Realize that the upfront cost will come back to you fourfold with increased creativity in your business and better sales down the road.



## Your Slides and the Jury: The current issues surrounding the process

If you apply to a number of shows, you might have noticed dramatic changes in the past few years. What used to work with jurors may not work as effectively now. I do a great deal of consulting with artists about their slides and how to consistently get into better shows. I noticed recently that the old rules don't always work, and some artists have to rethink the way they choose their slides and arrange them. One individual called me stating she has been doing shows for 20 years and had an 80 percent acceptance rate. I could hear the devastation in her voice when she reported she had been rejected recently from the last 18 of 20 shows to which she applied.

There has been a dramatic shift in slides and how the jury reviews and perceives them in the past few years. Two major contributing factors are digital photography and jury services such as Zapplication or Juried Art Services. As a result, you may need to rethink or change how you design your work for your slides, as well as how you arrange or group your work when you have them photographed for the jury.

The first and most dramatic change comes in the form of digital photography. Digital photography makes it possible for artists to take their own photos and achieve acceptable results, as long as they're willing to invest in equipment and learn how to use it. I know many artists who shoot their own work and have favorable results getting into shows. But I must add that these are individuals who spend a lot of time to achieve acceptable photos.

Prior to the digital era, it wasn't common for artists to get consistent acceptance by taking their own photos. Don't get me wrong; I still advise artists to have their work professionally shot by an expert. That said, bad photography costs just as much as good photography in most cases. Not all photographers are created equally. Be sure you see a photographer's portfolio to make sure it contains slides of the quality you're seeking and the kind of work you create before you hire them.

The second change major change is the appearance of jury services available for artists. Services like Zapplication and Juried Art Services have not only fundamentally changed the application process, but also the duration and manner in which jurors look at your slides. For the record, I'm not criticizing either of these services or digital photography, but there are certain things you need to know when applying to a show now that weren't an issue in the past.

Jury services make it easy for artists to apply to shows; as a result, more artists are applying to more shows because the process is virtually effortless. All you have to do to apply to ten shows, rather than one, is to check ten boxes and pay for the application fees. In the past, a separate application was required for each show, and this meant more work for the artist — work that was of the “left-brain” type that many artists don't like. As a result, a lot of application deadlines passed without the artist getting the application completed in time.

The folks at Zapplication told me that some big-name shows have seen a spike in applications by as much as 25 to 40 percent. While that's not true of all shows, it does mean that, in general, the jury will be looking at more slides and may suffer a more profound burnout as they study them. After interviewing individuals at Zapplication and Juried Art Services, I found that although the artist application process for these services is standardized, the process that the jury uses to view slides is not.

Some shows are juried by looking at projected images. Others are done by looking at computer monitors, while other shows might be juried remotely. In some cases, the slides are timed and can only be viewed for a certain amount of time, while others are reviewed for as long as the jury deems necessary. Some applications are discussed between the jurors and others are juried anonymously. The bottom line is that you need to know how your slides are going to be juried for a particular show so you can choose and arrange them to give yourself the best advantage. Most shows explain their methods and their procedure in the application. If they don't, you have a legitimate question and you should ask.

The advent of digital photography and the subsequent changes in the way the jury judges the slides has created a different playing field from the past. Digital photography has resulted in artists having better slides if they take their own shots. It's also much easier to achieve acceptable results than with film photography. I'm sure some would argue with this, but I'll tell you as an untrained photographer that I could never take a film photo of my work that would get me into a good show. With digital format, however, I can control the light and balance the color a lot better than I could with 35mm format. Those who learn how to use their digital equipment or who use a professional photographer have a big advantage.

As a result of having better slides now, the jury is more critical of images that aren't ready for “primetime.” I've noticed that artist's slides generally fall into two categories: terrible or amazing. It seems there are more amazing slides than ever, and any that aren't amazing are rejected. And there are fabulous slides by more artists than there are spaces at the show. There was a time when poorly photographed, fine craftwork might still get a shot at getting into a show. Those days are over; if you have amazing work, yet bad photography, you're handicapping your business. Because the jury is used to looking at clear, clean, professional slides, they have little patience for poorly photographed work. It takes top-quality photography to get into top-quality shows.

Here are some tried and true guidelines that will help you consistently get into shows:

- Your slides are eye candy for the jury. They respond to the visual impact of your work. Think about your slides as a composition and not as individual slides. (This is another side benefit of services like Zapplication. You can actually see your slides as the jury sees them.)
- Limit the palette of the work you are showing.
- Your slides should tell a story, but keep the story simple. If you give the jury more information than they can process in the short seconds your slides are

viewed, they'll score you lower because they didn't make up their minds before the slides moved on to the next set.

- The slides you choose to show the jury should have nothing to do with your sales. I often find artists make a mistake when they pick slides that represent their best-selling pieces. Customers and juries have different tastes. In general, it's the customers who want what sells best because the media and popular culture heavily influence their purchases. Juries, however, are primarily made up of artists who prefer artistic skill: visual stimulation, innovation, and presentation, rather than commercial and popular influences,
- Show a consistent body of work. And, for the most part, it should be one piece of art per slide unless the pieces comprise a set, such as necklace/earring set.
- Don't show different styles or techniques in one set of slides. When the jury gets tired, they care little about technique. Jurying is a hard job, and weariness can take over quickly. I know artists who go to great lengths to make a particular technique show up in a slide, but what really captures the jury's attention is a compelling visual blast. If you wake them up from their slide coma with refreshing and stimulating art, they'll reward you for it.
- Make sure your work fills the frame. Slides have more impact when the work fills 70 to 80 percent of the frame. Sometimes I see slides, particularly of beaded jewelry, in which the work is only 10 percent of the slide. This makes the work look tentative and not bold.
- Understand how the jury is looking at your work for a particular show. To have the best advantage, you need to know how the jury is viewing your slides: in what order and by what method. How long do they view them? Are they discussed aloud, or viewed anonymously? Do they see a booth shot with your work? Any other helpful information or criteria should be obtained.

Anytime a juror has a negative impression or is indecisive, the score will be lower. Make sure you have answered any potential questions a juror might ask, such as what scale, materials, and techniques are being used, and what is the object's function if there is one. Most questions are confined to these topics, but be sure you anticipate any other questions that might be asked about your work.

The number one problem is that most artists make their work on a whim or mood. Then when it comes time to have slides taken, they cherry-pick the items they're going to photograph. Their selections are based on what customers at shows like. Does this sound familiar? If so, use a different strategy. Instead of choosing items targeted for customers, create a body of work that has a strong appeal, and is innovative and bright. Remember that visual stimulation is crucial. If you plan a well-designed, cohesive collection, not only will you get better slides, but your customers will also relate to them better.

Whether you take a collection to a photographer or shoot it yourself, you'll have a line of consistent work that's easy for the jury to understand. When you stimulate them and make their job easy, you'll receive more acceptance letters.



## Knock-Offs: Gifts in disguise

I often encounter artists who claim that someone has copied their designs. This is probably true because when the economy gets tough, many people turn to any means to increase their sales. However, how you react when someone copies your designs (better known as being knocked-off) is important. Usually, the first reaction is anger or a feeling of violation. But was it really a knock-off? Or did someone just have the same idea at the same time?

I'll give you an example. One time, early in my career as a jewelry designer in the early 1980s, my business partner and I were designing a line of jewelry to sell at the Vermont State Craft Center. We thought a maple motif would be an appealing and saleable line in Vermont. We created maple leaf pendants and earrings. The highlights of this collection were our maple samara pendants and chokers. While the master models were in the kiln waiting to be cast, I went outside to get the mail. In the box was a mail-order catalogue that fell open to a page that stopped me dead in my tracks. There in full-color print was the entire line that we were just about to cast.

I couldn't believe it! I had never seen this line before, and that company certainly had never seen ours, because it had not yet been created. But anyone who would have seen these two lines together would have assumed that one of us had ripped the other off. In reality, two businesses just had the same idea at the same time. Lesson learned: not everything that looks derivative of your work is. Sometimes ideas just fly around in the cosmos and get picked up by receptive people.

Sad to say, I also know that some artists just don't possess innovative talent. They can copy someone else's designs, but they have not empowered themselves to innovate. There will always be these kinds of people in our field, but do they really take that many sales away from those of us who create and innovate?

It's impossible to measure how many sales are lost to knock-offs, but I bet it's far less than the artists who are getting knocked off think. I'll tell you for sure, though, that if you dwell on or talk about those who have ripped you off at a show, it'll cost you sales. It's a turn-off to customers, as they don't want to hear negativity when they're shopping.

At a show, it's not unusual to talk to an artist about his work or comment on one of his pieces and hear the artist launch into a tirade about who has stolen his design. But when they complain to customers, they're missing the opportunity to sell their product. They should let the facts of the infraction blow like wind through the trees and, instead, concentrate on the benefits of their merchandise, rather than on how many people are knocking them off.

I know firsthand how it feels to be knocked off, as it has happened to me several times during my career as a jeweler. The first time it happened, it was by a person



I considered a good friend. This act hurt on two levels. First, it was a violation of our friendship. Second, my business partner and I were just starting out in this business, and this individual was quite well established. So naturally, when people saw our work, they assumed that we were knocking him off. Lesson learned: be careful who you trust. But the reality is that to succeed, you have to show your work to the public.

The second time we were knocked off, it was by a company manufacturing jewelry in New York City; it tried to buy several of our designs at the JA International Jewelry Show. These two men took several of our designs and simply rubber-molded them and put their own hallmark on the pieces. At a retail craft show in New York, a customer came up to our booth and asked, "Have you seen this?" There in her hand was a quarter-page advertisement from the New York Times showing a large blow-up of one of our earrings made by the company that knocked us off.

A while later, another customer came up and said, "I saw these earrings in the New York Times!" I said, "Yes you did!" This knock-off turned out to be very good advertising for us. We sold out of that earring that weekend and ended up taking orders on it. So many people, when they get knocked off, use what I call the "turtle response," in which they withdraw into their shell and become very reserved about showing their work. Unfortunately, holding back your work for fear it will be knocked off is not a pathway to better sales.

A third knock-off involved a serpent earring. The design featured a snake head attached to the post worn in front of the ear with the tail of the serpent attached to the post behind the ear. This created the illusion that the snake was crawling through the ear lobe. This design was our second best-selling earring at the time, and we sold it in sterling silver for \$65. We had no problem selling these earrings at this price, and, at some shows, we would sell up to 20 pairs.

Imagine my surprise when, walking through a local department store one day, I saw this earring in a rack on top of the store's jewelry case. The design had been knocked off by a Rhode Island jewelry manufacturer and the earring was on sale for \$6.95. I asked the sales associate how well the earring was selling. She said nobody wanted them. "We've had them for weeks," she said. Lesson learned: just because something is cheaper doesn't mean it will sell better.

We had no problem selling these earrings at \$65 per pair, yet the discount department store couldn't sell them for \$6.95. The customers who shop at galleries and art shows aren't from the same demographic that shops in discount stores. If someone steals your design, it doesn't mean it will lower your sales on that item. Sometimes, it creates more awareness of a look and makes your work more desirable.

I believe that too many artists have the wrong attitude when their designs are ripped off. It does feel like a violation, because it is, and I know how that feels firsthand, but the usual reaction is not conducive to business growth. When you pull back and become protective of your designs, you cut off valuable awareness of your work. The next time you get knocked off, celebrate rather than take the turtle approach. When someone copies your designs, that person is telling you that you have "it!" The more "it" you have, the more people there will be to knock you off. If your designs weren't good, they wouldn't be knocking them off.

Be proactive and use this information as motivation for creating more new and innovative designs. Someone can only steal what you've done; they can't steal the designs in your head. It's so much more empowering to consider knock-offs as positive and a win than as a violation and a loss. A knock-off can be a gift if you look at it in a positive light.

If you're resisting this line of thinking, keep in mind that there's little you can do to keep someone from copying your work. If someone does copy you, what then? Do you have thousands of dollars to litigate? Most of us don't, and if even if you do, the most you can hope for is a cease and desist order that will force the offending company to stop making and selling your work. All this creates a lot of angst for very little reward.

It's true that there seems no end to some people's audacity. Here's another example. A few years back, someone was copying my marketing CDs and selling them online at full retail price. Even worse, the person took the customers' money but didn't fill the orders. These scams are usually not sustainable and the people are typically out of business in short order.

With the amount of time and money involved in taking someone to court, you could create three to five new designs. Think how much more productive and fun it would be to say to yourself, "Wow, those people ripped me off! I must be really good at what I do. Now, let me prove it by making something that involves talent and technique that's not as easily reproduced."

If you can change the way you think about those who knock you off and, more importantly, how you react to these situations, you'll find the power and motivation to overcome them. Dwelling on a violation will only make you feel like a victim. It's so much more productive to consider each knock-off as an accomplishment that moves you further up the ladder of success.



## Selling to Parents with Children in Tow

If you market your work at shows, sooner or later you'll encounter a situation with children that can make or break your sales. The best way to deal with this is to be prepared. No matter how much you try to avoid it, you're bound to run into a troublesome child. I love kids; I have two myself, but not all parents are created equal; therefore, not all children are created equal. Most parents are great and keep their kids under control with set limits and expectations. These good parenting skills go virtually unnoticed when they're in your space. Then there comes a time when an undisciplined or unaccompanied child enters your booth, and you must take action. A good plan is the best line of defense. There are three potential problems with children at a show:

1. They enter your space and damage or break something before you have a chance to protect it.
2. They hurt themselves because you didn't anticipate their childish impulses when you were designing your booth.

3. They blow a potential sale because they won't let their parents shop, or they disturb other customers, who move on and out of your booth. No strategy is foolproof, but if you have a plan, you're in a better position to stay in control and not lose a sale or valuable inventory.

After running a store for 17 years, my wife and I have experienced the gambit of parenting styles. But when effective parenting fails, you need to have a plan in place regarding how you will respond to a child who is threatening your inventory. Remember, when it comes to children or insensitive parents, protecting your inventory is one of your primary goals.

The first rule is to not allow unattended children in your booth. If you see young children in your booth, politely excuse yourself from the customer you are talking to, then go to the child and say something like, "I would love to show that to you with your mom or dad. Would you go get them please?" Or to be more direct, "Where is your mom or dad? Go get them and bring them back!" Take that approach right away if you feel like there might be a potential problem. Most customers use effective parenting skills and you can usually tell quickly by the relationship between the parent and the children how careful you need to be.

Certain products draw kids like a magnet, and the potential problems only increase if you sell toys or items for children. The more whimsical your product line, the greater potential for problems. Other products that capture kid's attention are fountains, illuminated or brightly colored items, and anything that is kinetic. If you sell these items, you're more likely to attract children and the accompanying challenges.

Some parents watch their children and feel a responsibility to keep them from damaging your creations, and some do not. Some actually try to get you to be the disciplinarian. They say things like, "Don't touch, or that man over there is going to yell at you!" I hate that. Why make me the disciplinarian? I learned early on that when this happened, trouble was looming. My wife and I had a toy store for several years and we saw the best and worst of parenting in that business.

If you sell toys or other items for children, some parents will actually drop their children off for you to babysit. I have seen this happen at craft shows too. People who make toys or children's items have a higher than average number of children in their booth.

I have witnessed just about every possible scenario when it comes to parent/child relationships in the three stores we have owned and operated. The best thing you can do is to take charge before it's too late. Set a limit if something is unacceptable.

One time in my store a few weeks before Christmas, I spotted a toddler roaming unattended with an open jar of peanut butter, eating it with his bare hands. It was dripping off his elbows and he was in bliss. I said, loudly, "Excuse me! Who belongs to this child?" hoping he had not roamed into the store unattended. A man stepped up and asked if there was a problem. I said, "YES! The peanut butter is unacceptable!" The child was left unsupervised in an upscale store with silk scarves and velvet jewelry boxes within reach. The man took the child and out the door they went! Remember, protecting your inventory is part of your job. I learned a valuable lesson; take charge and protect your inventory. If the parent

is offended, so be it. Once the man walked out of the store with his child, my inventory was safe.

It was a hard lesson for me to learn, as I am basically a nice guy who doesn't want to offend anyone. But a few months before the peanut butter incident, I heard a strange drumming noise coming from a back corner of the store. I had in my inventory a hardwood tongue drum with two hardwood beater sticks. An unattended child had taken the wooden sticks, crossed the room, and started drumming on a \$450 jewelry box. He put about 40 dents in the lid, ruining it. The loss of that item cost more than the entire day's profits.

The lesson was clear: part of the job is to protect your art, even if that makes you the bad guy or gal for a moment. Save the situation and then let it go. Don't think about it again; don't harbor the negativity, and don't retell the story; just do your job and move on to create more sales.

Most parents take their responsibilities seriously, but effective parenting is all about enforcing limits. If you see parents who set limits but don't hold the child accountable, that's a warning signal. For example, if a parent says "No! Don't touch!", yet less than ten seconds later the child is touching everything and the parent does nothing, be on guard. Almost all damage I have ever suffered at a show was preceded by the words, "Don't touch!" When I hear these words, they make me pause to evaluate the situation.

Here are a few ways to help you protect your inventory and create more sales with customers accompanied by children.

If you have items that are attractive to children, display them out of their reach. If you make items for children (a rocking horse for example), put it on pedestal to keep kids from climbing on it. A rocking horse on a pedestal looks great and makes it virtually impossible for a child to climb on. However, if an effective parent with a reasonable child came into your booth, you could pull the rocking chair off the pedestal and put it on the floor for a test drive. In this scenario, you stay in control and protect your inventory.

Don't use glass shelves to display items attractive to children. They may try to pull themselves up on the shelves to reach them. Getting items up higher and out of reach will go a long way to help you control the situation.

Even well-behaved children have a limited attention span. If you don't provide a distraction or entertainment, children can interrupt their parents' shopping. If there are two of you working the show, one can deal with the customer while the other entertains the children. If you are doing a show solo, however, you might consider having a few handheld video games handy. Getting the kids involved with a game or puzzle may be all it takes to create a sale. The entertainment doesn't need to be expensive; just alluring. Something as simple as an animal cracker can do wonders for occupying a child, allowing their parents to shop. Be sure, of course, to ask the parent for permission first before giving kids food. (Healthy snacks are best.)

I witnessed another low-cost way of entertaining kids at a show once. The artist said to a pair of siblings, "Look!", as she threw a handful of mini Mylar confetti stars into the air. She said, "Let's see which one of you can pick up the most stars in two minutes!" At the end, they had to count the stars, which occupied more time than picking them up.

Sometimes you need to have a few different activities for different age groups and interests. Be creative with these solutions, making sure your options are safe and entertaining.

Problems with ineffective parenting and unruly children are fairly rare at shows, but when it happens, you're unlikely to forget it. If you have a plan and take control of the situation, you'll significantly lower your risk of damage and sell more items.



## Change is Necessary

Change is the most common word that crops up when I speak to an artist about business success. When an artist tells me about a business or personal win they have experienced in the last year, change was nearly always the catalyst for this transformation.

The first hot tip is to fundamentally embrace change. Commit to making at least three major changes to your business; you'll find that this will yield big rewards. These changes should be focused on your displays, marketing methods, and design of your work.

### *Displays*

Start by changing the color of your booth. Your same old booth with a new color can make a huge difference in modernizing your display. If your booth is gray, as so many are, you look just like everyone else. If your booth shelves and pedestals show a lot of wood elements, consider painting them an interesting neutral color. If you look at any modern home décor magazine, you'll see that natural wood has virtually disappeared. If your customers can't relate to the material choices in your booth, it's much harder for them to envision your work in their homes.

### *Marketing*

You should also change at least one way you market your creations. For many years, studio professionals were able to make a living by doing shows alone. Many artists have changed from marketing only at shows to adding one or more additional marketing opportunities to their business. They've been creative with their marketing choices, like adding "trunk shows" (a show in someone's home or business featuring you and your work). This method is particularly successful in the pre-holiday season. An "open studio" format is another way artists have broadened their markets. Many states have organized open studio weekends. If you don't live in one of these areas, consider starting open studio weekends in your area during the fall or spring, or both.

Other artists are reporting success with marketing at farmers' markets, particularly if their work is functional. The number of farmers markets is on the rise across the country. They occur regularly throughout the growing season and have very low costs, yet they are attracting more and more buyers.

A good website should also be part of your marketing plan, as it can contribute

substantially to your business if it's designed and maintained properly, and you're constantly driving people to your site. Web sales are particularly effective if you get people to go to your website after they purchase one of your pieces in person.

### *Trends and Product Development*

Use trends and product development to create easy-to-sell products. I believe this change alone is responsible for most artists' newfound success. If you know the trends and follow them, you'll find a road map to sales success.

Many artists ask me how they can learn more about trends. My answer: just pay attention. We artists tend to hunker down and not pay attention to trends. Stop making excuses. Trends are all around us — just tune in and you'll see them.

First, go shopping once in a while. You don't have to buy anything; just observe the way products are designed and merchandised. The more we can emulate and take advantage of expert marketing skills, the easier it'll be to sell our creations.

Second, subscribe to a few magazines that influence your particular medium. The good news is that you don't have to read the articles; just look at the pictures. Nearly everything you need to know about trends will be revealed in the photos of your medium-specific publications. The articles will be illustrated with pictures that show the colors, styles, and scale of "on-trend" objects and accessories.

Here are trends you should pay particular attention to:

### *Aging Boomers*

This is the generation of the aging baby-boomers. They still have a lot of buying power, but they also have too much stuff. If you want to sell to this demographic, add or imply functionality to your creations.

### *Simple Elegance/The New Simplicity*

This trend influences almost every medium and category of merchandise, from wearable art to home décor. There's a new simplicity to everything. The look of "more is more" is waning and being replaced by the simpler, more casual but elegant "less is more" look. When I visit craft shows, however, it looks as if most exhibitors don't know this. The country look has taken a back seat to this more elegant style, yet many people still continue to display work that is predominantly country. Lacy, calico, and highly patterned, printed fabric on your walls or table covering is not the look attracting trendy buyers. Those who are making art for the new, simplified genre are finding easier sales, because their art fills people's needs.

### *Pets*

The trend for non-human companions has shown vast growth, with no signs of slowing down. Aging boomers, Millennials, and Generation-Xers are all finding comfort in owning dogs, cats, and exotic pets. Everyone has the ability to create art that speaks to these demographics and those who do will do well.

### *The Food Network*

Have you noticed the food explosion? Food and the highly televised culture now surrounding it have created customers who are ravenous for items related

to cooking and serving in the kitchen, dining room, and outdoors. This trend is huge. If you make products that are niche-marketed for the gourmet kitchen, you have a category of winning products. This trend is particularly advantageous to ceramic, wood, and glass artists, but other mediums could take part in this profitable movement too.

### *Gardening*

The trend toward gardening and gardening products has shown steady growth, and the experts say it shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. Anything you make for the garden that is useful or decorative has a bright future, from kinetic garden sculpture and forged gardening tools to gardener soaps and lotions. This is a hot trend with longevity.

### *Sanctuary*

Our world is so crazy. War, murder, chaos, hunger, disease, and global warming threaten us all. We are a fear-based culture, but people can find sanctuary in art. Creating beautiful things that bring people peace is a wonderful way to associate meaning and benefit to the customers who want to own your work. The more you create art that brings inner peace and promotes spirituality, the more people will respond to it. If you learn to articulate this concept verbally as well as visually to your customers, it will be successful.

### *The Shrinking Middle Class*

The middle class is stressed out with all types of financial burden, from the rising cost of energy and health care to looming retirement. Upper class customers, on the other hand, have a great deal of disposable income. Most of what we make as artists is geared or designed for the stressed middle class, yet the upper class and overseas markets have the most means to buy what we make.

Most of us don't make objects in the scale or materials that appeal to this upscale demographic. When I call on galleries and ask them what's selling, the answer is always, "the big stuff." Sales in the upper end are brisk if the scale and colors of the art are right. This is true for people creating two-dimensional art, as well as artists producing large sculptural accessories. The next time you go to a craft show, look to see how few objects would work in the large homes of upscale customers.

Above are just a few trends that are influencing our culture now. There are many more, but this is a good place to start. Review the trends and consider how you could tweak products you already make, or design new items to address these trends. Then find one trend (current or future) not on the list and create art to speak to that niche market.

### *Get in Touch with Technology*

Tooling up with technology is a tip that will make you more productive and able to compete. Technology tools are some of the best ways to achieve this added productivity. That said, buy only tools you need and will use. The right tool can pay for itself in a very short time through increased output.

Tooling up for the dreaded office work or business end of your enterprise is also very important. If you're an artist who hasn't yet put your business on an accounting software program like Quicken, you're operating behind the curve. Quicken is readily available, easy to use (after a slight learning curve), and it can generate so much information about your business, it'll amaze you. After using Quicken software to pay all your bills, you'll no longer be guessing what percentage of your business cost is overhead. If you don't already use this program or something like it, this would be the best technology tip I could give you.

### *Pricing is Everything*

I can't tell you how often I meet artists who don't have a clue about how to price their work. There's a lot of information available on the topic. Unfortunately, many artists price their work at wholesale value. That means they're selling wholesale to the general public. If you're pricing and selling your work this way, you'll never be able to wholesale it to a shop or a gallery. Pay particular attention to how efficiently you can make your work. Take all costs into account, and establish your wholesale price, which is the lowest price you can get for your art and still make a profit. Your suggested retail price should be at least double your wholesale price.

### *Stop Making Excuses*

Artists often tell themselves a story, and it is one of excuses and limitations. Usually, the difference between someone who is highly successful and someone who just gets by is their mindset. So much time and opportunity is lost in our business due to the fear of failure. Here's a case in point: the most common question I get asked at workshops, conferences, or Arts Business Institute weekends is, "How can I get my work in a shop or gallery?" The people who ask me this question have one thing in common: they're so afraid that someone will reject them that they never take a chance. My reply is, "Just do it!"

Get yourself and your work ready, have it finished and priced, make an appointment, summon up your courage, and call on a gallery. You may be turned down, but if you have the right attitude, you'll learn something that you can use to make your next presentation more successful. And even if the gallery isn't interested, they may suggest another gallery that is.



*The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success* is your roadmap to success in the business of handmade. Industry expert Bruce Baker shares all of the insider's secrets that he has learned over the course of almost 20 successful years in the handmade business.

"If you only read one book on how to succeed in the handmade business, I would recommend *The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success*. Bruce Baker really knows the business and teaches it in an easy-to-understand way."

Gregory Shelton

"I've gone to several Bruce Baker speaking seminars throughout the last few years. I'm so glad to see that all of his knowledge has finally been compiled into a book for everyone in the handmade business to learn from."

Ora Rodgers

"For years I've had people tell me that I should start making a living selling my handmade jewelry. After reading Bruce Baker's *The Ultimate Guide to Handcrafted Success*, I finally know, step-by-step, where to start. This is an amazing resource!"

Lindsay Barker

"I can't believe how many things I've been doing wrong in the way I've been marketing my work! Thank you, Mr. Baker, for helping me see the light!"

Dolores Kelly

**Jones Publishing, Inc.**  
N7528 Aanstad Rd.  
P.O. Box 5000  
Iola, WI 54945-5000  
[www.handmade-business.com](http://www.handmade-business.com)