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Thriving as a business person in the crafts industry

by Rebecca Skeels
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Thriving as a business person in the crafts industry

By Rebecca Skeels, Subject Leader for Postgraduate School of Craft and Design

Growing a business does not always mean making it bigger or becoming famous. It can mean changing to enable your business to continue to do what is wanted or desired. Each person is unique, which makes every business plan and structure unique. Each individual needs to find their own way of working and developing to ensure that their business grows. This is how you make your business thrive.

The environment is always changing; customers' tastes and ideals vary, the economic climate adjusts, the market goes up and down and how we feel about our own work can change. It's crucial to remember that something that was successful in the past may not be the answer to great success in the future. A business needs to be able to grow throughout with these changes in order to survive. Artists and their businesses need to continue to grow and develop constantly – sometimes in small gradual steps, at other times in bolder, courageous leaps. Here are some thoughts on how you can ensure to thrive as a business person in the crafts industry.

Produce a business plan

Business plans are important for showing potential stakeholders that you're serious about your work and you know what your intentions are, whether it's securing a funding opportunity, opening a bank account or getting new premises. A business plan is also really valuable for you as an artist, as it helps to get everything down on paper to enable an idea to be put into some sort of structure.

Do not worry; the plan is not set in stone – it may even need to be flexible for some stakeholders. Flexibility within your business plan also allows for you to make changes and alterations as further you learn and develop as an artist.

A business plan can be rewritten if ideals change, and do not be put off creating a plan simply because you know it will change! It is never a waste of time. Consider what you really want to do, what you enjoy and how you can have fun!

Create a time plan

By planning your time and mapping out key dates throughout the year, you will ensure that you are getting the most out of every opportunity for your business. Construct a timetable for the year to include deadlines – whether it is external deadlines for things like award entries or applying to be part of a competition, or personal deadlines to ensure that you are on track with your own market research, marketing, and design work.

Running the business whilst also focusing on these different aspects is hard, so creating and keeping to the plan will help you to stay on target. Remember to line up jobs, commissions and commitments rather than taking them all on at the same time, however enthusiastic you are. Equally, do not just take one at a time - think ahead.

Consider your working environment

It is essential that your environment helps you develop and work efficiently. Create a workspace that will encourage creativity, help you to avoid distractions and enable you to focus on any projects and commissions that you have.

Consider where your workspace is located: is it easy to travel to, can you interact with likeminded people, and are there other opportunities available in the surrounding areas? Do you need to have an environment suitable for customers to visit or for collaboration work to take place?

To allow space for development, reflection or repositioning yourself as a practitioner, you may consider artist residency positions. At UCA, we have artists in residence that have the freedom to work on their own projects, whilst they help to provide support for the students. These opportunities give you the chance to explore skills in areas such as teaching, curating, and working with others, whilst developing your own work in workshops with a broad range of facilities and equipment.

Expand your knowledge

Writing your business plan may highlight key skillsets that you need or would like to develop for your business. Though it is not a decision to take lightly, one of the best ways to do this is to study for a qualification. Pick the course that suits you best – depending on your prior study, a foundation diploma or access course may be most appropriate, or perhaps an undergraduate or postgraduate degree or even PhD research is for you. A specialist creative arts university like UCA gives students the chance to collaborate and learn from others, whatever level they are studying at, and they are immersed in a creative atmosphere.

As well as developing your thinking, reflection and making skills, these courses include elements that will help your businesses to become more sustainable and expand your understanding of costing, photography, publicity, promotion and marketing.

After you have graduated, keep in touch with universities for short courses and training, work with local galleries that run courses for makers and artists and contact associations and guilds that run training and events in specific skills and processes.

Consider subscribing to a selection of magazines, newsletters and groups, as this will allow you to

see articles about other practitioners, news within the industry and the opportunities available to you such as training, competitions, commissions, exhibitions and events.

Make time for you

Ensure time is allocated for you. Make sure breaks are taken, holidays are included and any time for reflecting, development and thinking is accounted for. If a business will only survive when an individual is constantly working all hours, without time to get a good night's sleep or to develop as an artist, then it is not sustainable and it sounds like it is time to plan and organise. Health and fitness are important too, so that you are ready and well for the next job, and the one after that. Allow time for family and friends; they are your support network, sometimes giving help or assistance and at other times, providing a healthy reality check or a distraction.

Good luck with your new ventures and the growing of your businesses. Enable yourselves to survive and enjoy life with a career that you love doing.



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