

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow— The Future of Craft Fairs & Shows

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Introductory Note from Barbara Brabec

A couple of years ago, a concerned craft seller asked, “Given our current economy and the proliferation of cheap imports, what does the future hold for the crafts industry—especially where art and craft fairs are concerned?” No longer active in the crafts industry at that time, I asked veteran show-goer and show-list publisher Bill Ronay to write an article on this topic for publication in the Crafts Industry department of [Barbara Brabec’s World](#). Now updated for 2011, this special report addresses many related areas of concern for today’s professional artists and craft sellers/

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IT'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE. All of us are aware of the international downturn in the global economy and the effect it has had on all areas of retail and wholesale markets. But I have adopted a very positive outlook on the situation. Instead of thinking “. . . because of the economy, we CAN'T,” I have been repeating over and over, “. . . in spite of the economy, we WILL!”

The business my wife Camille and I own has grown steadily, consistently from the very beginning. Founded in 1984, the purpose and vision of A Step Ahead, Ltd. was originally to be an “appointment and event” reminder company to alert customers and other interested individuals when to do what and where to do it. Almost from the beginning the premise changed, and the rest is history. Publishing and consulting expanded exponentially with Events2000.com becoming a reality in 1994 . . . and here we are today.

Our websites have moved into the 21st Century and the technology is increasing so quickly we have a web guru on retainer to help us keep up with what must be done on a daily/weekly/monthly basis in order to be “current.”

A Resistance to Technology

We have become more active in grassroots art and art programs. Learning what is new and different or updated in the Arts has helped us to map our future efforts. Most all we meet with are encouraged to do the same. Camille and I are convinced that keeping current with trends and technology is a key factor in anyone's success in the Arts.

There is a tendency among creative people to balk at moving forward into the digital world, but the need to move is as inevitable as tomorrow. A casual survey we generated revealed a significant number of artists and craft makers have found alternatives to accessing the Internet and on-line information. Cell phones have taken the place of the “hard-wired” telephones most of us remember. Wireless, Wi-Fi, and other forms of technology have allowed our subscribers, readers, and clients to connect to Events2000.com quickly and with more reliability than ever before. While there is a significant number who *still* do not have Internet access or knowledge about what's happening on the Web, the number of those remaining on dial-up or old-technology DSL access is continually shrinking.

The Internet has developed into an excellent learning tool as well as a product research and development resource. The more experienced exhibitor is learning that the Arts and Crafts Show “circuit” is not what it was just a few years ago. In realizing this, they have turned to the electronic media more and more as the current economic crisis has also forced us to prioritize our lives.

Some Craft Show Perspective

My ongoing impression of the craft fair and show concept has never wavered from the positive. *Never!* True, import items still have a strong hold on the market. Camille and I have been to numerous festivals where the prevalence of work from “over there” has been accepted for inclusion in an otherwise quality “handmade-by-exhibitor” event.

Several shows, however, have taken the initiative to help nip this occurrence at the very beginning. We personally observed an event director of a major North Georgia event, upon suspicion by fellow exhibitors, confirm that an entire display of rustic birdhouses were, in fact, “fresh from the boat.” They were closed down well before we could finish our breakfast of Apple Dumplin’ a la Mode.

Needs, wants, and desires are not necessarily in sync with each other. The access to and the availability of imports in addition to the temptation for buy/sell items is not going away any time soon . . . if at all. The professionalism and retail savvy of the novice and, sadly, the experienced exhibitor as well, will continue to fall a bit short of expectations as long as “short-cut art” is so readily available.

As we see it, some shows are growing while others are shrinking. Some are dead or dying. Booths are going unfilled more often with less of a demand than in decades past. However, my experience of over three decades has taught me that the current sales downtrend is likely to be short-lived as long as the core of the Arts and Crafts Industry, as we know it, stays intact. At the end of 2010, consistent reports from several veteran readers and members all pointed to an upturn and growth in their businesses.

Our travels across Georgia and the Southeast have uncovered many treasures. Closer to home, we reveled in learning that [Avondale Estates](#), a quaint, retro-looking town, has developed an arts group of 134 artists, all within the town’s city limits. Interestingly, these artists have always been there, but out of mutual need they developed a voice and suddenly find themselves as a persuasive chorus.

We attended one of their scheduled evening “Artists’ Studio Tours.” In former warehouses all within a short distance from one another we found graphic, performing and culinary art, literary performances, and other presentations that featured nearly all of the town’s creative elements. The night was very rewarding as we watched sales being made and artists, performers, and craft makers thriving in a very professional atmosphere. This was a very encouraging experience and one that might well be duplicated in other parts of the country.

Artists Must Acquire “Business Sense”

I stand firm on my observation that a great many “artists” still do not have the business sense or retail experience to be successful and profitable at what they are trying to accomplish. For whatever reason, many still don’t get it. A member of the Arts Development Council of Georgia Board of Directors teaches an in-depth course called

“The Entrepreneurial Artist.” He finds on a regular basis that his students have a hard time learning what parts of the mug they make or the paintings they produce represents the costs of doing business.

There continues to be a constant proliferation of new shows and events featuring arts and/or crafts. “New” events contact our office on a regular basis for information and advice for their interests. To be fair, there have been a few failures and long-lived events to be discontinued as well. A local guild, solid in the Atlanta area for nearly forty years, decided to disband and cancel all of its five annual events.

Yesterday’s “big thing,” the Barbecue Cook-Off, seems to be holding its own. However, the “Farmers Market” concept has taken over in this area and, unfortunately, is “feeding” from the Arts and Craft trough.

Nationally known motivational speaker [Bruce Baker](#) and I continue to agree on the premise that the public is not stupid and that artists and craft sellers must take the most professional approach possible to be consistently successful and profitable. His most recent project is producing a series of workshops geared toward applying his proven techniques in the retail sales world as it has made such an impact on the arts and crafts professional.

Moving to the next logical level in the retail marketplace and keeping pace with technology makes sense. Anyone in the Arts should take heed. Social Media is here to stay and we must accept its potential for our benefit.

As a result of this acceptance, I have learned to use Social Media as a cutting-edge marketing tool for our business. I am convinced of Social Media playing a vital role not only in our private lives but also in the public sector to help us achieve success in our individual professions. Each of our goals should be to become as proficient in as many of the Social Media as possible.

Lesson learned? Do whatever it takes to expand your horizons.



Bill Ronay is Founding Chairman of the [Arts Development Council of Georgia](#). Bill and Camille operate several web sites, including [Events2000.com](#) <http://www.gmagg.org/> and [GeorgiaMadeGeorgiaGrown.com](#).

This article was first published on [Barbara Brabec's World](#). Barbara is the author of several crafts business books, including *Creative Cash*, *Handmade for Profit*, and *The Crafts Business Answer Book*. She communicates with her home-

business network through her [Brabec Bulletin](#).