

The Gallery Game

Time-proven tips to help you sell your work in a competitive market

It's been 30 years since Phil Brennon opened his first gallery, where he sold his own and consignee's custom woodworks. Today, Phil is a partner in one of the most successful galleries in the Southwest, representing more than 60 top national artists. While working on both sides of the sales counter, Phil has learned many lessons as both a wood artisan and a gallery owner. Interested in selling your work? Here's what you'll need to know about dealing with galleries.

1. Is your work gallery quality?

This question is one of the biggest stumbling blocks for turners who want to sell their work. You need more validation than a spouse who thinks all your turnings are great. Get an honest evaluation from multiple respected sources in the field and have your work critiqued by successful turners. Your pieces should represent fine workmanship as well as good design.

Since most galleries will give you only one shot, go out and view the competition before approaching a prospective gallery. If you need to hone your skills before

presenting, it's better to wait and improve your product rather than trying to sell substandard work now. And remember, galleries always welcome new or cutting-edge work.

2. Select a gallery to represent you.

In today's vacillating economy, with 50 percent of businesses failing in the first year, I would bet that failed galleries nearly top the out-of-business list. What should you look for when selecting a gallery? First, location, location, location! I've seen many galleries with fine work for sale fail after a few months, solely because their locations were just one block from the main traffic flow.

Also, just because a gallery will take your work doesn't mean they can sell it. Find out what their experience is in selling fine craft. Do they have a track record, or is this just their business whim? Most professional turners will tell you, "It's not difficult to get into galleries, it's difficult to find the right ones."

Research prospective galleries carefully. Do they pay on time?

Do they move work or just store it? How do they display other work similar to yours? (I've seen galleries take top-notch work and put it on a bottom shelf or just use it as decoration for the gallery.)

Finally, check with their represented artists. I recommend speaking with three or more to learn their levels of satisfaction.

3. Don't show up at a gallery unannounced.

Avoid cold-calling. Never approach a gallery to show your work without making an appointment. Few gallery owners want to or have the time to stop their daily routines and view a potential artist's work. I can't count how many times artists have walked into our gallery with products, only to leave discouraged and disappointed when they couldn't show their work because our staff was serving customers or taking care of other scheduled business.

Most galleries have set times when they review new work. Ask for their review schedule and viewing format. Who participates in the review? Do they prefer photos, slides, or CD?



4. Be ready with work.

One of the most important considerations for a gallery is whether or not they can get work replaced when they sell it. A gallery relies on having inventory available. I hate to admit it, but artists and craftspeople as a group are notorious for being less than punctual at supplying work when needed.

You should have enough pieces immediately available for an entire display should your work be accepted by a gallery. If you're accepted into a gallery, you don't want to have to come back in two months to bring in work. By then, another artist will surely have taken your space.

5. Bring what the gallery needs.

When you meet with the gallery representative or send your

presentation for review, both parties should have business and sales on their minds. Artists often present wonderful, high-quality work, but it may not be saleable to the gallery's clientele. For example, in a gallery with mostly tourist traffic, you might stand a better chance of being successful if you bring in products that can be easily transported and that meet a lower price point. Price diversity is a big plus.

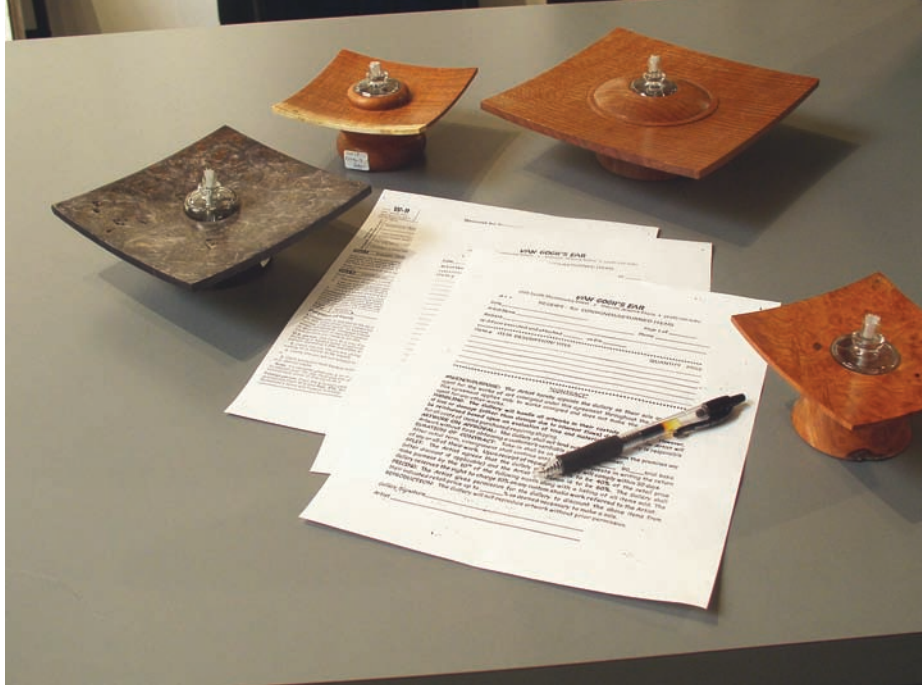
Submit articles written about exhibitions you've done, awards you've won, or anything that boosts your credibility as an established artist. These can become sales aids for the gallery, which will help them sell you as an artist and your product as something special. These aids can often make the difference in getting into a gallery or not. Also, professional images of your work

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along with an up-to-date resume are prerequisites at most galleries. But, educating the gallery staff on the uniqueness or marketability of your work is up to you. Make sure they know as much as possible about you, your work, and the process of making it.

6. Get it in writing.

Knowing what each party expects will save both you and the gallery a lot of trouble—especially if something goes wrong. Contracts are necessary and should be expected as part of doing business on a professional level. Besides including the rate of commission to the gallery, a contract should



include such things as the length of time a gallery will show your work, who is responsible in case of breakage or theft, notice of cancellation, and procedures for removing your work. Discounts for large orders, handling commissions, shipping costs, exclusive selling area, and all inventory should have some type of paper trail.

I call these contracts my comfort sheets. While a contract may not protect all of your interests in business dealings, it certainly can help if you ever have to litigate.

7. Get paid.

Money is the main reason behind selling your work. The terms of payment should be in your contract, including the exact payment schedule for any work sold.

But what happens if the gallery sells your work on commission and you don't get paid? Not only is this the most common problem for artists dealing with galleries, it's the worst problem.

When artists entrust a gallery with their work, they expect to be paid within a reasonable time after a sale. If a gallery ignores payment to an artist, it's likely that

other problems will arise with the gallery as well. No matter how upscale the gallery, if you're not getting paid, this issue needs to be dealt with immediately. Some states currently require galleries to have separate accounts to hold artists' funds in trust.

Back in the 1970s, I let a chain of fine galleries continue to operate on a promise to pay. They went 30 days over, then 60, then 90—all the while selling my work. When the chain went bankrupt, I retrieved none of my products. Eventually, I was paid less than five cents on the dollar.

Your best defense against a problem like this is to find out the gallery's payment history from other artists before you apply to the gallery.

8. Listen to the gallery.

Successful galleries don't operate on luck. They use sound business principles, track product trends, and offer what their clientele buy. On the other hand, artists and craftspeople tend to have a foggy idea of the business end of selling their work. Be respectful of the gallery's views when it comes to your work.

Be sure to listen if a gallery suggests changing some aspect of your turnings—like size or finish—to better meet their clientele's tastes. Don't get caught in the "I'm the artist, so I know what's right" syndrome.

A few years ago, I suggested to one of our photo artists to scale down the size of his photographs and produce smaller versions of his larger works. His overall sales more than doubled after he produced the smaller, more affordable versions. Although it's sometimes difficult to let a gallery make recommendations on what to produce, it can mean the difference between selling, or earning the title of starving artist.

9. Build a friendship along with trust.

A good sales staff knows how important it is to establish a sense of trust and friendly repartee with clients. For an artist or craftspeople, it's equally important to establish this type of relationship with a gallery staff. If the staff know they can depend on you to show up for appointments, provide inventory when needed, and get commissions completed in a timely manner, they will likely put more effort into selling your work. It's always easier to sell the work of a friend than a stranger. Make a real effort to establish a professional, positive working relationship.

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