

# CRAFTS MARKETING & PR TIPS



A collection of articles by Barbara Brabec, republished from her HandmadeForProfit.com blog (now closed).

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## Four Ways Craft Sellers Can Do Market Research

Do you have a great idea for a new product? Will anyone buy it? How should you price it? This article offers simple but effective ways to get answers to these questions before you lay out a lot of time and money making products that might not sell.

Few craft sellers do any market research before venturing out to sell their wares. Most beginners, and many long-time craft show sellers as well, simply make a bunch of things they want to make, offer them for sale, and hope people will buy. That may be okay if your instinct about what's likely to sell is finely tuned; if not, you could lose a substantial investment of time and money for materials if you create a large inventory of products you can't sell.

Most sellers get a handle on the market for their work simply by browsing shows, competitor's websites, and networking with other sellers, but here are four other things you can do to research the market for your latest product.

**1. Ask for Comments.** Ask friends and family members to test a new item and give you feedback. Some crafters also send samples of their new items to one or two of their favorite retailers, asking for comments about the product's sales potential. One crafter who teaches and sells locally says she uses her friends and students as guinea pigs for new products. When she makes something new, she puts it on display in her classroom for everyone to see. She says it's a good indicator when folks ask if she's going to teach a class for that particular item.

**2. Check Price and Functionality.** Start a pricing reference file. It's easier to set prices if you know what "the going prices" are for items similar to yours. Record what others are charging for your type of products at craft shows and gift shops, and check marketplaces on the Web where art and craft products are being sold, such as Etsy and eBay.

**TIP:** You can gain a wealth of marketing insight simply by typing in certain words on a search engine and visiting the sites that come up on the list. If you have a website or crafts blog, do some market research by asking visitors to fill out a brief questionnaire on your site.

**3. Test it at Market.** When selling at retail shows, display one or two of your newest creations to see whether they sell or not. One seller told me she makes a dozen pieces for a show and if she sells more than half of them, she goes into full production with the piece. "Since location and time of year have a lot to do with sales, I'll sometimes give a piece a few shows to see if it creates any interest."

**4. Listen and Observe.** You can get instant feedback on consumer preferences simply by listening to people who browse your booth at a show and noticing when they make statements such as “I wish you had this in a different color.” Listen intently to what customers say, particularly when they offer criticism. “I learn much more from good criticism than anything else,” one seller told me. “When the person is right, it can be very humbling, but you get over it, then look back and see how much you’ve grown.”

**REMEMBER . . .** If you can’t get the price you need on a particular product, don’t stop making it, just look for a new market for it. The same item offered at different fairs or shops across the country might sell at a much higher price, depending on the economy of the area, the sophistication of buyers, and the way the product is presented to them.

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## **Marketing in a Sluggish Economy Ten Strategies for Boosting Sales and Profits**

IN A SLUGGISH ECONOMY when your customers or clients have tightened their hold on their wallets or purses, you’ll need to develop special strategies not only to survive, but to move ahead in your business. Here are ten that have worked for me in recessionary times. They may work for you, too.

- **Remain consistent** in the quality of your products and services.
- **Further develop** your own special style of doing business. In the end, people do business with people, not “companies” or “businesses.”
- **Size up your competition.** Find their weak points and capitalize on them. Fight back with appropriate marketing strategies and sales pitches.
- **More sharply identify** your special industry niche and your special customer prospects; then intensify your sales/marketing activities in this direction.
- **Enlist the aid** of those who believe in you and what you are doing. Figure out ways to work with others on a commission basis. Let them help you grow.
- **Get serious** about managing your business. Make things happen by first making plans, then implementing them.

- **Increase profits** by adding new products or services.
- **Keep looking** for new ways to sell everything. The possibilities are enormous and often overlooked.
- **Study** the financial figures of your business to pinpoint your strongest, most profitable products and services. At the same time, look for ways to cut costs and increase profits.

If you do not always meet your financial goals, remember that you're doing fine when you can simply hold your position in the face of increasing competition. Longevity in one's business is an important success factor.

**One more thing you should NOT do:** Do not lower your prices thinking that this will help you make more sales. All it will do is tell buyers that you are desperate to sell (like so many major retailers today). Yes, some people may buy at lower prices, but then when the economy gets better again, you'll have trouble getting your prices back to where they were.

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## **Finding Your Niche: How One Special Market Automatically Leads to Another**

Niche marketing and diversification are closely connected since the discovery of a niche market often requires one to create, or at least vary, an existing product or service. Any time is a good time to look for market niches—little “pockets of riches” your competition may be overlooking. Many businesses that have failed during hard economic times might have succeeded if they had simply concentrated on selling not to the masses, but to niche markets. Others might have survived if they had taken steps earlier to diversify their business.

AS A FLIGHT ATTENDANT, Lynne Alana Delaney had collected a lot of loose change from various foreign countries. One day, thinking that her collection of odd-shaped and sized coins would make interesting earrings and brooches, she stopped by a local craft store to buy some findings.

“I surfaced almost two hours later with enough gold and silver findings, stones, loops, thread and charms to open a small retail outlet,” she joked. “Little did I know I would be speeding through those supplies within the month and be

seeking out more and more, and still more before I actually realized how involved I was in the craft of making jewelry.”

Lynne was proud of her first pair of Italian lire two-toned gold and silver earrings, but in no way prepared for the reaction of her coworkers. Dubbing her jewelry “Earrings of Destination,” she immediately began to receive orders from other flight attendants who also started the word-of-mouth advertising process. Although Lynne’s business developed gradually as she flew with different crews, it wasn’t long before both passengers and crew members were sporting earrings, brooches, and stickpins from countries as diverse as Japan, Egypt, and Italy, creating a demand Lynne was hard-pressed to match. As with all creative ideas, this one led directly to another—airplane jewelry for flight attendants.

### **Finding a Niche**

Lynne went on to produce a new line of earrings, hair accessories, pins, and neckpieces with all kinds of airplanes on them, from the oldest propeller plane to the latest SSTs. Her success illustrates how important a niche market can be to sales success. But her story also shows how the discovery of one niche market automatically leads to others.

Although Lynne began with the idea of creating jewelry only for flight attendants, airline passengers themselves proved to be good customers. Some of her most popular items were unique one-of-a-kind brooches that combined both foreign currency, airplanes, and points of interest such as miniature pyramids and camels. This jewelry was not only a great conversation starter, but often a lovely memento from a memorable trip.

Lynne soon broadened her market by attending several craft fairs, finding that her jewelry appealed to the traveling public as well as those who knew someone connected with aviation. By incorporating old recycled costume jewelry and antique buttons in some pieces, Lynne was appealing to yet another niche market of antique lovers.

Lynne set out to create original pieces and take special orders, but she got her first taste of production work when an aviation-related catalog placed a large wholesale order for one specific earring. Like so many other crafters with a big order suddenly in hand, she had to quickly enlist the aid of family and friends to complete the order.

### **Encouraging Words**

Once again, we have an example of how the discovery of a previously unknown talent can quickly lead to a profitable sideline business. What began as a simple project to use up loose change from foreign countries blossomed into a profitable

small home business. In my original article about Lynne, she asked me to pass on these encouraging words to readers:

“Everyone always dreams of turning their creative craft ideas into a profitable venture and exposing their wares beyond their circle of close friends and family. I happen to be one of the lucky ones who stumbled onto a business by combining two things I love doing. I get to use my creative abilities to the fullest while still flying and exposing those creative ideas to a receptive audience of consumers.

“My personal ‘Flights of Fancy’ have found their designation in my unique costume jewelry designs and have fortunately landed nose-up. Hopefully others can profit from knowing it could happen and will encourage their craft ideas to prepare for take-off as mine have done.”

**NOTE:** This niche marketing article was adapted from one of Barbara’s “Selling what You Make” [columns for Crafts magazine](#). Like so many sideline craft businesses, this one apparently did not grow into anything that still exists today; although in searching for this business and kind of jewelry on the Web, I did find other women selling “Flights of Fancy” jewelry.

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## **POSTCARD POWER: Nine Ways to Get BIG Results from Simple Postcard Mailings**



POSTCARDS ARE A POWERFUL and low-cost marketing tool that few craft marketers use effectively. Here are ideas on how to make the best use of different types of postcards:

**1. Announce Craft Fair Appearances.** Use postcard mailings to let previous buyers know where you will be exhibiting next, and offer them a discount if they bring the card to the show. Regular postcard mailings could greatly increase your craft fair sales over time. One seller who started out hand-addressing a couple hundred cards soon found herself computerizing the names of nearly 2,000 interested buyers. She told me that up to 75 percent of her craft show sales could be traced to people who got her promotional postcards.

Some craft show promoters offer exhibitors free promotional postcards. One artist in my network always uses these cards, putting a sticker on the back of the card that says, “I will be exhibiting at this show. Bring this postcard with you for a 10% discount on purchases.” She reports that she gets back anywhere from 2 to 17 cards per show.

**2. Contact Your Wholesale Buyers.** Send occasional reminder cards to your best customers, expressing your desire to serve them better. Give them a number of choices of things they might want from you right now — such as your newest catalog, a follow-up telephone call, an idea of what you'll have new for Christmas this year, and so forth. Also send them “hot announcements” about new products and dealer offers.

**3. Do Market Research.** Contact individual buyers and prospects, asking them to check categories of interest (which you've detailed on the other side of the card) so you'll know which special offers to send them in future. For example, you might ask if they buy crafts mainly for their own use, or mostly for gifts, and when they're most interested in hearing from you. Or you might ask them to indicate whether they are mostly interested in (a) collectible items, (b) miniatures, (c) country crafts, (d) contemporary designs, and so on.

**4. Announce Your Newest Gift Items.** Try slanting the advertising message on some of your promotional mailings to people who may have special gift-giving problems at that time; i.e., graduation gifts, Mother's day, Father's Day, Secretary's Day, Valentine's Day, etc.

**5. Do a New Product Survey.** Prior to manufacturing a special product for sewers, a designer in Canada first sent a postcard announcement to everyone on her large mailing list, briefly describing the product and asking her customers if they'd be interested in buying it if she manufactured it. The tremendous response she received gave her valuable market research information, confidence that the new product would sell, and a list of ready-and-waiting customers.

**6. Send Open House Invitations.** A potter who announced a private exhibit of her work in her home sent postcard invitations to 100 customers on her mail list. She reported that thirty people came to see her creations, and 18 of them made purchases.

**7. Publicize Your Web Site.** As more and more of your customers (both retail and wholesale) move onto the Internet, it becomes all the more important for you to let them know they can order from you online and communicate by e-mail. Print a Web card with an image of your site and send it to your best customers and prospects. It will not only be noticed, but saved for future reference. (To find such printers on the Internet, do a search for “promotional post cards,” which will also turn up sources for the photo cards mentioned below.)

**8. Enhance Your Professional Image.** Color is such a wonderful selling tool, but few craftspeople can afford full-color flyers because quantity requirements are so high. Photo cards, however, are very affordable and can be ordered a thousand at a time. When included with a black-and-white catalog or brochure,

they make a great impression and may even make the difference between a buyer's decision to order or not.

**9. Clean Your Mailing List.** Postcards should always be mailed First Class, with an "Address Correction Requested" line printed beneath your return address. Mail that can't be delivered will be returned to you free of charge, but when there is a new address, the Post Office will send you a notice (and charge you for this at current rates) so you can update your mailing list.

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## **Create a Business Card that Works for You**

The primary purpose of a business card is to help people remember who you are and how they can find you when they want you, so give careful thought to the content you put on your card. Unless you are using a post office box address for your homebased business, think twice before including your home address on the card. Either that, or be selective in handing them out.

This is particularly important if you are doing an art or craft that would be enticing to thieves. For example, jewelers who work in gold or silver wouldn't ever put their address on a business card because that could set them up for a possible robbery. You also need to be extra careful about letting people know where you live if you are a single mom or a widow, or if you know you are in violation of local zoning laws. These days, the content on a business card can often be limited to your business name, business telephone number, email address, and your Website URL, if you have one.

**NOTE:** It is likely to be a violation of local telephone company regulations to put your home phone number on a business card. Each state has a separate commission that determines the usage of a residential phone, so you need to call your local telephone company for more information.

Business cards and labels (as well as rubber stamps and Designer Post-It Notes) are very easy to design and order on the Web using templates and stock illustrations offered by printing companies. Standard business cards are very inexpensive and will pay for themselves many times over if you regularly sell at craft fairs and want to attract people to your Website or other places on the Web where you may be selling.

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## A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

WHETHER IT'S A FORMAL PORTRAIT, a casual photo of you at work, or a nice line drawing, a picture can do what mere words cannot accomplish.

In my books, I have often written about the importance of including your photograph on your printed materials and website because people don't do business with businesses; they do business with *people*. And they like to know what those people look like.

I don't understand why so many artists, designers, craftspeople, and service providers try to hide behind the fancy design of their website when what could really sell a stranger on their products or services would be a picture of the site owner. A brochure needs to focus not only on the products or services you offer, but on YOU, as the individual who is providing them.

Whether the picture you use is a formal portrait, a casual photo of you at work, or a nice line drawing or artist's rendition that captures the "real you," a picture can do what mere words cannot accomplish.



At left are two line drawings I used on countless black-and-white printed materials during my years as a mail-order book seller and newsletter publisher. The first one sufficed until I found an artist who could do a much better and more useful B&W line drawing of me from a photo I provided.

## How to Do a Line Drawing of Yourself

If you can't find a professional artist who does line art portraits, here's how to do your own:

1. Lay a smooth piece of clear plastic that will accept ink over a head-shot photo of yourself, then carefully trace the picture onto the plastic overlay using a fine-point black pen.
2. Using your scanner or photocopy machine that offers reduction and enlargement capabilities, create the number and size of line drawings needed.

Product sellers could do the same thing to create illustrations of certain products. (Long before we had inexpensive scanners, a craftsman told me he created line drawings by first taking close-up slides of his products, then projecting them onto white paper hung on a wall so he could trace the image.)



*Barbara Brabec*

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Excerpts from Barbara's crafts books will also be found on [The Author's Den](#) website in the [Crafts/Hobbies department](#).

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