

Making A Good Show At A Craft Show - (Tom Boley)

Getting into craft shows is actually relatively easy. Most are juried, which means that a committee will ask you either to come in person with samples of your work or will review your work through photos, slides, or, now more commonly, pictures on a CD. My advice is to do only juried craft shows. The quality overall is much higher which pushes you to a higher standard but also puts you in a higher bracket of quality. The Northern Virginia Handcrafters Guild (NVHG, at nvhg.org) is a great way to learn about being successful in craft shows. They meet once a month inside the Beltway on Rt 50. They sponsor craft shows and have a very stringent jurying process, good for five years, and then you have to be re-juried. This ensures that quality stays high. Most craft shows will just have a show fee but some will charge a percentage rather than an up-front fee. It is always wise to visit a craft show one year before you decide to participate the following year to see if it is a good fit for your work.

Presentation is everything. You must get people into your booth or they won't buy. The secret to success is Height and Light. Present your wares at different heights and have them well lit. You can use riser blocks, shelves, pedestals, or whatever will help you display at multiple levels. Compare that to having everything laid out on a table top – boring! Cover tables with cloth down to within an inch of the floor. That makes those tables look so much better plus gives you a place to stash stuff. You can use display stands, shelf units, or whatever will allow you to display your wares in multiple ways. That all adds interest to your display and attracts folks into your sales area. There is a member of the NVHG who lives in Culpepper who makes craft show furniture such as shelf units in different sizes, sales stands, display racks, etc. If you would like his info, let me know at tboley@erols.com and I'll send it to you.

If you display outdoors, you will need a tent. If it stays up overnight, you should have zippered sides on your tent even if you remove all your wares over night. The dew can make a mess of your shelves if left open all night so buttoning up is a good idea. That way, you can leave your set-up in place but put your wares in boxes and take them with you for the night. Tents tend to be like big umbrellas in the wind so be sure to have anchors for the corners, either heavy weights or even tent pegs and line. I made four 30-lb concrete weights with eye bolts in the tops as anchors. I painted 'em white to match the tent and they look just fine. Remember, you want to attract people into your display area so you want everything to look attractive. If you do many outdoor shows, you will probably want to develop some kind of flooring to use in your tent so you can have your shelves and such on a solid and relatively level surface. Sometimes even a large piece of carpet will be sufficient.

The objective, of course, is sales. Greet everyone who comes in your booth and let them know you appreciate them coming in. Encourage them to pick up pieces – if they pick it up, the chance of buying increases dramatically. Don't be pushy, but be available. And only take top quality work to craft shows. You will quickly develop a reputation based on your work. The highest compliment anyone ever gave me at a craft show was a fellow woodturner who said, "You don't have any sanding marks on your bowls." From then on, I knew that what I was presenting was worthy, as long as I maintained the same personal standard. I tell people I never sell "seconds." Those stay home and we use 'em for ourselves or for firewood.

Pricing your work is the hardest thing you will have to do (except for lugging those tent weights around, of course). I was once told to add up my cost for materials, multiply by four, and then take a look at that price and adjust from there. Too low, raise it a bit. Too high, lower it. Before you do a craft show, it is very helpful to

Craft Show (continued)

go see that craft show as a customer to see what it is like and if your work will be the right fit, as I said earlier. If there are other woodturners there, see what their prices are. To me, it is an ethical question about whether I should re-price everything depending on the venue, or if I should just give things a price and say that is the price whether it is for sale on the street corner or the Smithsonian Craft Show. Frankly, it is a lot of work to re-price all the time. You will also need a range of prices for your work. If you have high priced as well as low priced goods, your customers will have a much easier time of choosing what they want as they can more easily buy according to their budget and know from looking and from your reputation that you have the same quality in every piece.

You must collect sales tax and in Virginia, you may use an ST-50 form, which apparently is not available on line, to report sales taxes if you only do one or two shows a year. I have one and can mail you a copy. If you do three or more, you must file for a tax ID number and report sales taxes either monthly or quarterly, depending on how you apply. Get a receipt book with at least one retained copy. Get a rubber stamp with your company name, address, and phone number so you can stamp all the white pages, the ones you will give to your customer for each sale. That way, you can keep track of both sales and sales taxes collected. Get a change fund of about \$75 in ones and fives plus a pocket full of coins. Have price tags on all your pieces, preferably on the bottom. The reason for that is two-fold. If on the top, there is a chance the wood will darken around the price tag but not under it, and people will have to pick it up to check the price, thus getting it in their hands, which is a good thing. I have found that if you actually do two or three craft shows a year, it pays to take credit cards. I have a contact person with Global Payments with whom I have worked for years. If you are interested in discussing credit cards, please let me know at the above e-address and I'll send her name and number. I know of one sale I lost because I couldn't take credit cards. I haven't made that mistake again.

Dress the part. You are a crafter and maybe even an artist. Depending on the venue, dress accordingly. Remember, you aren't in your shop now. You are out presenting your top quality goods to the public. Dress for the venue. Some shows require period garb while at others, you may want to dress casually. The second most important part of this, besides Height and Light, is to have business cards. Give one away with every purchase. Give them to people who stop by to look. Encourage them to pick stuff up and be sure they take a card home. You can even have slick brochures made up by which you can present yourself as a woodturner with photos of the kind of work you do and information about how to contact you. Consider having a "How it's made" display and having "care cards" for everyone who buys a bowl.

Craft shows are great fun. You must be skillful, or at least willing to talk to people when they come in your booth. Many will ask how something was made. Have a synoptic story prepared which you can tell in one minute or less. Getting that story may be enough to encourage your customer to buy. And that's the point.