



# Ecommerce for Artists

*An integrated, modular curriculum developed collaboratively by CraftNet member schools and artists as an introductory guide to establishing an entrepreneurial Web presence. Created with the generous support of the Appalachian Regional Commission.*

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## MODULE 1: Start Here to Plan

### Why should I have a presence on the Web?

Growing as an artist has required you to invest in a number of resources – including your time. You also have used a number of tools in creating your art. The same is true of building a successful business in art. You need to utilize a number of tools, one of which is developing a presence on the Web.

Taking the time to create a website is part of reviewing your whole plan of building your business. Just as your art is created out of a rhythm, so will your business. You need to start defining how you manage your business and how you fulfill your customer’s expectations of you.

However, merely having a presence on the Web is not a guarantee for a successful business, nor should it be your only tool in building a business. You might want to remember that research shows that it may take a visitor up to 12 visits to your site, in addition to personal contact, before that person will conduct a business transaction on your site.

A website is, nonetheless, a very powerful tool and does provide you with a number of advantages:

- **Exhibit.** In our dot.com world, having a website helps you to build credibility. Nothing beats a website for providing visible proof that “I have arrived and am open for business.” Galleries representing you also can use it to show samples of your work to potential clients.
- **Equalize.** The Web is a great equalizer. Even a microbusiness can develop a powerful website that can creatively compete with a large corporation in putting products in front of a customer.
- **Market.** Developing a Web presence can be more effective in reaching more customers than printing flyers to post on the bulletin board at the local grocery store. Only a handful of people will notice a printed flyer on a bulletin board, and the chances of someone taking it down or posting over are great. What you have

- spent designing it, printing it, and posting will have been wasted. On the other hand, a website may be seen by thousands of potential customers.
- **Contacts.** Having a website gives you the ability to maintain contact with previous customers. It provides a vehicle for them to continue to “visit” you and view your new work.
  - **Branding.** In an increasingly competitive world, a strong Web presence can help you develop a business that is uniquely different from the rest of the crowd.

*ACTIVITY: Visit three websites and analyze each in terms of the above points.*

### **How will my life change if I have a website?**

This is a great question. When you make a commitment to a website, it is an extension of making a commitment to your business or your art. You are making an online pledge with your expanded audience, and you have to hold true to that. That pledge includes:

- A website needs to be maintained—and that requires an ongoing investment of your time. Customers typically are turned off by an out-of-date website. So, added into your already likely overcrowded schedule, you or someone else will have to budget time for this routine maintenance.
- If you have open studio hours and advertise that on your website, you are bound to observe the hours you say you are open.
- When you venture into ecommerce, you put yourself into a world like Amazon.com. In that world, customers will expect to receive their order in a reasonably short time. Transacting sales on the Web raises the bar for your business performance.
- Informality can no longer be the mode. You must professionalize your interactions with your customers.
- Your website needs to be integrated into your overall plan for your whole business. It cannot stand apart as just one separate little project.
- Realistically, don’t expect a huge return in dollars from a website, but consider any extra as a plus. Don’t have unreasonable expectations. There are many unknowns.

### **If I don’t want to manage my website, is it feasible that a member of my family might run the ecommerce side of my arts business for me?**

If you have a family member with a talent or interest in this area, your idea could work. However, you will need to face the typical challenges associated with working with family members. Those challenges will require clear communication and a clear understanding of everyone’s expectations.

## **I don't want this venture into ecommerce to take time away from my art. What kind of time commitment am I making?**

It is understandable that you would be concerned about an ecommerce business taking time away from your art, which you obviously enjoy. In weighing the time commitment, you should consider the following:

- More time will need to be dedicated at the front-end of the project. For example, you will have to commit some time to sketch a verbal picture of what you want on the website, review its ongoing development, and test the website. If you are reluctant to spend time on the front end, you may not maximize the full potential of the website.
- The aggregate number of hours that you spend in going to craft shows needs to be weighed against the time that you invest in your ecommerce business.
- Any marketing takes time.
- The more business you transact online, the more time you will spend managing the website.

After considering all these points, if you don't think you want to take any time away from your art and yet you understand the need to have a website, you will need to hire someone to develop the site.

## **What does that word “branding” mean, why is it important, and what does it have to do with having a website?**

Branding is the process of showing your potential customers that you offer them the best choice of products or services. By branding your product, you ensure that your product and any images, logo or words that you use convey a unified message that connects with the buyer emotionally, motivates your potential buyer, and builds customer loyalty. A website is an excellent additional tool to use in creating your own distinctive brand.

For more information about branding, please visit:

<http://marketing.about.com/cs/brandmktg/a/whatisbranding.htm>

*ACTIVITY: Investigate how three different artists have branded their artwork successfully in terms of consistency, emotional impact, motivation, and building loyalty.*

## **Okay, so I am convinced I need to have a Web presence. What should I expect from developing that part of my business?**

If you develop a strong Web presence, then the following are reasonable expectations:

- Increased market exposure.
- A credible professional image.
- Increased opportunities for branding your art.

- Increased sales. Berea College reports that their website accounts for 25 percent of their total sales.
- An easier way of showing your customers new work.

In short, the answer to what you can expect from an ecommerce business will depend on the website that you create and how effectively you learn to use that tool. Increases will be proportional to what you invest in advertising your website—whether through dollars or networking.

Although having a Web presence is an important tool, it is important not to expect that the Web will serve all your business needs. It probably won't provide:

- Instant riches.
- A substantial increase in first-time sales. Rather than expecting quick sales to first-time buyers, artists are finding that the Web is better used for strengthening customer relations with individuals they already have met.
- More time to spend just on your art because now you will have a quick and easy way to sell your work.
- A comprehensive approach to marketing. Your Web presence is only one part of your whole marketing plan.

As a final note, you can't expect to develop and launch a website and then never return to it. You will need to change and tweak your site, to update it, to correct all errors, and to amend and improve it as you receive feedback from your customers.

*ACTIVITY: Contact and interview one artist in your area. Choose an artist who has developed a Web presence and ask about their expectations and how those expectations were or were not met through the website.*

## **What are my goals for developing a Web presence?**

Clearly setting down your goals for your Web presence is an important first step. Setting goals will help to ensure that your own expectations are in line with reality. Because they are based on needs and expenses, clearly defined goals also will help you achieve the result you seek in your business.

For example, it is unrealistic to expect that a website will solve all your problems in marketing your art or that, upon posting your website, you immediately will become financially successful. On the other hand, if your goals are clear and realistic, they will help you to stay focused in how you go about developing your Web presence. It is important that you write your goals down...and then keep that sheet of paper handy as you work on your site. It will remind you of what you want to achieve.

Achievable goals that you might consider are to:

- Provide my customers with easy access to my newest pieces of art.
- Reach a new group of potential customers.
- Make enough income from my art to provide a second part-time income.
- Develop ongoing relationships with my customers.
- Help people better understand the process that I use to create my art.
- Build my professional persona.
- Help people more easily find my work and my studio.
- Provide a schedule of future shows.

In developing your goals, you also will need to consider your audience. You will be developing your Web presence for a particular type of customer, and you will need to clearly identify that customer. That is an important part of building a business.

*ACTIVITY: Imagine your prospective customer. For example: Where do they live? What do they wear? What do they do in their spare time? This portrait is important, because it informs how you will build your website.*

*ACTIVITY: Write your goals for your Web presence. Try to make these goals as specific as possible. Avoid goals that read simply, “To make me more successful.”*

### **What is the first thing I need to do to start developing a Web presence? And...if you say it involves doing research, why do I need to check out my competition?**

Remember the old cautionary, “Don’t reinvent the wheel?” Part of any successful business is doing market research. This stage is the research and development part of your endeavor and will help you shape the kind of website you want to develop. It also is how you can then position your business in the marketplace. If you can offer visitors to your website something that your competition doesn’t, you will have a better chance of drawing and holding visitors.

It is a wise use of your time to visit and study websites developed by your competition—to see how other artists build their businesses. This study saves you time and money if you learn from your competitors’ mistakes and successes.

As you visit these websites, pretend that you are a potential customer and ask yourself:

- Does the site make you feel good, like you can trust the business?
- Does the site load quickly? Or does it take forever, making it very tempting to move on to another site?
- Is it boring?
- Are there obvious mistakes in grammar or spelling?
- Is the site easy to navigate and can you find what you are looking for?
- Is the site missing important information?

- What about the site really appealed to you?
- Does the site have items for sale...and if so, is the process easy to understand?
- Is the website easy to find and do key words help you find it?
- What specifically about the website makes the visitor want to return (or not return)?

As you visit different sites, keep notes about what you liked and what you didn't like about them. Take notes about potential features that you think they may have missed. The idea is to form an idea of how you can build your presence to fill a niche or present your art in a compelling way that draws and keeps customers.

*ACTIVITY: Find and research the websites of three artists. Then analyze each in terms of the questions provided above.*