

Musings from the Editor's Desk
(Editorial from Beads & Jewelry Newsletter #2)

It seems as though I think of something new and important to say each and every day between issues. One day I want to discuss selling in person versus selling online. The next day it's craft festivals versus artisan fairs. I've thought about the differences about catering to different audiences/customers, and I've thought about creativity, inspiration, organization, and serendipity.

But usually I just end up talking about the most recent thing on my mind.

And today that thing is this:

How do we educate our potential customers about our products?

It drives me batty that many people see a high quality, well-made item and try to figure out why it costs so much more than the imported mass-produced similar looking item at the next table, or next in line in the eBay search, etc.

There were recently MANY eGroup conversations about an eBay seller named Austin Hamilton. At a quick glance, it seems you can get a real steal on some cool Lampwork beads. But then... reality sets in. I purchased three sets of beads from him and returned all three sets (he reimbursed me without a hitch... kudos to him for that).

So, even a seasoned buyer like me can be duped if I'm not "on the ball" at all times, investigating, questioning, and following my intuition.

Now if we look at the basic idea that:

Low Price = Low Quality

High Price = High Quality

... we're making some assumptions. But guess what... those assumptions may often be quite on the mark.

Yes, a lot of us have sold our things at desperation-induced prices, only to cry later as we're fondly remembering that certain charm bracelet that had to leave us in order to pay the electric bill, etc.

As I see it, there are two things VERY wrong with low pricing. One, it may give the idea that our pieces are somehow inferior or not of the highest quality. The discerning customer may look at our piece and its low price and think, "Hm... I wonder why it's so low... must be pretty crappy or poorly made or maybe she uses cheap materials... remember, you get what you pay for." Yikes!

Another reason not to sell your jewelry/beads for low prices is that you destroy the infrastructure of the artisan jewelry/bead industry.

Wow, didn't know *I* had that much power!

So what are we left with?

Hey, I never said it was EASY in this business. If someone just needs money and needs it fast, I suggest doing something else. Yes, money *can* be made in the art world, but I don't think THAT should be the motivating factor.

What should? Why, a love of the art, first and foremost. I tend to believe your passion (or lack thereof) will show through in your pieces.

Wait, let's get back to that money thing.

Fine, so you want a creative outlet to become financially helpful.

Do you want to compete with mass-produced imports or poorly made items? No? Then don't.

When I'm asked, "How do you compete with all the schlock on the market?" I merely reply, "I don't".

I used to pull my hair out over this... wondering how I could ever hope to make more than a penny an hour for my hard work and then slowly, over the years, it dawned on me. I don't have to compete with the aforementioned market flooders. I will NOT compete with them.

How will I not compete with them? Several ways.

- I will not make trendy, fashion jewelry
- I will not play "inside the box"; I will learn as much as I can and stretch my horizons, artistically
- I will continue to care about every piece I make and assure it is the highest quality possible
- I will continue to try to educate customers and non-customers in every way I can (future article)
- I will consider all things when I price my jewelry, not just the materials... I am NOT selling materials when I sell a bracelet or necklace (future article)
- I will not use the same materials as schlock sellers; jewelry is a luxury item... who buys the majority of luxury items? Rich people. What do rich people want? The best... THEREFORE, I will use only THE BEST materials I can find
- I will understand that I must build a customer base

Okay, let's take that last thing there.

You see, you can sell and sell and sell and sell, anywhere and everywhere. And you will make some sales, here and there. But to be successful, you're eventually going to have to do one of two things.

You either need to make a name for yourself in the business, or you need to have a customer base.

There are some "names" who sell EXTREMELY well on eBay. Are you one of them? If not, read on... 'cause those stories are few and far between.

Some people "luck into" getting a name... it just "happens"... but most work damn hard for a recognized name. That doesn't just mean they work hard now, it means they PAID a lot of dues. So don't whine to me with sour grapes attitude about the lady whose stuff sells for \$600 each in the local gallery, museum, or boutique. She worked 20 hours a day, 7 days a week, 4 years in a row perfecting her craft and proving her quality to others.

Making a name might involve some things that a lot of artisans find distasteful... schmoozing and marketing one's self. Ugh!

I've often thought how nice it would be to have an agent take my wares around and try to convince galleries I'm the next hot talent and they simply MUST have my work on display. But I don't even have the initiative to find an agent. Ha!

Some people get names, not by doing anything in particular, other than working their craft as best as they can and just having that thing that sets them apart and gets them noticed.

Me? I'm left with option two. Building a customer base.

Yes, I can get a random customer here and there on eBay... but it's not enough, not enough by far.

Well then where's my bread-and-butter gonna be? In the repeat action.

I'm building a customer base of people who have now seen my jewelry up close and personal. People who know my quality, and people who obviously have similar taste in design as I do.

It bothered me at first, the idea of selling to someone I'd already sold to. I kept thinking, "Well, this is it... I'll never see them again 'cause they already bought from me... why would they need to buy more?" Ha!

But I actually ended up (6 years later) realizing that repeat customers were a HUGE part of my sales. Yay me. Heh

What's my point to all this rambling?

Maybe to voice some advice I'm giving myself this week. Instead of focusing the majority of my energies and money into situations where I find myself competing with schlock or big names, I'm going to focus my EVER SO PRECIOUS energy and money on continuing to build my customer base.

- Keep great records of previous customers, even with little notes about what they bought, how they reacted, if they're chatty, and even personal details about them so you can start to feel familiar and friendly with them
- Begin regular mailings (email or snail mail) to keep previous customers from forgetting you; this doesn't mean spam them, though... be judicious
- Send out postcards or flyers with PICTURES of your work
- Keep immaculate records of those customers who do not want to be bothered, and don't bother them!
- Send coupons, gift certificates, or freebies occasionally with your flyers

Okay, this was supposed to be a muse and it turned into something much bigger.

What's a muse anyway? It's when I'm musing or thinking about something. It's not an article because it's on a subject I don't feel authoritative enough about. I'm merely musing... thinking aloud

As usual, your thoughts and comments are welcome. We can start a "letter to the editor" section. ☺

Laura

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