



CRAFT SHOW SUCCESS

Chapter 2:
Submitting a successful application

The first time I got a rejection email from a craft show, I was DEVASTATED.

“Thank you for your application but we regret to inform you that we can’t offer you a space at our upcoming craft show.”

I felt like donating my sewing machine to a thrift store and going back to college for something practical like accounting (which would I knew would have made me miserable). I had been running my handmade business for a decade, had sold at hundreds of craft shows and I KNEW I shouldn’t take the rejection so hard, but I did at first. I had also been a vendor at this show multiple times. I thought my items fit in with their aesthetic. My photos were great. I’d recently revamped my website. So why didn’t I get in?

After stopping myself from dramatically turning off the phone and crawling into bed, I calmed myself down with a glass of wine and a little (ok ... a lot) of ranting in my journal. I reread the rejection email and paid particular attention to the section of general points on why I may have been denied and thought about which of them might apply to me.



One of them led to an ah-ha moment: “If you’re a return vendor, how has your work progressed since participating or applying to our fairs over the years, and have you produced new items or designs since your previous participation?”

I thought about my line and how it hadn’t changed much over the past few years. My line was still selling well at craft shows and I had wholesale orders rolling in but I hadn’t come out with any new products or variations on current designs for a while.

Once I realized that this was likely the reason I had been denied, I felt a bit better. I also took this as a sign that it was time for me to re-evaluate my business and ask myself what happened to that creative spark that used to wake me up in bed at night to jot down new ideas for a product or design. I realized that after 10 years of producing new items four times a year plus dealing with the business side of my company, I was burnt out. That assessment led to some big changes with my business. In retrospect, that rejection was one of the best things that could have happened to me. Instead of letting it get me down, I used it as a learning experience. I ended up making the decision to focus more on the parts of my business that I was enjoying, which were teaching, producing a craft show and helping other creatives start and grow their businesses.

If you get rejected from a craft show, it's difficult not to take it personally, but if you take your time and submit the most awesome application you can, at least you know you tried your best.

The first step to submitting a successful craft show application is applying to the show that's right for your line and brand. Assess the show before you apply using the guidelines and questions in Chapter 1 on finding the right show.

Once you've decided which shows to apply for, you need to submit a stellar application. I've spent over a decade selling at craft shows and nearly a decade producing over 40 of them. I have tons of experience on both sides of the application process, as an applicant and as the head of a jury. If you take your time and address all of the things below, you'll have your best chance of getting in.

RESEARCH THE SHOW:

I go into detail on this topic in the previous chapter. Read it carefully and make sure the show you're applying to is a good fit. If you're applying for a show that isn't a good fit for your business, it doesn't matter how fabulous your application is, chances are you won't get in.



MAKE SURE YOUR LINE IS READY:

Go through the "Are you ready to do a craft show?" questions in Chapter 1 on finding the right show. Reread the part about cohesiveness, branding and uniqueness. This is especially important if you're applying to a larger juried show.

PAY ATTENTION TO DEADLINES:

Once you've decided to apply for a show, the first thing you need to do is mark your calendar with the application deadlines as well as the show date. Some shows let vendors in on a first-come, first-serve basis, meaning that as soon as they receive an application they decide if the vendor is accepted or not. Producers don't always make this public but they often put applications into a yes or no pile as soon as they get them. If you have the funds, apply as soon as applications are released. If the show requires any additional paperwork (like permits) make sure you turn them in on time!

READ THE FAQ's:

Show producers are busy people, just like you. Often they're juggling other jobs or their own handmade businesses too on top of personal commitments. Don't contact them with questions that you could have answered yourself by reading application instructions or the show's vendor FAQ page. If they state on their website that they don't accept vendors who don't make their products themselves and your products are made in a factory, and you're a representative for Scentsy candles (or another multi-level marketing business like Mary Kay or Avon), it's likely not worth your time to ask them if they'd make an exception for you. Your time would be much better spent focusing on venues that do accept the type of product that you sell.

FOLLOW APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS FULLY:

Show producers are likely receiving hundreds of applications and don't have the time or resources to email to you and ask you to send a link to your photos if you didn't include it as you were asked to do with your application. Often, producers will put incomplete applications in the no pile without even reviewing them. If they ask you to send no more than five photos, don't send six. If they ask you to write your business name in the notes section when you're making your booth payment through PayPal, do it!



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YOUR PHOTOS MUST BE AWESOME:

No matter how lovely your products are, if your photos aren't stellar, chances are you won't get into the show. Our jury looks at product photos first. Then we look at the rest of the application. I've heard the same sentiment from other show producers.

If photography isn't your strong point, seek out help from a talented friend. If you don't have the money to pay your friend, offer a trade or a favor. If you don't know any photographers, reach out to photographers who are just starting out at an arts high school, community college or university, or who have just begun sharing their photos on social media. Lots of times new photographers are happy to take photos for free if they're trying to build their portfolio. You can also offer to refer them to fellow makers and give them a shout out on your website and social media. You can also take an online course (CreativeLive has some awesome ones) or a class at a makers studio or community college in basic photography.



You'll need to have clear, in-focus, well-lit product shots. Product shots should be taken with a simple background. I like to use a white background but I've seen photos with wood or colored backgrounds that look great. The goal of a product shot is to show the thing you make as clearly as possible. The viewer should get the same sense of the product as if they were seeing it in person.

It's just as important to show product shots as it is to have lifestyle shots. Lifestyle shots are photographs of your product being used or in a setting. If you make scarves, show a photo of the scarf hanging as well as on a person. If you make art prints, include an image of the print hung in a styled room as well as a shot of the print itself. Be careful when you take lifestyle shots not to let the background or props overshadow your goods. You don't want the jury to look at a photo and wonder which item is the one you created. Don't have a model or a cool setting? Again, reach out to your network and offer something in return for someone posing in your shirt or letting you use their stylish bedroom as a background.

Ultimately it's best to take photographs with an SLR camera to show depth of field and capture crisp bright images. In a pinch you can use your smart phone and edit photos with an app like VSCO cam or Instagram.

Top five photography tips:

1. Your photos must be well lit. It's best to take photos during the day with diffused light. Overcast days are key. If it's not overcast, avoid the sun by heading indoors and setting up next to a window, create a light box or use a shady area. Avoid shadows and dark photos!



2. Close-ups are great, as long as they're in focus. Don't take a close-up unless the image is crisp, sharp and in focus. If you're too close and camera can't focus, the photo will be blurry and the jury will wonder what they're looking at.



3. Include booth booth photos. If your booth setup is innovative and eye-catching be sure to include a photo of it with your application.



4. Use lifestyle shots. Lifestyle shots are photos of your product being used or in a setting with props. Make sure people can tell which thing in the photo is the thing you make.



5. Have a great head shot. It's rare that a show will ask for your head shot but as a business owner you should have one on hand. Use the resource suggestions above to find someone to photograph you. Remember this is a photo of yourself for your business, not a glamour shot or boudoir picture. Forgo heavy make-up and lots of cleavage for something flattering yet natural (unless of course bright red lipstick, false eyelashes and low-cut tops fit your businesses branding).



**This is an example of a great head shot of my business partner/aunt Delilah by Chris + Jenn Photos. I love it because it hits all the points above and she looks natural and relaxed.*

Let's look at some examples of what NOT to do. You can download a PDF of some examples of bad photos with some notes about what's wrong in them at the end of this chapter. It's important to note that I took 95% of these bad photos and the ones I didn't take were taken by my mom! So before you think I'm a big jerk who's just out to trash-talk bad photos, remember I'm trash-talking myself!

Now that we know what to avoid, look at the same PDF in this chapter for some examples of well-done photos with notes on what's working. Most of these photos were also taken by me except for a few that were taken by Lisa Rios of The Makery.



MAKE YOUR WRITING CONCISE AND INTERESTING:

Some people find writing about themselves or what they make difficult. I totally get it! It's hard for some of us to toot our own horns. Craft show applications will require you to do a bit of writing and chances are it will be about how great you and your business are. Some only ask for your bio (biography) and some may ask for a business description, artist statement or product descriptions. Take a bit of time and have all of these ready to go so you're prepared for whatever an application calls for. There's also a resource sheet at the end of this chapter with examples of bios, product descriptions and business descriptions.

Here are common types of writing shows will ask you for:

Bio:

Your bio should be written in the third person. This is your chance to talk about yourself, your accomplishments and what you currently make. Don't be shy and feel free to include a sentence or two that expresses your influences or personal life. Bios are generally around 300 words. I like having two bios on hand: one short one (around 150-200 words) and one longer one (around 300-400 words).

It's time to let go of self-deprecation and highlight your accomplishments. If you're uncomfortable writing about yourself, ask a friend to help you out. Offer them some credit towards what you make, a home-cooked meal or a favor in return. My favorite bio I've had was written by a friend who offered to help me when I told her what a hard time I was having with it. If you're having a rough time writing your artist statement or biography, look at your resume, create a list of your accomplishments and look at the branding worksheet you're about to fill out in Chapter 3.

Artist statement:

Your artist statement should be written in the first person and describe your work and your process as a maker. It's a good idea to include your history as a creative and how your work evolved to where it is now, but focus mainly on what you make now. Most craft shows won't ask for an artist statement. However, juried art fairs often do. If you're a fine artist or plan on applying to juried fine art fairs, it's a good idea to have an artist statement ready to go.

Since I'm not a fine artist and never apply to shows that require an artist statement, I don't have one but you can check out some examples of artist statements here:

http://www.montserrat.edu/academics/writingcenter/writingcenter_pdf/statementsamples.pdf

Here are some great tips on creating an artist statement:

<http://www.artbusiness.com/artstate.html>

Business Description:

Your business description is a brief summary of your business that communicates the essence of your business to the world in a few sentences. Think about the Who, What, Where, When and Why of your business, but keep it short!

Product Description:

Some applications may also call for product descriptions to go along with your photos. You can keep your product description short and sweet or you can do some storytelling, like in the example at the end of this chapter from Maiden Voyage. It's important to include pertinent facts about the item like color and materials.



TOP 8 TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT YOU AND YOUR BUSINESS:

1. Have a friend who knows you and your work well write your bio or describe your business.
2. Include interesting facts about yourself or your work. If your studio is in a building that used to be a bread factory, include that.
3. If you are really having a hard time with your bio, you might find it easier to write it as a list. Use the Harper's Index as inspiration. <http://harpers.org/departments/harpers-index/>
4. Make it clear, concise and interesting.
5. Have a friend proofread your writing for grammar and spelling errors.
6. Being OVERLY descriptive is never a good choice. Don't use two adjectives to describe something if one would suffice.
7. Try not to use big words or pretentious language or make obscure references that the general public doesn't recognize. You don't want people to have to head to a dictionary to decipher what you're trying to say.
8. Be creative. Producers are reading through hundreds of applications and an interesting fact may help them remember you.

Since makers seem to have the most difficulty writing about themselves, here are a few more resources to help you write an honest yet compelling bio:

<http://wondergrow.com/2009/07/16-questions-to-help-you-write-a-douche-free-bio/>

<http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/233264>

<http://thestoryoftelling.com/10-rules-for-writing-about-me-page/>

<http://abbykerr.com/writing-your-authentic-about-page/>

<http://meylah.com/meylah/top-10-tips-for-writing-a-killer-about-page>



THINK LONG AND HARD ABOUT SHARING A BOOTH WITH SOMEONE:

Lots of vendors apply for shared booths with friends, family members or fellow makers. Sharing a booth can seem like a great idea. Your booth fee is cut in half, you have someone to watch your stuff while you take break and you won't be lonely. BUT, heed my warning: When you apply for a shared booth, your booth partner needs to be as serious about their business, their booth and the application process as you are. You need to make sure their line is a good fit for not only the show but that it complements your products. Their products, branding and displays will be next to yours and will influence how customers perceive your business.



For most of her life, Nicole Stevenson had a different answer when asked, "What do you do?" *— None!*

At age 9 when she started her first business, a handmade stationery shop housed in a refashioned refrigerator box in her front yard, she said she was a shop-keeper. In junior high when she snuck into the teacher's lounge and self-published her first short story on the mimeograph machine, she answered, "I'm a writer." In high school when her sketches of female nudes caused a stir among the nuns at her catholic girls' school, she called herself an artist. *— do people know what this is? how has she written?*

Then, things got a lot more complicated as she found that no one genre sufficed. Her path includes time as a creative writing graduate student in San Francisco, street artist on the Venice Beach boardwalk, costume designer, Hollywood flea market art vendor, DIY workshop instructor, co-founder of a non-profit that produced art shows benefiting charities, owner and designer of Random Nicole (an art-inspired clothing line carried at over 250 locations) and owner of craft workshop studio and retail store: The Craft Kitchen. *— who is this? what is this? when was it?*

These days, Nicole can be found creating illustrations and designs for Show and Tell Design Studio, co-producing Patchwork Show: Modern Creative Festival and Craftication: Creative Business and Makers Conference, writing about business, making and her adventures for the blog Dear Handmade Life as well as answering the question, "What do you do?" with "I'm a maker." *— what is a maker?*

"It took nearly two decades of living a creative life to finally realize the one thing that all my pursuits had in common. Whether I'm creating a venue for crafters to sell their

DO SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF:

Your application is a reflection of your professionalism as a business owner. Try your best to avoid grammatical and spelling errors. I'll be honest, I'm the worst speller and even though I have a Masters Degree in English, I am a miserable failure at proofreading, copyediting and catching grammatical errors. Chances are that you've found at least one error in this course even though I had two editors review it before I published it. We're all human and sometimes things slip past even the best editor. Do your best and have a friend or a few friends take a peek at your application before you submit it. Make sure your email address is correct! I can't tell you how many times an acceptance email bounces back because the vendor had a typo in their email address and then is furious with me that they didn't get their email.

FOLLOW-UP:

Mark down the date when the show sends acceptance/denial emails. Don't email the producers before that date. Application time is extremely busy for show producers and you don't want to start off your relationship with the show by nagging the jury before the deadline. If you do get rejected, read their FAQ regarding feedback. If they provide a list of general reasons why you may have been rejected, go through that list and see if any apply to you. If they offer personalized feedback, email them after the show, when they're not as busy. Be nice when you email them and let them know you want to improve your application for next season and ask if they have any suggestions.

There's no guarantee you'll get into every craft show every single time you apply. I've heard seasoned vendors who have been accepted, then denied, then accepted again at the same show complain that it seems like there's no rhyme or reason to the way some shows accept or reject vendors. I can't say I know the jury process of every show, but I do know that most established shows are looking for vendors that will fit in well with the show they've built. There's no surefire way to get an acceptance email every time to every show you apply for, but if you do your research, apply to the shows that are a good fit for your brand and make your application as perfect as you can using the tips in this chapter you'll have an awesome shot! Good luck.

P.S. – Need some more tips and love for craft show rejection? Check out Unanimous Craft's awesome article on craft show rejection.

