

::: 6 Habits of Highly Successful Artists :::

The list of six key habits for success with your art career is based on my 14+ years working with artists in museums and as an artist marketing consultant. I could have easily come up with 25 habits, but I think these are critical and must be mastered before you can expect to achieve your goals. I hope you find the lessons valuable and that you'll share them freely with others who can learn from them! —Alyson

..... The First Habit

**The First Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .
. . . They are involved in their communities.**

Successful artists are meeting new people all the time. They're connected, but don't rest on their laurels. They know the more people they go out and meet, the more people they'll have on their mailing lists, attending their exhibits, and buying their art.

I have talked to many, many artists recently who are going it alone. They might have support at home, but they don't know anyone in their local arts community. Not a soul. If you think, as many artists do, "I'm not a joiner" or "I'm not the 'group' type," think again. When you're trying to sell your art, you're no longer just an artist. You're a businessperson as well.

When I begin coaching a client, one of the first things I insist they do is to join and get involved in an artists' organization. Being around other artists:

- ... Builds your confidence.
- ... Provides emotional and professional support.
- ... Opens your eyes to opportunities you never knew existed.

Not only that, but **did you know that 85-95% of artists get into a gallery because of a recommendation from another artist, dealer, curator, collector, or other artworld type?** That's why you can't go it alone! That's how important it is to meet people and to meet more people. The Internet is great, but there is absolutely no substitute for connecting in person.

Artist communities don't have to be fancy or structured. However, they must be consistent and have participants devoted to the cause of art itself—not just their own art. If you are not already part of some type of artist community, consider beginning one of your own.

But don't stop there. Reach out to other parts of the community as well. Get involved in your church, schools, political parties, and favorite causes.

:: take action

Build your own artist community!

The tools for a complete art-marketing plan are available at

<http://www.artbizconnection.com>. Get together in real time and support each other.

If you do not consider yourself part of an artist community, take at least one step this week toward becoming more involved. Call your local arts council and find out about existing artist organizations. Attend an art opening or lecture. Read the local arts newspaper cover to cover. Whatever it takes to get you on the right track.

..... The Second Habit

The Second Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .

. . . They define success and maintain focus.

This great, big, beautiful world presents so many opportunities. And most of us who live in open, democratic societies are fortunate enough to be able to choose how we want to live our lives, the paths we want to take, and the ways we spend our time and hard-earned money.

For artists, this means you get to choose the materials you use to draw, mold, construct or paint, as well as what they look like. As you know, this is both a blessing and a curse. It means you have to make loads of decisions. After you figure out what your art will look like, you must decide what you're going to do with it.

You have to define what success means to you.

Sales options are abundant. Traditional galleries and dealers are among the most sought-after. Not only is someone else validating your efforts when you are part of a gallery, they are doing a lot of the work for you. In addition, they are on the beat of arts writers, critics, and curators. This is the clearest route if your dream is acceptance by the artworld elite.

On the other hand, there are plenty of other (quicker) ways to make money as an artist and claim your prize. Arts fairs and festivals are among the most popular and are excellent choices for artists who love being outside, talking with people, and marketing themselves. Artist co-ops, eBay (and other online sales), and creative marketing can also provide a good living for the self-representing artist.

If you want your work to be in an art museum one day, you will define a set of options to help get you there. If, on the other hand, your major goal is to make a good living as an artist, your options might be entirely different. Sometimes the two are compatible. Other times, they are not.

Define your success and the options you have for attaining it. Then, stay focused and keep your eyes on the prize.

:: take action

How would you like to be remembered?

Write a paragraph all about you that will appear in a newspaper, art history text, museum catalogue or other publication after you have achieved the success you desire.

Goals must help you stretch your boundaries, but be within your reach. You should also review goals monthly, weekly, and daily to make sure you are staying on track.

:: . . . Recommended Reading

Brian Tracy, Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001. Probably my favorite motivational book on the shelf. Short, sweet, although a little redundant toward the end.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1576751988/artbizcoachco-20>

..... The Third Habit

**The Third Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .
. . . They stick their necks out.**

Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.

— James Bryant Conant (1893-1978), Harvard President (1933-53)

I first heard this quote while watching a recent TV interview with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. A little online digging led me to its originator (Conant). And I had never before thought of where the phrase "sticking your neck out" came from. I guess it could have been long before Conant's use of it, but we have come to associate sticking one's neck out with opening yourself up to great risks and even danger. The truth is, until we risk it we won't make any progress toward our goals.

Many, many artists are happy making their art only for themselves. Other artists want recognition and validation for their work, and the only way to do this is to stick your neck out.

Sticking your neck out occurs at various stages in one's career. You first share your work with friends and family, then with other artists, then with strangers at arts festivals and -galleries, then with critics and curators.

Each stage involves a leap of faith and requires you to answer these questions:

Am I more afraid of failure or success?

What is the worst that could happen if I take this risk?

What is the best possible outcome?

What will my life be like if I don't take this risk?

Like the turtle, you will make progress only when you stick your neck out.

:: take action

Take one risk this week. What's it going to be?

- Calling up an art figure in your community and inviting him/her to coffee?
- Scheduling a call with an artist whose works/career you have admired from afar?
- Submitting your work to an exhibition or festival you're dying to be part of?
- Trying a different medium or color?
- Calling a local venue and inquiring about exhibiting your work there? (gallery, coffee shop, bookstore, bank, library, . . .)
- Signing up to present a talk about your work?

:: . . . Recommended Reading

Marcia Yudkin, 6 Steps to Free Publicity. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2003. My newest favorite book!

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1564146758/artbizcoachco-20>

..... The Fourth Habit

The Fourth Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .

. . . They learn to enjoy the business as much as their art.

Yes, you read it right. **There actually are artists who like to market their work, promote themselves, and make sales.** And, not so surprisingly, these artists are doing better than those who despise the business end of things.

Why? **Because no one likes to buy anything from anyone who doesn't reek of self-confidence.** If you absolutely hate to talk with people, attend art openings, or close a sale, you can't fake it. You will have so much negative energy around you that people won't want to get within ten feet of your art.

Artists who want to sell their work and help slay the myth of the starving artist know they're not just artists. They're businesspeople as well! They have become comfortable in that additional role and even thrive in it.

Do you know that small business development centers recommend spending **70% of your time marketing** for your first couple of years in business! That's enormous. And it's not unreasonable. Think about it. So what if you have all of this great art? How will anyone know until you tell them. They aren't, after all, going to come knocking on your door.

Over the last year or so I have developed a list of words describing qualities an artist must have in order to succeed. I use these in my talks and workshops.

One of the words is "competitive," which sometimes draws frowns from my students. They think the word has negative connotations, preferring to imagine it would be better if everyone just got along and helped each other out. Truth is, you are in business for yourself. If someone doesn't buy art from you, they'll likely buy it from another artist. That other artist is your competition. If they are enjoying running a business, they're probably much more effective at it and devoted to everything that must be done. They'll be miles ahead of you in no time.

:: take action

Block out time for your business. If you have 20 hours to spend on your art each week, save at least 10 of them on your marketing (that's only 50%!). Marketing might include inputting names into your mailing list database; photographing your work; updating your résumé; or writing thank-you notes. Whatever the tasks at hand, you can't put them off. You're building a business!

..... The Fifth Habit

**The Fifth Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .
. . . They read, talk, and write about art.**

Can you say, “oops”? The esteemed curators at Tate Britain made a major gaffe by labeling a Pre-Raphaelite painting as an image of one of Mohammed’s wives. An article in The Guardian noted, “It was a concept that many Muslim visitors condemned as an act of blasphemy – since the Muslim faith prohibits human representations of the prophet, his wives or relatives.” As it turns out, the museum assumed the title of the painting referred to Mohammed’s wife when it is more likely to have come from a character in a book. For the whole story, try this link, which has been active:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,1083156,00.html>

When you make mistakes like this, it’s hard to recover. You lose a lot of credibility in the eyes of the public. Forget that tons of information on the other labels is probably 99% accurate. That’s not what people remember. Unfortunately, they remember the mistakes. Trust me, I’ve made enough of my own to know what I’m talking about. It’s embarrassing, but necessary, to admit to them and make the corrections.

When you are putting yourself and your art “out there” for everyone to see, you’d better know what you’re talking about. Artists lose a great deal of credibility in my eyes when they can’t talk intelligently about art.

You should be able to talk about:

- Your work (duh) using colorful, enticing language. It doesn’t have to sound scholarly, but should show that you’re enthusiastic about it.
- Where you fit in the artworld—historically and with your contemporaries. And why.
- Your materials and how you use them.
- Your subject matter.
- Anything that distinguishes you from other artists.

Back everything up with facts. Do your research and get them straight. Everyone is allowed to make mistakes, but it doesn’t mean they will be forgotten.

:: take action

Work on your weakest area first.

- If art history is your weakness, **take a class or rent videotapes.**
- **Organize a group of artists to meet regularly and talk about art.** Not only will you enhance your vocabulary, you’ll become more connected to your community (Habit #1) and, trust me, you’ll be inspired!
- **Keep a journal.** Don’t let those great thoughts escape. Write them down! If you don’t like the idea or pressure of keeping a regular journal, jot down fleeting thoughts on scrap pieces of paper and throw them in a file or shoebox. These places are for

your eyes only. Writing them down gets them out of your head, thus making them easier to remember. It also frees up space for new ideas to develop.

- **Consider joining a Toastmasters group near you.** I've been speaking in public for 14 years and I just joined this terrific group. I wish more artists would hone their speaking skills. Find a group near you at <http://www.toastmasters.org>

:: . . . Recommended Reading

Lenny Laskowski, 10 Days to More Confident Public Speaking (audio cassette). The Princeton Language Institute.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/158621263X/artbizcoachco-20>

..... The Sixth Habit

**The Sixth Habit of Highly Successful Artists is . . .
. . . They follow through and follow up.**

Successful artists are not flaky. On the contrary, they can't afford to be! As part of being a business owner, they know they must be reliable and dependable. People are counting on them. They give themselves deadlines. They make promises. And they do what they say they're going to do.

There's an old saying in customer service: "Under-promise and over-deliver." It's cliché, but it's true. If you think you can finish a commission in three months, promise it in four. When you deliver it early, your patron will be thrilled!

Follow up is one of the most neglected areas of an artist's business.

When someone expresses interest in your work, what do you do? Saying thank-you is only one step. A successful artist will ask the person if they'd like to be added to the mailing list. A successful artist will get the person's business card and **send a handwritten follow-up note.** Why handwritten? Because it sets you apart—not only from other artists, but from everyone else who is sticking to email these days. There's something special about getting handwritten notes in the mail.

The mere fact that you are taking the time to write it out proves your sincerity. If you have difficulty coming up with language, there are lots of books out there to help you write thank you notes (check the etiquette section at the bookstore). More than likely, however, your own words will be sufficient since your notes don't have to be long. Two or three sentences will do.

You must send a handwritten note immediately. You have a couple of days. Two weeks is too long. After you have said "thank you," it is easy to keep the recipients on your mailing list. When you invite them to your next show, they'll be far more likely to remember you than if you waited until your next mailing to contact them.

Saying thank you, sincerely and in a meaningful way, should be ingrained in your business practices.

Besides the usual thanks to people as you go through the day, you should be giving special attention to those who take the time and care to help you with your career and business. Send handwritten thank-you notes with an image of your artwork on them to help people remember you.

:: take action

Make a list of all the people who have helped you in the last month or who you would like to remember you. Have you written them a note? What are you waiting for?

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I hope you have benefited from "6 Habits of Highly Successful Artists."

Please forward this document to anyone who might benefit from the lessons.

:: . . . Recommended from ArtBizCoach.com

The Do This! newsletter can be delivered to your inbox each Monday evening for free. It contains articles with sound, proven advice and motivation, much like what you have found in these lessons. But you'll also discover lots of practical tips. Read the current issue and subscribe:

<http://www.artbizcoach.com/dotthis>