

# Business-Minded Artists Get Ahead

By Susie Frazier Mueller

It was eight years ago when the mechanics of the for-profit arts industry began to make sense to me. Up until then, I had only sold my art to local galleries and through weekend art festivals. I had never tested my vision for an art business beyond Ohio, and I was determined to know if I could sell into the wholesale gift market...without selling my soul.

As first-time exhibitors at the prestigious Buyer's Market of American Craft, my sister and I presented our line of slate home accessories next to hundreds of wood-turners, metal smiths, fiber artists, jewelry designers, ceramicists, and glass blowers from across the country. While it wasn't easy or cheap to earn a booth there, the prospect of having retail buyers pick up our line was worth eating ramen noodles every day.

Yes, it was terrifying, but motivating. After filling out orders for about 60 galleries from New York to San Francisco, we began the process of managing revenue (and production) for an entire year.

I saw, first-hand, how cash flow is king.

Dinner with a T-bone steak was how we celebrated, and it was a milestone in my quest to evolve from artist to *arts entrepreneur*.

Interestingly enough, the most valuable aspect of that experience wasn't necessarily the orders that were placed. It was learning how our products fit into the market and the consumer purchasing habits that drove the buyers' decisions. We left that show knowing which time of year we needed to build a larger inventory, the exact designs on which to expand, and different price points we ought to consider. For artists, in any genre, at any stage of their careers, that kind of information is as good as gold.

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## Enlighten Yourself

Like most types of entrepreneurship, arts-based businesses are extremely hard work, and if you're able to dodge (or make good use of) flying wrenches on a regular basis, you actually stand a chance of surviving. Half the battle for many artists is shedding their self-destructive behavior, whether it's a lack of commitment to the endeavor, chronic undervaluing of their work, or allowing myths to paralyze them from taking real action.

For example, I used to believe that formally trained artists at decorated art schools had the upper hand because they had access to the best practices. After a decade of seeing all types of artists succeed and stumble, I now accept this as false reasoning. It's *knowledge of free enterprise*, not just techniques of one's craft, which puts some artists at the top of their games.

Fostering left-brain business sense aptly alongside of right brain talent is what's important, if you want to stay in business. In fact, the marriage of these two qualities is now viewed more as a prerequisite than a conflict of interest according to some art books, workshops, colleges and

associations. It's no wonder. Arts-based businesses are just as susceptible to the unforgiving laws of the marketplace as any other business. The ones that last are those that remain relevant to consumers.

A study called *The Creative Industries 2005*, conducted by Americans for the Arts, found that the number of arts-centric businesses in the United States grew 5.5 percent (548,281 to 578,487) from 2004 to 2005, as compared to a growth rate of only 3.83 percent for all U.S. businesses (12.8 million to 13.3 million)<sup>1</sup>. Within this statistic are large numbers of self-employed gallery owners, photographers, musicians, filmmakers and other fine and performing artists. This is great news to learn of the critical mass developing in the creative sector. All the more reason, however, that arts entrepreneurs should pursue every resource available to compete within a growing industry.

But how long does it take?

Marti Geramita, the business partner of acclaimed Cleveland illustrator Derek Hess, put it to me this way. "Be prepared to do six years of free work before you get paid well to do anything." While this timeline may vary for different people, it's true that artists can have longer runways than other businesses. It's what they do while they're taking off that counts.

## Be Active, Not Passive

As a professional artist, you are your brand, and if you aren't constantly honing your ability to connect with potential customers, you ought to accept that your art is more of a hobby than a business.

From day one, it's critical to take every exhibit opportunity to test-market your designs and learn about the audience that may be interested in you. Marti agrees, "You have to track the patterns of your buyers and then get busy making your work accessible to that demographic."

Yet, it's not just about following the latest trend to make money. There are ways to maintain creative integrity while still making a profit from your art:

- Focus on one genre or medium in order to be an expert at it.
- Develop a trademark "style" that's recognizable in the marketplace.
- Work consistently on growing your business, with time in the studio and in the office.
- Educate yourself about savvy marketing tactics or find qualified partners who share that workload.
- Explore new projects only if you're able to hold true to your beliefs and aesthetics.

Sure, artists like Derek Hess are fortunate to team up with others to help them prosper. But even Marti is the first to tell you that Derek would have been successful with or without a partner. Why? "Because," he explained, Derek has always been aware that "it's up to the artist to find his niche and work it to death."

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<sup>1</sup> *The Creative Industries 2005: The Congressional Report*. Available at [www.AmericansForTheArts.org](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org)

*Susie Frazier Mueller is a self-taught environmental artist in Cleveland and founder of Sparx in the City, the initiative that stimulates downtown commerce by presenting the talents of artists. Her art products and consulting services have been featured on numerous radio shows, TV programs and in various publications including Art Business News, The CraftsReport, Women's Health Magazine, Northeast Ohio Luxury Living, Artefakt, The Denver Post and The Plain Dealer. Susie delivers keynote addresses, writes articles, and advises organizations on ways to leverage the creativity of arts entrepreneurs to foster economic and cultural vitality.*