

A photograph of a busy craft show booth. In the foreground, there are various handmade items including a large white unicorn plush, a colorful patterned bag, and a white character plush with large eyes. The booth is set up with orange and white boxes and displays. In the background, several people are browsing, including a woman in a green hoodie and a man in a grey hoodie. The scene is outdoors under a red canopy.

CRAFT SHOW SUCCESS

Chapter 6:
Putting your best foot forward and
dealing with the unexpected at craft shows

Some makers experience a deep fear when it comes to sharing their work with the world. It's hard and sometimes painful to put the essence of your creativity out there. We fear that people won't "get" or like what we make. We fear that we'll be sitting in our booth at a craft show and no one will come in or buy anything. Honestly, all of these fears are totally possible BUT if you're ready to sell what you make at a craft show, you're totally ready to conquer these fears!

If you're still in the "I don't know if I can do this" state of mind, I suggest picking up Austin Kleon's "Share Your Work" or Kim Werker's book "Making it Mighty Ugly." Austin urges creatives to stop worrying and start sharing. Kim is so good at helping us creatives realize that everything doesn't always have to be perfect and that the imperfections are part of the journey. Once you decide you are ready to share your work with the world, it's important to spend a bit of time preparing yourself for the big event by making sure you look and behave in a manner that's not only professional but that reflects your brand.

YOU ARE YOUR BRAND

Since I work from home, I'm a big fan of working in my pajamas. Like many other creative entrepreneurs who don't go into an office, I relish the fact that I can make my own hours and don't have to worry about what I'm wearing when I head into the office (aka my studio at home). After all, my office mates (my cat and dog) could care less if I put on lipstick or if my socks match. But when I'm vending at a craft show, I make sure to look polished and put together since I'm representing my brand.

In the chapter on merchandising your booth we went over every tiny detail of your display, except for one ... YOU! At a craft show you are a part of your display and it's important to dress and act the part. This doesn't mean you have to wear a suit (unless wearing a suit makes sense for your brand). It does mean that you need to look and act professional. Dressing and behaving in a way that fits the branding of your business is essential.



If you make clothing, jewelry or something else wearable, wear something from your line that looks good on you. You're trying to attract your ideal customer and dressing in a way that appeals to them will help them relate to you and they will be drawn to your booth and products. If you make punk rock patches and metal studded leather cuffs, dressing conservatively won't help you connect with the types of customers who'd be interested in buying edgy accessories.

Don't just think about what you wear but also take into account the functionality of your outfit. No matter how cute those new high heels are, you'll be standing all day long and if by hour two of the show your feet are killing you, you'll get cranky. I also suggest dressing in layers so you're ready for hot afternoons and cool evenings.

Hopefully this goes without saying, but good hygiene and is a must! You don't want your customers clawing their way out of your booth to escape your bad breath or body odor. Revisit the craft show packing list from the Preparing for a Show chapter for a full list of personal items that will help you stay fresh and comfortable during long show hours.

Good manners are just as important as looking (and smelling) great. Some vendors say that sitting down in your booth is unacceptable. I totally get what they're saying but sometimes you need to get off your feet for a few minutes. Having a high table that serves as your check out area with a stool bridges that gap between sitting and standing. I try to never sit down for longer than five or 10 minutes. Even if my booth display is in perfect shape, I'll get up and rearrange or refold things to keep myself busy and make my booth look more inviting and less like a place where a desperate maker lays in wait for someone to come into their booth. This is also the perfect time to pull out your busywork that you brought along. You should appear engaged but open and ready to help. Try to avoid eating in front of customers by taking advantage of slow times to slip out for a bite or take a cue from Jeanette from Sweet Perversion (from the Merchandising Your Booth chapter) and create a "back room" where you can eat out of sight. Smoking or drinking alcohol in your booth or at least in clear view (in most cases) is also not the best idea. You don't want to alienate parents or customers who have an aversion to booze and cigarettes. Some vendors I know love bringing champagne or beer to craft shows and pouring it into a coffee cup. A drink or two loosens them up and helps them start conversations. If champagne is your cup of tea and you're not breaking any laws, just make sure you keep it moderate and have gum or mints handy.

Be very careful about what you say. I've overheard vendors loudly complaining about some aspect of the show when they had no idea the producer was standing within earshot. It's rare to be at a perfect show with no problems, but your criticism is much more productive if you email the producers directly after the show. I'll talk more about following up with producers in the After the Show chapter as well. The same goes for complaining about fellow vendors or pretty much anything else. A positive attitude goes a long way!

Your craft show booth is the part of your business that is highly public so professionalism with your customers, fellow vendors and show producers is essential.



TO CATCH A THIEF

I'd like to think that the type of people who come to craft shows appreciate all the work that independent business owners put into their products but this isn't always the case. Most veteran craft show vendors have at least one tale of being ripped off. Sometimes the thievery is someone stealing one of your products from your booth. Sometimes it's a designer copying your idea. I've even heard of vendors getting their cash box stolen when they had their back turned. At a busy show things can get pretty chaotic so the best thing you can do to protect yourself is to be prepared.

You can protect your products and cash box with some of the tips I mentioned in previous chapters, like bringing a helper along. Having a second person in your booth doesn't just help you keep calm and in control when it gets busy but provides a second set of eyes to watch your stuff and ensure that your booth is never unattended. I like keeping my cash on me in an apron or fanny pack and not in a box. If you do have a cash box, make sure it's in the back of your booth and that you or your helper is always watching it. Every few hours, separate large bills and put them in another spot so that when you pull out your money to make change you're not fishing through tons of large bills. I like to keep my helper in the back of my booth at my checkout area. I deal with the customers and handle the selling side of things while my helper takes payments, wraps items up and has a good view of the booth.

The other type of theft that vendors seem to encounter more often than theft of product or money is idea theft. Sadly large brands and designers often send scouts to look for emerging trends. Sometimes these "scouts" are less than obvious about being there to look for designs to copy. Once you make something and put it out into the world, whether it's offline at a craft show or online on your website or in your Etsy shop, the opportunity for someone to copy what you've made exists. It's nearly impossible to completely protect yourself from idea theft but there are some things you can do to hinder it.

Having a sign in your booth that explains your policy on people taking photos of your booth and your products is a great place to start. Carefully choose your wording so that it's friendly but clear. The sign I had in my booth said, "All products and designs are copyrighted property of Random Nicole. If you'd like to take a photo, please ask." Even if your designs aren't legally copyrighted, saying that they are can help deter copycats. Copyrighting your designs (especially artwork) is always smart and if it's in your budget, I highly suggest contacting a lawyer who specializes in intellectual property law for creatives like Annie Tunheim. Legally protecting your ideas and work isn't cheap but it can be well worth it.

If it's a two-day show and you are allowed to leave your items overnight, ask the producers about what kind of security measures they've taken. If you're not 100% comfortable about leaving your products overnight, take the time to pack them up.



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Since we're talking about how to handle thieves, it's the perfect time to go into other types of difficult people you may encounter at shows. Although hard-to-handle people come in all varieties, there are a few repeat offenders I seem to run into at shows year after year. Here are my six craft show trouble-making personality types.

The Pick-up Artist: The pick-up artist may not have gone to the show with the sole intention of getting a date but a few minutes into talking to them you'll know it's on their mind. If you're single and interested, awesome! You can add getting a date to your list of benefits you got from the show. If you're not single or are not interested you need to quickly but nicely make it clear that you're not into it. Casually mention your boyfriend/girlfriend/wife/husband/partner by saying something like, "Yeah my husband was just telling me about how much he likes _____ too."

The Bargainer: Encountering a bargainer is pretty common at craft shows. For some reason people who are perfectly content paying sticker prices and would never think of asking for a discount in a brick and mortar shop feel totally okay about trying to get a few bucks off when they're at a craft show. It's not always their fault. Their only non-brick and mortar shopping experiences may be at flea markets, swap meets or garage sales, where bargaining is not only tolerated but expected.

To help avoid people asking for discounts, have your products priced. If the cost is written down it seems solid. I also like to offer discounts for multiple purchases; for more on this return to the chapter on pricing. Discounts help offer a way out of the conversation when you encounter a bargainer. You can respond by saying, "Actually I do have a special promotion today, if you buy two shirts you get 10% off." Often bargainers are just looking for a deal and offering them one can lead to a multiple-item sale. If you have a bargainer who won't back down, explain that you can't offer a discount because this is your full-time job and you need to make a living wage, or explain your process of making so they understand how much work goes into each product.

The I-Can-Do-That-er: Personally this is my least favorite problem personality type I meet at craft shows. It really bums me out to hear two customers looking at something I put so much creativity and time into and hear them saying something like, "Oh, see how she sewed this part right there? I can totally make you something like this. It's super easy. Don't buy it. We can make it." Sometimes they'll even start talking about how they should make the same thing you're making and start doing craft shows too! UGGHHH!!! How rude, right?

When I met my first I-Can-Do-That-er, I slunk down in my booth, felt awful and said nothing to them. Then I took a different approach. If someone said something like that I'd join the conversation and say something like, "Actually the sewing part isn't that complex. The hard part was coming up with the design. But since I already did that, I guess it would be easy for you to make." Sometimes I'd even get a bit bolder and offer to show them exactly how I made the product. That usually helped them get the picture that what they were doing was offensive.

I have to thank people like this because although they really bothered me, they are what inspired me to create a new product line. I realized that so many people wanted to make things and be creative so I started making craft kits. The products my kits made were different than the ones that I sold but shared the aesthetic and branding of my business. Once I started making kits, it was simple to turn an I-Can-Do-That-er into a paying customer by saying, "Yes, you totally can make something like that, in fact, I make kits with everything in them so you can make your own necklace."

The Chatty Time Waster/Over Sharer: Craft shows are not only a place to shop but social events. Most customers realize that you're there to make sales and share your work but some people treat walking into your booth as if it's an open invitation to share their life story with you. These situations can be tricky to escape. Before you lose your cool with them, try to be kind and realize that chances are they're pretty lonely. Try to break free of their chatter by saying something like, "It's been so great meeting you, talking and hearing about your sick dog and your dog's upcoming surgery and how you love to knit, but I need to help my assistant fold these bags." You can also excuse yourself to the ladies room or go for the classic answering a fake phone call. If none of these things works, you can give them a taste of their own medicine and just start talking and talking and talking and not let them say anything. If they do try to say anything, interrupt them and keep on talking. This last tip is truly a last resort, I've only done it once and I felt terrible about it but sadly it was my only reprieve from the over-sharer and being free to work my booth was worth mirroring their oblivious time sucking. HINT: These tips will also help you get out of situations with The Pick Up Artist.

The Rude Vendor: Surprise! This last one is not a customer but actually a fellow vendor! That's right, even your peers can be a part of a less than perfect craft show experience. I've rarely experienced this as the victim of vendor-to-vendor troubles but have seen it a lot as a show producer. It's nice to think that all of us makers are part of a one-for-all-and-all-for-one family of kindness and creativity but unfortunately this isn't always the case. I've broken up more vendor fights than I'd care to count. Often these fights are about space. One vendor has a mannequin that's a foot out in front of their booth and the vendor next to them says it's blocking their display. Sometime it is blocking their display, but more often than not it isn't. Be sure to stay within your allotted space to avoid disputes like this. I always bring extra snacks and water and offer them to my booth neighbor when I arrive at a show. I also arrive early so I have a little extra time to lend a hand if my neighbor needs help with a heavy display item or setting up their pop-up tent. Starting out the show on a positive note with your neighbor helps avoid conflict throughout the day. If you do have a problem with a fellow vendor, try to solve it yourself before going to the show producers and asking them to intervene. The producers are juggling tons of issues and will remember vendors who come to them with problems they could have solved themselves.

WHAT TO DO DURING A SLOW SHOW

Despite your best efforts and those by the show producers, sometimes the craft fair will be slow. It's easy to get bummed out by a lack of customers after you've put so much time, effort and money into preparing for a show. The hard part is utilizing your time and the resources at the show to seek out non-monetary benefits to create a good return on your investment.

Slow shows create the perfect opportunity to meet fellow creatives, network and share resources. Take advantage of the fact that you brought a helper along and leave your booth to introduce yourself to the other vendors and get to know your community. Ask them what other shows they do that they enjoy, do some shopping, and ask about business resources like conferences, blogs or books that have inspired them or helped them grow their business. If you're looking to get into selling wholesale and you find out they do, ask them about their experience. If you're open and sharing about the resources you have, usually other creatives will be too.



If a show is too slow for you to meet your financial goals for the day, reassess your goals and brainstorm about other things you can get out of the show like building your mailing list. Create a goal of getting 25 new newsletter subscribers and focus on that instead of sales if you realize that your sales goals aren't possible. Since your attention won't be fragmented by helping multiple customers you'll be able to spend quality time with a few customers. Make that time count! Connect with them and get to know them. Ask them what their favorite products in your booth are and why and use that time for market research.

I always bring something to work on with me so that I can get things done during slow times. Bringing along a portable aspect of what you make or another project doesn't just help out at slow shows but also during lulls at busier ones. When customers see you making something it helps engage them in your process and incites conversation, plus you're maximizing your time!

You can also take advantage of downtime to assess your booth display and the way you merchandise your products. If the show seems busy but your booth isn't, rearrange your display and see if that helps.

Above all, don't just sit there and look sad and lonely! No one wants to hang out in a booth with someone on the verge of tears. Keep smiling and keep busy (but not so busy that a potential customer feels like they'd be interrupting you).



WHAT TO DO DURING AN EXTREMELY BUSY SHOW

Remember the story I told in the chapter on how to prepare for a craft show about how my assistant backed out at the last minute and I had to recruit my ex-boyfriend to help me out? That show was the busiest show I ever had in my decade of being a vendor. I sold more in that day than I ever had before or ever did again at any craft show and although I'd done my best to prepare, I know I could have connected with and made sales to even more customers if I'd been better prepared.

I know I've pounded the need for you to have an assistant into your head at this point but I'll reiterate it. Having a helper is key! You are only one person and even if you're an excellent multi-tasker, there is only so much you can do at once!

Having a helper is only one part of the equation to keeping calm and pulling off a busy show. The second part is coming up with and implementing a game plan with specific tasks for your helper ahead of time. You don't want to end up with a line of eight customers ready to buy something and no plan on how to help them all. Figure out what your duties are and what your helper's duties will be ahead of time and create a timeline and list of duties throughout the day for each of you. Included in that list should be routinely replacing sold items with extra stock that you keep hidden under tables or in the back of your booth. Ideally, your booth should look just as great at the end of the day as it does at the beginning. Think about walking into a department store. Do you ever see empty shelves? No. You want to always utilize the space in your booth to display as much as you can. Your customers can't buy what they can't see. Be sure to have an extra calculator, bank/cash box and receipt book so both you and your helper can check customers out if needed.



THE ART OF SELLING

Some people think that great salespeople are born not made. I agree that some of us come into the world with a natural ability to connect with customers and close the deal but I also think that the art of selling can be taught, especially if the salesperson has a deep knowledge of the brand and product. In this case, you do because you designed it!

The two classic sales techniques are the hard sell and the soft sell. The hard sell is aggressive and usually puts pressure on the customer to buy the product. The soft sell focuses on building a relationship with the customer so that making a purchase becomes something that they want to do as opposed to something they feel forced into. I'm pretty sure you can guess which one I prefer for makers: the soft sell.

I've created my own version of the soft sell that I call the storytelling sell. The storytelling sell takes the principles of the soft sell technique a step further and is perfect for makers. For the most part, the reason that people attend craft shows is because they are conscious consumers who care deeply about what they buy, who made it and how it's made. These attendees actually want to hear about you, your products and your process. They want to connect not only with the products they purchase, but with the people who created them. They want to trust that the products they purchase are made responsibly and carefully and therefore they need to trust the maker. Fostering this sense of trust between you and your customer is key and it's not that hard if you are passionate about what you do.

When a potential customer enters your booth, say hi and then give a minute to look around. Don't bombard them with product information or questions right away. Give them a moment to experience your brand. If your products are a good fit for them, chances are they'll linger for a moment and eventually pick up one of your products for a closer look. Now is your chance to ease into a conversation naturally. If someone is attracted to what you make, it's pretty likely that you have something in common with them. When you start the conversation you can begin by complimenting them on something they're wearing. Only do this if you truly like the thing you're complimenting. Don't be fake! People can sense a phony from a mile away. Remember that you're trying to start a relationship based on authenticity. Another way to start the dialogue is by commenting on your product that they are looking at and saying something like, "It's so cool that you're drawn to that shirt. It was inspired by a trip I took to Paris last summer."



Someone recently asked me how I'm able to start conversations with strangers so easily. To be honest, I hadn't really thought about it before and would have never added to my list of attributes, "Easily starts conversations with strangers." But I realized they were right. The reason instigating conversations is usually easy for me is because I genuinely care about other people's lives and stories. Since people generally like to talk about themselves and I'm interested in hearing about people, it works out pretty well. Asking someone about themselves is a great way to start the conversation but if you're at a craft show you'll need to start talking about your products as well. Practice your elevator pitch that I mentioned in the chapter on preparing for a show. It's so important to be able to talk about your brand, what you do and how you do it without searching for words or being verbose. Again, usually customers at craft shows are there because they care about where the product comes from and they want to hear your story. If you started sewing because you were inspired by your grandmother or your prints are inspired by a trip you took to Europe, talk about it. At craft shows, it's just as much about the product as it is about the experience.

You want to be ready to give information about yourself and your products as well as information that will help a customer decide if the item is right for them. If they ask if your shirt is machine washable, you need to know the answer. If you make onesies, do a little research so that you know what size a 2-month-old baby would need.

Your goal isn't to have a customer who just buys one thing, your goal is create a regular customer who thinks of you when they need something new in their closet or house or are looking for the perfect gift. Regular customers can account for a large percentage of your sales. It's super important to not only make that initial connection with them, but also keep it up after the show. We'll talk more about this in the After the Show chapter.

Sometimes sales will be super easy. Someone will walk in, fall in love with something you made and immediately purchase it. Customers like this don't need you to go into your whole sales pitch but it's still essential to relate to them and begin a relationship as you ring up their purchase. Don't let any customer slip through the cracks without making an impression on them. One easy way to keep that relationship strong is through your mailing list, which I discussed in the chapters on merchandising your booth and preparing for a show. Your mailing list is the easiest way for you to build your brand and your customer base. Social media outlets are great resources for this as well but social media is constantly evolving. Remember how Facebook began limiting which fans saw what you posted unless you paid to have your posts appear in your fans news feeds? Newsletters allow you to be in control of your online marketing instead of being limited by the restrictions of social media outlets.

If selling isn't your strong point, find a helper who's great at it or improve your sales tactics with these tips. Above all, be professional and positive, smile, say hello to everyone who comes into your booth, practice the art of being friendly and available without being pushy, and put as much effort into being an authentic conversational salesperson as you do into every other aspect of your business.



AT SHOW MARKETING

Most of us have grown pretty accustomed to doing all of our marketing online through social media and our newsletters, but if you ignore the fact that you have hundreds or hopefully thousands of potential customers right in front of you at a craft show you'll be missing out on a great opportunity. By this point you know how important it is to have a newsletter mailing list and to build it. Ask every person who buys something from you if they're interested in joining your mailing list. Most people are inundated with emails so you need to make it enticing. Let them know how often you send newsletters and what they kind of information you send. Saying something like, "Would you like me to add you to our email list? We send a monthly newsletter with coupons, free DIY projects and information about other shows like this," will go much further than just saying, "Do you want to sign up for my newsletter?"

I also like to offer an incentive for people who sign up for my newsletter or follow/fan my business on social media at a show. Some incentives I've had success with are giving away an item, a gift certificate or a coupon for my online shop for one lucky person who joins my mailing list or follows me on social media. I've also done a grab bag where I have small items like pins with artwork on them or matchbooks I collaged with images for people who sign up for my list or fan/follow me on social media. You can also tie your giveaway, discount or grab bag item to social media by offering those things to people who follow, fan or use your hashtag to share something you made on their social media. Make sure to create custom signage that matches your branding for promotions. You can also utilize your existing social media audience by posting photos from the show while you're there. This is a great way to interact with your current audience and give them a glimpse into what you do offline as well as shout out about the show (which show producers always appreciate).

Craft shows are also great for promoting other events where you'll be vending. Be sure to have postcards sitting on your table for future events and slip one along with a business card to everyone who buys something. Someone may not be ready to make a purchase that day but might be ready when they see you at another show. If the show doesn't provide with you with printed postcards, create and print your own. You can also print just one and have it in a frame so people can photograph it on their phone as a reminder.



UNCONVENTIONAL WAYS TO ATTRACT CUSTOMERS

I usually barely have enough space in booth for my displays and products but I've seen other vendors create a small area in their booth for an activity. One of the best things I've seen that barely took up any space was a kid-sized table with crayons and printed masks that kids could color, attach some yarn strings and wear. The whole set-up only took up a few feet and cost very little and it attracted tons of kids who had something to keep them occupied while their parents shopped. Having a DIY activity in your booth can attract interest but it can also detract from what you're trying to do, which is sell what you make. If you want to have an activity in your booth make sure it's one that fits your branding and aesthetic. The booth I saw that had the kids coloring station was a vendor who made kids clothing, so it was a great fit and the perfect way to keep kids busy while their parents browsed.

A lot of craft show vendors lure people into their booths with bowls of wrapped candy, but make sure the event you're at doesn't have rules against this.



SO THIS IS IT!

The day you've been preparing for all these months and months is finally here. Don't let all that hard work, planning and time go to waste by not putting your best foot forward on the actual day of the craft show. Make sure you look as good as your booth does. And by preparing for any scenario – whether it's difficult people, not enough customers or too many – with a strategy for tackling any problem, you can ensure that your craft show experience will be the best that it can be.

And remember to have fun! Making lots of sales is the goal, of course, but either way you should be having a good time. People are attracted to happiness and are much more likely to engage with you, and then ultimately buy from you, if you have a smile on your face.