

THE JOURNAL REPORT: SMALL BUSINESS

Beyond Fair Trade

The Web has given artists an easier way to pursue their passions -- and make money from them

By SHARA TIBKEN

Sherry Ward has spent decades crafting and selling handmade goods, everything from quilts to crocheted hats to costumes for tribal dancers. But last year, she decided she needed a new way to reach customers.

She was getting tired of traveling to countless craft fairs -- one of the biggest venues for her work -- and packing and unpacking boxes of products. So she began offering some of her creations on **Etsy Inc.**'s online marketplace for handmade goods.

Now she gets steady orders from the site and recently sold a batch of hats to a shop in Europe.

"I love that it's an international community and that it's primarily focused on handmade things," says the 60-year-old from Maryville, Tenn. "You can get a good price for your products, and they don't charge you so much that you lose all your profits."



Sherry Ward

Every entrepreneur faces an uphill battle -- but artists and craftspeople have an especially rough time. They turn out small batches of items with a big investment of time, and often find themselves trying to reach an extremely small audience. And most of the time, they're crafting their wares while holding down a day job.

CREATIVE OUTLETS

- **The Situation:** Artists and craftspeople face an uphill battle trying to sell their goods, investing lots of time to reach a tiny audience.
- **The Development:** A host of online marketplaces offer these entrepreneurs a place to showcase their wares.
- **The Caveat:** Artists still have to do the heavy lifting of marketing their work.

Now they can get help from the Web. In recent years, hundreds of sites have popped up where craftspeople can sell everything from handmade jewelry to fine art for a relatively small charge -- usually a flat monthly fee

plus a commission on sales.

"Throughout history, artists have been dependent on dealers and galleries," says Eric Sparre, founder of Artspan LLC, a site where artists can showcase their work and connect with buyers and galleries. "Now, they can do their own marketing. It's a very empowering thing, and it levels the playing field."

For amateur artists, the lure of these sites is simple: It's a painless way to earn money from a hobby. "Selling online is so convenient, especially with having other responsibilities," says Samantha Kuykendall, a 26-year-old stay-at-home mom in Independence, Mo., who sells jewelry on Etsy. "You can do what you love to do, but you don't feel responsibility about meeting a quota or making someone else happy. Doing it on my time and doing what I enjoy is what makes it great."



For pros, the sites are a way to streamline an existing business. For instance, craftspeople who want to test out new products usually must make up a whole batch of items and lug them to craft fairs to see if they

sell. With Web marketplaces, artists can make a single prototype, list it online and see how many people click.

And, of course, they can get their work before a much broader audience. Karena Colquhoun has sold her digital images and prints on Etsy for a couple of years. The 40-year-old says the site offered a chance to move beyond the confines of her fairly small community of Adelaide, Australia.

"Putting my work out there has also brought my artwork to the attention of clients requesting commissions and retailers who wish to stock my products," says Ms. Colquhoun, who sells 40 to 120 items a month on Etsy at an average price of about \$25.

Pamela Larsson-Toscher, a 60-year-old oil painter in Santa Barbara, Calif., has landed gallery showings thanks to her exposure on Artspan. "When I've gone in to talk to galleries and I tell them I'm on Artspan, they look at me differently," she says. "I think it makes me look more professional."

Since moving online, Ms. Larsson-Toscher says, she has sold her paintings for \$750 to \$10,000, and has generated enough income to quit her full-time job as a sign-language interpreter.



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Pamela Larsson-Toscher

Craftspeople also say they appreciate the smaller scale of the sites. Many artisans who list their items on eBay say that their work gets lost on the popular auction site, where it's competing with tens of thousands of other products -- both handmade and mass produced. In comparison, many popular craft sites offer work from just a few thousand artists.

"I have done a few things on eBay, but eBay gets so overwhelming," says Ms. Kuykendall. "It's hard because when you do something handmade like that, it kind of drowns on that site."

Jim Griffith, dean of education for **eBay** Inc., replies that successfully selling your own crafts or artwork in any venue takes lots of promotion. He adds, "We still think eBay brings the highest buyer traffic...when it comes to looking for unique, unusual items, and that include arts and crafts created by individuals."

Ease of use is another big plus for many artists, who often don't have the time or technical know-how to create full-featured sites of their own. Many online marketplaces simply ask you to upload photos and descriptions of your work, and they handle the rest, including payments from customers. The artists are usually responsible for shipping, however.

Hand to Mouse

A look at some popular online marketplaces for artists and craftspeople

■ Artspan.com

No. of artists: 2,200
Cost to list on site: \$29 setup fee; monthly fee from \$13.95 to \$19.95
Unique viewers: 70,000 to 100,000/month

■ Etsy.com

No. of artists: over 150,000
Cost to list on site: 20 cents per item; 3.5% commission per sale
Unique viewers: over 10,000,000/month

Sources: the sites

■ ShanaLogic.com

No. of artists: about 100-120
Cost to list on site: site owner selects items; some artists get upfront fee from site, others a percentage of sales
Unique viewers: 200,000/month

■ Yessy.com

No. of artists: 5,546
Cost to list on site: \$59 annual fee; 10% fee on sales in some cases
Unique viewers: 300,000/month

Some sites make things even easier. At Shana Logic Inc.'s site, for instance, founder Shana Victor photographs all the items and handles every aspect of sales, including shipping. But the site works a bit differently than most. Ms. Victor, a 31-year-old from Ann Arbor, Mich., handpicks the items that appear on the site; artists can't list anything they want. "People submit work, and if I find it appropriate to my brand, I accept it," Ms. Victor says. "I'm very picky."

Of course, the sites won't solve all the problems artists face. For one thing, there's marketing. Most of the sites take out ads and try to get prime placement on search engines. But individual artists must still find ways to stand out -- whether trying to build word of mouth on blogs or building sites of their own where people can get more information about their work.

Potential sellers should also get ready for a big reality check: These sites can help you bring in extra cash, but most likely not enough to quit your day job. Even professional artists often do limited sales online, and have to maintain their regular real-world businesses to make ends meet.

Ms. Ward, for instance, currently sells only about \$300 to \$500 of merchandise a month online. She still has to travel to fairs, and sell antiques, to maintain her business. "I would like to build [the online operation] to the point where I could sustain myself on it, but I'm not close to that at this time," she says.

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