

A Newbie's Guide to Art Festival Booths

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Starting at the Beginning -

Deciding Whether To Take On The Challenge Of Art Festivals

Art Festivals are the step many take in moving from art as a hobby to art as a business. Just like any small business enterprise (because, let's face it, this is essentially the same as operating a small business), there are both positives and negatives to the art festival circuit. For many, the positives tend to outweigh the negatives. The positive feedback given about your art is very reaffirming and there are very few things more rewarding than selling a piece of your art. Meeting people, networking and making new friends who are also artists are all big benefits to being involved in art festivals. Art festivals can take you places you might have not gone before; plan ahead and stay an extra day so you can explore.

On the down side, most festivals are on weekends, the days can get long and, since many festivals are outside, the weather is often a factor. The hauling and toting associated with set up and tear down get old. You can also experience poor sales, less than optimal festival management and, as with any retail endeavor, you will, on occasion, have to deal with rude people. Don't let these things discourage you but be prepared for them so they don't dampen your enthusiasm or impact your chosen avenue for getting your art out there and, hopefully, benefiting from it personally and financially.

Where to Start

First, you need to get your feet wet. I recommend testing a few smaller, local art festivals. Do research on the internet for festivals in your area, check with local arts organizations for listings of festivals, contact state organizations (like MACAA or MAC in Missouri) to see what lists they can share. Find resources like www.artfairinsider.com, Sunshine Artist Magazine, Midwest Art Fairs, The Art Fair Source Book and Zapplication to read participating artists' reviews and check on upcoming festivals. Doing these smaller types of events will let you see what actually goes into having a successful experience. Usually the booth fees are lower and you aren't out much in travel costs. Pay attention to what other artists do at these events and learn from them. Most artists are more than happy to share tips and help you along the way - they've all been there at one time. In smaller venues, as long as they are well run, you often get more face time with those attending the festival as well. If, after doing a few festivals, it doesn't end up being the right move for you, then you aren't out much to find that out.

If you do some smaller fairs/festivals and are successful, then step it up a notch and go for a larger event. Ideally, shows that have been in existence for more than 4 or 5 years and have high attendance are on the right track.

Whether large or small, make sure the event is an art festival and not connected with a car show, carnival, county fair or something of that nature. Most people attending these events aren't there to buy art. Also, know the difference between a craft fair and an art

festival because they attract a different set of buyers. If the word craft is in the title of the event, it is important to do research on the event to determine if the crafts are "fine craft" or crocheted toilet paper cozies - it might not be the right show for you and your art. Art festivals do not allow buy/sell items or kits. Art festivals typically have a jury process for admission into the festival. A jury is typically made up of 1) a show committee where the management selects the work, 2) a show committee with finalists juried by outside experts or 3) a jury made up of all outside experts.

As you graduate to larger festivals and you identify one to which you are thinking about applying for a booth, I recommend attending it first as a patron and checking it out (this is a good learning tool whether the festival is large or small). If you like it and think your type of art and expression are a good fit, apply to it the following year.

Applying To Art Festivals

When filling out applications, you must submit high quality images. Submitting these types of images will show the jury you are a professional and will show your art in the best way possible. You are competing against other artists in the jury process so the images truly matter. If you feel you are unable to take high quality pictures yourself, I recommend hiring a photographer. You can often find a student of photography who will do professional studio shots of your art and they typically don't charge as much. DPI and resolution also need to be addressed for photos submitted online. I recommend performing a quick internet search for "free tutorial dpi". <http://www.usphotogroup.com/Tutorials/Tutorials.htm> and <http://www.hdr-photo.org/photoshop-free-tutorials.html> are among the sites that came up when I did the search for example. There are often size restrictions on photos submitted online; make sure the size of your photo and the size of your file do not impact your photo's quality and sharpness; attention often needs to be paid to one or more of these factors when submitting online.

Some things to keep in mind for high quality images include:

Clarity – No blurry or fuzzy areas. Also, there should be no glare or dark shadows.

Make sure the whole piece has light and is not darkened by shadows. An artist can make their own light box for a very professional look. Try a quick internet search for "free tutorial light box" to look for information on how to do it. (Some that came up:

<http://strobist.blogspot.com/2006/07/how-to-diy-10-macro-photo-studio.html>

<http://digital-photography-school.com/how-to-make-a-inexpensive-light-tent>)

True Color – Stay true to the color of your piece.

Image Only – No framing, matting, glazing, fingers, dust, dirt or carpet should be in your image; let the piece speak without distraction.

Image Is Square And Level – The image should not be crooked, unlevelled or slanting one way or the other and no fading off in the distance.

Your Best Pieces Only – During the jury process, show only the best. If you have three high quality pieces and one "okay" piece; the one "okay" piece may stop your chances of being accepted into the event. All pictures count.

The ability to discuss the ins and outs of your artwork well in written form is also important. Many applications request 75 –100 words to describe your art. This is often read to the jury panel. If you aren't a wordsmith, find someone who is and pay them (or trade them art) to do it for you.

The website Zapplication is becoming a more and more common way of applying to art festivals. Simply go to www.zapplication.org, become a member and set up your profile. You can manage your images (up to 40) and apply to shows. It does require payment by credit card for the jury process and booth fees. There is a sizing requirement for images so, if you aren't computer savvy in this regard, find someone who is to go through the process with you so you don't become frustrated and quit mid sign up.

Tents and Setup

If it is your first time choosing a tent, I recommend purchasing a less expensive one until you know the art festival business is right for you. Purchasing a white tent is a wise choice as most festivals only allow white tents (for uniformity) Please note that this is currently NOT a requirement for the Clara Brierly Festival of the Arts - we love color. Canopy tents typically need to measure 10' x 10' and sides are recommended to protect your work from weather and wind. An EZ-Up type tent is fairly inexpensive (\$150-\$200 at big box stores like Sam's Club). They are lightweight but not all that sturdy. Other similar brands include KD Canopy, First UP and Caravan. A alternate tent type is a Dome or Hoop top tent made by Trimline or Lightdome. These tents are much more sturdy and waterproof. They are expensive though, running anywhere from \$800 to \$1800 depending on the brand.

If at all possible, I strongly recommend sweet talking someone into helping with set up. Usually the tents take more than one person to put up and, especially during your first few set ups, it will take longer than you might imagine just because you are not accustomed to doing it. Also, it can get exhausting doing it all yourself, making you less vibrant for your patrons when they arrive. Sometimes a good Samaritan will step in to assist if you are alone (a more seasoned artist or festival staff) but you can never count on it. I recommend setting up at the earliest time allowed by the festival's management if you are a beginner. It's hard to judge just how long it will take to set up. With time, you'll learn how long it will take and you can adjust your arrival time accordingly.

Weights and stakes are a non-negotiable for your tent. The weather is so unpredictable and the wind can destroy your tent and others around you (which will lessen your popularity with your artist neighbors quickly!) if not properly weighted down. Some festivals require a certain amount of weight attached to your tent. You can purchase weight bags that hook or Velcro to your tent. Many artists purchase large, white PVC piping (3" PVC is a good size), fill it with cement and place an eye bolt in the top to be used with a tie down hook and rope. Tie or hook rope to the weights and attach them to the upper cross bars of your tent (make sure not to make them too short or you will bend the frame of your tent; they should rest on the ground but not have slack in the rope). I

use the PVC weights and, if the event is on grass, I will use my stakes as well as dog tie out hooks that screw into the ground. Always better to be safe than sorry!

After considering what you will need for covering your work from the weather, you need to consider how to display your work. The type of work you do will determine what type of display units you need. Are you a painter or photographer who needs "gallery wall" displays? Are you a potter, jeweler or metal artist who needs more pedestals or counters than "walls"? Think about what a 10'X10' space is and how your art work will best be seen within that space.

There are many companies that make units for this display purposes. The display pieces are usually panels that can be joined together to form a gallery look in your booth. Some are covered in carpet, fabric or mesh material. If you are just starting out and you are handy, you can build something that will work and look attractive as well with lumber and wire. Companies also provide things like print bins, shelves, height extenders, half walls and podiums. When I first started out, my husband made me pedestals out of lightweight wood. They were painted a neutral color (you don't want your display to detract from your art and it is better if it is uniform) and looked professional and planned. They were a little bulky to tote around but they worked just fine. Pro Panels, Armstrong Panels, Graphic Display and The Flourish Company make some or all of the items mentioned above.

Don't forget creature comforts! A chair is needed during these types of events. When considering what you will be sitting on for hours, one thing to think about is the height. You always want to look in your potential buyers' eyes. I would recommend a taller director's chair. The shorter ones are more stable but the trade off is getting up all of the time to talk to a customer. You might think it isn't worth it but, after standing up for the 300th time from a low chair, you will wish you had a taller chair. When purchasing your chair, keep in mind that wooden chairs look nicer but show more wear and tear. Lightweight, aluminum chairs are easier to pack. My first chair was a wooden director's chair from World Market. I got it on winter clearance for \$6. I think it was originally \$60 or so. It did just fine for the my early festivals.

Another consideration is lighting. Most artists attach track lighting to the upper interior part of their tent. Where you direct the lighting depends on the arrangement of your art. You want customers to see the art. The more light the better. Also think about the floor of you tent. Carpeting or a rug can give it a nice touch however, I don't use carpet just in case it rains which causes your booth to become a soggy mess. A rug can also be a trip hazard so, if you choose to use one, you need to tape down the edges. You might want to consider fabric panels/curtains along the tent walls as well as an artsy sign with your name on it. Any little touch will pull your booth together. Just don't go over board because it is your art you want people to notice. Many artists take credit cards. So if you feel you need this availability, get in contact with your bank or research processing companies. For beginner artists, I would not invest in payment processing avenue. See how things go with just accepting checks (check with your prosecuting attorney on the info you need to capture on checks if you intend to pursue any bad checks) and cash.

Setting Up Your Festival Booth

Keep in mind that the presentation of your booth should be an overall part of your sales strategy. Plan your booth using graph paper or a computer layout. Know the sizes of your work when planning each wall. I recommend that pieces that stack need to be hung on a vertical line. Pieces that are side by side need to be hung on a horizontal line for symmetry. Hang pieces that represent a body of work together. If the framing or mounting is harmonious, the attention will be drawn toward your work, not the frames. Try hanging a large impact piece on the center back wall. This is the piece that is most apt to draw people into your booth. Jewelers should consider blow-ups of their work so the public can easily see your work from a distance. 3D artists need to have pieces located on multiple levels if possible and use pedestals to show their work. Many art festivals request photos of your booth as part of the jury process. It is a good idea to take photos when it is first set up; it will look its best and be full at this time.

How To Price

It's good to offer multiple price points. You can cast a broader net for shoppers at all price points. If you are just beginning the festival scene, it's hard to figure out what to price your art and what will sell or not. Start off selling more for less. This may expand your buyer base. You need to make sure you cover your material costs and your time. If the art is extremely unique, then add that into the price. Check out other artists, ask them questions about how their piece was determined and observe where in the price spectrum they price their items. This will help give you a clue on what sells and what doesn't. Over time, this base will allow for higher prices and you will begin to know what is most apt to sell. Remember, just because you love something you've done doesn't mean it is marketable. This is a business, the sale is your end goal. Pay attention to comments that even those who don't buy make about what they like so you know what to bring more of next festival. You may also find what is well received in one location isn't in another. Pay attention, take notes, make adjustments.

Toot Your Own Horn

This is the internet age - set up a website as soon as possible and keep it up to date with new work and show schedules. Another good thing to do is to keep a guest book of visitors and customers that visited your booth in past festivals. This way, you can send email announcements or postcards to announce an upcoming festival. This should be done a couple weeks before the event. While you are just starting out, mail announcements to friends and families and tell them to spread the word. Possibly send a postcard with 10% off to past customers if they bring the card to the festival. Send out a press release to local papers about the show and your participation. Network. Use the advertising avenues other new businesses use. Be creative, use the free/less expensive avenues at first. You're an artist, use your creativity to get people to your shows.

Artist Behavior

Remember, when you are at your art festival booth, you are a salesperson. Be approachable, dress appropriately, keep people engaged in your art, be friendly, tell them your art story, remove sunglasses when talking to customers, have business cards to give

them (if they are interested in a piece they don't buy, write what it was on the back of a card and give it to them so they can reach you when they change their mind) and keep a positive attitude. Sit where art patrons can see you and don't have your head behind a book. Don't complain to a neighboring artist about slow times during the festival. Make sure to follow up with people you said you would follow up with. Send thank you notes to buying customers. Art Festivals take a lot of work but they can be so gratifying. So ENJOY them.

Checklist - Here is a checklist I use so I make sure I take everything I need to set up my booth and sell my work. Use this one or create your own so you don't get thirty miles from home/your studio and realize you have to turn around and go back to get your extension cord!

1. Art
2. Tent
3. Weights/Stakes
4. Lights with extra bulbs
5. Extension cords (construction grade)
6. Panels
7. Pedestals
8. Rugs/Carpet
9. Tie Downs
10. Clamps
11. Guest Book
12. Sunscreen/hats
13. Bug Spray
14. Calculators
15. Change
16. Totes
17. Pens
18. Receipt Pad
19. Bags, Tissue Paper or Plastic (in case of rain) - for wrapping art for customers.
20. Little broom brush and dust pan
21. Zip Ties
22. Shims to level pedestals, tent , etc.
23. Cash Box
24. Snacks/Water
25. Business Cards
26. Curtains/Backdrops
27. Bio – Display a bio and picture of yourself to place in your tent. This tells a little bit about you as an artist and your background. Place it in a nice frame.
28. Chair
29. In a little toolbox keep: scissors, tape, price stickers, s hooks, hammer, rope and wire.
30. Comfortable shoes

I hope this helps you as you venture into the world of art festivals. If you come across something you would want me to add that would help other "newbies", by all means, email it to me at natalie@downtownpeculiar.com.

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