

# Sharon Elaine Thompson

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## 19 WAYS TO MARKET YOUR PRODUCTION LINE

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by

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In the 1960s, when many craftspersons started working, artists who thought about making a production line were not infrequently accused of prostituting their work. But as time went on and the economy changed, many realized that production work was the only way to survive and do the work they loved. While, creative minds that they are, they realized that production work could remain lively, interesting and innovative, they also realized that it meant a life of marketing.

We talked to seven artist jewelers and gleaned 19 marketing tips that have helped them lead long and productive artistic lives.

### **1. Marketing or creation first?**

When creating a production line, should you consider the market or the product first? That depends a lot on your personality. Boston artist/jeweler Carolyn Bensinger says, "My interest is in making jewelry that people will want to wear. I have to say the work comes first."

Portland, Oregon, artist/jeweler Kristin Mitsu Shiga's production work develops directly from the materials, techniques and of her one-of-a-kind pieces. "I don't think I'd be able to develop a production line without developing one-of-a-kind pieces from time to time...They're almost research for my production work."

Lisa and Scott Cylinder, in Oley, Pennsylvania, knew a marketing strategy was important but they also wanted to pay close attention to what they "liked and loved," in

developing their product. We liked dogs and cats. We're birders. We're big on toys, things that lighten your life. We try not to be serious about things."

For Ipswich, Massachusetts, designer Betsy Frost, "a lot revolved around what I could afford," she says of her start up. That eliminated gold. But she knew of well-established silversmiths selling through craft galleries; she targeted the American craft galleries. "The most affordable way to market to galleries was the American Craft Council (ACC) shows and the Rosen shows [The Buyers of American Craft Shows established by Wendy Rosen]," she says.

Vermont artist/jeweler Karen Krieger, says her marketing strategies and production jewelry design are interwoven. In fact, Krieger says marketing and design are so interwoven that at one show she and others joked about writing a book entitled *Marketing: A Lifestyle*, "because our entire lives revolve around our work and the distribution of our work...the way we dress, where we travel, who our friends are, etc. Our lives are enmeshed in our work..." Although "all the sexiness is in one-of-a-kind pieces," she says, "it is more challenging trying to come up with something that you can put into the marketplace that has a stamp of individuality at a price people are willing to pay."

Lastly, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Phil Carrizzi, Chair of the Allesee Metals/Jewelry Design Program at Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University is helping train the next generation of jewelry designers. Some may go into high-volume production while others end up handcrafting jewelry. No matter what their future, the concept of marketing is integrated into almost all their classes. "We [raise] the issue of market as a significant/fundamental issue to consider in the design of objects," says Carrizzi. Students learn to choose a client base that interests them—from "little faddies," 12 to 13 year old girls who are into things like "Hello Kitty," Carrizzi explains, to a woman with an empty nest who suddenly has money to spend on herself—and then

consider everything about that market, from the types of jewelry they wear and how much money they spend to what their unmet needs are. They consider the kinds of materials that might be used to make jewelry for their target market and the production technology that might be used to convert those materials into jewelry. They research periodicals to see what is going on that might affect their design and market, from the new headphone technology that will affect earring design to the earring designs of others. And they look at the advertising necessary to reach their target market, including the language the ads would use that would be appropriate to that market, and the rates they'd have to pay to reach that audience. "There are design considerations to make regarding what market you're designing for, what type of jewelry you are able to design, who would buy it, at what price point, and what technology you'll use," says Carrizzi.

This kind of "market first" approach to jewelry design is foreign to most craftspersons working today, but Carrizzi says that failure to look at their product this way has led the jewelry industry to lose "lucrative corporate design accounts," to "non-specialists.

"Who designs watches for Nike, for instance?" he asks. "I will bet it is NOT someone who was trained in our field, but [who was trained] as an industrial designer. Why, because we would have nothing to offer? Not in my opinion, but because we are less flexible in terms of materials/processes/psychology/form language. I believe that jewelers have something significant to offer any product that adorns or augments the human body - but we have to prove that we are flexible in considering a wide variety of user types, price points, features, and ways of communicating these things. If, that is, we want to compete with some of the amazing objects (like Nike watches), that we are currently ignoring as worthy of our time and energy."

Many artist jewelers won't want to compete or produce at this level, but there are those who dream of being the next Elsa Perretti with a Tiffany's to market their work.

## **2. Create solid designs.**

Marketing can sell anything. Pick the product you love to hate—whether it's Barbie, Thomas Kinkade paintings, or pet rocks—and you'll realize it's true. But when talking about craft, art or studio jewelry, design is what sells. Most artists we talked to have noticed that the price point for which their work sells is falling.

Artists seem to be unsure whether this is due to economic factors, or a younger buying audience that may not be educated to appreciate craft. Whatever the cause, it is a gauntlet thrown at the feet of the artist/jeweler.

Santa Cruz, California, artist/jeweler, Carol Webb's average retail sale used to range between \$300 and \$500; it now averages around \$150. "It's really challenging to come up with something that is creative and a well-thought-out design [that sells at a lower price]," she says. But that lower price point doesn't mean you can get away with sloppy design. Webb quotes Don Friedlich's comments that when the market gets tough you spend more of your time developing a well-designed piece that you can sell for less.

And the competition will become intense. Carrizzi believes that computer aided design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM) will have a hand in changing "the nature of what craft is." If CAM becomes the dominant way of cutting waxes, he says, there will be less time put into developing the hand-eye motor skills needed for wax carving. The time saved, he says will go into design.

## **3. Develop a catchy name.**

A line of solid designs can't be beat, but it can be helped along by a catchy name, says Lisa Cylinder, who, with her husband and business partner, Scott, named their

business “Chickenscratch.” She credits their name and logo with helping fix their identity in buyers’ minds, and, as a result, helping build their business.

#### **4. Get a handle on prices.**

The market is growing increasingly competitive and prices for everything are rising. More than ever, your pricing has to be right. To ensure her pricing is in line with her costs and time, Webb says, she keeps cards on her products. On the front is a detailed time study; on the back, she figures overhead costs, detailing hourly expenses for everything, and keep track of the costs of materials. She uses a formula to arrive at a wholesale price. She doubles that figure to determine the retail price of a piece. If she concludes her galleries can sell the piece at that price, she adds it to her production line. If not, she says, she marks the piece up more, and sells it through her retail shows.

#### **5. Don’t go overboard.**

In the enthusiasm of starting a new business, it can be easy to go overboard with your line. Cylinder says they started Chickenscratch with “stars in our eyes.” Their “huge line of more than 100 pieces,” she says “was a big mistake.” Not only do you invest a lot in inventory, Webb says that “people get overwhelmed and don’t make a decision because there are too many decisions to make. It’s like the invention of the remote and how it changed television. If there is too much, people will change the channel or walk away. “

#### **6. Develop a catalog.**

A good catalog serves many purposes. It can act as a gallery’s “back up” inventory—if they run out of an item or think a customer may be interested in something they don’t normally stock, they can use the catalog to make a sale. It can help a gallery—or the artist, at a retail show—sell a special order, says Webb, if a customer sees a pattern or piece they like but want something slightly different. It makes it much easier for

a gallery to reorder a piece or collection, thus reducing the number of show appearances you might otherwise feel compelled to put in.

A catalog doesn't have to be fancy. Some of the artist/jewelers we talked to used simple line drawings or scanned images. Other catalogs are much more polished or complex. A few use no catalog or use a website as their catalog.

Frost's first catalog consisted of scanned, black and white images and a price sheet. But by her fourth year in business, she wanted something better. "I invested in a very nice catalog, nicer than the average that you see at a show. That got me huge amount of business. It put me up a notch. Instead of looking like a starving artist, I looked successful. I picked up the San Francisco Museum of Modern art, I'm sure, from the catalog."

Frost's catalog proved she didn't have to be big to sell big. "People think I'm a huge business," says Frost. "That's what I wanted to portray at the time, that my business was bigger than just me." If people think they're dealing with a bigger firm, she says, they have more confidence in placing a large order. "I wanted to swim with the sharks. The catalog is the best investment I made."

Shiga, with a background in graphic design and book arts, produced her own 20-page catalog. "You only have one chance to make a first impression," she says. "A lot of galleries are getting tens to hundreds of people approaching them every month. They don't know you. It's important to make a visual impact."

"I wanted [the catalog] to feel very precious. It had a metal closure that I made in the studio. Esthetically it gave, hopefully, an idea of what my jewelry felt like." As the look of her jewelry changed, Shiga changed the paper, the graphics, the fonts in the catalog. "I tried to keep it current so people seeing my work for the second time wouldn't think, 'Oh, this is old.'"

While some artist jewelers give their catalogs away at the shows, Cylinder doesn't. "The buyers don't want to carry the catalog around at the show," she says. She knows because she sees so many of them tossed in the trash cans around the shows. Instead, she gets contact information for a buyer, gives them a style sheet with the title of the piece and the price. After the show, if requested, she'll send specific images via e-mail or postcard, or send a catalog.

### **7. Look professional.**

Whether it's a full blown, full-color catalog with hand-crafted clasp, or an invoice form, look professional, says Krieger. "Try to use nice packaging. Make the invoice neat and clean, and make sure the bags are clearly marked. That's part of the presentation of things." That professionalism will inspire confidence.

### **8. Plan for the surprise order.**

It's a truism that every designer dreams about "the big one," and just as true that, if you are unprepared for it, "the big one" can put your business out of business. Some craftspersons, says Krieger, when asked if they can make 1000 of a product, say yes, then figure out how. "I need to do a little more legwork beforehand," she says. At one point she made picture frames for the craft market. She based her price on making the frames by hand, but she also looked at how she would make them if she got a lot of orders. That was fortunate, because "I got slammed with orders," she says. Plan ahead. Ask yourself, what could you job out, have made through die-striking, casting, laser cutting? By what companies? Ask colleagues for recommendations, get price quotes from the manufacturer, determine what your bulk price discount will be. You may sell only three pieces, but if someone asks for 3000, you can say "yes!" with confidence.

### **9. Consider limited edition.**

While most artists make as many pieces as a production line can hold, the Cylinders make limited editions. “We don’t number them,” says Lisa Cylinder, but they make only about 100 pieces of any one style in a year. Once a line sells out, it’s gone for that year. They retire and introduce about a dozen styles each year. In the last five years, they’ve started bringing back some of their more popular styles from 10 to 12 years ago—but only for a year. “We change it so it’s not like the original. It’s larger or smaller, and it has a ‘redux’ title.” It keeps the line new and fresh and continues to offer something for collectors.

#### **10. Let sales reps come to you.**

You may get tired of the show circuit, and start wishing someone would make the rounds for you. “Don’t go searching for sale reps,” warns Lisa Cylinder. “Let them find you. If they find you, they’re drawn to your product and will work to sell it. If you find them, they won’t be as interested as you think they are.”

There are other caveats. The Cylinders found that by using reps, they were losing control over the delivery dates. “The reps made promises to the customers that we couldn’t deliver. But their promise became our promise.” To keep that promise and their reputation, says Lisa Cylinder, “at one time, we were making 300 pins every two weeks.” They finally released the sales reps and cut production back to a point they could manage.

#### **11. Choose the right gallery.**

Almost all the artist/jewelers we talked to participate in one or both of the top wholesale craft shows in the US: The Buyers Market of American Craft, established by Wendy Rosen ([www.americancraft.com](http://www.americancraft.com)) and the American Craft Council shows ([www.craftcouncil.org](http://www.craftcouncil.org).) This is the fastest way to exhibit your work to a huge number of buyers. But no one says you can’t shop for galleries yourself.



Scout the galleries. “Look at the jewelry there,” says Bensinger.” Look at where your prices are compared to the other work in there. You don’t want to be at the low end or the high end. You want to be in the middle with maybe a few pieces on either end. You want to have the widest appeal you can. I make sure the other work looks like handcrafted jewelry and that mine fits in with it, but that there is nothing particularly similar.”

“Ask friends and colleagues about the gallery’s reputation,” says Shiga. “I want to see that they advertise in national magazines.” A little undercover work may be called for. “I’ve been know to go into the galleries that do represent me or that I want to represent me, I don’t introduce myself and ask about the work in there,” says Shiga. “I wouldn’t consider a gallery where they can’t even tell you the name of the artist or don’t look up information about the work.”

Frost scouts galleries when she is on vacation. She wears her jewelry and carries a copy of her catalog in her pocket. If the gallery owner expresses interest in the pieces she’s wearing, Frost leaves a catalog and adds the gallery to her mailing list. “I have picked up probably 10 galleries that way,” she says. When she first went into business, she also read Wendy Rosen’s *Crafting as a Business*, which listed the top 100 galleries in the US. Frost sent the galleries a mailing and picked up some representation that way.

## **12. Help the galleries sell your work.**

Galleries are in business to make money, just like you are. If you can provide tips or sales tools that help them sell your product, you’ll improve your chances of gaining their representation.

For example, when Webb sends out a consignment order of smaller pieces, she’ll often include a larger, more expensive piece. “People can’t afford the larger piece,” she says, “but they can afford the lower priced pieces. The bigger piece brings them in.” Several years ago, she used to do some of her pieces in red and silver and would include

those in her consignment package even if not requested. “The red would draw people’s eye to the display,” she says. Even if they couldn’t wear red, they’d often buy the same piece in black and silver. “It wasn’t a matter of affordability,” says Webb, “but the red caught their eye.”

Webb also produces a floor catalog for her galleries. The catalog contains images of her entire line of jewelry, so even if the gallery doesn’t stock all of her pieces, they can sell them from the catalog. The catalog contains no prices, so the gallery can add their usual markup, and there is no contact information for Webb, so the customer cannot bypass the gallery. It’s an arrangement that serves everyone: customer, gallery and artist.

Frost includes product information cards with her work that can be given to the purchaser. The cards contain an artist’s statement, care information, and a place for galleries to stamp their own address.

### **13. To website or not to website.**

Websites can be a bone of contention between galleries and artists (see 16 below). “I have a website,” says Rockford, Illinois artist jeweler Deb Karash, “but you can’t buy from it.” In fact, most of the artists we talked to who have a website use it primarily as a cyber-portfolio. They display their work on it as well as a resume and bio, an artist’s statement, show dates, and often a list of galleries representing the work or links to the galleries’ websites. “It’s like a business card,” says Karash, “but with a great deal more information.”

Webb, who exhibits her work at retail shows as well as in galleries, provides the website as a place for retail customers to reach her after she’s done a show. Although she doesn’t post prices on her site or take orders directly through the site, if someone has seen a piece at a show, they can send her an e-mail to order it.

Not everyone is sold on the website idea, however. Krieger doesn't want one, for example. "I don't want to run a retail store," she says, "and an online gallery feels like a retail store." The Cylinders work without a website, too. "Handcrafts are meant to be seen in person," says Lisa Cylinder. "If you see it and want it, buy it, or I'll tell you where you can buy it."

#### **14. Reinforce your advertising.**

"It's true what they say--that people have to see your work three times at least before they actually see it," says Shiga. "I believe in repeat mailing. If you want to associate with a gallery, you have to mail to them multiple times." She keeps a separate mailing list for each region, entering them into a database. When she has a show coming up, she prints out labels by zip code and sends postcards. She notes her booth number and often offers a discount on purchases over a certain amount if the postcard recipient brings the card to the show.

Webb, too, sends postcards to announce an upcoming show. She also prints an image of her jewelry on her business card—a welcome reminder for wholesale and retail buyers alike who often see a lot of work at a show.

"Galleries a business, too," says Frost. "They're looking for something new and fresh. Try to weasel your way into their mailbox. My best galleries I got by sending them a postcard and asking them to see me at the show or call for a catalog."

#### **15. Develop new lines.**

Don't let your work get stale. You don't have to reinvent yourself every year, but you do have to have something fresh to show buyers. "It's one of the most pressing problems as a production jeweler," says Frost. "The first thing buyers say when they come up to the booth at a show is 'What's new?' I come up with two or three new collections a year. If you don't have something new, you're not going to get new orders."

“Every year, I throw out pieces that aren’t popular,” says Krieger. “I’m always looking for a price spread that is in the range galleries are looking for. For me, it’s something I can wholesale for \$25 to \$150.”

While Krieger and Frost deliberately add to and change their lines, Karash’s line changes more intuitively. “I don’t deliberately sit down and design a new line for the next year,” she says. “I just start making what comes to me and that develops the line. I let my work evolve.”

#### **16. Don’t undercut your galleries.**

Not one of the artists we talked to said they’d make a sale at any cost. Every single one of them said the same thing: Don’t undercut your galleries. That is the underlying fear that galleries have about artists having websites—is that it opens up the possibility of direct competition with the gallery. “It’s important that you never sell your work wholesale at a retail show,” says Karash. “I never sell a piece at a show for a lower price than what I’ve indicated to the galleries that I would sell it for.”

#### **17. Deliver on time.**

This is another axiom repeated by everyone we talked to. And that means giving it to your galleries straight. “We never lie about when we’re going to get the pieces to the gallery,” says Lisa Cylinder. “We set limits for ourselves. They may have to wait a couple months, but they get it when we say they will.” If a disaster causes you to miss a delivery date, call the gallery, she says. It’s a common courtesy too often overlooked.

To avoid scheduling conflicts, Karash sits down with a calendar, marks her retail shows and blocks out the dates she need to make the work for those shows. That shows her how much time is left over for wholesale work. Because she knows how much time it takes to make her work, as buyers place orders, she blocks them in on her calendar.

“Someone else can’t have their order at that time. That has helped me to pretty much stay

on time with my deliveries. I can deliver my order within a week of when I say I will. I'm counting on the galleries to pay the bill when they get it, and they count on me to provide the merchandise when they need it. If they can't rely on you, they won't order from you, even if they like your work."

### **18. Remember customer service.**

Your product is your reputation and your reputation is your biggest marketing asset. To keep their reputation good, says Lisa Cylinder, "we back up our product. If something goes wrong, we fix it. We don't charge for it, unless the customer damages it. We stand by what we do."

Your galleries are your customers, too. Sometimes they make buying errors and a piece or style of yours isn't selling. "As long as the work is in good shape," says Krieger, "I'll swap it out with a gallery. I want them to be comfortable trying something that is risky. I want them to know they're not going to lose money."

### **19. Network with other artists.**

Finally, word-of-mouth doesn't always apply to advertising with the retail buying public. Network with other craftspersons, says Shiga. Someone may recommend you for another show or a publication. Shiga says she has gotten in a "lot of doors that way because people trust the advice of people they already know."

Be aware of the craft publications out there. Bensinger's work will be shown in *American Art Collector-North* a book published by Alcove Books in Berkeley, California. There are other publications that exhibit the work of craftspersons and that reach large, interested audiences. Talking to other artists at shows and in online groups will expand your networking circle and introduce you to opportunities you never knew existed.

Thanks to all the artists who gave so generously of their time and experience: Carolyn Bensinger, Phil Carrizzi, Lisa and Scott Cylinder, Betsy Frost, Deb Karash, Karen Krieger,

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Kristin Mitsu Shiga, and Carol Webb. To see more of the work of these artists, or to find a gallery representing their work, see their websites: Carolyn Bensinger, [www.cbjewelry.com](http://www.cbjewelry.com); Betsy Frost, [www.betsyfrostdesign.com](http://www.betsyfrostdesign.com); Kristin Mitsu Shiga, [www.kristinmitsushiga.com](http://www.kristinmitsushiga.com); Carol Webb, [www.taboostudio.com](http://www.taboostudio.com); Deb Karash, [www.debkarash-jewelry.com](http://www.debkarash-jewelry.com); Karen Krieger, [www.karenkrieger.com](http://www.karenkrieger.com).