

What is the business of art? David M. Boje September 12, 2009

I teach in the Business College. I teach small business consulting. For three years I have been fielding teams working with arts and culture organizations in southern New Mexico. In fact 60 teams did free, service-learning projects in our region of the state. Here are some ways to enhance the business of art. I hope it's a help to artists, galleries, arts organizations, and to me students who want to learn how to sell more art. See <http://talkingstick.info>

How to sell art? Too many artists are showing work in exhibitions throughout New Mexico, but not selling anything. Even when artists open their own studio or put their work in a gallery, most times their art is not selling. Many artist I know put up a website. But few people visit their website to see their art. And those that do are not buying. Many artists join one, and most join several arts organizations (or clubs or associations). Such arts organizations run by artists, cross-promote one another's works, put on exhibitions in libraries, and even take space in galleries or museums for special events.

Do websites sell art? The problem is most artists, most galleries, most arts organizations and most of their websites are not really marketing that art. Most people, despite EBay, are not going to buy art based on a web image. Be ready to send them a photo, or to invite them to a show where they can see it for themselves. Many of the websites my small business consulting class examines are not optimized for the web. They do not have the embedded code to be recognized by search engines. No one can find the site. A website by itself won't sell art. It takes follow up email, phone calls, postcards, and visits to the buyer to sell art. Sites not maintained have wrong contact information, art that is already sold, etc. Such websites are not helping sales.

How to sell? You and organizations representing your art need to have a convincing story. You need a list of buyers. And then to contact those buyers and tell your living story. The buyer needs to know who you are, what kind of skills you have, what style of art this is, and what success you have had. The buyer needs to know who your gallery or arts organization is.

The story needs customers to tell it to. Who are your customers? What price can they afford? What size? How much wall space or floor space do they have? Is this an investment or decoration? Are they a collector or one time buyer? What style of art do they like? Is your art the kind of style they appreciate?

Art creativity can be disorganized, but to find a buyer, artists need to get organized. There are things artist, galleries, and arts organizations can do to increase sales.

How to Network. Each day contact five potential buyers. Meet them by networking, by asking for their card or contact info at events. Set a goal of selling one art piece each workday. Set a price that makes the goal doable. Make a small painting or sculpture piece, and sell it a reasonable price. Set a goal of selling 20 art pieces during the month. Send five emails a day, to different set of possible customers, with an image of your art. Build a list of 100 prospects. Let them know about your artwork. Make new art daily, and sell it daily.

Keep a notebook. Make an entry for each new potential customer you meet. Get their name and contact information: address, phone, email. Record the styles they like, price range, current art in their collection, etc.

Computerize. Develop a database (a word file or spreadsheet) where you can search for styles of art that particular customers are seeking. Make a searchable database of potential buyers for your art. If your database is a shoebox of business cards or scraps of paper with phone or email scrawled on it, its not surprising that your art is not selling.

Art does not sell itself. A gallery owner, club, their website, or your own website needs to tell the story of the artist and the art, its style and value. What is it about your art that makes it sellable? What is it about you as an artist that is marketable? Galleries can develop contact lists. I went to a gallery opening and there was no sign in sheet, no place to leave my card. No one asked me what kind of art I liked. This too me, tells a story about the seriousness of their marketing efforts. They were not building a prospect list. Other galleries had a sign in book, but did not seem to develop it into a marketing tool.

I have been to arts organization exhibitions and the art pieces did not have prices. No one bothered to tell the stories of the artists or their work. I was not asked to sign in. No one gave me a call about the exhibit, the artists or their work.

Make the call. You can have the best story of the best art, but if no one is selling it, who is going to know? If you have developed a database, its time to turn it into a prospect list. Then you have to actually contact the potential buyers. Its easy to send them email, but not effective. Yes, you will want an email list. And send new information about shows, new art pieces to that list.

What to say? Look at your notes. Talk about them. Ask them questions. Tell your living story, not a dead narrative, or some script you read. Boring and it turns off buyers. Have a conversation about your new work, a new process, something new in your life. That ways it's a living, moving, changing story.

Better to call them than to only email or postcard. Invite them to see your artwork. If you have made notes about your prospective buyer, then you have things to say. If they have a moderate budget, then art with a moderate price is the topic. If they have a small space, then small sized art is the topic.

Know your customers. The best ones stand in line to buy your art. You call them first, when you have a brilliant new piece to sell. 20:80 rule: 20% of your customers are buying 80% of your art. The prospect list changes. The 20% who were buying five years ago, are not the same list buying today.

What story are you telling? When someone visits your studio or the gallery or museum exhibit where you work is being shown, what story does the salesperson tell? In most cases, the representative does not know the story of you and your work. Or they do not know how to tell it to the buyer. They believe 'art sells itself.'

How to close a sale? There is a time to tell your story, and a time to be silent. There is a time to pop the question: do you want to add this piece of art to your collection? When

do you ask? After they get around to asking you a price (if they don't know) or about shipping? Time to pop the question and keep silent. People who ask, then rush in to fill in with chatter, lose the sale every time. Silence is golden. It's a time when the buyer is thinking, weighing options, calculating an offer. Interrupt them and the moment of the sale is lost, destroyed, often forever. Silence after you ask the buy-question is the most important selling lesson you can learn. Right after record keeping. And keep notes while you are having that sales conversation. For the next sale.

How to pick a gallery? Visit them. Watch, look, and listen! Are those representatives knowledgeable about the art and artists? Talk to artists whose work is shown there. Is their work selling? Are they satisfied with the story being told to buyers about them as artists, about their work?

Is the art being presented professionally? Is there information on price, on the artist, on the style and type of art? Is there a representative who is knowledgeable? If the buyer has to ask the price, many of them move on, and don't ask.

Are buyers there? I attend many exhibitions, and do not see any serious buyers. There is the usual crowd of *lookie-loos*, who drink the free wine, and eat the free food, but do not buy anything at all.

There are galleries that do not have professional art agents. Evaluate if there is someone there to sell your art, to tell your story, to explain to buyers the value of you and your art.

Gallery owners, and art cooperatives, go out of business unless they learn to sell art. Another option is they show art, and give away free food and drink, but do not sell art at all. They are often galleries and something else. The something else is another kind of business, where the owner knows how to sell, such as a gift shop, a print shop, or a place giving music lessons. They hope that some day the gallery will sell art and they can focus on just the one business, instead of subsidizing one business with the other.

A professional gallery owner that knows how to sell decides which artist and what kinds of artwork are most sellable. They look at the artist's portfolio, at the success stories of their sales, and they decide to represent them, if it's a good bet the art will sell.

Join Arts Organizations. Joining one or more arts organizations is a good way to socialize, and sometimes a way to pick up new art skills. But, too often the artists are joining as a substitute for doing their own art sales and marketing. Artists in arts organizations, who are not selling art as individuals, generally, are not selling it collectively. Go to their exhibits. Check to see if anyone is buying the art. Is it just about showing, and not selling. You are in the wrong arts group, unless socializing is what you are seeking. I know successful artists, who got successful after they took matters into their own hands, and developed their own marketing. Most arts organizations have a website, and put member art there. But that does not do the job of selling. Most arts organizations have several arts exhibitions, but that does not do the job of selling. They run ads, gets the art reporters to do stories, but too often it's only the artists showing up and a few people who like the food and a free night on the town. Each of these arts organizations has a mission or set of goals that involve marketing and promoting art of

their members, and even to build an arts economy. But are they doing these things? An arts organization that is not building a database of prospective customers, calling the customers, visiting customers, building relations with customers, is not a good bet for selling your art. Joining an arts organization is no substitute for doing the work of selling your art.

Build Your Own Arts Tribe of Collectors The desire to belong to arts organizations, to put your art in exhibits, to go to meetings, is all very social. It feels good to belong to a tribe of artists. However, you want as artists, to build your own tribe, a tribe of buyers eager for your art. The price of admittance to your art tribe is that they have purchased your art, hopefully many times. People in your art tribe want to be part of your living story. Their role in your living story is to be a buyer, a promoter, a networker helping your art to sell. When your tribe is comprised of active collectors, your living story has sales value. Ask collectors in your tribe to refer you to other collectors. They know one another.

Why do people buy art? To find out, you will need to connect to buyers, to have conversations with them, to invite them to art events. People buy art to change their lives. Collect the living stories of how your art has changed their lives. Collect testimonials about your artwork. Post them (with permission) on your website, and add them to your portfolio (the one you show to gallery owners and to collectors).

Why do people collect art? For investment, as a fetish, as a fashion, because they can. Where do collectors go? They go where the art is shown they want to collect. Probably won't buy from art shown on a restaurant wall, unless the artist told them to go there. They are more likely to go to artist studio or to a gallery. Collectors read art magazines, and rely more upon them than newspaper ads. Collectors go to well known arts colonies, art destinations, art cities with reputation for kinds of art they want to collect