

# How to Make Money with Your Art

10 Important Keys You Need to Know  
to Thrive as an Artist



Matt Tommey

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[www.TheWorshipStudio.org](http://www.TheWorshipStudio.org)  
“Raising Up An Army Of Artists to Reveal God’s Glory”

You have an artistic gift. You create beautiful pieces of art and people like your work. You've sold some things over the years, honed your creative skills and now you're ready to take it to the next level – actually making money from your art. So what's the next step, you ask? How do you go from just producing a few cool art pieces on the side to actually making a living doing what you love? So many artists, maybe even you, are sitting on ready, waiting to sell their art on the open market to clients just waiting for the newest, hottest piece of their work to come on the scene. They live under the spell of an illusive dream, hoping that one day they will be able to cast restraint to the wind, quit their 'real job' and just 'be creative' when in fact the road to becoming a profitable and prospering artist - either full-time or part-time – is typically a long road of choices that lead to a successful career.

While there's no 10-step, iron-clad, sure-fire plan for artists to succeed in our creative career, there are keys that hold true no matter your creative medium, years of experience or geographic location. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to practice and observe these keys in my life and in the life of many successful artists. I'd like to offer them to you.

## **Be Excellent**

You're asking people to spend their hard-earned money on something you've created. Not only that, you're asking them to bring it into their home have it be part of the landscape of their life for many years to come. Make sure that whatever it is that you've created – a painting, a pot, a sculpture, a piece of clothing – is done with excellence and attention to detail.

Early on in my career, I remember going to highend craft fairs and realizing that much of the work looked 'perfect' – every edge clean, every shape beautifully formed, every line carefully painted. That perfection is not something that happens but rather the convergence of skill, eye for quality and spirit of excellence that come together in the work of a great artist.

Don't make the mistake of making something that's 'just good enough'. Just

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because you have a booth full of art doesn't mean it's worth the canvas it's painted on. Take the time to learn your craft, hone your skills, master your technique and give your very best. Believe me, it shows.

## **Developing Your Image**

It's been said that "image is everything". I'm not sure I agree totally with that statement, but many times image is the first thing that people see when being introduced to your work. Whether in a gallery, an art show or craft fair the way you present your work is vital to your success. Is your work displayed professionally with good lighting? Is your sales booth clean, uncluttered and inviting? Do you have your artist statement and studio photos somewhere that prospective clients can learn more about you? Is your sign professionally created with a strong logo, clear wording and in a location that draws attention to the crowd? Doing little things like coming up with a clean logo or icon for your work and then putting that on postcards, business cards or a sign really makes a big impact on prospective buyers. It lets them know that you're not just some schlep that's come up from the backwoods with your bucket full of crafts but rather a serious artist with beautiful, quality art they should consider purchasing.

## **Find Your Niche**

Someone once told me you don't have to be the best, you just have to find your niche. That is so true. You may be reading this article and thinking every year "or "Matt, I've been doing shows parttime and am ready to take it to the next level". Whatever your goals are, it's important to understand the market for your product and go after it. Let me give you an example. I am a basketmaker and create rustic Appalachian-style handmade baskets out of natural vines I harvest in western North Carolina. (You can see my work at <http://www.matttommey.com>) Most of my pieces range from \$300 to \$5000 depending on the size, shape, materials, etc. I found out a number of years ago, after doing numerous outdoor shows that my work didn't sell well at shows where there was lots of music, food vendors and a 'community event' type atmosphere. Most folks were there just looking around, having fun and spending the day with their family. Consequently, I started researching my niche. I found that I was in a category called "Fine Craft" and that collectors who wanted my type of work typically attended high-end, indoor shows sponsored by Guilds or other reputable craft organizations. Not only that, but I realized that people with luxury mountain homes found my work desirable as a unique rustic accessory for their home. No more outdoor community festivals for me.

## **Media & Technology**

No matter what industry you're in, creative or otherwise, your website and social media presence is one of the first places people will try to find out more about you and your work. You need to make sure that your website adequately represents your work, vision, image and the creative niche you're in. YouTube is owned by Google and con-

sequently is a huge boost when trying to get search engine traffic. If you're not already, start your own free YouTube Channel and try putting out some video's out there that are 'tagged' with appropriate keywords (See Google's free "Keyword Planner"). Once you have some video's out there, be sure to set up your own Facebook and Twitter account for your art business. Using a free program called "Hootsuite.com" you can manage all of your social media in one place, making it an easy yet powerful tool in your marketing arsenal. Throughout all your media, tell your story through pictures and video. People want to see your latest work, work in progress, even pictures of your booth at shows you're doing. Keep up the buzz!

## **Make What People Want**

If you're a new artist, you're going to have to find out what pieces you make really cause people to purchase from you. For me, I love making big baskets out of big, knarly vines. They look great on fireplaces and porches but honestly not everyone has a place for such large pieces of my work – especially if it's their first purchase with me. I learned early on that I needed to offer my clients a variety of shapes, sizes and price ranges in order to fit their needs. That also gives your clients something to work toward. They may start with a small piece and over the years purchase from you until they make that large purchase that they have been dreaming of. Research your industry and find out what's selling. Find out what colors, textures and finishes are hot right now and try to incorporate those into your work. I know, some of you are saying "but that's not art!". Say what you want – this article is about making money and prospering financially. If you make what people want at a price they find to be valuable then you my friend will have the opportunity to do what you love – create art. If not, you'll have a whole bunch of stuff in your garage you think is really awesome. Remember this is a business and it's important to know what your clients will respond to. Finding the balance between marketability and creative expression is a healthy tension.

## **The Price is Right**

I have read more articles on this subject than I care to mention, especially when it comes to the wholesale versus retail conversation. A mentor of mine,

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Bille Ruth Sudduth told me one time that “you should always price your work at the price for which you’d be willing to make another piece of the same size and quality”. I have found that to be a good rule of thumb. If you’re considering selling wholesale, remember you’re going to be selling to the gallery at 50% off your normal retail prices. That means if your painting is \$1000 retail, it’s selling to the gallery for \$500. Are you willing to paint, prep and market another piece just like that for \$500? There’s no right or wrong answer, it’s just a conversation you need to have with yourself.

A couple of other ways to price your work is to survey the competition and find out what they are selling comparable work for: to determine a reasonable hourly rate (both wholesale and retail) and then price your work by the hour plus materials, overhead and marketing.

## **Networking & Building Relationships**

People always laugh at me because I seem to get a lot of ‘favor’ when it comes to media, interviews, show selection, etc. I’ve heard them say things like “wow Matt, you sure are lucky” or “you were just at the right place at the right time.” The fact is much of my success with people is because of my serious investment in networking. I love meeting people, finding out about their life and connecting with them in an authentic way. More times than not those relationships yield incredible benefit for me and the person I’m in relationship with.

When you choose to invest your time and energy in a relationship with someone – a client, gallery owner, friend – you place value in that person and believe me, that is recognized. When I meet new people and interact with ones I’ve known for years, I really try to be ‘present’ with them, focusing on the conversation, listening to them and asking myself “How can I help them succeed.” This model of relationship building and honoring the other person has not only developed many friendships over the years but has produced much success in every area of my life.

One practical thing that I always do is go straight to the top. Through my network of friends around the country I usually know somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. If you’ve done the foundational relationship work, most people are happy to refer you right to the decision maker. recognized.”

## **The Jury Process**

Once you’re ready to actually market your work into a gallery or show, you’ll more than likely have to go through what’s called a jury process. This is a group of either artists, producers or both who judge your work for its quality, design and craftsmanship. 99% of the time this process is done through photographs which means you need to have great photos of your work. Finding a reputable photographer that’s worked with your media is vital to your success in

a jury. You can expect to pay \$75 - \$300/hr depending on the photographer but it's well worth it. For me, if I sell one piece, I've paid for an entire photo shoot of 8- 10 items. It's well worth the investment.

Your artist statement and work descriptions are also vital to your success in the jury process. When you're writing your artist statement, make sure you adequately tell the story of your work. What inspires you to create? What's unique about your work, materials or process? How did you come to be an artist in this medium? What do you hope patrons of your work will gain from interacting with your art? These are details that help clients and gallery owners understand and advocate for your work. Always be sure to include a nice picture of you working in your studio, etc. People love to see artists 'in their element'.

## **This is a Business**

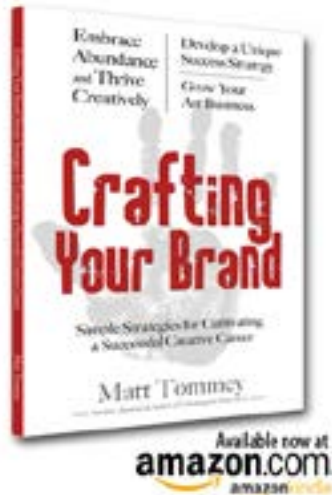
In his incredible book "The E-Myth", Michael Gerber talks about would-be entrepreneurs who suffer from what he calls an "Entrepreneurial Seizure" – thinking that just because you're a good technician (Painter, potter, actor) that you should automatically start your own business. Many wake up a year or two into a new business venture often disheartened and disillusioned by the failure they are now experiencing. The main reason you ask? Because most people, especially artists, don't treat their creative pursuits like a business.

The bottom line for all of us artists is that no matter how great our art may be or how talented we think we are, unless we are creating art that people will purchase, marketing to our niche market, selling those pieces and actually turning a profit we're not going to survive. I recommend either taking some basic business and marketing courses or being mentored by another artist who's further down the road than you are in their creative career. You've got to know at the end of the day if you're profitable or not – that is, after everything is sold and all your expenses are paid, did you walk away with money? If you didn't you have a problem. One of the best business resources I've used over the years is something I learned from a business coach I retained from Action International. It's called the 5 Ways Profitability Calculator. Here's a link you can use: <http://www.actioncoach.com/free-businesscalculator-profit.php>

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There's no silver bullet when it comes to making money with your art. In fact, for every artist that's in the marketplace there's a different story to how they developed their career. One thing's for sure. If you try to copy what someone else did just because they are successful, you're sure to fail. Rather, use these 10 important keys to success as signposts that help you check your own development as an artist. Your journey to success will be as creative as your art and remember, that's half the fun!

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**For more on this subject, check out Matt's book "Crafting Your Brand" available in print or Kindle at Amazon.com**





## **Matt Tommey**

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## **About the Author**

Matt Tommey has spent over twenty years cultivating a successful creative career as a visual artist, musician, author and creative catalyst for artists. Since the age of five, Matt has been singing, playing the piano, leading bands and writing music. His passion for music and creativity led him into a career in creative ministry within various churches where he served as a worship and arts pastor. It was there that he began to understand the deep connection between spirituality and thriving as an artist.

In 2003, Matt took a break from his ministry pursuits and founded a boutique creative agency in metro Atlanta, working primarily with small businesses and nonprofit organizations as their outsourced marketing department. After a few years, the company expanded regionally and started working with larger clients on projects including branding, collateral design, web design, printing and marketing strategy.

While a student at the University of Georgia in the mid-1990's, Matt found a book on willow basketmaking and began experimenting with the use of kudzu and other natural materials in basketry. This hobby soon became a passion for Matt, providing a vehicle where he could not only connect spiritually in nature but release more of the creative passion that lay inside his heart. Now Matt pursues his passion for sculptural art basketry using natural materials as a full-time artist at his studio in Asheville, North Carolina's River Arts District.

In 2009 everything started coming together for Matt. Disparate parts that seemed unconnected converged in a supernatural spiritual experience where Matt realized that he was created to be a father to creative people and was called to raise up an army of artists to reveal God's Glory. Through this experience, Matt founded The Worship Studio, a nonprofit organization who's focus is to be an equipping resource for artists, a hub for creative communities and a catalyst for creativity around the world. The Worship Studio hosts multiple conferences a year for creative people to explore the connection between their faith and creativity.

Soon after founding The Worship Studio, Matt wrote "Unlocking the Heart of the Artist" which is now used around the world by artists of every creative medium to overcome roadblocks to creativity, break the starving artist curse and thrive as an artist. The passion of Matt's heart is to help artists live the life of abundance, joy and creativity they were created to live.

Matt now lives in Asheville, North Carolina with his wife Tanya and their son, Cameron. He works as a full-time contemporary basketry artist, worship arts pastor and Executive Director of The Worship Studio. Matt is also a popular basketry teacher, leading classes and workshops at the John C. Campbell Folk School and the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. He is a member of the prestigious Southern Highland Craft Guild and Piedmont Craftsmen. In 2010 he was included in the "American Artist Under 40" registry by the Smithsonian's American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery.