

The Marketing Dance: Choosing Your Partners

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Richard "pouring tea" for Silken Laumann and Carol Selfridge
at the Minerva banquet

Twenty-five years ago we would go just about anywhere to try to sell our work. Yes, we were sort of hippies and we thought nothing of packing up our functional pots and selling them off a tie-dyed bedspread in a Friday "flea market" at the university or a folk festival or craft fair, even in the middle of a shopping mall. We really liked the direct contact with the end users of our pots and the "attaboys" that we got when passing over our latest, fresh-from-the-kiln, experiments to an appreciative public. In those golden granola days, you could live on \$300 a month (who needed a dental plan or children's university tuition?) and anything you could drink coffee or wine from, or would hold soup or a plant with a matt glaze and a splash of decoration, would usually sell. If you only had to wrap up half your stock at day's end you were laughing all the way to the grocery store.

In those days we thought we could identify our customers. They looked like us (head bands, bell bottoms and women wearing drapes) they liked the same things (music and "handmade art") and our inexpensive work was considered a "consumer durable" (like an old car or stereo system) of this counter culture. Of course our most expensive item was about \$40. Things changed, us, our work, our audience, and our marketing approach.

We remember a first "reality check" about what is called the SLAGIT principal, Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time. In the middle 1970's, Randy Johnston remarked at the Calgary Ceramic Seminar about how he had tried to sell his subtle woodfired pots at a music festival. He thought this was his target audience because "they liked the same music." He said he wished he had sold the food that day.

Selling good work requires the right context. Just because it looks earthy doesn't mean it will sell well on a blanket on the ground. It's hard to dance like Ginger Rogers if you're partnered with Bozo the Clown.

The real nadir of my mistaking my audience came on a snowy winter weekend (I only lasted the first day) at an antique and gun show, where I sold nothing and was frightened by the "gun nuts" in the bargain. My friend, who sold leather handcrafts, was going, and we both liked antiques and thought that at least half the crowd would be "our people." I also remember the remark of a pan handling wino with a proper British accent. He assured me at a farmer's market on Mother's day that "things may be slow now," (people were only buying flowers, house plants, chickens and vegetables) but "when our crowd gets here sales will be much better." Yeah, seemed like a good idea at the time.

What follows is a description of some of our present approach to selling our work, using a specific SLAGIT event as a starting point to explain some principals of selling your work in this post Thatcher/ Reagan global economy. First a brief note on what our work is. Carol and I work collaboratively making stoneware and porcelain pots for use (gas reduction fired and woodfired, cone 10-11) and illusionistic majolica glazed terra cotta, (electric oxidation, cone 04).





Most of the stoneware and porcelain is sold from the studio, (a showroom in the front porch and yard of our Victorian house), at two open house events, summer and winter, (900 mailed invitations). The illusionistic majolica also is sold in about 15 galleries across North America.



Our wholesale represents at most 35% of our income. We have lived solely from our work for the last 25 years and although we are not rich, we own a home and travel a little and help our three kids with university expenses. We have been in about 95 exhibitions, international, national and provincial, some juried, some invitational, in the last 20 years, (see our web site at <http://www.compusmart.ab.ca/selfridg>).

Presenting Your Studio as Community Minded (Or dancing with the Folks That Brought You)

With the hard economic realities of the end of the "welfare state" and the cut backs and governmental offloading of public services especially for those on the economic bottom in North America, fund raising has become an activity for citizens at all levels of society. Whether it's a bake sale to send preschoolers on a field trip or a new cancer facility or children's hospital or art center, we don't want for "worthy" causes and as artists we are inundated with people who want our donated work. Often those who do this fund raising, especially up-market celebrity events, are our clients, patrons, supporters, and buyers. These past customers and their fellow benefit attendees are a significant part of our target audience in our city of 850,000. They don't differ significantly from the profile of what Wendy Rosen of the Rosen group, publishers of American Style and Niche magazines, calls "The New Collector." They are usually women; college educated, with a family income of \$100,000, a house worth \$270,000, children of WWII parents, 35-54, baby boomers who were flower children in the sixties. They are sometimes cynical. But "It is your (handmade) work that gives them hope and nurtures the little voice in them that tells them that individual people can still make a difference in this complicated world."

An instructive example of our community involvement occurred when Carol and I participated in a fund-raising dinner last year when asked by two of our regular customers. This was for the Minerva Foundation which funds ABC Headstart, Hope Foundation, Kids Kottage, Kids with Cancer and many other worthwhile endeavors. Usually people ask us for a donation of our work for a benefit auction (more about that later) but this time the request was different. They were having a fancy diner with an inspirational speaker talking about overcoming adversity. The speaker was Silken Laumann, Canada's two-time Olympic rowing medalist, who persevered despite a career threatening leg injury incurred in a boat crash just before the Barcelona Olympics. Two hundred thirty people would pay \$350 per couple to dine at twenty-seven round tables in the Empire room of the Macdonald hotel in Edmonton. The Hotel is a palatial "Chateau style" historic landmark in town, the place for visiting royalty, i.e., The Queen and the Rolling Stones.



Instead of the traditional flowers for centerpieces they wanted to "borrow," for the evening, one piece or ensemble of our trompe l'oeil majolica for each table. The reasons why this "seemed like a good idea at the time" illustrate some of the important things we have learned since those days of "the gypsy pottery caravan hits the road," of twenty-five years ago.



1) As an artist you want to control your life as much as possible, and other people's ASAP deadlines and artificially enforced themes are a quick way to kill creativity.

The organizers asked us to participate ten months before the banquet so the timing allowed us to set aside work we would be making for the winter open house anyway. We were able to choose pieces we thought appropriate. We merely postponed by a week or two some of our regular gallery shipments. The event itself took us about a day of our time

2) You want to present your work in the best possible appropriate context.

This venue was elegant and up-market, as good as any local gallery with the added twist that even though they were not used to serve the meal, many of the pieces suggested that possibility. The idea of placing the work in front of our target audience was enhanced in that it was the center of attention, something that they discussed, especially after the M.C. made the announcement that acknowledged our presence as the makers. Yes, we attended as guests, mingled, dined and yes, "there is a free lunch." It was not seen as a selling situation, but as an opportunity to view the work, more like the way we see things in a museum or in someone's home. Although we were mentioned in the program, there were no prices or promotional material present, reinforcing the idea that this was our "contribution" to the event.

3) Controlling the costs of public relations, or when to say "yes" and when to say "not this year," is crucial.

We get asked about twice a week for contributions of our work and like everyone else we get telephone solicitations for funds. Money is something we don't have a lot of, so we have decided to only give goods in kind to causes we support. This also lets us deal with the problem of worthy causes who use professional fundraisers who often keep more than 80% of the funds they raise. The delightful thing about the Minerva event was that we only "lent" our work. These pieces actually took the place of about \$1800 worth of flowers, which might have been some benevolent florist's contribution. Our costs were in time, transportation and planning. Fortunately, the hotel is only ten minutes from our home/studio and the work was transported without much packing in two mini-vans, and set up with the help of one of the volunteer /customers who asked us to participate. When you compare this with the enormous costs paid by corporations to publicists to present their companies as good corporate citizens, this event was very cost effective.

4) If you can, it is usually a good idea to show solo rather than with a lot of competing goods.

It seems counterproductive to us to advertise and draw a crowd so that others can make the sales. Fairly early on we decided that it was better for us to stage an event, bring out our loyal clientele, and sell to them in an environment that we could control to some degree, rather than to be in the "scrum" of a sort of "juried" fair that sold "crafts." It may be that as a buyer it is nice to find a "bargain" hidden amongst the dross of a craft fair, over-run with beginner work that got "juried in" because of the organizer's greed for fees and admission receipts. But as a seller, it can be discouraging even without the gratuitous insults of people who think it's easy. ("My aunt took pottery once." "She better not have taken any of mine.")



I am sure that there are some excellent juried craft shows both retail and wholesale. However, the idea of sending out invitations to your former clients to meet you in a large hall where they will be confronted with the work of 200 others selling "substitute goods" never made much sense to me. Our philosophy has been that, unless you are some kind of factory, (Warhol comes to mind) the amount that any one individual (two with no assistants in our case) can make

in a lifetime is really very little. Ideally you should have a path from the sale of one of your valued works back to you, either directly or through a long time continuing relationship with a store or gallery. If you make quality, your past work should sell your present. You want them to find you again unlike the guy selling "Rolex" wrist watches six on an arm on street corners. The people who come to our studio and our two open house events see it as a destination. We have a "home craft" in an historic residential neighborhood, not a commercial shopping area. Although they don't usually "throw their wallets in from the street" very few are tire kickers or only looking for entertainment. Although the Minerva Banquet was not a selling event, we might not have done it if we were one of thirty artists each asked to loan a

piece. The impact of our pieces being the visual stars of the evening, with the silver, crystal and chandeliers, and not playing merely a supporting role was important. Sometimes a secondary role at a fund-raising auction can be valuable, often if the other items are more up-market than yours are. But it all depends on the audience, their affluence, and their familiarity with your work.

5) Sometimes it is important to show your work again to your target audience.

Our experience has been that the way for your customer base to grow is by letting past customers "sell" your work for you. Even if you donate or "give a piece away," the person who buys it at the event will usually display it prominently in their home, or give it as a gift. They become your new customers, and they bring new blood to your mailing list. We always tell our clients to "bring a friend" on the invitation and these new friends are then our new regulars. The Minerva event had a liberal sprinkling of our regulars, almost one or two at each table. They were reminded about us and enthused about our work to their dinner companions. Most messages need to be repeated to be fully communicated.

6) Projecting the image that your work is valued, changing for the better and in demand by a growing audience is necessary for continued success as an artist.

Unfortunately, the only constant in contemporary society is change and a demand for novelty. People always want to know what is new and unique and what important "success" you have had lately. It is also a truism that you are seldom valued in your own hometown until some consensual validation comes from outside, from away. Although they seem like a lottery where the tickets are good slides, we enter juried exhibitions (only a few are open to Canadians) and we have had some success.



"Tempting Eve Teapot"

majolica, 58 cm, (Cone 04), \$800 U.S.

The 11th Annual San Angelo National
Ceramic Competition, 1996, (juried)



"Daphne Comforts Apollo"

majolica, (Cone 04), 55cm, \$1000 U.S.

Monarch National Ceramic Competition

Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts, Florence, Alabama, 1997

We let our regular customers know about these minor triumphs by making postcards of these pieces with the info about the show and we send them out as invitations for our open house events. They also provide an introduction and consensual validation of the gift giver's "good taste" when they accompany the gifts we sell from the studio. As well as these cards, our invitations also have a letter that is a "brag sheet," telling of our recent new work, our exhibition successes and distant gallery representation and some of our donations to worthy causes. The Minerva dinner and the photo of me pouring tea for Carol and one of our national sports heroes, Silken Laumann, provided an interesting visual for our winter open house letter, extending the scope of our contribution to our larger audience. The cachet of having your work collected by a celebrity or given as a gift to a visiting dignitary will certainly enhance your work's value to your normal clientele. You do however, have to let them know about it.

7) If you are careful, sometimes what you give away you get back double.

When you let people know you donate your work for worthy causes, you have to expect that more will ask you. How you say yes and no is a public relations dance where you have to be fast on your feet. First the "yes" need be reserved for events that will be attended by your target audience. It can be a benefit for the indigent women's shelter, provided at least some of those attending are not indigent women and they know of your work and appreciate it. Don't expect the bidding to go through the roof at a picnic or rummage sale. Black tie usually means they bring their wallets. Even more important is the way the work gets there. You don't drop it off yourself or send it by courier. When one of your potential customers asks you to give them a donation, you should arrange for them to pick it up at the

studio/showroom. Usually they bring a friend and often they remember that they need a gift either for themselves or for someone else. At the least it is a time that they can see your latest work and find out about your current exhibitions.

It is also good to let them know about the tax implications of your donation. We generally don't bother with getting a charitable tax receipt because we then also have to show it as a sale for tax purposes. It would be a balancing entry that just raises our gross. For them, giving money away is easier because it lowers their tax. For us giving our work away is just an expense at its wholesale value. Provided that you only give away work you are proud of, not seconds or inferior pieces; this can be an opportunity to clear the decks of older inventory. Sometimes the best pieces are the last to sell, especially if they have been "in the dark" at a distant gallery. Often these older pieces are perfect for representing you to the grateful fund raising community.

The business of saying "no" can be difficult because you may be disappointing a valued customer. Sometimes it is easier to just give them a couple of mugs and some postcards, especially if you think their event will be "thin" on your target audience. Also, if it is a sensitive organization which is partisan, like a political party, or a controversial issue which divides your clientele, or an art association that you know would never show the kind of work you do, then it is not too hard to say "not this year." It is particularly galling when other visual artists ask us to help them raise money for their installation and performance cutting edge art venues when they only want to associate with "lowly craft media" on the one day of the year when they have a fund-raiser. Unfortunately, too many artists went to art school where they had a pottery sale of beginner works (candidates for the recycle clay bin), sold so that they could bring in a "real artist," seldom a "lowly" potter. All of us want our work to be taken seriously, and not feel used or gratuitously insulted. We do, however, support theater and dance groups and often receive complementary tickets to events we would pay to attend anyway. People understand that we get asked by almost everybody and they understand that we can't support everything, and in the end these are really decisions about how we will distribute our goods as advertisement.

We try to dance with the folks who brought us, to pay back the community that has bought, collected, praised and valued our work. Without them we could not have done it. We are now getting a lot of wedding present business from the kids of our aging hippie customers of twenty years ago. These kids grew up using our pots and see them as the kind of things they want to give and use. We are part of their community. At the Minerva Foundation Banquet, Carol sat next to the heart surgeon who replaced her mitral valve twelve years ago. (When he says he wishes he were talented like us, we laugh and say we think he's pretty good with his hands.) His wife has brought scores of people to our studio. They like many of our customers have become our friends. It is a pleasure to help their fundraising endeavors, to nurture that voice in them that says individual people can still make a difference in this complicated world.