

What is it Craft Buyers Want? Results of a Nationwide Survey¹

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ABSTRACT: Results from a nationwide study of retail craft owner/buyers highlight product mix, customer preferences, influences in purchase decisions and demographics of the craft industry.

The information in this paper was generated from a nationwide study of buyers for retail businesses that merchandise handcrafts (Brown, 1995). The research was conducted at Iowa State University, Department of Textiles and Clothing and sponsored by ISU, George Little Management, Inc., The Crafts Report and Aid to Artisans. The results provide not only descriptive data of the U.S. retail craft industry, but also provide an indepth examination of decision criteria that can affect the production and sales of forest related craft.

The study was conducted in two stages. The first was a nationwide survey of 779 retailers selling craft in their inventories. A 48% response rate was generated from 302 completed and qualified surveys. The objectives of the study were to provide a description of craft retail businesses and their buyers, profile the buying decision process, examine decision criteria for different types of craft media, and to analyze reasons for craft originating in the U.S. versus foreign sources. The study focused on the business, the product, the person (buyer) and his or her experiences at wholesale gift and craft markets.

The relevance of this study relates to the sustainability of income for craft producers. Artisans producing craft produced from forest products are wise to develop an understanding of the decision making strategies of buyers at wholesale markets as they peruse the volume of craft. Understanding of this process enables artisans to produce craft that is marketable to retailers who decide the product mix from which consumers make purchases.

Useful to the craft producer is a 'buyer definition' of craft. Craft should be handmade by an artisan. The work can be traditional, folk or contemporary, but must have evidence of the 'hand' of the artisan in the work. Craft should be reflective of the culture within which the producer lives and works. Craft is also

defined as unique, or one of a kind. Point of origin can be U.S. or international.

This session describes retail craft buyers, their businesses, and where they buy craft. Craft are found in businesses specializing in gifts, home furnishing, galleries, museums, or specialty craft stores. Of the buyers in the study 75% were owners and 75% were women. Owners were well-educated, in their forties, had little or no business experience prior to starting or becoming involved in the retail business, and few were craft artisans themselves. The majority of businesses were sole proprietors with 5-7 employees. Businesses were located in smaller cities with store sites occupying approximately 3,500 sq ft. More than 60% of the businesses were profitable.

Ninety-three percent of buyers make craft purchase at wholesale market events, 85% order directly from individual artisans, while other purchase directly from sales representatives or catalogs. The average buyers attends 2.5 wholesale markets per year, and 3.7 retail craft shows annually.

Customers buying craft from the retailers in the study were generally tourists, collectors, business people, artists/artisans or people attending conferences. Their ages fall between 30-50 years of age. Purchases averaged \$50 per item. Most purchases were used for home decorating and gifts.

What are craft buyers seeking for their craft inventory? The results indicate that buyers have more wood craft in their product mix (22%). Clay ranked second (19%), decorative fiber (15%) next, with metal (14%), glass (13%), wearable fiber (8%), and stone (5%) following. However, these craft media are found in a broad variety of wholesale market categories, including jewelry, decorative accessories, home accents, home furnishings, table top, kitchen, garden, apparel, rugs, bed and bath and gourmet. On average retail craft buyers spend \$65,000 annually on craft inventory. Average gross receipts for craft

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businesses carrying 10% to 100% business of their inventory in craft were \$500,000.

The implication for forest artisans is that he/she must know who they're selling to, how they prefer to make decisions, the interests and needs of consumers, their preferences for color, style, size, and quantity. Artisans must not only be creative, but monitor change in color and design trends in order to remain competitive. This requires staying in touch with retailers and listening, not just selling.

Craft artisans might be advised to use some of the same selling strategies that retail craft buyers use in selling their craft. Those strategies include: focusing on customer service, educating customers about unique qualities of the store, specializing in products/services, promoting the artisan as much as the craft, offering breadth rather than depth of inventory, and developing and maintaining a strong craft image.

Craft buyer decisions are most influenced by customer satisfaction, meeting product/sales goals and fulfilling their own personal preference.

Artisans creating craft from forest materials are advised to look beyond the creation of the art itself. In

order to successfully develop a business that provides sustainable income they should understand an industry that thrives on creativity, uniqueness, competition, and rapidly changing preferences. Artisans who do not exhibit at wholesale markets should at least visit those markets to observe and visit with competition and buyers themselves. Artisans tend to be isolated from the market and the people purchasing their creations. Making a conscious effort to develop working relationships with buyers will benefit artisans in developing sustainable income from the forest crafts.

Literature Cited

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