

Keeping Up With a Changing Wholesale Market

the Crafts Report
NOVEMBER 2000

How artists can attract more buyers ... and keep them coming back

by Bernadette Finnerty

GALLERY BUYERS HAVE HIGHER DEMANDS ON THEIR ATTENTION THAN EVER. NOT ONLY IS THERE A WIDE VARIETY OF QUALITY WHOLESALE CRAFT SHOWS, THERE IS THE INTERNET, INCREASED MARKETING CAPABILITIES FOR ARTISTS IN TERMS OF PRODUCING HIGH-QUALITY MARKETING MATERIALS, E-MAIL IMAGES, PHONE, FAX, ETC. YOU CAN VIRTUALLY GET IN TOUCH WITH ANYONE, ANYTIME. THE SPEED AT WHICH BUSINESS CAN BE AND IS BEING CONDUCTED HAS DRASTICALLY INCREASED, AND IT SHOWS NO SIGN OF SLOWING DOWN.

Many have questioned where this will leave the wholesale craft market, and even retail venues, which have been the traditional means of selling work for 30-plus years. Show organizers agree that alternate forms of communication, and increased demands on gallery owners, have caused a shift in buying patterns away from the traditional summer and winter buying seasons. "More and more buyers seem to depend on the Winter shows," says JoAnn Brown, director of shows for the American Craft Council (ACC). "They tend to do more reorders in the summer," she says, acknowledging that buyers are also relying on other forms of communication to place reorders and even find new work instead of regularly attending summer wholesale shows, which can drain an already tight travel budget.

"It's a really different market than it once was," says Brown. "When we started the summer wholesale shows, the main reason was to accommodate artists who also taught for a living. That's not where artists are coming from today."

Despite the shift in buying patterns, show organizers stress that what really keeps the buyers attending and buying is keeping work fresh by offering new designs at every show. And that responsibility lies with the exhibiting artists. "The show can bring buyers to market, but it can't bring them to your booth," says Wendy Rosen, president of The Rosen Group, which produces the Buyers Market of American Craft (BMAC).

NO PLACE FOR REORDERS

Buyers agree. Finding new work is their primary reason for attending. "We're not there to write reorders. I can do that over the phone," says Art Milstein of Hanson Galleries in Houston, Texas. "We attend shows to find something new and exciting." Milstein says he has been frustrated recently because, in his opinion, artists aren't adding enough new merchandise to keep buyers interested. "[The tendency to resist changing a line] is partly a by-product of good business," he says, referring to the principle that if something sells well, there's no need to change it. "But that doesn't work for a gallery. My philosophy is: If they liked it, they bought it already. If they didn't like it, they didn't buy it, and they probably won't," he adds.

Milstein says he rarely reorders the same item more than once. (There are a few exceptions: big sellers in his gallery such as cutting boards, door harps, and some kaleidoscopes.) "I think there are many artists who are not really clear on what 'new' means. For us, it means more than changing the color of an item," he says. "I know it's tough for artists, I'm not saying it's easy by any means, but the challenge is to create something new that is as salable as what sold before."

Rosen agrees. "If an artist 'earns' the reputation of 'SOS' (same-old-stuff), retailers will ... walk right past. That's why it's so important to put new work up front, send postcards and advertise new work



Buyers walk the floor in the Handmade section of George Little Management, Inc.'s New York International Gift Fair.

before the show," she says. "Most retailers spend hours (or days) planning their time at a show. You want to get on their must-see list ... before the show."

NEW WORK SELLS BEST

Ceramic artist Lynn Goodman exhibits at ACC Wholesale Markets, and has made it her policy that at least one-third of all the work that she brings to any show is new. "Over the years, I have found that the bulk of what I sell at each show are those new items," she says. There are some items, like her larger, more expensive pieces, that she brings to every show. But those are different, she says, "because people need to see them a few times before they finally decide to commit."

IF IT AIN'T BROKE ...

Goodman says she understands why some artists choose not to change their lines for every show. "There are some people who think, 'If it sold before, why tinker with it?' But that doesn't work for me," she says.

"Every product has a sales bell curve," adds Rosen. "The problem is that too many artists wait until things start showing signs of being broken before they start to fix it. Too many artists rely on just a few (sometimes only one) great widgets in their line. It's important to see that widget as a place in the path ... not a destination point. You must always be designing beyond that. Try new paths that extend from that point. And you must do it when [your work] is approaching the top of the curve; not after it starts to decline. It's too late then."

LISTENING TO THE MARKET

Robert and Sheila Kuster of Belle Mead Hot Glass in Belle Mead, N.J., exhibit in BMAC and the New York International Gift Fair in both summer and winter. Sheila Kuster says that in addition to bringing at least three or four new products to every market, listening to what buyers want has been crucial to growing the business. "We have a real respect for the people who buy our glass. They know more about selling it than we do," says Kuster. "They're a real resource for us." She reflected on one situation where a buyer was specifically looking for glass doorknobs and drawer pulls. "It wasn't an item that [our studio] had ever done, and finding the appropriate hardware to fit the knobs and pulls took a lot of research," she says, "but having that push from a buyer really added to the process."

While the Kusters listen to what their buyers want, they have a strong philosophy against creating something new that they have seen already. "We're glass artists, but we only do one vase and one pitcher. We don't make the same things that everyone else is making and selling well. When a product is suggested to us, we'll only do it if there's nothing else like it on the market."

Kristina Pitaniello of Pitaniello Company in Boston, Mass., has also made it her business to take customers' comments seriously. Pitaniello sells her "reactor rings" at Handmade at the New York International Gift Fair. It wasn't until she figured out how to accommodate retailers' needs that sales of her rings, which change color with a person's body heat, started to really take off.

"Rings are a hard thing to sell, because there are so many different sizes," she says, "so we figured out how to change the design so we could fit as many fingers as possible with three different ring sizes, and we packaged the rings in little bins that retailers can put just about anywhere in their stores." Pitaniello says she squared off the top of the rings, which makes them easier to fit a wider variety of sizes, and she now sells the rings in individual bins that each hold 45 rings. While this forces the buyer to order a larger quantity of rings, sales have gone up because the product comes complete with its own packaging and display.

ADAPTING TRADE SHOW TACTICS

Kuster, who worked as a trade show organizer before joining her husband's business, added that the couple is keen to what works in a trade show atmosphere. "Obviously, craft shows are very different from other trade shows, where companies hand out T-shirts and other novelty items to get noticed. But sometimes you can custom fit those strategies to your own business," she says. One such example was a drawing for a piece of hand-blown glass. Buyers who received the Kusters' pre-show mailing were asked to come by the booth for the drawing. "It was a new and different kind of excitement," she explains.

The Kusters are also aggressive about pre-show marketing. "We call or mail to the list of *Niche* Top 100 Galleries," says Kuster. "We call our top customers, tell them what's new and [give them our booth number]."

CONSTANT COMMUNICATION IS KEY

"Phone feedback has become really important for keeping tabs on how things are selling," says Rosen. "You can't wait six months to find out whether your work has sold and the retailer needs more. Most retailers will tell you that they expect most of their inventory to turn four times a year. If you aren't getting reorders in between markets, something is wrong ... and you'll eventually be dropped."

Rosen points out that the onus is on the artists to know how their work is being handled in the stores. "Know what the markup is and also know where retailers are placing your work; and whether they are advertising or promoting it," she adds. "Do you know the employees' names? Have you talked with them? The more they know about you ... the more they can tell customers about you."

Buyers and promoters agree that there will always be some pieces in any artist's line that sell well every year. They also say they realize the time constraints that busy artists are under to create new work and deliver current orders. But creating new work, being open to suggestions from the marketplace and keeping in constant communication are paramount to the success of any artist/retailer relationship. Rosen stresses that the success of any wholesale show relies on a partnership between artists, the promoter and the economy. "I've had shows where we spent tens of thousands more [on promotion and advertising] than we brought in, and the show was a flop," she says, "I've had shows that have had half the budget and were wildly successful. The economy controls part, the show promoter controls part and the artist controls part. But we all have to do our jobs well to make it a good show."

Bernadette Finnerty is editor of *The Crafts Report*.

Copyright ©2000
Subscription Questions: [Subscription Services Dept.](#)
Letters to the [Editor](#)
Technical Problems: [Web Editor](#)

The Crafts Report Online
P.O. Box 1992, Wilmington, DE 19899
(800) 777-7098, (302) 656-2209
fax (302) 656-4894