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Galleries in Cyberspace:

Not A Buck Rogers Idea

By Dave Donelson

"You can do anything on the web, but it's got to pay," says Mike Stutland, owner of Artique Galleries in Lexington, Kentucky. His observation sums up the quandary of gallery owners considering how much--if any--time and money they should devote to marketing online.

The Internet offers many exciting business growth possibilities. You can have a simple website promoting your gallery or an online catalog offering thousands of items for mail-order purchase. You can email a personal note with a picture of a new piece by a favorite artist to an individual collector or send a newsletter highlighting new works, upcoming events, and market trends to your entire database of customers. You can hold an auction, view portfolios from new artists, or list your gallery among the major tourist destinations in your area. The marketing possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

And your pocketbook. And manpower. And patience.

Customer Interaction

Stutland put his galleries online in 1999 and says, "The customer reaction has been mixed. Most of the orders that come through the internet have taken further human interaction." He describes the process like this: "A lot of people find us on the internet, contact us via email, then we move to the telephone and conduct our business that way."

Those customers may well not have been reached otherwise, however, so they represent new sales, according to Stutland. "The web site has attracted customers from beyond our normal market area," he says. "It has brought people into our stores, especially through our links with many tourist information sites." A feature on his site allows the potential customer to request driving directions and a road map to the galleries from just about anywhere in the United States.

Jan Pessin, manager of Freehand Fine Crafts in Los Angeles, says interactions with customers from their website work much the same way. "You can go to our website and, if we happen to have the item shown, you can contact us and we'll send it to you. If we don't have the exact item shown, but we have something different by that artist or something in the same vein, I can take a digital picture and send it to you." It's not fully-automated e-commerce, but it works.

Major Commitment

At the other end of the spectrum is the extensive web presence maintained by NJM Gallery, Portsmouth, NH. Owners Lois and Lee Kupersmith have considerable experience selling in cyberspace. "We've been online since early 1995," Lee Kupersmith says. "We were the first gallery online of any type."

NJM's website has over 300 pages and features thousands of pieces of museum-quality contemporary art glass blown by more than 100 artists. Customers can order online through a secure server, get toll-free live telephone support, and track their shipments through UPS. The website is essentially another complete gallery--which happens to draw customers and artists from around the world who shop with their keyboard, mouse, and credit card.

The images the customer sees on the web are color-corrected pictures of the actual piece offered--not a sample. As Lee Kupersmith explains, "We show actual inventory, we don't just show samples, so we make sure our images look like the pieces. We take care to make sure the website is done so that we'd be happy buying a piece off of it ourselves." Maintaining a website like this is a full-time job. "It is a huge amount of work keeping a website up to date," according to Lee. "We update our site every day to keep a current inventory."

"Anything that's worthwhile takes time and effort," Lois Kupersmith adds. How worthwhile is it?

"I won't give out any numbers," says Lee who devotes almost all of his time to the site while Lois runs the physical gallery, "but obviously we wouldn't be doing it if it weren't paying off."

Everybody's Doing It

The Kupersmiths aren't alone in finding cyberspace a profitable place to do business. Enter the exact phrase "art & craft gallery" into the Google® search engine, and you'll see 2,700 listings from around the world. Try the search engine Alltheweb® and 5,700 come up. Not all of these are galleries, but the search results are indicative of the growing use of online media to promote and sell fine arts and crafts.

"I think we have to be there (on the web) because it's not going to go away," Stutland says. "There will be more and more ways of using it and the group of people that use it is expanding."

The Pew Research Center, which tracks Internet and other media usage, says nearly 60% of American adults use the web for entertainment, email, keeping up with the news, and shopping. While there are some regional variations (the South dips below 50% while both coasts approach 70% usage), it's interesting to note that these figures are comparable to daily adult newspaper readership in the top fifty markets as reported by the Newspaper Advertising Association, which was 55% in 2002. One of the most attention-getting numbers in the Pew report is the high percentage of Internet users who have made a purchase online--45%! That's a lot of customers.

Online Alternatives

Gallery-owned websites aren't the only way to the use the marketing potential of the web. There are several online craft "malls" where both galleries and artists market in groups. Many gallery owners with and without websites combine the convenience of digital photography with the ease of email to market pieces to receptive customers. Auction site e-Bay®, often mistakenly thought of as only a venue for consumers to sell the gleanings from their attics, is also the on-line home to some 650 stores selling crafts and craft-related items as well as more than 400 art galleries.

Every gallery owner we talked to pointed out the amount of work involved, however, which is no small consideration. Sometimes, too, a little online imagination helps. Betsy Hills-Bush, owner of Drosselmeiers.com in Scarsdale, NY, says she once received a multi-tiered candle pyramid that had been crushed in shipment from the artist. "I sold it in shards as a craft project on e-Bay," she says.

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Tips From The Pros

In an exclusive interview, Chairman/CEO Chuck Curtis of Valentine Radford Advertising in Kansas City, Mo., interpreted for us the results of the agency's August, 2003, survey of 1000 online shoppers as they apply to art and craft galleries.

1. 89% of Internet shoppers use the Internet for product information. Make sure your web site is rich in product details. Art and craft gallery owners are in a particularly strong position to meet this need.

2. 45% of Internet shoppers click on their local newspaper and 32% click on their local television station site. This is good news for galleries who can inexpensively buy advertising just on the local media's web site.

3. Also buy advertising in the email news updates that local news media send out. About half of online shoppers have signed up for these.

4. 58% of these shoppers have signed up for an online loyalty program. It's a smart idea to reward your best customers with a frequent buyer plan (like the frequent flier programs run by the airlines.) For example: Get a 10% discount on your next purchase when you spend $50.

5. More than a third of our survey (38%) use a wish list for their purchases. These are items they would like to buy, but can't purchase at the moment, and they register their desires online.

6. About two-thirds of the time a shopper will research a product online and then buy it in the store.

7. Many retailers will publish their coupons for in-store use online because the distribution costs are so much lower than putting them in the newspaper or on direct mail.

8. Between 40% and 60% of shoppers (depending upon the amount they spend) strongly object to shipping charges. Many retailers build the price of these into the products, or offer free shipping above a certain amount; e.g., "Free shipping when you spend $50 or more."

9. 81% of shoppers expect to find a wider selection of products online. Remember that your market online is worldwide. If you find items that you can't display in your store because of limited retail space, put them on your web site.

More information about Valentine Radford's iCustomer® Observer survey is available at www.valentineradford.com.