

Honoring Your Value

Why artists do not negotiate prices

Kristina Malcolm

The last 20 years of my life have been dedicated, in one form or another, to art. Opting out of the academic fine art field in 2004 and returning to my roots in craft enabled me to bring a very broad background to my work as a silversmith. In school, I studied silversmithing in the most authentic extent of the term so that I now have an extensive repertoire of fabrication skills. During that time I also studied conceptual art and as a performance and installation artist I was immersed in the rawest forms of abstract art. From this experience I brought a critical eye, a taste for truly traditional silversmithing techniques and the ability to scrutinize everything. What I did not bring was any sales or marketing knowledge and experience. So eight years into my sole-proprietor silversmithing career, I still find myself a little inexperienced when it comes to selling my work.

One of the things I feel most ill equipped to deal with is determining the valuing of my work. In graduate school, no one actually discussed how they were going to make money. It is just supposed to somehow magically happen. As a sole proprietor there is no magic. It is comprised of facts, figures and a little bit of emotion. To me, the problem is not coming up with the price - it is honoring that price.

Through years of experience I have come up with a mathematical equation that easily lets me figure out retail prices. I keep track of the hours I spend working on any piece and multiply that by my hourly rate and then add the value of the materials. I then take that price and mark it clearly on every piece that I make. This helps me and anyone else working in my booth (husband, booth sitters, etc.) to be consistent on the given prices. Unfortunately, it does not cut down on the amount of times I get asked about those prices.

So what happens when someone wants to pay less than the price marked on the piece? This happens regularly enough to make it an issue. Most of the time, it is an aggressive person who pulls a wad of cash out of their pocket and says something like, "I am paying cash. How much is it now?" My immediate response to this situation is usually to panic. One thing I have noticed over the years is that when I give the discount that *panic* feeling continues past the point of sale. The cold sweats, the upset stomach, the guilt - all continue for hours and even days past the confrontation. To them, it is a game that they just won. To me, it is an assault.

Just to clarify, I am not talking about previously determined discounts or sales. Those are valuable marketing tools that will presumably pay for themselves. I am talking about letting the customer determine the value of your work. It all comes down to getting less than what you have established as your worth. I base my hourly rate on what I believe my worth is as a silversmith. If I accept less for my work, it definitely influences my overall feeling of self-confidence.

It's all psychological - both to you and the customer. These situations create those frustrating *I should have said...* moments that we tend to visit over and over again in our heads. I remember one particular case early in my silversmithing career when I was still

working part-time at a hardware store. The owners were generous enough to let me try to sell a few pieces that I displayed by the checkout counter. At one point a friendly older man shoved a roll of cash into the palm of my hand then pointed to a large amethyst piece and said, "Box that one up." I put the cash in my pocket and ran to box up his new piece. Only after he left the store did I realize that he shoved \$52 in my hand for a piece that was marked \$96. I was sick for days, obsessing over the loss. That was my first experience with that type of manipulative behavior, but certainly not my last.

On average, that type of manipulation happens at least twice a show. It is something that I mentally prepare myself for in advance. I practice responses and visualize myself looking them in the eye and saying, "No." Still, sometimes all the preparation in the world is not good enough. They leave with a trophy and I am left feeling like prey. I am sure biology has a lot to do with it. Predator/prey, fight/flight are all very real aspects of this response. We all know the haggler may negotiate for real financial reasons, but most of the time, they do not actually need the discount. Hagglers haggle for different reasons. They are driven by a competitive instinct that can be a conscious decision or not. Regardless of the motivation, the end result is the same when you accept a lower value for your work - you are becoming their prey. What is worse, there will be a ripple effect. Not only will those predators think that they can continue to prey on you, but they will also think that they can search out other prey at shows, haggling and insulting every artist they meet.

I started asking fellow artists about their experiences to prove to myself that I was not the only one who had these feelings. A colleague of mine, Marilyn Cook, says, "I never lower my prices and find it insulting if someone asks." Katie Mullins of Bonya's agrees, "We have all encountered those customers [who are] rude, know-it-all, etc. There isn't anything any of us can say to those folks except, 'Well, I'm sorry we can't do business together.' Be polite and just move on." Spending days agonizing over the loss may be a little over the top on my part but my sales and marketing guru (also known as my husband) says, "A little offense is appropriate. Without knowing it, they are in essence telling you that your time, skill, materials, etc. are not worth their money; often wrongly assuming that we are making huge profits."

I also asked fellow artists if there were any useful techniques to deter anyone from trying to negotiate. Mullins says, "My prices are clearly marked and I am typically doing demos for pretty much the entire time of the show. I make every attempt to be professional, polite and provide education on what I am selling, the process and the materials." She even goes so far as to suggest that if you cannot take your tools with you, load a laptop, digital frame, or tablet with images or movies of you at work. My husband agrees, "A little education may be all that is needed to increase the value and turn them from potential customer to happy owner of your work. Engage your customer. Speak as an expert. Let them into your head by explaining techniques you used and the years it took you to reach the level that caught their attention in the first place. Finally, be confident."

Photographer, Marita Bitans also points out, "You know how long a piece takes to make along with the cost of the material. The profit margin is not that great to begin with. If you bring down the price for one, soon you may be doing that for others, probably at a loss to you, and then what is the point? Since I started doing only one-of-a-kind pieces and not duplicating in various sizes, people have been trying to negotiate

with me a lot more. I figure if they really want the piece they will pay my price. Otherwise, they probably just wanted to match the color of the couch.”

Artist Eva Sherman, owner of Grand River BeadStudio (dedicated to teaching jewelry arts) states, “How we value our art should not come from a formula based on time and materials, but from the belief that we have spent a lifetime arriving at a point where we are able to create - from a few simple materials - a thing of beauty that resonates. That is the heart and soul of design.” So often it is hard to measure the effect of art in concrete terminology. The real value of art comes more from our hearts instead of our brains. It is because the role of the artist has changed over time that we are now left to measure our value as artists in dollars. I have adapted my skills so that I can provide myself with a living wage. I do not have wealthy sponsors backing up my every financial undertaking like great artists of the past. What I do have is the freedom and creativity to engineer a broad range of ways to capitalize on my skills, enhancing my authority as a silversmith - all of which add to the value of my work.

So how do we maintain our self worth and realize our value as we struggle to forge new pathways through our ever-changing niche? Doctor Alise Bartley cites Malcolm Gladwells’ work and says that after 10,000 hours of work in your field that you are considered an expert. This equates to roughly six and a half years of full-time work. So speaking as an expert, I can tell you that survival has everything to do with staying flexible and finding the right combination of products for your target market. It also has a lot to do with courage. I have discussed that art is not measurable by monetary means. However, as entrepreneurs we must modify our roles to fit our needs – and money if definitely a need. When we create, we are the artists, but at shows we are retail sales employees. Being employed by our artwork entails a great deal of responsibility. Shows require us to adopt the persona of a business person, which is necessary, but quite unnatural for most of us.

What my husband and Mullins did not mention is that selling our work requires us to leave most of our emotions at home. Most importantly it requires us to stand up straight and be proud; and we have much to be proud of. Not only are we offering a product that is only conceivable through our litany of experiences, but we must also recognize that ours is an ancient profession. We spend considerable time studying art history in school and understand the contribution an individual artist can make. We have seen how one person can change the momentum of society. We are still the same artists who change the world.

*Kristina Malcolm can be contacted through the following online sites:
fluxusmetalworks@gmail.com, www.fluxusmetalwork.com and
http://www.facebook.com/fluxusmetalworks.*