A New Renaissance for Art Materials

By Frankie Ridolfi

In February I attended my first CHA trade show in Anaheim, CA. People were more welcoming to a newcomer than I could have anticipated. At the same time, I also detected a hint of pessimism about the industry's immediate future. There was talk of scrapbooking having reached its peak, and a need for the elusive "next big thing" to attract new types of customers. But according to the 2007 Scrapbooking Trend Report, "the industry has the potential to grow to $20 billion in the next 10 years." What accounts for this disparity between perception and reality?

It might be fear. In a turbulent economy there is a natural tendency for businesses to fear the worst and pull back on marketing and initiatives. But moments like these may actually be the best times to tantalize customers with new project ideas. According to the latest neuroscience research, the antidote to fear is—drum roll please—happiness. Our brains appear to be incapable of feeling both of these emotions simultaneously. This may explain why arts and entertainment have always been a trusty refuge during tough times. Perhaps we should think of art materials as the tools for making happiness. Is it a coincidence that the craft market boomed in the years following the dot-com crash and the 9/11 attacks? Perhaps, but I don't think so. The hunger to move beyond fear and create beauty has never been stronger.

Even if the economy heads into recession, this could be a shining moment for art materials businesses. Consider a historical perspective. After centuries of socio-economic bleakness in The Middle Ages, what factor brought about the Renaissance? Many credit the forward-thinking merchants of Florence, who attracted painters, sculptors, scientists, poets, and philosophers into the same arena. The cross-pollination of ideas created the greatest explosion of creativity in humanity—until now. Author Frans Johansson calls this "The Medici Effect," and points out that innovation in business comes from the intersections of seemingly unrelated ideas. Following this theme, marketing research suggests terrific opportunities to spur customer activity by offering existing art materials in new combinations.

Here's an example that inspires me. I'm selling an instructional DVD that shows beginners how to make elegant journals with simple tools. The trend report cited above indicates that 90% of pens and markers bought at scrapbooking stores are for journaling. It also shows that paper is the primary driver of traffic through stores. See where I'm going? CD/DVD tutorials were the third most common "software tool" owned. It notes that "There are 4.5 million scrapbookers; however there are over 12 million people within the family history community" and that "over 60% of consumers responded that they were either currently working on their family history, previously worked on it, or want to work on it." It even concludes that "retailers should consider offering classes that combine family history and journal-oriented scrapbooks." In isolation these statistics might seem unrelated, but a journal-making project crosses over many product categories. And it can appeal to different demographics—over one-third of my customers are men.

Readers of this newsletter undoubtedly have countless examples of innovative merchandising that have worked. A low-risk experiment would be to work with retailers to suggest new cross-over projects to customers with simple in-store displays. The cost is negligible but the upside could be worthwhile. The next time you feel a twinge of fear about the bottom line, remember: even in a tough economy, merchants may have the power to inspire a new art materials Renaissance.

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