



Buying Wholesale Crafts: Order Outside the Box and Set Your Store Apart

by Amy Knebel



You've just returned from market and are feeling a little uninspired by what you saw. Or maybe you want something unique that speaks to your core customers. It could be that you admired a piece of jewelry and the wearer told you about the great artist who made it. Any way you look at it, buying wholesale from craft artists can be another avenue to add something spectacular to your store. Susan Gerock of Zoe Boutique in Alexandria, VA concurs. "Working with artists can also allow you to provide your customers with something no one else with have. I've found that my customers love to point to the unique nature of their find – you can't get this from the large, mass production houses."

Even though handcrafted artists have been producing and selling their work for ages, it hasn't been until recently that the appeal has gone mainstream. More and more people are turning away from mass produced trends and looking for distinct items. Add in the fact that many handmade artists use reclaimed and recycled materials, and you have something that appeals to a more globally eco-conscious buyer, as well.

An Indie Duo

As an independent retailer, how do you go about buying wholesale from craft artists? Retail Minded spoke to industry insiders to help you navigate working with an artist, who, just like you, is an independent businessperson wanting to provide her customers the best of what she has to offer. Vanessa Ber-tozzi, Senior Program Manager at Etsy's still beta Etsy Wholesale, thinks of it like this, "It's inspiring to think about (it) as a whole community of independent businesses – some are designers and some are retailers – but we're all in this together."

It's inspiring to think about as a whole community of independent businesses – some designers and some retailers – we're all in this together.

One way that many independent retailers learn about and see artists' work is when a handcrafted artist pitches her work directly to that store. Many handcrafted artists

who are new to wholesale concentrate pitching their line to local merchants, hoping that they will pick up their line or perhaps host a trunk show. To help accomplish this, some artists will employ a well-crafted email pitch to present their work while others will personally visit your store to make an initial introduction and set up an appointment. And yet others take the time to prepare line sheets or buyers packet, helping communicate to the retailers in a familiar, professional fashion that is respected and appreciated from a buyer's point of view.

You've Placed An Order... Now What?

They have been bought, delivered and merchandised on your store shelves. So now what do you do? Nancy Vince, President of WholesaleCrafts.com and Susan Gerock of Zoe Boutique in Virginia share their best tips on how to sell handcrafted successfully:

Have a passion for working with artists and a genuine appreciation for the talent and time that go into creating handcrafted art. Your interest will come through in your sales.

Have a good business mind and look for things you can mark up well. You want to make money, right?

Make sure the artist is realistic about what her item can be sold for in a retail store. If a designer has an incorrect sense of what a product is worth, you need to have the courage to pass on those items.

Buy for your core customer and know when a handcrafted item is a fit for your business...or not.

Establish a relationship with the artist so that you know the artist's and the item's story. You have to be able to communicate a compelling story to your customer why a handcrafted item is remarkable and you need to train your staff on this, as well.

Include handcrafted art and the artist's story in your marketing and social media campaigns. Social media is an efficient way to introduce and promote your handcrafted artists, as well as your entire assortment of inventory.

Crafting the Buy

So when a handmade artist has an appointment with you, what should you know before placing an order? One of the first things you should look for is an artist who had modeled his wholesale business similar to an established brand or manufacturer. This level of professionalism is a strong indicator that the artist is serious. Look for a well-edited line of product available in bulk.

If an artist offers wholesale for every product he creates, it's likely that he or she could struggle to fulfill orders. In other words, identify just how serious this handcrafted brand is by reviewing their expectations, collection and sales pitch. The artist should provide with a line sheet that has photos, descriptions and prices – helping to communicate that they have done their homework and are “retail-ready” to talk sales. Additionally, check out the artists's own website and see if her online prices match the MSRP. Also make sure terms and conditions are spelled out for payment, returns, damages, order cancellations, shipping, and lead time.

For face to face meetings or even virtual buyers, it's ideal to see an example of their work - showing you quality of the end result. Finally, make sure they have an order form prepared. Scribbled notes won't do the trick. And don't forget to do your homework, as well. “Ask for references from other stores where they are sold. You want to know if quality is consistently high and delivery is dependable,” Gerock emphasizes.

Finding Handmade Wholesalers

Perhaps you want to see a wider variety of handmade artists or you are looking for additional items that mesh with your current store assortment. One good way to access artists is at shows and at select markets. Attending a show such as the Buyers Market of American Craft, any of the three ACRE (American Craft Retailers Expo) shows or Beckman's handcrafted at the Chicago Gift Market exposes you to many artists under one roof. Among the countless advantages of going to a tradeshow or market that focuses

solely on wholesale craft artists is that you know you are dealing with an artist with a proven track record. “It's peace of mind”, explains Nancy Vince, president of WholesaleCrafts.com.

Most of the wholesale craft shows require artists to apply for the chance to exhibit, which also assures buyers that they are working with legitimate, juried artists. For retailers who like the opportunity to see and touch the crafts and establish relationships with many handcrafted artists, attending a trade show allows the time and setting for that.

WholesaleCrafts.com President Vince elaborates, “It's a community about serving the indie retailer and the retailer's experience.”

While many retailers find it cost and time prohibitive to travel to shows in addition to their regular trips to market, there are still options available for these merchants to source handmade items for their stores. A number of websites, including WholesaleCrafts.com, specifically work with only those artists who can create in amounts suitable for wholesale, eliminating guesswork on the retailer's part.

Etsy Wholesale, a new division of the popular website, was recently launched in a direct response to retailers wanting to buy wholesale for their stores. Senior Program Manager Bertozzi points out, “We know that retailers searched Etsy for amazing designers, but it was hard to determine who was wholesale,” Bertozzi stated. Now, thanks to Etsy Wholesale, retailers can do this from their comforts of their store.

The great advantage to working with websites such as Etsy.com/Wholesale, WholesaleCrafts.com and Handmadeology.com is that artists' work is juried or carefully screened for acceptance. These websites also invest in artist and buyer education and give both sides of the sale a platform in which to interact. Buying from a wholesale craft based website can make your life easier, as well as smarter. For example,

Handmadeology.com has a wealth of business-oriented content geared toward educating independent designers about how to sell and market the right way. Wholesalecrafts.com streamlines the buying process so retailers can buy direct from multiple artists - all on one website. They also provide a quarterly print Buyer's Guide in addition to multiple ways to learn about an artist online through bios and videos. All this said, the one disadvantage from buying online is the lack of touching and feeling the handcrafted items.

In Conclusion

But, really, why handcrafted? Independent retailers are all too familiar with the data demonstrating how much of every dollar spent at an independent retailer

remains in that community. With this in mind, consider how this may impact your purchase of handcrafted goods for your own store.

Ask for references from other stores where they are sold. You want to know if quality is consistently high and delivery is dependable.

Allison Fromich, an artist who creates preserved botanical jewelry at Tiger Lilly Shop, elaborates on buying handcrafted for your store as a way to invest in your community. “When you are buying American handmade, you are an advocate for your community and you're taking an activist position. The money that

you spend with an artist spreads a wider net. The dollars go farther and do more good.”

Bottom line? Handcrafted is good for everyone, including your customers.

Help a Hopeful Handmade Vendor Out

Know someone who wants to start selling to retailers and you're not sure how to help her? Not sure what to say to the next unprepared artisan that tries to sell you her handmade goodies to your store? Help a hopeful handmade vendor out by referring her to these great resources.

BuyersPacket.com

Handmade or mass-produced, if you are trying to sell to retailers you need to be prepared in your communication. BuyersPacket.com delivers the necessary marketing support vendors need, offering line sheet templates or customized options, as well as providing studio effect photography services that can be applied to line sheets, websites or any other marketing collateral for only \$20 an image. With pricing that begins at only \$19.95 for a line sheet, this can help hopeful vendors finally get retail-ready.

RetailMinded.com

Shameless plug, but let's face it... if a vendor wants to sell to retailers, they should first begin to understand retailers. Retail Minded is packed with useful articles that wholesalers can appreciate and learn from, as well as gain countless insight to what a retailer needs and expects from their vendors. There is even an entire category dedicated entirely to wholesalers with articles archived dating from 2007 just for them. Plus, available in October 2013, Retail Minded will release a special edition of Retail Minded Magazine designed uniquely for independent wholesalers, Wholesale Minded: A Special Edition of Retail Minded Magazine.

Wholesale 101

Author Jason Prescott, CEO of TopTenWholesale.com and Manufacturer.com, shares his tremendous amount of wholesale insight in this must read book. Gain communication tactics, importing and manufacturing details, trade show knowledge and much more in this comprehensive book on the real business of wholesale. For those vendors looking to grow their brand, this will provide valuable support to lead them along the way. Order your copy here: toptenwholesale.com/wholesale-101.