

A large, diverse crowd of people is gathered at an outdoor craft show. The scene is filled with various stalls, tents, and people of all ages. In the background, there are signs for "ORGANIC HEIRLOOM" and "FARMERS". The atmosphere is bright and sunny, with a clear blue sky. The crowd is moving through the aisles, some looking at the displays, others talking to each other. A woman in a green jacket and sunglasses is in the foreground, looking towards the camera. A young girl in a purple top and plaid skirt is walking next to her. A stroller with a white blanket is visible on the right. The overall scene is a busy, vibrant community event.

CRAFT SHOW SUCCESS

Chapter 4: Preparing for a craft show

There are some mistakes you only want to make once at a craft show. For me, forgetting the bar that goes across the top of my rolling rack was one of them. A panicked feeling rose in me as I unpacked my car the morning of the show and realized I'd left the bar leaning up against my garage door. My line was mostly clothing and without that bar, I had no place to hang it. I was in a tough spot. I racked my brain for a solution. Driving to a store and buying a replacement was out of the question since doing that would take too long and I'd miss the first hour of the show. It was an indoor venue, so I didn't have my pop-up tent. If I did, I could have hung my clothing from it. I ended up borrowing a table from someone and taking all my shirts off the hangers and folding them on the table. My booth didn't look great and I know it affected my sales that day. That night, I made a detailed list of every single thing I needed for the show and I swore to check it twice before heading off to future shows.

I'm not the only vendor who has been filled with dread when they realized they'd left an important part of their display or even some of their products at home the morning of a craft show and I'm sure I won't be the last. At just about every craft show I've produced, at least one vendor has asked me, with a terrified look in their eyes, if I had a spare table. Sometimes it happens to even the most seasoned vendors.

Making sure you have your inventory, booth display and everything else you need for a successful day is a big part of how to prepare for a craft show. However, there's a lot of preparation that starts months before the day of the show.



TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The best way to prepare for anything is to plan ahead so that you're not rushing around days or even hours before the big event. These tips will help you make sure you get it all done and hopefully have time to spare. With regards to timing, there are three important areas to consider:

Start preparing as early as possible

Aside from things the show asks you to do, you'll have your own tasks as well. You don't want to be up late the night before the show putting price tags on everything, painting your displays or making inventory. I've created a timeline at the end of this chapter of things to do starting from a year before the show that will help you stay organized and on task. I suggest taking my list and personalizing it by adding your things to do and being as specific as possible. Once you make the list you can reuse it for every craft show you do, so that initial time investment of creating it will pay off big time! Large projects like preparing for a craft show can feel overwhelming when you look at your list of things to do, but if you break it up and chip away at it a little bit every week, you'll get everything done and won't be stressed out.

Be realistic about what you can accomplish during a time period

As you plan for the craft show using my timeline, think hard about what you're able to do in any given block of time and always add a time buffer. We tend to underestimate how long a task will take. If you think something will an hour to complete, give yourself at least an extra 15 minutes. If you finish early, great! You can get a head start on another task or reward yourself with a break.

Pay attention to the deadlines and timing of the show

It's especially important to pay attention to show deadlines. If they ask you to submit permits, licenses or paperwork by a certain date – get them in BEFORE the deadline. If the show asks you to promote the event on your social media outlets by a particular date – do it. Waiting until the last minute adds unneeded stress, plus it makes you look unprofessional.

TIMING TIPS:

- Be on time!!! Read all directions for loading and unloading and parking (be sure to bring change for the meter if needed).
- Don't leave the show early! If the show isn't going well, use the tips in Chapter 7 to make the most of your time.
- Plan on having your booth completely set up a half-hour before the show starts. Sometimes organizers open the doors early to customers, or people wander in and often other vendors will get their shopping done before the event starts.
- Don't be too early and get in the way as staff prepares for the show but DON'T BE LATE. That extra time will not only help you be more relaxed as you unload and set up your booth, but can help you solve unexpected problems.
- Think seasonally. If it's a holiday show be sure to have gifty items or lower priced stocking stuffers. If you don't have anything like this, you may consider making DIY craft kits or a lower priced version of one of your products.
- If you do have car trouble or an emergency, call or email the producers so they can prepare for an empty booth if you're not going to make it or find out whether they can save your booth for you if you're going to be late. Make sure you have contact information for the producers.
- If you find out that you can't make it to the show, let the producers know as soon as possible so they can prepare for your absence or fill your spot if possible. If they clearly state no refunds after a certain date and you cancel after that date, respect their rules and don't ask for one.
- DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE to do anything! I can't stress this enough. Take it from someone who has sometimes been super prepared and other times thought, "Oh, I'll just do that the night before the show." There's never as much time as you think, so get everything done as soon as possible.

MAKE A LIST + CHECK IT TWICE

The only way you'll be able to get everything done on time is by making a list. It took my husband a year of teaching cooking workshops and forgetting at least one thing every single time to actually get on board with the notion of making a list of what he needed. The first time he made a list was the first time he didn't forget anything. I held back my "I told you so's" and was simply happy to not see him scrambling for a place to get cilantro or goat cheese 30 minutes before his class started. He's the perfect example of someone who thinks he can keep track of everything in his head, but can't. It's a good theory but it rarely works.

I'm a list-making type-A personality, so organization comes fairly naturally to me. Making a weekly list of things to do is actually a fun task for people like me.

If you're someone who likes to fly by the seat of your pants and believes it will all work out, you'll need to really focus on your preparation, timing and organization.

The best way to be organized is to create lists of what you need and what needs to be done. At the end of this chapter there's a detailed list of what to pack for a craft show. Use this list as a jumping off point and add and subtract based on your specific needs. Create your own packing list at least a month before the show. Don't overlook important paperwork like directions, the booth map, and a copy of your business license or any other permits you may need to have.

PACK LIKE A CHAMP + HAVE A DRESS REHEARSAL

I remember the first time I saw an ex's band load their equipment into their van after a show. They had an intricate system of puzzle-piecing the amps, guitars, drum set and everything else into a small space and they didn't even have to discuss what they were doing as they did it. It was like watching a team of engineers. Here were four guys who never paid a bill on time and whose dresser drawers chaotically overflowed, but when came to loading their van, they were experts. Why? Because they'd done it so many times. Take a lesson from these punk rockers and rehearse. They didn't just rehearse their songs, set list and stage banter, they even rehearsed how to pack their car

You don't want to be caught the morning of a craft show wasting precious time trying to shove one of your racks into your car only to find that the door opening isn't wide enough. Before you even think about what kinds of racks and displays you'll use in your booth, measure all the door and trunk openings in your car. You may find an awesome card rack at a thrift store but if it doesn't fit in your car or it's super heavy, it may not be the best bet. Sometimes, like at street fairs, you can drive right up to your space and unload but it's more common that you'll have to carry or cart everything from your car to the venue. Lots of times you're able to use a hand-truck or dolly (which I highly suggest; see my packing list) but there are times that venues have stairs, the elevator could be broken or you may have to go across uneven ground like gravel or even worse, muddy grass. Take into account your transportation both to the venue and once you get there. If you're considering renting a truck or van, you must add that into your costs for the show. It might be worth it but it might not. I'll go over figuring out your costs and profit in Chapter 6.



Efficient packing isn't just about weight and packability, it's also about the shape of what you're packing. I've found that best displays and racks are ones that fold down to save space. I also like having clear, labeled and color-coded bins for all my small things and merchandise. Having different clear colored bins for different items makes it easy to find the right bin when you're in a rush and want to know what's inside without having to open it. I also label them in case I have a new helper. That way they can see instantly which bin has office supplies or inventory, etc. When you look at my packing list, you'll see the way I divided things up based on how I use them, then I place similar items in one bin. For example, all first aid stuff and personal items in one bin and all office stuff in another. Once all my bins and booth displays are ready to go, I do a trial run and pack my car just to make sure everything fits and there's still enough room for my helper and me.

You also need to do a dress rehearsal for your actual booth set-up. I go into detail about displays and merchandising in Chapter 5. Once you have a game plan for your booth set-up, do a trial run in your backyard or living room. Invite a design savvy friend or fellow maker over and offer to make them dinner in exchange for them critiquing your booth. You can take photos and email them to a friend if you're seeking the advice of someone who doesn't live nearby. Having a dress rehearsal for your booth set-up is also the perfect opportunity to practice setting up your pop-up tent by yourself. If you realize that this requires a second person, ask the producers if there are volunteers or staff at the show to help or seek assistance from a fellow vendor. Nine times out of 10 if a fellow vendor sees you struggling with a pop-up tent they'll volunteer to help without you even having to ask.

I highly suggest packing your car the night before the show (assuming you have a garage or live in an area where you feel safe leaving things in your car overnight). You'll sleep easier knowing that all you have to do in the morning is get yourself ready and hop in the car.



PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Rain is the one of the most difficult weather conditions to deal with at an outdoor show (at least in California). A few years ago at our Patchwork Show in Long Beach it didn't just rain, it poured. It was also windy and the wind blew the rain so that it was hitting us from above as well as from the sides. The torrential downpour happened so suddenly and there was so much rain so quickly that within an hour we were all standing in ridiculous puddles. My co-producer Delilah and I were freaking out. We felt awful for our vendors and staff but short of a rain dance, there wasn't anything we could do to stop the water. The majority of our vendors braved the rain and stayed. They banded together, offering extra tarps and tent walls as well as shelter to their fellow vendors who didn't have pop-up tents. They hunkered down under their tents sharing warm coffee from thermoses and made the best of it. A few hours later, the rain let up and the sun came out. So did the customers! I wasn't just producing that show, I was also a vendor. I ended up doing really well. A few vendors left before the rain stopped and we didn't hold it against them but most of the ones who stuck it out ended up having a good day like I did.

If you're vending at an outdoor show, one of the things you can't control is the weather. It may be blazing hot or rainy or super windy. The thing you can do is prepare for all types of weather and check the weather report often. The week before I'm vending at or producing an outdoor craft show, I start checking the weather. Being caught in the rain without a tarp or overhead covering at an outdoor show is a huge bummer! Do your best to prepare for inclement weather by bringing a tent or umbrella for shade and rain protection, extra tarps and sandbags or weights.



Another way to expect the unexpected is by preparing for variations on your space. If it's an outdoor show, there may be debris in your spot. Bring a broom and dustpan just in case. There's always a chance that you'll arrive at a show and the venue isn't exactly how the producers described it or maybe the Wifi isn't working or perhaps one of your displays broke when you were unloading. Triple-check your packing list and be sure to have things on hand for unpredictable situations. Go over the packing list at the end of this chapter for more specifics on what to bring for just-in-case scenarios.

If you need the producers or venue to provide something for you, don't just expect it to be there. Ask the producers questions about the venue as soon as you can. If you need Wifi to run credit cards or electricity for lighting, request those things on your application (if they are things they can provide on a case-by-case basis), follow up with the producers to ensure that it will be available for you on the day of the show, and have a back up plan just in case it isn't.

If you need coffee in the morning to feel like a human being then make sure you either get your coffee or that the venue has coffee. The same thing goes for food and water. You don't want to be stuck at a show for eight hours wishing you'd brought a snack if the food truck doesn't show up or only takes cash and you didn't bring extra money.

Bathrooms at craft shows are a big issue for me. I drink a lot of water and if the restrooms at a show are far away or all they offer is portable restrooms, I take that into consideration when deciding if I'm going to apply. Regardless of the bathroom situation I always have hand sanitizer, a small container of soap and some emergency toilet paper.



DON'T GO IT ALONE

I used to regularly sell at a show that was three hours from where I lived. Bringing a friend along to help with the drive as well as assist was a must. One year the person I had scheduled to help cancelled at the last minute. On my way to pick him up I called to check in and he said he'd woken up sick. Later I found out that sick actually was code for hung over. I tried to be nice but I was panicking! This was the busiest show of my year and I couldn't imagine doing it alone. It was too late to find a replacement who lived nearby. So I scrolled through a mental list of every single person I knew who lived in the city where the show was. The only person I could come up with was an ex-boyfriend from years ago. He would never have been my first choice for a craft show assistant. First off, he wasn't the most friendly and looked a little intimidating. He also was a mechanic who knew nothing about my industry or the art of friendly craft show banter. But he agreed to help and when he pulled up to the venue on his motorcycle, I breathed a sigh of relief. He may not have been my first choice but he ended up being the perfect assistant. He watched my booth while I went to the ladies room, grabbed lunch for me and even helped me ring up customers when I had a line eight people deep waiting to check out. He'd worked in the parts department of a mechanic shop for years and could add multiple purchases and even calculate sales tax in his head!

My lesson: Make sure your help is reliable and takes the job seriously, but never underestimate the person who might be able save the day when you're in a pinch.

If you have employees, consider asking one of them to assist you. If you're a one-person operation, you'll need to get a bit creative to find help. When you're considering who will join you at the show, treat it as if you're hiring someone since essentially that's what you're doing (even if it's just for a day). The best way to do this is to come up with a list of qualities you'd like your dream assistant to have, then you should weigh your prospective helpers against that list. It's rare that I find someone who meets all of my assistant dream qualities but I try to pick out someone who scores pretty well.



Your mom may be willing to help but if she's shy and gets flustered if there's more than one thing to do or if she has to talk to strangers, then she may not be the best choice. My dad often visits the shows I do and occasionally I ask him to watch my booth while I use the ladies room. But the second someone steps into my booth he calls my cell phone and asks me what to do. My dad is great at helping me add price tags to my products or build displays but watching my booth is not his forté.

Sometimes we can't be picky, and having someone in a booth even if it's just to let customers know that you'll be right back is better than having an unattended booth. If you know or are worried that you won't be able to have an assistant at the show, request that the producers put you next to a vendor you know who can help by watching your booth during a quick food run or bathroom break. Ask the vendor ahead of time and make sure they're cool with covering your space and offer to do the same for them. If that isn't possible, make friends with your neighbor vendors while setting up and chances are they'll be happy to help you out.

These are the people I pull from when I'm looking for a craft show assistant in order of who I reach out to first:

- Employees
- Interns
- Friends
- Family
- Makers I know who haven't done shows yet and want experience
- Students at a local arts high school, community college or university

Once you decide who to ask for help, figure out how to compensate them. Some friends or family members are willing to help out for free, which is great. However, I suggest finding some way to "pay" them even if it's in trade or favors. People tend to take things they are paid for more seriously.

Here are a few suggestions of how to pay booth assistants:

Money

No surprise here! This is the #1 way to compensate someone but if funds are tight, consider the other options below. If you're paying your helper in cash, you need to mutually agree on an hourly wage or day rate. If it's an hourly wage, be clear whether travel, set-up or break-down time counts. As a rule, I never offer anyone less than \$10 an hour.

Trade

Some people would be happy to trade their time for your products, but if you make baby clothes and the person helping you doesn't have children, offer them credit that never expires towards baby shower gifts.

Favors

Get super creative with this one! Write down skills you have and offer up your services, like babysitting, painting a room in their house, doing a painting of their family, or teaching them a skill like sewing or how to use Quickbooks.



OUT OF TOWN SHOWS

Out of town shows create a special set of issues that need to be tackled on top of things you already have to do when you're vending at a local event. First, you need to assess if an out of town show is worth it. Revisit Chapter 1 on finding the right show and make sure the event meets as much of the criteria as possible. Out of town shows are riskier since expenses are higher, there's more preparation and assessment of the show is more difficult.

When I do an out of town show, I try to reduce my cost by road tripping with another vendor, buying my plane ticket early, booking a discounted hotel room or staying with a friend, and adjusting my booth display so I have less to transport or ship. I also try to turn an out of town show into a mini-vacation by bringing a friend or my partner and staying an extra day or two. Along the same lines, if I am planning a trip, for example to see my brother in Phoenix, and the dates are flexible, I'll do some research and apply for shows in the area and plan my trip around show dates. If I don't make a killing at the show, it's not as big of a deal since I was planning on going there anyway and only spent one day of my trip working. If you don't know anyone in the area, reach out to other vendors on social media and see if they have a spare room. You can offer them cash or trade, plus you'll get to know a new maker. If your booth display includes standard items like a pop-up tent or 8-foot table, check out rentals or you can also reach out to other vendors on social media and see if you can borrow one.

Out of town shows are also a great place to research new potential wholesale accounts. Plan ahead and set aside time to check out shops that may want to carry your items and try to set-up appointments with the shop's buyer.



GET YOURSELF READY

Once your stuff is ready you need to get yourself ready. Selling at craft shows is exhausting. You have to deal with the physical aspects of packing, loading, unloading, setting up your booth then loading and unloading when the show is over. It's also mentally draining since you spend the entire time striking up conversations with strangers. The anticipation and anxiety about the outcome can also take its toll. If you're like me and struggle with taking care of yourself and working within your limits, it might be hard for you to get yourself physically and mentally ready for an intense day. BUT I highly suggest trying to. As I talked about earlier, prepare as much as you can as far in advance as possible. Have your car packed and all your lists checked of the night before so you can get a good night's sleep knowing that you likely didn't forget anything. Don't plan any social activities the night before, keep drinking to a minimum and get a good night's sleep. Make sure your alarm is set. Since I'm a bit (okay maybe a lot) OCD, I set three alarms the night before just to be sure I don't snooze through the big day. I also pick out what I'm going to wear the night before so I'm not struggling trying to find the perfect outfit or ironing something in the morning. I pack my snacks and water before bed, along with any medications I might need in case I get a headache or an upset stomach. I also make sure I have something quick to prepare that's full of protein for breakfast.

Prepare yourself for a long day of making small talk and talking about yourself and what you make. If you're not good at making small talk, jot down a list of potential conversation starters and keep it in your apron to review throughout the day.

Have your elevator pitch memorized but practice it with your partner or friend so it doesn't sound too stiff. If you don't have an elevator pitch, create one. An elevator pitch is basically a brief summary of what you do in a sentence or two. The idea behind an elevator pitch is that you never know who you may meet and you should be able to network and connect with anyone in the time it takes an elevator to go between floors. When someone asks, "what do you do?" know what you're going to say.

Here's my elevator pitch:

"I produce large-scale festivals for artists and makers and a conference for makers and creative entrepreneurs. I'm also a writer and an illustrator and artist.

My elevator pitch is short and not markedly interesting. There's no fascinating story there but it does contain pertinent details of what I do and if the person I'm talking to is interested in any of that stuff, they'll likely ask me more about it. If they ask, then I get creative and tell my story full of colorful details about what I do and my journey. If you need help creating your elevator pitch, go back and look at your bio, business description and branding worksheets. Start by writing a paragraph about yourself and what you do then edit way down. First cut one word from each sentence. Then cut one sentence. Repeat until it's one or two sentences and you feel it does justice to what you do.

It's also smart to practice talking about yourself, what you make and how you make it in detail. This comes easily to me but I know it doesn't to everyone. Try having practice conversations with a friend or your partner to get comfortable talking about yourself and your business.



MARKETING THE SHOW

What's the use in being totally prepared for a show if no one shows up? As a vendor you expect the producers to advertise and market the show to their audience but part of your job as a vendor is to do the same. It's easy to get wrapped up in getting yourself, your products and your booth ready for the show, but you must make time to spread the word about the event too.

There was one holiday season when I sold at over 40 craft shows in three months. I was completely overwhelmed and couldn't find the time to promote all of them. A few of the shows (they happened to be the ones I didn't promote) were sparsely attended. As I sat there getting upset and feeling like I was wasting my time I couldn't help but think that if I had done my part in marketing the shows, perhaps at least one of my regular customers would have showed up. I felt like a jerk and promised to never again be so careless in my promotion. Heed my warning, don't end up sitting there bored at a show that isn't crowded and kick yourself for not promoting it.

Distributing printed postcards + posters

Some shows offer to send you printed postcards or posters to distribute. **DISTRIBUTE THEM.** If the show doesn't send vendors printed promotional materials, create your own or ask a friend who's good at graphic design to assist you. Carry the cards and posters with you everywhere you go. Keep some postcards with you in your purse, bag or car at all the times. If you are wearing your product and someone compliments you on it, respond with a card for your next show. When you stop for coffee or even go in for a doctor's appointment ask if they would be interested in putting up a poster or having a few cards on the counter. You never know who you'll run into or if they'll be interested in going to a craft show. I added distributing postcards to my preparation timeline but you should adjust my dates to fit your schedule. It's never too early to start advertising!

Here are some suggestions on where to distribute printed postcards:

- Friends, family and neighbors (you can also ask friends and family to bring some to work and post them in the break room or hand out to co-workers)
- Fellow vendors who could hand them out at other shows they're doing
- Other shows you're vending at
- Coffee shops, restaurants, bars and cafes
- Music venues, plays or other arts spots or events you're going to
- Schools, universities or community colleges
- Groups you belong to like mother's groups, bowling clubs, churches and craft meet-ups
- Places where you get services done like nail salons, doctor's offices, yoga studios, massage studios, hair salons, estheticians or tattoo shops
- Chamber of commerce, community center, libraries, arts center or tourist center
- Craft, art or design studios or workshop spaces
- Record shops or music studios
- Bookstores
- Independent boutiques and shops



Spreading the word online:

Aside from distributing physical postcards, you can spread the word about the show to your online audience. It's helpful if the show's producers give you cut and paste social media posts, but if they don't, create your own. Spread the word on your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest accounts. If you utilize other social media channels, find a way to promote the show on them as well. If the show doesn't provide digital images or postcards, create your own or take my advice from the section above and seek help from a friend. If you have a blog, create a blog post announcing the show way ahead of time and then another post reminding your readers that the show is coming up. If you're vending at multiple shows in one season, you may want to combine the events into one post instead of bombarding your readers every day with a new show announcement.

If you have a mailing list and send a newsletter, send one about the shows you're doing. If you don't have a mailing list, I **HIGHLY** suggest starting one and signing up with a newsletter service like Mailchimp.

If you have an Etsy shop or use another online marketplace to sell your products, use it to promote the show. Add the show to your bio or shop announcement, create an event for it or announce it in the forums or discussion boards. Whatever avenues you use to announce that you'll be vending at the show, start early and remind your audience. Your customers are just as busy as you are and it's easy for them to let upcoming event slip through the cracks.

If you want to have the best possible experience at your next craft show, you need to think ahead, prepare and get down and dirty with some list making. Even if your product is outstanding, if you're not ready for the show, chances are the event won't be successful (at least for you). All of this attention to timing and details may not be the sexy side of entrepreneurship but it will help pave the way for your crafty empire. There's nothing glamorous about missing a deadline or forgetting part of your booth set-up, but there is something spectacular about coming home from a craft show with a pocket full of cash, a bunch of new contacts and the satisfaction that you did your best.

