



Photo by Natalie Johnson

Laura Gunnip works in her shop on the TwispWorks campus.

STRONGER THAN BEFORE

Artisans adapt to changing market during pandemic

By Ashley Lodato

WHEN COVID-19 closed non-essential businesses, retail outlets, craft fairs and holiday bazaars, artisans and makers who were selling in those types of location-based venues wondered if their businesses would survive the pandemic.

“I found that the art community rallied to make sure we all had access to support”
— Laura Gunnip

Now, thanks to community support, strategic networking, and a willingness to adapt to changing sales environments, some of those small businesses are stronger than before.

Although some Methow Valley artisans and makers did not previously have an online presence

established, those who did “saw huge support,” said Sarah Prochnau, director of partnerships and marketing programs for TwispWorks. “There was a real feeling of folks wanting to support local. Our community already does that, and then people in urban areas were looking for something

other than Amazon—which saw a huge uptick in sales anyway—so those artisans with websites saw strong support.”

Silversmith Joanne Marracci, of Marracci Designs Handmade Jewelry, found this to be true. Thanks to custom orders and increased website traffic, Marracci said her

bottom line was higher than expected for a normal year, let alone a pandemic year.

Marracci attributes increased sales to customers' desire to support small businesses, but also toward a priority shift. "They seem to lean toward more meaningful pieces from local producers and makers they know rather than toward mass-produced costume jewelry," she said.

Customers are also more interested in quality products, Marracci said.

"I found a definite move toward requests for higher quality gold and gemstone heirloom pieces as well," she said.

Marracci hopes that this shift in buying trends will be "a lasting positive after-effect of the pandemic," saying, "Fingers crossed!"

For artists and makers without an established web presence, doing business during a pandemic required new strategies. Almost immediately after pandemic closures were announced, TwispWorks, Methow Arts, Confluence Gallery and other arts-based nonprofits "stepped up to mentor artists," said Prochnau. "A series of free workshops and consultations showed artists how to set up online stores and increase social media presences."

Silversmith Nicole Ringgold, for example, was hired by Methow Arts to offer free Zoom-based workshops familiarizing artists with using Instagram to promote their work and drive sales. Nearly all of Ringgold's sales take place online, and she has for years



Photos courtesy Joanne Marracci

Joanne Marracci is suited up to work on her gold and silver jewelry designs.

aggressively established her brand and promoted her work on Instagram and Facebook. Ringgold walked workshop participants through setting up Instagram accounts, advised them on

curating photo feeds, and helped them navigate the relationship between their social media accounts and their websites.

"The goal of all these arts organizations was to mentor and

"They seem to lean toward more meaningful pieces from local producers and makers they know rather than toward mass-produced costume jewelry."

– *Silversmith Joanne Marracci*

shepherd artists through that challenging time," Prochnau said. "This community put its arms under our artists and makers. We have a really talented pool of artisans and expertise. We all worked together to figure out how to make sure artists could make it through."

Prochnau points to the recently-established Methow Valley Goods shop at TwispWorks, which features the work of more than 70 artists, makers and producers from the region.

"Since the bazaars were shut down, we pulled together to make Valley Goods year round," she said. "This was a way to help support those artisans who typically only sell at the holiday craft markets."

To some degree, the creation of Valley Goods also made shopping easier for consumers, as well as providing makers with a venue for selling their products.

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Jewelry artist Joanne Marracci saw an increase of online orders during the pandemic.

Lucinda Tear of Lucinda's Botanicals said, "I am so grateful to Methow Made for creating Valley Goods and putting all our products in one place where people can find them all the time. It makes all the difference for me."

Laura Gunnip of Fireweed Print shop agreed. "The Valley Goods store really helped with artwork sales as well as online sales of a calendar for a local mutual aid project," she said.

But still, canceling the small, local markets hurt many artisans. The holiday bazaars and seasonal markets are "our micro economy," Prochnau said. "For artists and makers, they come to rely on that couple of thousand dollars they make at those markets to see them through the lean months."

When those venues were closed, it had a ripple effect, Prochnau said. "A small maker selling at a bazaar is a small thread in our community net. When you pluck at one thread, it's OK, the fabric still holds up. But if you pluck at a whole bunch at once—like what happened when markets and holiday shows were closed—you affect the economy of our whole community."

For some artists, shortages and increased costs in the supply chain were more a deterrent to production than pandemic-based closures were. Clay, for example,

said Prochnau, grew increasingly difficult to source during 2020, creating issues for potters. And "gold, silver and other raw goods prices are high and keep climbing," said Marracci. "This issue has made me consider alternate materials and sources, like melting more old gold and silver to make new pieces. It is more labor-intensive to do that, but it solves the out-of-pocket expenses of buying new materials."

Despite the many challenges, Prochnau said, most artists and makers were able to pivot to making and selling in the COVID era. Some, like eqpd, which makes durable everyday bags and accessories, temporarily shifted its business model, turning the bag-making studio into one that manufactured a range of high quality masks. Throughout the pandemic, eqpd continues to improve and refine the masks for increased safety, comfort and adjustability. Intertwined Designs, which makes hand-crafted organic clothing, also fabricated a mask, made of 100% hemp cotton.

Although the demand for masks is already ebbing, some form of seasonal and temporary mask-wearing quite likely lies ahead for a number of years.

"I don't think masks are going away entirely," said Prochnau, noting that in some countries,

such as China and Thailand, situational mask-wearing is quite common and was long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another notable pivot came from the Old Schoolhouse Brewery (OSB). Prochnau said, "Before COVID they had a small canning operation but the majority of their business was wholesale kegs. They shifted and launched an amazing line of canned craft beer, with incredible artwork." OSB had always planned to offer a line of canned beer, Prochnau says, and COVID forced the timeline on this project. "Instead of making time farther down the line, they had to shift priorities immediately," she said.

Prochnau points to this business pressure as a silver lining of the pandemic. "The great thing



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for TwispWorks

about COVID is that it gave artists and makers a kick in the rear to get their online stores started. Online sales aren't going away, and nearly everyone selling something is going to need to have some sort of online and social media presence. The economy is changing and the way people shop is changing. COVID lit a fire and ultimately that's going to be a good thing."

Online retail makes shopping more convenient for customers, but it has some notable

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drawbacks. For one, purchased goods must be shipped, adding to the cost of the products, both for the direct shipping cost and the time it takes to package a product and get it ready for delivery. A large online retailer can absorb shipping costs, but a small artisan can't, especially with bulky, heavy or fragile products like pottery, large paintings or custom ironwork.

Artists also say that online sales arrest one of the most meaningful aspects of their transactions with customers: the personal interaction. "It is the personal connections that make this industry such a joy to be in," Marracci said.

The Methow Valley social services, arts and business community was aggressive about seeking funding for artists and makers through various channels, Prochnau said, noting that TwispWorks, Methow Arts, the town Chambers of Commerce, Room One and others helped small business owners navigate the complexity of processes like applying for PPP loans, unemployment and individual grants. Methow Arts, for example, asked a private donor to fund 30 grants of \$1,000 to support local artists whose sales avenues were immediately cut short by the pandemic. A subsequent award from Leavenworth's Icicle Fund provided 37 additional relief grants.

"TwispWorks assembled a database of 400 local businesses and send them e-blasts with information about relief grants,



Joanne Marracci is seen at her workbench. She noticed a change in her customers' tastes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

loans, unemployment, and other sources of support," said Prochnau. "There was such a deluge of information at that time. We tried to help those businesses filter out the noise and get the precise information they needed. Not every community has that resource."

"I found that the art community rallied to make sure we all had access to support," said Gunnip. "I would not have been able to keep my studio without getting [Pandemic Unemployment Assistance] and a grant from Methow Arts."

"We made a promise to our partners at TwispWorks," Prochnau said. "We promised to help them get through the pandemic. They've now stabilized and some are stronger than before; they're seeing great sales. So now the question is, 'Is this an anomaly? Can I count on these numbers?' It makes it tricky to run a business. It's probably going to take a few years to see what the effects are, and what are the ramifications for how people shop."

The Methow Valley Farmers Market rebounded quickly, Prochnau said, initially with a virtual market, online sales and a scheduled pickup time at the TwispWorks campus. Later the market reopened for in-person shopping, with social distancing measures in place. Both weekly markets—Twisp's Saturday market and Winthrop's Sunday market—are back this year, and Prochnau anticipates a return of the holiday bazaars as well.

Prochnau is optimistic that the support that buoyed artists and makers through "the first few scary months of COVID" will continue. "Artisans and small businesses are still something to invest in and support," she said. "If the artists and small makers go away, it changes the nature of our community in a way we won't ever get back. What they do contributes to everyone's quality of life in the valley—that should be at the forefront of our minds when we are decided how and where to shop."



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