



I loved doing craft shows. They're fun, exciting, educational, and inspirational. You meet lots of people that share your interest in quality hand-made work. You get to see some truly beautiful work and get to meet the people that do beautiful work. Your creativity is freshly energized with a barrage of new ideas and you make some great network connections. Then, if all that isn't enough, - you make money selling your work.

I started in glass art as a craft show gypsy traveling from show to show. I've done over 100 shows retail and wholesale and from that experience built a group of successful glass art businesses. Craft shows are not anywhere close to producing the volume of sales they did in the past but are still a great way to get started selling your work and to maintain a steady market for your work. When I did my first show in 1982 in my hometown Victoria BC there was only 2 shows in all of Western Canada. One in Vancouver and one in Victoria. In a 3 day show I made \$9,000. Allowing for inflation, that would be like doing a show today and selling almost \$10,000 each day. That kind of sales volumes doesn't happen anymore. At that time there was only the one show in town and people lined up to get in. Last Christmas there were over 100 shows here in Victoria. No line ups. Promoters were desperately scrambling to fill exhibit spots and let in many exhibitors that really had no place in a craft show.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't do craft shows. It just means you need to work harder at making them work for you.

Choosing a Show

Not all craft shows are equal. Some are great, while others are gruesome. In some, you'll sell loads of your work while in others you might not sell enough to pay your booth fee. You won't have any advance guarantees how good a show will be until you try it. I've been surprised many times doing shows. Some shows that I expected to be terrific, turned out to be a waste of time. Other shows that I was completely unenthusiastic about, turned out to be some of the best ever. Although you will always have a few of these surprises, there are a few guidelines that will help you guess what a show will be like.

Seasonal Shows

Christmas shows are usually the best and the closer they are to Christmas, the more you will sell. It's not that summer shows are bad - some are great. It's just that at Christmas, people are spending a lot of money buying gifts.

Indoor vs outdoor

Outdoor shows can be dangerous at any time of year. There's always the possibility of rain or wind damaging your display and discouraging customers from visiting.



Charge Admission

Show that charge admission for people to get in will usually have more sales than those that let people in free. When customers pay to get in, they more likely came looking to buy quality crafts than just to pass time looking around. Rent at higher rent shows you will usually sell more expensive stuff than at lower rent shows. Shows that charge a lot for booth space usually have a better assortment of high quality work and will attract the kind of customer interested in high quality work. Very often sales at a low rent show are so poor it was not worth the effort to go - while a high rent show can sell enough to be exceptionally profitable. It's just like retail shops. High rent locations produce a higher volume of sales. It doesn't matter how much the space rent is so much as how much you sell from that space.

Juried Shows

Because "juried" shows are harder for sellers to get in, they usually have a better mix of high quality work. Customer come to these shows expecting to find high quality expensive work. These shows also attract a much higher ratio of customers to lookers. Church basement and school auditorium shows usually just get customers looking for very cheap goods.

Blind Jury

If you want to cater to a more art-oriented buyer, look for shows that use a blind jury system where the jurists are blind to who the artist is and judge the work based only on the work. I remember one such show that when they introduced a blind jury system, many "name" artists were juried out and freaked out.

Festivals Shows

Shows that are attached to some kind of festival (like music, harvest, etc.) are usually poor for craft sales. Especially if the craft displays are only a secondary part of the show. People come to these shows for the entertainment, not to buy crafts. But, these are also the kind of shows that are most likely to surprise you.

Cheap Rent

Shows like those done by schools and church groups with cheap table or booth rent might seem attractive but sales will usually correspond to the rent. I learned that shows with low rent produced low sales while shows with high rent produce high sales. It's the same as renting a store. Low rent means low traffic. Locations with high traffic charge high rent. It takes you just as much time and effort to do a show with low rent as one with high rent. Don't be seduced by low rent unless you're just starting to experiment with shows and not yet sure how to set up for sales and what to make to offer for sale. Low rent shows are for education. High rent shows are for sales.

Expect surprises

Sometime the guidelines don't apply. I recall one show that broke all my rules for selecting a show. It was in early June, had no jury and just accept applications in the order applied, had ridiculously low booth fees and mixed entertainment with craft sales. I expected to sell mostly low-priced items but, as I always do, I took a few expensive show-off display pieces. Sales started with a \$500 piece. Everything I had over \$100 was sold before lunch the first day. I



didn't sell out everything I brought to the show but it was the closest I ever came to taking nothing home.

Also don't expect sales consistency. Once I had contracted to set up a sales booth at a ferry terminal for people to shop while waiting for the next ferry. My contract was to stay for two weeks. I set up Sunday morning and although lots of people looked and asked questions, I sold nothing. NOTHING. First time ever I was skunked. Zero sales. I was way beyond discouraged, but figured if I'm committed to being here I'll try to keep busy and get some work done. Sales on Monday were \$1800. Solid sales every day – except Sundays. I have no idea why Sunday sales were so terrible.

Another big surprise was an indoor weeklong show I did during the summer. Sales were good but not exciting – until Friday. On Friday it rained. The show was packed with people. Half of the whole week's sales were made that day. I guess a lot of people came to get out of the rain.

What to Take

What to take to a show depends on the show. They're all different. I've done shows where only \$10.00 and \$20.00 items sold and others where only higher priced items sold. Unless it's a show you've done before, there is no way to predict what will sell. Even if you expect a show to sell only low-priced items, you should always take a few "show-off" pieces. A few samples of your work that say, "Look what I can do". These will encourage sales of less expensive stuff - and you will be surprised how often they sell. Even when you've done a show several times before, you can't predict what will sell. Just as sales are different in different shows, sales will be different at different times in a show.

The answer to the question, "What should I take?" is "Everything". Take everything you can. Most important is to take what you expect to sell. Avoid putting too much effort into selling what you like to make.

Instead of asking people to buy what you like to make, make what people like to buy.

What Works

When you start doing shows you don't know what will sell so you make a variety of different items and take everything. As you do more shows you learn to focus on what sells well and what does not sell well. The most successful sellers at craft shows are not the ones that display a wide variety of different items but instead have developed a theme or style that is unique to them. They've learned how important it is to be offering something unique. Something other sellers don't have.



Should Have

You should try to have something for every customer. Some small items for customers with only a few dollars to spend and some elaborate expensive pieces for customers looking for something special. That big expensive piece you display not expecting to sell might be what draws people to your exhibit to buy other items. It might also be what attracts a customer to place a commission order with you. Also, surprisingly often, it might sell.

Business Cards

Take lots of business cards. Print lots and take lots. Give them out freely. If you have a website designed to sell your work, the more business cards you hand out at a craft show, the more people will go to your website to order from you. The same if you offer classes.

Preparation

It's important you have worked out a plan for the show and have everything prepared before. I often had one of the biggest displays at craft shows but was usually one of the quickest to set up and quickest to pack up. That's not because I work hard but because everything was planned in advance. I don't do craft fairs and wholesale shows anymore but still do a triple booth exhibit every spring at Las Vegas Glass Craft Expo. I have a floor plan like a blueprint and use it to put the booth together, have all the boxes clearly marked and a specific plan for how everything is to unpack and put out. The plan is applied in reverse as I did take down and pack up to leave.

If you haven't done a show before it's a GREAT idea to do a practice set up before the show. It's also a good idea to watch what other artisans do and learn from the more experienced ones.

Credit Card Payment

Sales won't be in a steady flow but instead a combination of rushes and lulls. When it gets busy you want to be able to process sales as fast as possible. The last thing you want is a buyer ready to pay for something to become frustrated waiting and walk away. Prepare in advance to be ready to process payment quickly.

Pricing

Steady as she goes

Whatever price you decide an item should sell for at a show, keep that price for all shows. Do NOT play games increasing prices for some shows and lowering it for others. That is dishonest and destructive. Doing that will infuriate any customer that learns, or even suspects, you do that.



Wholesale Pricing

If you sell wholesale as well as retail, or hope to start selling wholesale, it's important your show retail prices be two times your expected wholesale price. That's called "keystone". When a store buys from you, they expect to sell it for twice the wholesale price. If you sell retail at a craft show for less than twice the wholesale price, you are undercutting your wholesale customer. I built my business on craft show sales and test marketed everything at shows always charging twice what I expected to wholesale for. When I offered a new product to a gallery or gift shop and they asked, "I'm not sure it will sell at that price" I could respond, "I can confirm it sells at that price because I've been selling it at that price". Building trust is good business.

Price perception game

You should keep prices the same for all shows but need not use the same price markup for everything you make. Remember, there is no such thing as real value. There is only perceived value. What someone thinks it is worth. I used price perception to my advantage. Some of the things I made (like stained glass model ships) were much different than things others made but to keep sales volumes up I also made a lot of small items that sold steady and helped pay the bills. On things I made that were in some way similar to things others made, I set the prices as low as I could to be extremely competitive.. On the things I made that nobody else had, I took a much higher profit markup. When customers could compare prices of my work with that of others, they always had the perception my prices were terrific.

Discount

Discounting a price won't always make customer happy. You might have something priced at \$50 and accept an offer to sell it for \$40. Some customers will be satisfied with getting a discount but more will think if they had pushed harder they could have got an even lower price. Whenever I was asked to accept a lower price I always responded,

"I wish I could sell it for less but I wanted to be fair to everyone so I started off with the lowest possible price."

Make Your Exhibit Special

Display is important

How much you sell will depend directly on how well you display it and how you display it reflects your work attitude. A shoddy display suggests shoddy workmanship. Show your customers you care by putting some effort into your display. First impressions count. If a customer is impressed with your display, they're more likely to be impressed with your work. Perhaps impressed enough to buy it.

Statement piece

Take a few special show off pieces to every show. Just because the show you're preparing for is likely to only sell small items is no reason to not put a few high priced items out on display. A big



expensive show off piece will attract people to your display to admire even if they can't afford it. There's a good chance while they're at your booth they'll notice something else they like they can afford. The \$1000 piece you display might help sell a lot of \$50 and \$100 pieces.

My favourite story about how that works that is from a shop I sell to in Saugatuck, Michigan. They had a large model ship priced at \$2,500. The owner phoned me one day telling me he sold it and wanted another one as fast as possible. I told him I remember he had that one for almost a year so it's not something that sells fast. Why the hurry? He replied that he had it in the center of his window display with special lighting at night and that display brought a lot of people in to look at it. They didn't buy that piece but many that came in bought something else while they were in his store. He was concerned about how many sales he would lose because he didn't have that display piece bringing people in.

Segmented Display

There are two distinctively different ways to display for sale. The "eclectic mix" and the "drug store". The "eclectic" is how most people display stuff in their homes. No particular arrangement or pattern. Everything scattered around. The "drug store" display is with everything in some structured pattern or order. Many gift shops like the "eclectic" display with everything scattered about intermixed. The assumption is a customer might enjoy browsing and while browsing happen upon something they like enough to buy. The "drug store" display is with everything displayed in orderly categories. When you go into a drug store, all the makeup is in one place, all the tooth care products in a different place and all the health care products in yet a different place. When you're looking for a new toothbrush you don't want to be sorting through the different options mixed in display with hair spray and foot fungus medication. If you want those things, you'll go look for them in their display area. Use the "drug store" display in your craft show. All the glass in one group, all the paintings in another group and all the pottery in another group. This display doesn't just look more professional but significantly increases sales. If you have plates and vases and jewelry for sale, put all jewelry in a group, all the plates in a group and all the vases in a group.

Create an Opening

It's not possible at all venues but where you can, arrange your display with an entry. If your exhibit has a table across the front it's more likely people will walk by but if you have some floor area where they can walk into to your booth, it's more likely they will come into your booth and stay long enough to buy something.

Banners & Posters

Big bright multi-colored banners and posters will make your display special and draw people to it. It can be photos of other work you do, it can be images of you doing the work or perhaps just listing all the things you have to offer – especially if you take commissions or teach classes.

Brochures

If you offer classes it's a good idea to have a brochure or flyer to give to anyone that asks.



Lighting

Add lots of extra lighting to your exhibit. The new LED lights are relatively inexpensive and use surprising little power. Load up your booth like it's decorated for Christmas. Bright light attracts customers. Strategically positioned lighting is an effective way to draw attention to a special piece.

Live demonstration

Nothing attracts people more than a live demonstration and having a crowd at your booth attracts more people. If what you can be demonstrated at your booth, design your booth to allow for it. Whenever there are no people at your booth, start a demonstration to attract people.

Videos

As good as, maybe even better than a live demonstration is a monitor playing videos. Produce some videos of you working and put them on a loop to play constantly.

Special Services

Shipping

Offer to ship anything a customer buys. Many a sale is lost only because the buyer is concerned about how to get it home. I had small posters on display that said,

"Worried about getting it home? Don't be. Let us do it for you".

I had calculated 10% of retail price as a reliable average cost for packing and shipping. When a customer was obviously interested, but wavering on deciding to buy, I would often close the sale by offering to ship it free.

Gift Wrapping

If the show is at Christmas or near a special holiday like Mother's Day or Valentine Day you might offer a gift wrapping service. Everything you do that makes you different than other sellers increases the likelihood customers will buy from you and not buy instead from other sellers.

Layaway Sales

A customer might want to buy but can't afford it right now. You might offer to take a deposit and accept installment payment.



Making It Work – the Do's & Don'ts

DO greet your customer.

Make eye contact, smile and say hello. The person you greet might be buying your next meal.

DO initiate conversation.

It could be something as simple as, "Are you enjoying the show?" or "Where are you from?".

DO encourage sales.

Talk to your customer and tell them something about yourself and your work. If you think a customer is interested in something specific, tell them something about it. The easiest way to see if they like something is watch to see what they touch are spend a lot of time looking at.

DO be patient.

No matter how painfully difficult it is. Remember, that person making you impatient might be helping you pay your rent.

DO dress to impress.

You don't have to dress like you're going to a wedding or fancy party but also not be there looking like you just came from cleaning the garage or garden. This is a job interview. Dress for it.

DO create traffic.

If there is nobody outside your booth, put yourself outside rearranging or organizing something. Everything you can do to make your booth look busy will bring more people to your booth. The more people that come to your booth, the more people will buy something from your booth.

DO network with other vendors.

You can learn a lot from them. They can tell you what other shows are worth doing and warn you about any problems that might come up.

Do be a good neighbour.

Be considerate of other sellers. It pays good dividends.

DO NOT read a book

or play with your computer, or continue a conversation with a friend when a customer appears.

DO NOT be eating or drinking

when customers are in your booth. There's plenty of time for that later when there are no customers.

DO NOT just stand or sit

waiting for a customer to ask to buy something. It makes you look uncaring and indifferent. If you're not enthusiastic enough about your work to be anxious to talk about it, why would anybody be enthusiastic enough to want to buy it?



DO NOT say “May I help you?”

NEVER EVER say that. That question just irritates customers and chases them away.

DO NOT hover.

Don’t hang over a customer like a starving vulture or commission salesperson. Find a comfortable balance between engagement and aggression. Watch your customer’s body language and tone of voice to see the difference.

DO NOT be curt, rude or abrupt .

No matter how desperately much you want to be. Even if this individual isn’t a potential customer, they may well bring back someone that is.

DO allow taking photos.

There are lots of reasons people take photos. Some just as a reminder of their visit and some to use hoping to copy what you make. You can’t stop people from taking photos. Accept it. I always encouraged it. More than a few times I’ve sold something to someone that had taken a photo from my exhibit and contacted me later to buy. I was making stained glass model ships and often had people taking photos and asking questions about how they were made were it was obvious they wanted to try making them for themselves. When I realized how many were doing it, I produced a series of instructional pattern books to sell to anyone that wanted to learn how to make stained glass model ships. I sold a lot of those books.

Extra Benefits

Craft shows can provide many benefits other than sales revenue. Sometimes those benefits are more valuable than sales revenue.

Market Test

Big companies spend big money on market testing new products. Craft shows give you a way to market test at almost no cost at all. To test market a new technique or new product just make one piece and put it out on display at a craft show. Watch for customer response and customer comments. You’ll know quick whether or not it’s popular. If it sells, make more for the next show. If it doesn’t sell, don’t make any more. Make something else to try.

Price Sticker Test.

An effective way to test a new product is by putting the price sticker on the bottom so if someone wants to know its price they have to pick it up to check. We humans are a tactile species. If we like something, we touch it. If a customer sees something they like, they will want to know the price so they’ll pick it up. That’s valuable information for you. It shows you what customers like. If they touched it they liked it. Now.....the really important lesson. Did they buy it? It’s



hard to know if you have priced your work relative to what customers will pay. If you have something on display a lot of people have picked up to check the price and none of them bought it, you know they like the product but do not like the price. You now have 4 options.

1. Reduce the price.
2. Improve it to justify the price.
3. Offer it for sale only where customers will pay higher prices.
4. Stop making it.

Contacts

Craft shows are a great place to make contacts for commission orders or even for new wholesale accounts. Many gift shop and gallery owners routinely cruise craft shows looking for new suppliers.

Website Feed

If you hand out cards or brochures to people that visited your exhibit some will make the effort to visit your website. The more people that visit your website the more sales you will get from your website.

Classes

If you offer classes, you'll connect with prospective students that want to learn to make what it is you do.

Ideas

Seeing what other artisans are doing will generate new ideas for new products for you to make. Everything that encourages you to innovate and invent encourages increased sales.

A Place to Start

One of the great things about doing shows is the information you collect from other exhibitors. If you're interested in whether or not some show is good, ask someone who has done it before. Networking with other sellers can provide invaluable information. To a large extent, I built my business on the contacts I made at different craft shows - and I have constantly benefited by all I learned doing them. I loved the shows and miss doing them. I started with retail craft shows, extended to doing wholesale shows, expanded to selling supplies and equipment to other artisans, continued expansion to manufacturing tools and equipment for other artisan and now focus mostly on teaching other artisans. It all started with craft shows.