



STAY IN YOUR LANE

An essay on focusing on what you are good at.

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I recently attended a round table discussion at [1 Million Cups Cleveland](#), and the most concise advice I heard was “stay in your lane”.

Sometimes we are ready to hear something so it resonates as loudly as standing inside the bell in the bell tower. That was what happened on that day for me.

As a serial entrepreneur, it’s easy to get caught up trying to do too much yourself. Yet, we all know that it’s folly. Stick with what you’re good at. Focus. Find someone else who is good at other stuff to complement your skills.

The conversation at our local business-networking group of the national program of 1 Million Cups, started with a question about finding a productivity tool for artists to manage the logistics of getting the right inventory where it needed to be at the right time.

I was asking questions and looking for advice. I’d been investigating this concept since it is difficult to manage the back and forth of inventory of paintings and pieces of artwork as it is sent out to shows, committed for months at a time, sometimes sells, sometimes not. Sometimes it is returned damaged. Sometimes it wins awards and so may travel on to new shows extending its time away from the studio as it travels onward.

Managing the back and forth, and allowing for travel time and making deadlines is confusing.

Although not a commonly held definition, in reality, an artist is a manufacturer creating inventory to meet the fluid demands of an eclectic market. Logistics is a quandary common to manufacturers as they ship products and manage inventory--but it is not always something that comes to mind in regard to artists. (And I don’t know about other artists, but at times I may have over 150 paintings “in play”—in galleries, in shows, on approval in client’s homes or businesses, in transit, being considered for a show, being repaired, etc.)

It is a process of logistics in shipping and inventory management. There are some galleries that have programs to do similar processes, but their goals are different. They receive inventory, and in theory, once it’s sold, it’s probably out of their immediate concern. It’s unlikely for the

inventory to come back. They will continue to maintain data on what it sold for, who bought it, who has previously owned it, etc. It's considered the "provenance" of a piece and that data for the object or painting will be maintained. It's similar for museums. They keep track of the objects in their collection. But again when the pieces travel, (to other museums or to a restorer or conservationist) they come back. There are fewer permutations of travel options than those for the artist, and things ultimately, typically, come back to the museum that shipped it out.

While with the artist, they may or may not come back. They may be sold along the voyage. Or may be lost or damaged. Some shop owners are much more careless about the work of artists, then say, a museum would be. There are strict, precise policies for museums about receiving or deaccessioning or shipping out objects. Not so much for many galleries, shop owners, or exhibit managers in the handling of the work that belongs to the artist. (Many do an extraordinary job.)

The tool needs to be part database management, part project management, and, it was pointed out by the group, mainly a workflow management tool. As far as I know, there is not currently a tool to manage this process that is affordable and easy for an artist to use.

A participant echoed the "stay in your lane" comment by reminding me that starving artists may be starving because they try to do everything themselves. Many artists simply don't think in a logical, left-brained manner. In fact, their thinking may be decidedly inconsistent with best practices in successfully running a manufacturing business.

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Although, candidly, I wouldn't limit this characteristic to artists. There are many creative, motivated, passionate, brilliant business-owners—including artists—who don't think in traditional business school channels or in a linear path.

Another participant noted that frequently artists don't start with the basic beginning document of most businesses: a business plan. As I recall from marketing classes of long ago: if you don't know where you're going, any old road will take you there. So true.

This pulls me back to one of my favorite YouTube videos, Simon Sinek and his scintillating [TEDx Puget Sound, 2009 talk, "Start with Why?"](#) (He has a book by the same title, too.) He discusses how it makes a difference if you start with articulating why you are doing something and then answer how and what you will make, rather than reversing that sequence of questions.

Artists tend to jump into creating inventory to solve their craving to create and figure they will solve the other business issues, such as ROI, later. They may benefit from looking for advice from people who know how to run profitable businesses. And even by attending networking sessions and asking questions. I was jumping into the path of creating a productivity tool—and I am not an expert in workflow management.

This sounds so obvious, yet the instruction to “stay in your lane” is so succinct and smart.

It made my day. Point well taken: I should concentrate on my gifts—such as creating art and teaching creative thinking—and encouraging others to figure out a productivity tool to manage the logistics side of an artist’s life.

Now, if that sounds appealing to you, call me.

I’ve got plenty of ideas!

*Do you have thoughts or feedback to add to the conversation?
Email me at Hello @watchingpaintdry.com*

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