

The Psychology of Selling Art

by

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A Monkey + Seal Guide

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Introduction

Hi hi everyone! This is Rick and Eve of Monkey + Seal. This is our guide to help you sell more at craft fairs, gallery openings, art expos, and other sort of in-person events by getting into the proper mindset as an artist-salesperson.

We've been lucky in a way to have some extensive experience working retail, which translates to us selling stuff for other people. When we created Monkey + Seal, we found that this salesperson training really helped us when we were out selling our own products and wares. We also have seen tons of people selling at various shows who seemed to be a bit afraid of talking to people and engaging them, and they did not seem to be enjoying themselves, so we thought we would create this little guide for you to help you gain the confidence to sell and represent your art.

So you know, this guide is really geared towards 2D visual artists (painters, illustrators, designers, photographers) since that's who we are, but there are a lot of applicable lessons to be learned no matter your craft if you want to be able to sell your craft in person.

We hope you enjoy this little guide, and we'll see you at the craft fairs!
-Rick + Eve

The Psychology of Selling Art, or It's Okay to Hustle

Okay. So you're an artist. Chances are that if you're reading this, you have all these assumptions about selling art that you don't even know you have. Don't worry, it's okay, we've fought a lot of these assumptions ourselves over the past years (that's why we know about them - we dealt with these ourselves).

There is an old-school way of thinking present in the art world that is sort of a myth - and it's preventing you from really succeeding as an artist who can live off their art.

The myth goes like this: You create art. You scrape and you struggle by, making piece after piece and eventually you get discovered. Either by a gallery or a patron and then suddenly you're awesome and everyone loves you and pays hundreds of thousands of dollars for your work and then life is great. There is the assumption that great art must be slaved and starved away before reaping reward. People wait to be discovered without taking any actions to market their art personally.

This is totally poo-poo. Being miraculously discovered after you have creatively slaved away might be the case for a few people here and there, but the vast majority of people who do this eventually get tired of waiting to be rescued and end up giving up on their art and getting a day job so they can eat something other than bread and peanut butter day in and day out.

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The reality is that it takes years of constantly showing portfolios, sending out postcards, going to art shows, gallery shows, making contacts, networking, entering and winning contests to become art giants like that. While some might get it right and get a solo show at age 19, it's definitely the exception and not the rule.

Built into that myth is the assumption that if you do get out there and hustle, if you go around selling prints, if you commercialize your art, you're considered a sell-out who is making art for money. So already the idea of selling your art is froth with myths and negative assumptions that hamper you from getting out there and getting your art seen by the right people.

We'd like to shatter that myth right now. First off, you're not a sell-out if you land a huge illustration client or start making six figures from your art. You're a sell-out only if you're giving up your morals or your true artistic vision for money. Big difference.

So we're not advocating that you drop your style and do whatever is really hot right now in the art world. If you don't like drawing cartoony-owls for hipsters, please don't do it! If you paint classical landscapes, do that. If you paint nudes, paint nudes. If you do a frenzy of mixed media spraypaint with your own blood and poo go right ahead and do that. But just make sure that you're doing what you really love to do, not what you think you SHOULD love to do or what you think the next niche the market will latch on to.

(This is a special note for all you art students, or graduates from art school. Every art school has a certain "look" to it. If you aren't into that style, then don't do it. Seriously.

We'll be back to cover this topic a bit more, but yeah, do what you like to do, at least when it comes down to selling your art.)

To make money off your art, you first have to be okay with the idea of selling your art. Most artists initially think that if you're selling your art, you're creating art to make money. This is the wrong way to go about things. What you have to do is create art, then make money off that which you have created. Subtle, but huge difference. In the first case, making art to make money, you'll end up chasing whatever style or subject is selling at any given time, and you might make some cash up front, but will never build a solid reputation as an artist. You'll sell out for short-term financial benefits (if any).

In the case of making art then making money off that art, you're letting your inner artist do the work first. Create something you are proud of, then find a way to monetize that creation. In this way you will be making art for yourself, then figuring out how to cash in on it and make a living.

Now, if you read any sort of modern day entrepreneurial course, they will tell you to figure out the market first, and then create the product. In most cases, when you're just doing something to make money and to wean yourself off of your day job, this is the smart thing to do. HOWEVER, this doesn't really work so well for artists.

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I don't know if you've ever had to make/paint/draw/illustrate something that you just didn't want to do, but if you have, you'll know that it's not fun. Rather, experiences like that turn art into a painful process when it really should be awesome and fun. Getting paid to do art, especially at first, seems fun and exciting no matter what hurdles you might be asked to but in the long run, painting crap you hate will ruin painting for you. In that sense you might as well just stay at your day job and paint on the side for yourself. So in our case, we need to create for ourselves and then either find or create a market for our work. It's generally a lot easier to find a market rather than create one, but if you end up creating your own market, then the rewards will also be a lot greater (since you're the only one filling that niche).

When you're ready to accept that making money isn't selling out, and you're creating art for yourself - awesome. Now, you have to deal with the false assumption that the only way to make money is to sell your originals. This is not true.

Monkey + Seal rarely bring their originals to craft fairs. Why? Because we don't sell a whole lot of them at craft fairs. We have found that people at the craft fairs we attend generally are not into spending \$175-1,000 on original paintings. They are, however, into spending \$20-30 on prints. This could be much different depending on the type of event you are exhibiting at. Granted, there is the additional expense of making the prints, but we've seen people sell color photocopies of their work printed on cardstock. We sell archival giclees, but the idea is the same. And if you aren't a painter or illustrator, you could sell prints of your photos, or if you're a designer you could sell posters or something. Either way, selling multiples are a great way to get

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your art out there. You are offering a great product while making it accessible to the general public at an affordable price.

A real life example of this is how Monkey did a painting, framed it, put it up in a show, and offered it at \$175 for the original. While this painting hasn't sold yet, he sold over \$200 worth of prints of the same piece in a single craft show. It really doesn't matter whether you are selling your originals or prints, what matters is that you're selling your work and getting it out into the world to people who want your art.

The lesson to learn is that some people cannot afford the original, but love your work and would want to buy a print. As the artist, you can make a living off your art in either way, by selling your original or your prints. While the common perception is that prints might make your originals worth less, in fact, they help to sell the original. It used to be that exclusivity was the trait that sold art. Nowadays, saturating the market and getting your art up as much as you can is what's going to bring you success. By having your images (whether they are originals or reproductions) in more and more places, it gives you more and more opportunities for your work to be seen by the right people.

So. Assumptions have been cast aside, and now you're ready and willing to go and sell your art in person. Now, how do you become a salesperson for your own products? How do you represent your art in person? Well, I'm glad you're asking that question, because we've got the answer coming up.

Psychology of Salespeople, or How To Help People Buy Your Stuff

We take it that when you think “Sales” you think “Creepy-pushy-car-used-salesman-type” sales. Well, that’s what we thought at first too, but a lot of successful sales have nothing to do with pushiness, or being a creepy car salesman (apologies to used car salesmen everywhere.) Actually, it’s a lot about your state of mind and being very non-sales-y.

Instead of thinking “How do I sell my stuff,” you should be thinking “How can I help people?” “What do they need from me?” **By selling your art, or your craft, or whatever, you are helping people fill some sort of need.** You might think “Well, no one needs xyz craft/art thing,” but in a way, people do. Every purchase fills some sort of need, usually an emotional one. Whether it reminds them of their childhood, or it makes them laugh, or it makes them feel inspired, or it serves to solve a problem that they might have, what you are selling serves a need. It’s the same reasons for why we buy other art from other artists, the piece move us in some way and fulfills a need.

Monkey + Seal used to not really want to sell. We were afraid of being in public with our art and afraid of interacting with people about our art. At first, it also always felt like you were selling people things that they don’t need. Sure it’s scary, especially since art is so personal. But since you must . . . it is simply a state of mind and continual practice.

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And really, good sellers don't push things onto people – they figure out what the customer needs and figures out how to provide them with something that they need. And most importantly, they believe in their product and its worth, so believe in your product and put it out there.

The other thing to keep in mind is that the difference between a good sales person and a bad salesperson. That difference is that you have to realize that your product is NOT right for everyone. Pushy, terrible salespeople will try to sell to every single person regardless of whether or not the product is right for you. Good salespeople will sell to everyone at least once, but won't expend extra energy trying to close a sale with people who aren't really interested.

This brings us to our second major point: **Shoppers can smell desperation.**

You've all seen that person – wild-eyed, looking around for any potential sale they can get. They're usually smiling really big, abnormally big, and they talk a mile a minute. "HihowyoudoingcanlinterestyouinmyfinehandcraftedgoodsthatIcarveby-hand?" You try to say something like "Oh, I'm just looking," but before you can even begin your sentence, they're already pushing something into your hand to demo or try on. "Ohgreatwhydon'tyoutrythisonIthinkit'lllookgreatonyou <quick breath> Ohthatlooksgreatit'sonly\$11.95andI'mhavingaspecialsoyoushouldbuyit righnowwouldyouliketopaycashorcredit?"

As a vendor, you don't want to be this person. We all try to stay clear of people selling at booths like that, as you don't want to get sucked into this whirlwind of

desperation for a sale. So if you are this person, please take a breath, and relax a bit.

The take-away lesson here is that while you definitely should be talkative and friendly to everyone, you don't want to scare away people. People need some time to mull things over and once they have enough information, they want to be able to browse in peace.

Give them time to think stuff over, and even if they walk away, chances are they're making their first (or second) rounds through the show. As a rule, we never buy anything on our first walk-through of any show, since we're on a budget and want to make sure that we're spending our money on the stuff that we really want. Many times our sales occur towards the end of the day when people have seen everything in the event and have decided that our products are going to do it for them.

Also, if you're trying too hard to make a sale, you'll burn yourself out. Save your energy and enthusiasm for the people who are equally enthused about your products. If people are only looking at our prints and not our ties, we don't go trying to sell ties. So if you sell pottery, and they're looking at your butterfly vases, you probably don't want to tell them about your demon sculptures unless they mention they want something a little more scary instead of pretty.

But what if your customer just isn't into your work at all? Or they say they really like it, but walk away without buying anything. This is something that we all have to deal with, and since we're selling our own art, it's can be especially scary if you don't know how to manage it. This beast's name is Rejection.

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If you're selling gardening tools for a big box retailer, and someone doesn't like the hammer you offer them, no sweat. It's not personal. When you're selling a painting you worked on for a few weeks and it seems like no one really likes the piece, it's really hard to distance yourself from your work. But do that you must.

First of all, us artists tend to be a very self-criticizing bunch. Many of us have self-esteem issues where we are either self-deprecating or too cocky, both attitudes which fuel a very competitive, cut-throat industry (which just creates a vicious cycle of poopiness.) If you're trying to sell your art, you need to realize that **if people don't buy your art, you are not a bad artist. Your sales do not reflect your skills as an artist.** If you aren't selling, you probably need to change which audience you are selling to.

Art is very subjective. We can talk about art in academic terms, about good use of color harmony or rendering of form or line quality, but for many of your prospective buyers, there is also a seemingly magical quality that comes down to whether or not they just really like the piece.

What this means is that you need to make sure that you're selling to the right people. Figure out who your audience is. Is your audience 40-something moms who like photo-realistic paintings of dogs, or is it 20-30 year old single men who don't own any art but really likes funny comic drawings? Whoever your ideal customer is, you should figure out what kind of shows they'll be at and vend there. You'll be doing both yourself and your customers a favor.

Also, sure you're showing to the right people to buy your work, rather than to the people who you want to buy your work to gain their approval. This can be a big difference at times, especially if you're in any sort of artist community (art school is the most obvious one) where your style/subject matter varies greatly from what the school looks for.

Conclusion

Well, that's it for this guide. We hoped you gained some valuable insight into the way you should be approaching sales from a psychological point of view.

Everything you're read can be boiled down to the following major points:

- By selling your art, or your craft, or whatever, you are helping people fill some sort of need.** Remember this, and use it to help your customers find what they need. This also helps you chill out as you should remember:
- Shoppers can smell desperation a mile away.** Don't be the creepy vendor who tries waaaaaayy too hard. It'll probably hurt your sales in the long run rather than help them.
- If people don't buy your art, YOU are not a bad artist. You just need to find the right audience.** Do that, and you'll find your sales shooting up.

Make sure to download our companion guide filled with action-oriented steps on how

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to use customer service to improve your sales at craft shows. It's called "[7 Tips to Better Customer Service](#)" if you're interested. Thanks for reading and good luck selling!

PS - If you liked what you read, make sure to check out our [blog](#) where we talk more about the day-in's and out's of being working artists and announce new guides, new products, and workshops for artists! We'd also appreciate signing up weekly newsletter where you'll get all of the above sent to you in one tidy little package.

Thanks so much for reading and extra special thanks if you'd like to comment or spread the word via [Facebook](#) or on [twitter](#).

Cheers,
Rick +Eve
(Monkey + Seal)

PS - If you liked the guide and you've found that it's made an impact on your ability to sell your art, we have a virtual tip jar on our [Guides](#) page that would greatly appreciate any love you have to show. Thanks!