

Art Marketing in Fairbanks--The Basics
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Introduction

The aspiring artist in Fairbanks is very fortunate to have such a supportive community in which to grow and develop. For whatever reasons--location, climate, size, or perhaps the more unpretentious character of Alaskans--Fairbanks offers plenty of opportunities for the artist. These include both formal and informal art education, a variety of show and sales venues, groups fostering collaboration with other artists, an ample supply of artist materials and support services, and lastly, plenty of inspiration from our colorful history and beautiful natural setting. Even the long, cold winters can be an asset (with the addition of good full-spectrum lights), providing the artist with long stretches of time with few distractions to work in the studio.

As a new watercolor artist in 2002, I found that starting along the art marketing path wasn't difficult. The difficult part was, and still is, controlling the speed and intensity of the ride. Making the best choices along the way involves constant goal re-evaluation and a great amount of tenacity, while keeping the passion and creativity that started it all. The best part is I set my own standards of success, so I can always be successful!

Below are some insights and resources that I have found especially helpful in starting this journey. I still consider myself a novice, so this information is not exhaustive, nor necessarily appropriate for every artist. It's what I learned by gathering information from anyone willing to share and much trial and error. Your best source of information will always be the unique experiences you gain along your personal journey.

Set Your Marketing Goals

Consider your personal assets and limitations carefully. One of the most difficult aspects of marketing for me has been trying to make my art schedule leave time for family, recreation, and other interests. It is very easy to get out of balance in a one person enterprise with seemingly endless opportunities. Ask yourself specific questions about how much involvement is right for you and set realistic goals. Art classes, workshops, shows, and meetings are all rewarding but the opportunity costs can be high.

Do you need income from your art sales to live comfortably? If so, your goals will probably be more ambitious. If not, you can relax a little and keep art a fun hobby or small enterprise to cover your art expenses. If you decide to sell art on a regular basis you should get an Alaska business license (\$200. for 2 years) and keep records of your expenses and income. Many retail and wholesale shows require all vendors to have a business license on file. Go to the State of Alaska web site at <http://www.dced.state.ak.us/occ/home.htm> to get information on registering your business name and buying the appropriate licence.

Also recommended is the **Small Business Development Center's** workshops. There are several workshops offered two or three times a year that cover writing

business plans, creating effective brochures, small business record keeping, and more. I took an evening workshop on taxes and record keeping for the artist, by local CPA Paul Robinson, that was excellent and has helped me tame the paper monster. After Paul's workshop, I was able to set up my Quicken program to match IRS categories closely and better track my accounts. It's not a fun part of my art business, but it keeps me informed of what I'm actually spending and where I stand on the balance sheet.

Utilize Support Organizations

The **Made in Alaska** label is a good one to have if you are going to market to tourists or wholesale gift shops and galleries. Their web site is at <http://www.dced.state.ak.us/dca/mia/home.htm>. Fees to use their label on your products and literature is only \$25. per year, which includes a newsletter, invitations to state-wide marketing workshops, information on State-wide venues, publicity, and other benefits. It's a good buy.

The Annual Wholesale Alaskan Gift Show

(<http://www.newimpressions.com/exh.html>) is run by Dee Carpenter of Fairbanks (also an artist) in Anchorage each February. The cost is around \$260. for half a booth for the two-day show. This is a great way to get in contact with local and State gallery and gift shop buyers interested in gift items at wholesale prices. This doesn't work well for original art, however, if you have prints, note cards, or items you can produce quickly and inexpensively, this may be a good avenue for you.

Fairbanks Arts Association (FAA) promotes the arts and artists by providing a venue via their various shows and gift shop at Bear Gallery in Pioneer Park. Their web site (<http://www.fairbanksarts.org/index.html>) offers links to other local and state-wide art organizations. **Art Expo** is another way FAA promotes artists and provides education opportunities. FAA fosters the arts by providing funding, grants, and supporting activities in the visual, performing and literary arts.

The Fairbanks Watercolor Society (FWS) is one of those groups, and is dedicated to providing encouragement for individuals of all abilities interested in water-based mediums. Their web site (http://www.geocities.com/fairbanks_watercolor/links.html) has an extensive list of links to other art-related sites--artists, suppliers, organizations, education resources, and more, and is an excellent source of information about FWS meetings, shows, paint-outs, and other information.

Stay in School

While not directly related to marketing, there are many painting workshops and classes in the Fairbanks area which not only improve your skills, but will put you in contact with artists more experienced in marketing. Developing relationships with colleagues and instructors is a vital part of establishing your identity as an artist in the

community, and shouldn't be overlooked as an important part of an art business.

JoAnn's, Michael's and Ben Franklin (North Pole) all have ongoing classes offered in various arts and crafts, with watercolor instruction well-suited to the novice.

UAF (<http://www.uaf.edu/reg/schedule/index.html>) has semester-long classes in many aspects of the arts on campus or in the downtown center. They offer excellent **Summer Sessions** (<http://www.uaf.edu/summer/index.html>) short courses, many on-location in inspirational areas such as the Brooks Range, Valdez, Denali National Park, and Cordova, while others are located on campus.

The **Summer Fine Arts Festival (SFAF)** (<http://www.fsaf.org/>) specializes in all the arts over a two week period in July each year. It's a wonderful opportunity to immerse yourself in art among many talented students and world-class instructors.

A great number of individual artists offer private instruction in their studios or community centers around Fairbanks and North Pole. They often advertise in the Daily News Miner or via the **Fairbanks Watercolor Society** newsletter (http://www.geocities.com/fairbanks_watercolor/calendar.html#workshops), so check these places regularly for updated information on classes and workshops.

For those who'd like learn at home, there are numerous books and print resources on line that give art marketing strategies to suit any goals. Check with Gulliver's or another book store for titles available locally on this subject, or go to Amazon.com and do a search on their site under art marketing. My recent search brought up over 2,500 results, including **Art Marketing 101**, by Constance Smith, for \$15.72. Another book that gives detailed information on how to sell online is **Selling Crafts on the Internet** by James Dillehay, available from Amazon.com.

On-line sites that offer tips and information on marketing your art are abundant as well. Google "lessons and tips for marketing visual art" and see what comes up. **Alaska Internet Today** offers a free newsletter covers issues regarding marketing online. Subscribe at newsletter@alaskainternettoday.com.

Price Your Art

Pricing deserves some consideration, since this is a common stumbling block for beginning artists. I don't pretend to have all the answers or the correct philosophy, but I have realized there is a loose protocol out there. Galleries are expensive to operate, therefore, their commission is higher than small shops or the weekend shows. Their commission of 35 - 50% is justified if you think of them as paying for showroom rent,

utilities, merchant bank fees, staff, publicity, web site, and for developing the big client base needed to sell art. These costs exist whether your art is in a formal gallery or your home studio --it's just a matter of degree. It's hard to sell art which is stored in a box at home most of the time.

Price your work so that you are compensated fairly for your talent, materials (including framing), and if you dare, your time involved. Then add a percentage to cover the promotional costs mentioned above, say somewhere between 10% - 60%. Go low if you are new to the art scene and want to move your art. Go high if you have had a history of sales and have developed a good following. You can also adjust the price depending on what you see for sale that is similar to yours. Set your price, then keep it consistent in every venue it shows. Don't undersell the gallery.

According to Paul Dorrel and Mark Gottsegen of Artist's Magazine (Jan.2006, p.66) artists almost always underrate the value of their work. These authors suggest setting prices based on your age, experience, and what other artists are charging for similar work, with oils and acrylics on canvas fetching more than water media and pastel.

For a more thorough guide to pricing and selling strategies, refer to the article by Kathy Gulrich in the December 2005 issue of Artist's Magazine, pages 18 - 19. It presents another method for pricing art and some good points on how to talk money with prospective customers.

Seek Venues

Art/craft Shows available in Fairbanks are too numerous to list. The main ones are in the fall, around Christmas time. Many non-profit agencies and schools use weekend shows as fundraisers. Entering a show can put your work in direct view of the general gift-shopping public, but not necessarily the fine art consumer. Fees range from \$35. to over \$500. for the more popular shows, with the expensive shows often worth the expense since you will reach more potential buyers. The only rule I have learned is that sales fluctuate depending on the year, location, and general consumer tastes that I don't pretend to understand. Sometimes I've done well at the same show that was a bomb the year before. In spite of low sales, shows can still be a success if people see and recognize you as a serious local artist. Contacts are often made that result in a future sale, new show opportunity, commission, or name recognition. Selling directly to the general public is quite rewarding, since they usually appreciate your talent more than seasoned art collectors might. And, I'm always impressed by how many people enjoy giving gifts purchased directly from the artist.

Consignment gift shops and galleries are another avenue easily used by beginning artists. A consignment store usually displays your work and pays you a percentage ranging from 85% to 60% of the retail price. This is a good place to start

testing your art sales, since your overhead and time investments are low. Check on your items regularly, replenishing or replacing non-sellers as needed. Keep a copy of your inventory, since some small store owners are more informal with their record keeping. Check with stores that seem suitable to your art to see if they take consignment, asking for their needs and terms. Finding a good match for your art is important, since you'll want to know that their customers are likely to buy your art before tying your inventory up for a period of time. I once put note cards and beaded items at a RV park gift shop hoping that the retired RV crowd might be interested. This proved false, and I didn't make one sale all summer. Even a good guess has the potential to fail.

Art Galleries are interested in new and upcoming artists, and often will display original work or prints for a 50% commission. Call for an appointment with the owner, curator, or art director to show samples of your work. Ask about their procedures and expectations, and what they have to offer you as far as promoting your art. Attend First Friday openings and the monthly shows at each gallery to get to know their styles, character, and staff. Enter group shows hosted by the gallery whenever you can.

Internet exposure via your personal web site is a whole different breed of cow. My experiences with web sites is that they are like having a child. You spend a lot of time planning, learning, and laboring if you do it yourself, or money if you hire a surrogate mother. It's thrilling to think of the potential! Finally, the site is born and you are ecstatic with your wonderful creation! However, you soon realize the real work has only just begun since your baby will need regular updates, new operating and security features, constant attention, repeated search engine optimizing, frequent troubleshooting, and is susceptible to lethal diseases and viruses. Your spoiled child may even be frustrating viewers and potential customers with bad behavior, reflecting poorly on you and leaving you vulnerable to online creeps. I recently viewed a site with a 35 page guest book filled with spam for viagra, levitra, gambling, and mortgage sites, plus a few zealots raving on issues only remotely related to the site's topic. Obviously, the site owners were either too busy or totally unaware that these entries made them look guilty by association.

In spite of these dire warnings, I have found that a well run web site is of great benefit to the professional artist. While I haven't yet completed my business site (**betsybearcreations.com**), it functions very well as my online portfolio, bio, and updated schedule of shows. It is more convenient than carrying around samples of my work to give out when I happen to meet someone interested. I have had a few sales online, in spite of not having online payment options yet. I do have a printable order form and accept phone orders, which work for some online shoppers. A web site provides an opportunity to reach those people searching for a particular subject matter or item that you may just have in your offerings. Viewers can be given options to interact via guest books, chats, discussion boards, or just sign up to receive your (free!!!) email newsletters, if you like. Interacting with viewers can help develop the rapport and trust needed to turn viewers into clients. You will need to keep the same vigilance and use filtering devices on these features just as you do for your personal

email. Of course, check everyone out thoroughly via personal phone conversations and secure payment methods before doing any financial transactions.

Web site costs are either in the form of your donated knowledge and time, or paying the green stuff to hire a professional web designing service. Locally, **Webweavers** has a variety of good options and prices, depending on how elaborate you want your site. A small, portfolio only (no e-commerce) site of a few pages and images would likely run \$500 or more to set up. More extensive sites would range from \$1,000 to \$15,000 with the more expensive offering online buying and other sophisticated features. You would still need to pay for the auxiliary services of regular updates, maintenance, merchant accounts, web hosting (\$35./month with Webweavers) and more. Many of these costs would also apply to a site you develop and maintain yourself, so either way is not free. Ginger Stock (daughter of Marionette Stock, one of our wonderful local artists) is the owner of Webweavers, and I found her very friendly, helpful, and willing to talk to me about prices and services. Webweavers will do parts of web sites, so you can do some of the work and leave the hard parts to them, which sounds like a good compromise if you are computer savvy.

Commercial **online galleries** are another option for Internet sales that might be worth investigating. My experience is with a few free gallery sites that will list your name and post an image you supply, and is rather limited. Most online galleries require a fee to promote you within their site, and might be worth trying out, but I doubt it. There are so many competing sites that it seems unlikely you would be noticed by the right people unless you paid quite a bit for the extra attention, or your art falls in an exclusive category that attracts high-end collectors. Posting your information in some of these galleries can open you up to online scammers targeting inexperienced artists, so beware of offers that seem too good to be true.

EBay is another route to go, and if you look at the listings by self-representing artists you will see just how many thousands of artists you will be competing with. I've researched EBay quite a bit and even sold a few prints one year, but was not willing to devote the time at the computer that it required. If you start small, manage it properly, and stick with it long enough to develop a following of EBay buyers, you can probably do well. One drawback is that you pay fees even if you don't sell an item, and these can add up. Another is that you have to pay an extra hefty fee to have your item placed higher on the list in hopes of getting noticed in the thousands of listings. And, of course, most EBay shoppers are looking for a bargain, so your chances of selling low are far greater than selling high. It is fairly easy to list items, however, and the potential is always there for your art to get bid up very high if it catches enough attention. I've followed several artists who sell on EBay and they keep with it, so they must do fairly well.

Reflect and Reaffirm

Finally, I'd like to address another part of marketing that seems to keep many good artists from actively marketing their art. As artists we have that sensitivity to the creative process which can be in direct opposition to the selling process. Creating art is subjective, interpretative, and focused on our personal vision. Selling focuses more on the material and more objective aspects of your work. Pitfalls abound. Value is not primarily in quantifiable materials and labor, but in the more intangible elements of personal feelings, preferences, and concepts of what art should be. However, if you value the experience of creating and celebrating your art with those who appreciate it, then you will probably put aside the awkwardness of selling for the privilege of having your art reside in the homes and hearts of others. It helps to develop poor hearing, a thick skin, and the broken record approach to competitions and marketing. The intangible rewards often outweigh the monetary rewards, but having both is a lovely thought!

Resources to get you started:

Web editors (free or almost free)

<http://www.thefreecountry.com/webmaster/htmleditors.shtml>

<http://www.hippiepro.com/>

<http://www.newbiehangout.com/hotdog/>

MS Word has a save as html feature you can use or if you are wanting a good editor, **Dreamweaver** is a great investment.

Web Hosting sites (free or inexpensive):

<http://geocities.yahoo.com/v/fm.html>

<http://www.meccahosting.com/us/>

<http://order.1and1.com/>

Domain Registrations:

<http://order.1and1.com/>

<http://www.register.com/retail/index.rcmx>

