

# Beyond the Product and the Price: Tell a Story and Sell your Art

by Bruce Baker

Every year I attend a dozen or more shows ranging from art/craft shows (wholesale and retail) to gift shows (trade only). While at these shows I see many sales transacted and a multitude of orders written. For every sale closed, there are countless missed opportunities and even more sales postponed to a later time. This is mostly due to the fact many artists, as salespersons, do not tell their customers what they need to know (or want to hear) about their work to motivate them to buy it. Sales and good sales skills are about language: within every good salesperson you will find someone who is masterful with language and uses it to get the results they want. Language, both verbal and body, are fundamental in creating better sales.

Most artists are visually oriented: they expect their work to sell by just putting it out in front of customers. Customers, on the other hand, may not be and these individuals need words to get involved in your work. Sales will soar when you learn to tell fascinating details and stories about your work, which give your work meaning. This concept is important for both retail and wholesale selling—if you get vital information about your work to the sales floor of a shop or gallery, you should see a dramatic increase in your reorder status.

Those artists who know how to communicate the benefits of their work with a good story always have better sales.

Only two elements of a sale dominate most art/craft transactions. When a customer sees something they like they generally have a positive verbal response. Once this dialogue dies down the next response (or question) usually turns to the price. If the price is not clearly marked, “How much is it?” would be a typical question. At this point most art sellers will give the customer the price, quit talking and wait. This waiting period is when many sales are lost. If this scenario sounds familiar, chances are you have not discovered the power of the other half of the sale. You are only trying to sell your work by the product and price paradigm, which is 50 percent of the sales equation; there is another half to the sales dynamic

that is often overlooked. Fifty percent or more of a sale revolves around telling a potential customer a meaningful story. The story of what you make and why will trigger the customer to buy (for themselves or for resale).

## Everything has a story

The more you can link the story of your work to current trends or to the benefits a customer can experience, the better that story will work to close more sales. Keep in mind the story must be sincere and true. Do not say anything to a customer you personally don't believe or they will see through your lack of integrity.

Generally, customers do not buy anything they don't understand or have no knowledge about. This is particularly true if the item in question is to be a gift. If you give someone a gift, you want to be able to tell the recipient about it. Think about what happens during gift giving: don't you usually end up explaining why you thought it would be a great gift for that person? It is part of your job as a salesperson to be able to relate to your customers and communicate the purpose and function of your creations in a warm and friendly manner. The story of an object is also important to the person who is buying something for themselves. While you are communicating this information to the customer, make sure they are touching the object if possible. The touch response, (along with invoking any other senses) will help to create even more interest.

When telling the story of your work, don't get too technical. Artists often struggle with this when finding the proper sales dialogue. Technique and technical information are not as interesting to customers as they are to you, the artist. For example, ceramic artists who talk about firing their pots to “cone ten” or dissect the ingredients of their glaze formulas are missing the point. But if you say to a customer, “You can take this serving piece from the freezer to the broiler, no problem,” this is a story they will understand. To say “this dish is a brie baker” and to stop there is insufficient. But to add “This brie baker is wonderful because when you pull it out of the oven, it will keep your brie soft and spreadable

throughout hors d'oeuvres time," will keep interest. Then supply the dish with several different recipes for baked brie (value added), and you have created a story with which the customer can visualize the benefits.

The story will help you sell your art, guaranteed! Here is a list of some common themes for stories that grab customers' attention:

- Describe how owning the pieces will benefit the customer. How will this piece enhance their lives and bring them joy, tranquility or peace? Will it make it easier for them to entertain, or will it add value to the decor of the home? Many people buy objects to impress other people—don't rule out expressing (in subtle ways) that people will notice it.

- Functionality is a huge story downplayed or overlooked. It might be quite obvious to you what an item is for, but often it will go over a customer's head. Multi-use/dual-purpose characteristics will help amplify its perceived value and help you sell it!

- The composition of an item can add to the story. The materials used will create interest; explain where they are from or any special meaning associated with the materials. For example, if you are using clay in your ceramic ware from the region the show is located in, that's worth mentioning.

- Connect your work to the past. If you are keeping a tradition alive, say so. Explaining why your pieces are an important piece of the history will endear you to the customer.

- Create bodies of work or collections, and talk about them like they are a family. Nesting bowls or nesting objects build a relationship between the objects and promote people to buy them all together and not leave orphans.

- Color can be a story. Be aware of color trends and explain them to the customer, promoting your pieces in those colors as representative of the newest trends. Let's say they like the look of your glass bead necklaces, but are unsure of a purchase. If you explain that they may be the first to have a necklace in the newest color trend, this may complete the sale for you.

- Style is a good story for a customer. To say a piece is "transitional," meaning it can go into either a contemporary home or a traditional home, is a story that will peak interest.

- Inspiration is a huge topic of interest, especially for nonfunctional art. What it is you are trying to say as an artist (clearly stated) and relating that to what you want the customer to feel when they experience your work can be important in terms of sale.

Practice with these and then learn new categories of stories to add. Keep in mind, for the story to be effective it must explain the benefits to the customer and be a story they can relate to.

### Another key point

When customers talk, be sure to listen! They will tell you what you need to hear. You must be able to solve their objections (if any) before you are able to close the sale.



During your conversation, it is important that the customer touches your products if possible. Working all senses is a successful tool.

The product, the price and the story are like three legs of a stool; with only two legs the stool will fall over. Use these three elements of a sale to create better business. Here is a simple test to see if you are using product, price and story effectively. Do these words sound familiar?

"Well, I'll have to think about it, I'll be back!" If you hear these words frequently at a sales venue, it is a loud and clear admission on the part of your customers that you did not tell them enough story. They could not make up their minds on their own; they either talked themselves out of it, or they postponed the sale, as you did not give them enough incentive to buy it *now*. The next time you hear these words, say something like this: "Allow me to tell you a bit more about this piece before you go." Watch what happens...they will tune back into the object if you tell the right story, and if there are other people around they will all be listening. This creates the interest for the next customer. Fascinating details are what fuel the sales machine.

Those artists who know how to communicate the benefits of their work with a good story always have better sales. This process takes practice for sure, but it will be worth it.

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