

The Art Marketing Project Podcast — The ONE Big Reason Your Art Isn't Selling

Hi everyone, I'm Cindy Hohman, and this is the Art Marketing Project Podcast.

Today, what we're going to talk about is the one big thing that could be limiting your art sales, and as part of that, why you need to address all four Ps of marketing. So, in marketing, we talk a lot about the four Ps, and I'm going to discuss that with you today so you understand all the different pieces of what makes marketing successful. And then, talking about the one thing that could limit your art sales, I'm going to talk to you about ways that you can do something about this problem of not selling enough work. Links discussed during this episode and all of my show notes are always available at artmarketingproject.com/podcast, so join me over there if you'd like.

This is honestly a topic I've been wanting to address for quite a while, because I get a lot of questions from artists about marketing, and a lot of the questions that I get are about tactics and what they can do to improve their sales. So I get questions like, "Should I post more often on Instagram?" "Should I be using Instagram Stories?" "How can I use better hashtags?" "Should I start a business page on Facebook?" "Should I build a new website? Maybe I just need to improve my current website, maybe that's the problem." "Should I start using Instagram ads?" So I get a lot of questions like that that are specifically for the promotion side, and I want to talk to you about what you might not be considering, which is kind of a big elephant in the room that we need to talk about, so let's get started.

Most artists I talk to ask me the same questions, maybe slightly differently, but in the end, they're really all about the same. They're questions about tactics, about the doing. "What do I need to do differently? Do I need to change up my hashtags? What am I not doing correctly to make my art sale? What am I not doing correctly to make my art sell?" So what I want to talk to you today is about the four Ps of marketing. Promotion is one of the four Ps, and promotion is all about how you get the word out about your art. It is what social media outlet you're going to be on, what your website looks like, what you say on your website, whether you use email newsletters, or you send postcards to your audience. So it's all about promotion of your art and of your business.

Most people focus on the promotion side, and think of it as marketing completely, but it really is only one piece of the puzzle. The next piece of the puzzle is place, which is literally where you choose to sell your work, whether that's in person or online, or if you're looking at in-person opportunities, are you going to sell through galleries, or through unusual venues, you know, tattoo parlor, coffee shops, local business? Are you going to sell through festivals, or are you going to look specifically at holiday markets? Or, on the other hand, are you going to be selling your work online? Is that through your own website, or is it through a third-party site like Etsy or Saatchi or Fine Art America?

And then the next piece of the puzzle is price. Price, place, promotion. Price, of course, we all know what that is, which is how you decide to price your work in the market. Some artists say, "I want to have affordable work, and that's how I want to price myself." Some artists create only original large-scale work, and their work isn't... They don't want to be seen as affordable, they want to be seen as higher-end. Or artists who have both originals and reproductions and sell them for different price points. So deciding on price is definitely an important piece of the marketing puzzle, because if you are not priced appropriately for your audience, they're not going to buy your work, because it's either too expensive for them, or if you have it priced too low, they could see it as not having the value that it needs for them to feel like it's worth buying.

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So, place, price, and promotion, definitely important pieces of the puzzle to consider, and this is something that I think a lot of artists think about these three Ps much more than the fourth, and the fourth one is product. Product is the most critical piece of the marketing equation. And why is that? It's because you can't sell what someone doesn't want to buy. I've had artists ask me recently about what they choose to sell, and I had this question come up, which was, "Does it matter what I sell, as long as I have good marketing? Will good marketing sell anything?" And my answer was, and will continue to be, that the best marketing in the world won't sell something that people don't want to buy. It's like the old country song, right? "I've got oceanfront property in Arizona." No one is going to buy that, right? I mean, obviously they're being facetious or ironic in that statement, but you can't sell oceanfront property in Arizona, because Arizona has no ocean.

So, going back to current day, really, the best marketing in the world won't sell something that people don't want to buy. In my career, I have an interesting example of this, which, when I worked in the art museum world, I saw how people have more interest in certain types of work than others. So, in comparing two exhibits that I worked on in the art museum world, one was a French Impressionist exhibition, so it's beautiful Impressionist works from Monet and Degas and Pissarro, and all of these well-known Impressionists. Well, that exhibition, we literally had to expand our open hours to get the number of people in who wanted to purchase tickets to see that, because so many people are interested in Impressionist work, period, and the Impressionists, Monet and van Gogh and Degas. They just, they know those names, they're known, and they're very interested in that kind of work.

On the other hand, we had a modern work, or a modern masters exhibition, and they were modern and contemporary artists who were fairly well-known names, but not well-known in the general market, right? Not known to the average person. And we put that out, and we could not get people in the doors by giving tickets away. They just had no interest in a show with modern masters, with names that they didn't recognize. They maybe saw modern work as more challenging, and they had no idea how to interpret it, and so just the difference there was really clear from the marketing standpoint.

So, my point with all of this is that if you're struggling with selling your work, take a step back and look at all four of the Ps of marketing. But I would encourage you to pay special attention to your product, and when I say this, I am not saying that you should absolutely change the work that you create to make it commercial. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, if your goal is to sell your work, and your work is not selling, and you feel like you've tried everything, if you haven't looked at the work that you're trying to sell, then you haven't tried everything.

And that may be just changing up the format of your work, it may be changing up the colors slightly that you use, it could be selling reproductions versus originals. I mean, really look at the kind of work that you're creating, and ask whether that might be part of the problem. Ask yourself the hard question: "Do people want to buy what I'm selling?" And if you think that answer is, "Eh, I'm not sure," then I think you need to do a little work. If you say, "Absolutely, yes," and you're not lying to yourself, and you say, "Absolutely, yes, people want to buy this work," then look at the other, look at the price, and where you're selling your art, and the promotion side of things. Look at those three. But if you're being honest with yourself, and you say, "I am not sure if I am creating work that people want to buy," then you need to figure out how to fix that problem.

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"So, how do you fix the problem?" you ask. Well, the biggest thing that you need to do is approach the issue with curiosity, with an open mind. If you're not open to learning this answer, if the answer might be a no, and you don't want to ask it, don't expect much to change. But if you can be curious and unattached to the answer, and not make it mean something that it's not, but approach it with an open mind and a curious mind, that is one of the biggest things that will help you with this.

And then, the next step is to do some research. So, some thoughts on research that you can do are: You can visit galleries, festivals, other in-person sales venues, such as if you've sold at a coffee shop, or you know people who sell at local businesses. You know, walk in, see what's selling, at least watch what sells, and ask questions. I would not be... If I were you, if you're really being curious about this, go visit some of these locations and ask the question, "Hey, what sells more than other things here? Is it the medium, is it the price, is it the subject matter?" You know, really get curious about what is selling in the places where you feel like you could sell your work.

Also, online and in person, research artists in your niche and see what sells for them, and then honestly, look at what they don't sell. If they don't sell certain things, I personally would interpret that as they don't feel like that is something that would be interesting to their audience. It's probably harder for you to understand what doesn't sell when you're researching somebody online or through a gallery, but I think looking at an artist's website and finding the kind of work that they do sell, or they do offer, and paying attention to what isn't there will help you gain some insight.

And then, when your work sells, ask why. When somebody buys your work, ask them if they have 10 minutes for a quick conversation. Ask them why they were interested in the work, what the benefit is to them. You know, is it the subject matter, is it the size, is it the color scheme, because they were looking to decorate their home and they were looking for a specific color? What is it? Ask them why they purchased that work from you. And I would say, make sure you also ask them a couple extra questions to help you refine your ideal buyer profile. I'm always talking about that as being important. So, when you have the opportunity to speak to somebody who has purchased your work, ask them a few questions so you can get to know them as an art buyer.

And then ask your audience. What I have recommended to a number of artists is to find 10 people in your audience, and ask them what they would be most interested in buying. This suggestion is really on your email list, or your social media followers. Put out an offer that says... You know, offer them something. Give them a free print of your work or something, and ask if they would be willing to sit down for a phone call or a video call, or even in person for coffee, and if you could ask them a few questions.

The questions that you want to ask them are, "Here are the three types of work that I create. Which are you most interested in?" And I would refrain from asking them 20 questions, meaning, you know, don't go in there and ask them, "Okay, so this one is most interesting to you. What kind of price? What kind of place? Where would you find this?" And just trying to dig too deep into that. I would ask them pretty simply, what work they're most interested in buying, and if you have a question around how that would be priced, ask them that as well. And then, maybe do a little bit of quick investigation into, "Hey, you know..." Ask them a couple ideal buyer questions. You know, "Where would you shop for this? Would you find it online, or..." Always ask those questions that help you build out your ideal buyer profile.

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And then, make sure that the people that you have in your list of 10 people are not your friends and your family, because your friends and your family will tell you that they'd buy everything, because they probably would, and that isn't real because they're not your ideal buyer. So, I challenge you to go out to your audience and ask those questions of people who actually would be your ideal buyer.

And then, my last tip is to approach new products that you create as a trial, which is how I started my business. In my business, I called it a beta, so it's basically a test. Start something as a test. Ask your audience if they would be interested in a certain type of work. Offer a lower-priced trial product, so if you want to test out the idea of reproductions, tell your audience that you're considering creating reproductions, and you'd like to offer a lower-priced kind of introduction to your reproductions as long as your audience will give you feedback on which ones would be the most interesting to them.

So, offer up to a select number of people that you're going to sell these works at 50% of the regular price. Only let a certain number of people in, because you don't want to sell your work at half price to everyone in your audience, but ask those people who would like to join in on your test that you're doing, you know, tell them what you would like in return is for them to give you feedback. And then ask them the same questions about pricing, where they would shop for this work, whether it be in person or online. Ask them about some of those ideal buyer questions. And then have them help you create a product that would sell to other people like them. That's how I created my business, is doing this kind of trial process, and getting people in at a lower price to start with, and then asking them to help you develop how it's priced and where it's sold, and all those things, so you can find more of those people and actually sell it to them. So, that's something that I recommend actually quite often, so give it a try.

The bottom line of all of this is that when you're in business for yourself, it's messy. No one has all of the answers for you. I don't, nor does anyone else. You need to approach challenges like this with curiosity and an open mind, and be prepared to go through a testing or trial-and-error phase to find what works. So, keep an open mind, keep a curious mind, and don't be afraid to ask yourself the hard question of, "Is this work that I create something that people want to buy?" And if your answer is a maybe, do the work to figure out how to make it a yes. It's what I've done in my business, and I know you can do it too. I believe in you.

All righty, thanks so much for listening. I love having you here, and if you enjoy this content and you like what I have to say, and you have a minute to spare, I would love it if you'd rate the podcast or leave a review wherever you listen to the podcast. If you have questions, a suggestion for a podcast episode, or even just want to say hi, connect with me on Instagram at @artmarketingproject. Send me a DM, say hi, ask a question, any of the above. I would love to hear from you. Thanks so much, everyone. See you again next week. Bye.