crafting an MBA
Guide to Wholesale and Trade Shows

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Grow your business, reach new markets, and increase your sales.
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Introduction

Welcome to the Crafting an MBA Guide to Wholesale and Trade Shows. This book is geared towards anyone looking to grow a business selling products wholesale to stores, catalogs, and online retailers.

Perhaps you’re an Etsy seller who is looking to expand into new markets. Or maybe you do the craft show circuit, but are tired of sitting outside in the rain every weekend. Or maybe you’ve always dreamed of seeing your products on the shelves of Anthropologie.

But would you be ready if Anthropologie called?

Well, now is the time to get ready. This book is your guide to entering into the world of wholesale. Part 1 focuses on getting your business wholesale ready. I’ll show you how to choose the right products, develop your pricing, put together your line sheet, and find and contact stores. Part 2 will focus on building your wholesale business through trade shows. I’ll share all the tips for exhibiting at a trade show that I wish I’d known when I started – everything from finding the right shows to designing an eye-catching booth to interacting with buyers and writing orders.

So if you’re looking to grow your business, reach new markets, and increase your sales, read on. With this book as your guide, you’ll be on your way to a flourishing wholesale business.
Part 1
Wholesale
1. Why wholesale?

What is wholesale?
In wholesale, you sell your products directly to stores (both brick and mortar and online) and catalogs at a fixed, reduced cost. These store then markup your products to sell to customers.

Benefits of selling wholesale
Many designers and makers shy away from the idea of wholesale because they worry about giving away half their profits. But the truth is, if your products are appropriately priced, you can generate more revenue through wholesaling. Some of the benefits of wholesaling include:

- **Predictable schedule and revenue stream.** When you write orders, whether through a trade show or independently, you determine a ship date for the order. This allows you to space out both your production schedule and revenue stream to suit your needs. While store owners and buyers will have some input on when they’d like an order to ship, you will have the flexibility to schedule ship dates so that they work with your schedule.

- **No more guessing as to which products will sell – you only need to produce items you have written orders for.** Perhaps, like me, you’ve had the experience of preparing for a retail craft show where you need to build up inventory, but you have no way of knowing which products will sell the best. In wholesale, after making your initial samples, you only need to produce the products after you’ve written an order. This means you don’t waste time making products that may not sell – products that you may have to discount later to clear inventory.

- **Increased exposure to a larger audience.** Wholesale introduces your work to a much larger audience who may never have found you through your online shop or retail shows. If you wholesale to a major online retailer, you have the benefit of a much higher level of traffic than you might see on your own site.
• **Sell your work in more locations than you would ever be able to reach doing retail shows.** If you did a full circuit of retail craft fairs every season, there are still plenty of cities and states you would never see. Wholesale brings your work to new locations that may be out of your reach through other methods.

**Wholesale vs consignment**

When you are first starting out, you may have stores approaching you with the “opportunity” to sell on consignment. In most cases, I have a very strong NO consignment policy. (There is one notable exception to this rule. If you make items with a higher price point - retail prices of approximately $250 and up - and you deal primarily with galleries, then you will most likely sell on consignment. It’s the way that system works.)

In wholesale, you sell your products directly to the store. In consignment, you loan your pieces to a store, and if the product sells, they send you a percentage of the sales price.

Here are some of the reasons why, as a maker, you should choose wholesale over consignment:

• **Cash flow.** In wholesale, you get paid for your products in their entirety, either up front, or within a reasonable amount of time after shipping the order. (As in a Net 30 payment, where the buyer has 30 days after receiving the order to make a full payment.) In consignment, you only get paid when an item sells. This means that it might be months before you see income from the items sent out, if at all.

• **Inventory.** When you sell on consignment, you are sending out lots of inventory into the world, with no predictable timeline for revenue. If you are making everything yourself, you can only create so much at one time. Do you really want a large portion of your inventory tied up in stores with no guarantee of payment? In addition, consignment requires you to be a diligent record keeper. You need to know what pieces you sent out, which ones have sold, and which ones are still sitting in every store you consign to at any given moment.

• **Professionalism.** If a store asks you to consign, and instead you present them with a professional line sheet and set of wholesale
terms, this can legitimize you as a credible business - not just someone looking to sell a few pairs of earrings on the side.

- **Insurance and liability.** This is an issue that comes up frequently. If you consign to a store, and they have a fire, break-in, or go out of business, who covers the value of lost goods? If you don’t have a clear consignment agreement, it could be you. (And even with a good agreement, it might still be you anyway.) If the store had bought the products from you outright, it is clear-cut. The store now owns the goods and it is up to them (or their insurance provider) to recoup any value lost.

- **Control and trust.** When you consign, you are putting all the responsibility into the store. You must now depend on them to keep track of what has sold, and to pay you in a timely manner. In wholesale, both parties have a clear arrangement from the outset about what products are being sold, and when you will get paid.

  A good rule of thumb is that if a store acquires the majority of their inventory through wholesaling, than insist they purchase your products wholesale as well. It is not worth your time and headache to consign just to be in a store. If you’re products are good, there will be plenty of other stores willing to work with you on your terms.
2. Preparing to wholesale

Evaluate your product offerings
Not every product you are currently making is suitable for wholesale. Evaluate each product in your line using the following criteria:

- **Price** – Can I sell this item at wholesale pricing and still make a profit? Will the product sell well at the retail price point?

- **Production capability** – Can you easily produce multiples of this product? Are the materials easily sourced?

- **Salability** – Is this one of the more popular items in your line, or do you sell very few? You want to present buyers with the products most likely to succeed.

- **Cohesiveness** – Does the product fit with the other products in your line? Does it convey your brand identity?

Ultimately, you want to create a line with a strong visual identity. The number of pieces in your line could vary greatly. Some designers may only have a few styles, with some additional variations in size and color, while other designers may have well over 100 styles. Just don’t let your line get so large that you can’t manage it. Periodically review your line and remove styles that aren’t selling well.

Effective wholesale pricing
Pricing your work appropriately is the key running a profitable wholesale business. I often have makers tell me they can’t imagine giving away half their profits, but the truth is that *makers should price their work so that they are making a profit at the wholesale price.*

Retail price = wholesale price x 2 (at a minimum)
To determine your wholesale price, you need to factor in the cost of materials + the cost of labor + expenses + a markup for profit.

- **Materials.** Calculating your materials should be straightforward. Divide the cost of bulk purchases to get the cost of materials per item.

- **Labor.** For your labor costs, you need to factor in your labor, the labor of any employees and the costs of any outsourced manufacturing. Determining your own costs per hour can be challenging for many makers, but here are a few factors to consider:
  - You are not sweatshop labor, nor should you pay yourself minimum wage.
  - Take into account the cost of living where you live.
  - Make sure you get paid for the skills and expertise you've accumulated over the years.
When factoring employee labor into your pricing, don’t forget to include costs about their hourly wage, such as taxes and insurance. Outsourced manufacturing will be the easiest cost to calculate, since you’ll have a bill from your manufacturer.

- **Expenses.** Your expenses should include everything from rent or mortgage on your workspace, to office supplies and marketing materials, to insurance and taxes. Calculate your monthly expenses and divide them amongst the number of pieces you can sell in a month.

- **Profit.** Finally, you need to add a markup for profit. Profit allows you to continually grow and reinvest in the business. It also gives you a cushion for when times are tight.

All these factors together add up to make your wholesale price:

\[
\text{materials} + \text{labor} + \text{expenses} + \text{profit} = \text{wholesale price}
\]

When setting your prices, keep in mind what the market will support. Check out related products to see how your prices will compare. If your prices are considerably higher, you may need to look at ways to lower them by reducing your material costs, manufacturing time, or expenses. If your prices are significantly lower, double check your costs to make sure you aren’t missing anything and that you are paying yourself adequately. Something to keep in mind when researching pricing – I don’t
recommend using Etsy (or any similar online marketplace) as the sole basis for your price comparisons. Prices there tend to be artificially low.

How to lower your prices without reducing your profits

If your prices are much higher than any other product on the market, you may have a hard time selling many items at that price. Here are some suggestions to lower your costs so that you can lower prices without cutting into your profits:

- **Order materials wholesale and in bulk.** It is hard to price your products competitively if you are buying your materials retail from a local craft supply store. Search out vendors that provide wholesale pricing, and by in bulk whenever possible to get quantity price breaks. (But be sure not to over buy – having too much money tied up in materials can cause cash flow problems.)

- **Start (or join) a buying co-op.** This is a way to take advantage of bulk discounts without the stress of extra materials. Join forces with several other makers to order similar products to get quantity breaks. For example, if you and three other jewelers order your silver together, you can get a better price per ounce than what you would get if you were buying alone.

- **Reduce labor time.** This is where the old adage, work smarter, not harder comes in. Keep detailed time studies of your processes to see where you can reduce time. Perhaps you cut and sew every purse from start to finish before moving on to the next one, but you may be able to save significant time by doing all the cutting for multiple bags at once, then all the sewing.

- **Hire someone at a lower hourly rate.** If you need to charge yourself $50 an hour, but you can find someone to make chain for you for $10 an hour, this can reduce your costs. But beware, if you hire an employee that works out of your studio, you will have to pay additional costs such as taxes and insurance. That $10 an hour may actually be costing you $30. Instead, I recommend looking for an independent contractor – someone who can do the work for you from her own studio or home.

Creating item numbers for your products

Every product in your line should have an item number attached to it. (Often referred to as a SKU.) This will make it easier to organize your inventory, set up your line sheet, and communicate with buyers. It’s much
easier for a buyer to order LBD-221-S than “that little blue dress with the white buttons in size small.”

For your item numbers you can choose to use a system of all numbers, or one that uses letters and numbers. But don’t just randomly assign. Come up with a way to organize your items by category, and then break it down from there. You might use a code that starts with type of object, then variation, then color, than size. For instance, I use:

CC-SN2-LG-M

to describe a cozy/cuff with two snaps in light grey, size medium. The first set of letters is the main product category, followed by sub-category, color, and size.

Whatever your system, make it something you can understand and remember easily. When writing orders, you shouldn’t have to continuously refer to your line sheets just to check item numbers.

**Wholesale terminology** –
- **Minimum order** – The minimum amount, either in dollars or number of pieces, that a buyer must order to receive wholesale pricing.
- **Net 30** – The number of days after an invoice is issued that a store has to pay for an order.
- **Keystone** – The amount of markup from wholesale to retail – a keystone markup is a retail price that is twice the wholesale price. Key and a half means 2.5 times the wholesale price, and triple key is 3 times the wholesale price.
- **Lead time** – The approximate amount of time it takes from when an order is placed to when an order is shipped.
- **Resale certificate** – A form the buyer fills out with their resale sales number, which proves their eligibility to buy wholesale.

**Wholesale terms and policies**
When creating your wholesale materials, you will need to create a set of terms & policies. These are the guidelines that stores must follow when placing an order.
• **Minimum opening order** – This can be a dollar minimum or a certain number of pieces. Minimums can range from one hundred dollars to thousands of dollars – set a minimum that ensures a store will have a reasonable display of your work. Your minimum should also be high enough to discourage personal orders. If someone can hit your minimum with just 2 pieces, it probably isn’t high enough. You will also need to decide if you want a per piece minimum – for instance, 3 of each design. This could be consistent across all designs or vary based on style.

• **Minimum reorder** – This is the minimum dollar amount you require on all subsequent orders.

• **Terms** – Terms refers to the types of payment you accept. For all first time orders, ask to receive payment **before shipping an order**. The easiest way to do this is to accept a credit card and processes it prior to shipping. Some stores may ask you to use pro-forma – in those scenarios you will send an invoice prior to shipping the order, and the store will send you a check. Be sure to let the check clear before shipment.

  Most stores will want to switch to Net 30 terms on all reorders. In Net 30, you send an invoice when the order is shipped and the store has 30 days to send payment. Make sure you get credit information before approving any store for Net 30 terms. Some major retailers will only operate on Net 30 (or even Net 60 or Net 90) for any order. If this is the case, do a thorough credit check prior to sending the order. The buyer should provide you with a credit sheet that contains bank information and references.

• **Shipping** – Do you have a standard, flat rate for shipping, or does it vary by dollar amount or weight? Do you have a standard shipping carrier, or can the buyer choose?

• **Returns** – Determine if you will accept returns or exchanges, and how you will handle damaged merchandise.

• **Other** – Stipulate any other policies that you wish, as long as they are clearly stated up front. These could include a cancellation policy, a policy on minimum retail pricing, retail display, quantity or volume discounts, or anything else you deem important.
3. Your wholesale materials

Before you begin targeting wholesale accounts, you need to put together your wholesale materials. These include your line sheet, catalog, order form, and invoice. These materials convey your brand, products, pricing, and policies to potential buyers.

**Line sheet**

A line sheet is your most important tool when communicating your products to potential buyers. At the minimum, a line sheet is a list of all your item numbers and prices. This is the tool buyers will use when placing orders, so it is important to make it as informative as possible – without cluttering it with extraneous stuff.

There are two basic types of line sheets – ones with or without images. Creating a line sheet without images is faster in the long run – but you will still need to give buyers images of your product. This works best if you can connect the line sheet with images hosted online or in a printed catalog.

If you are creating a line sheet with images, you can either use actual photographs, or simple line drawings of your products. The advantage of using line drawings is that you can print your line sheet in a single color, which saves money. Line drawings can also be a bonus if your product photography is less than consistent. Slight variations in product angle or background color from photo to photo become very obvious when stacked together in a line sheet.

Whether you use images or not, your line sheet should have a listing for each product that includes the item number, title or description, any
available options (color, size, length) and price. If there is a per piece minimum order, that should be mentioned on the line sheet as well.

Your line sheet may be one page or multiple pages, depending on the number of products in your line. You may also want to include your wholesale terms on your line sheet – but if they don’t fit, you could put them on a separate sheet or work them into your order form.

**Catalog**

A catalog allows you to show off your product a little more than a line sheet does. Catalogs can vary greatly in size, number of pages, and layout. Keep a file of catalogs and other promotional materials that you respond to so you have inspiration when you decide to create your catalog.

Your catalog may have simple images of each of your products, or it may showcase your products being used or worn. You may choose to create a new catalog each season, each year, or design a catalog that will last through several years.

If you plan on making your catalog available to the general public, leave off pricing information. (This is also true if you want to create a catalog that you plan on using for more than one year – as the prices could become outdated.) You can give the catalog to prospective buyers with a line sheet containing pricing information. If your product line is small, you could just give out a catalog with pricing information and no line sheet.

For catalog printing, you can use online services like psprint.com or jakprints.com, or you can make a DIY version at your local copy center or with a high quality printer – just remember that this is what attracts potential clients, so be sure it looks professional. Designing a catalog can take a considerable amount of time, so start well in advance of any trade shows or major wholesale outreach.
Order form

Once you’re ready to take orders, you will want something professional and personalized to take orders on. Creating your own order form is the best way to do this. At the top of any order form, have your company’s name and contact information, and space to write the order number (or purchase order number), buyer name, company name, email and phone number, shipping and billing addresses, payment method, and estimated shipping date. Luckily, if you are taking orders at a trade show, most buyers will give you a business card that you can staple right to the order form, or a sticker with all of their information.

Below is an example of the information commonly found at the top of an order form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>customer</th>
<th>date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ordered by</td>
<td>order #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phone #</td>
<td>email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>payment method</td>
<td>estimated shipment date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>billing address</td>
<td>shipping address</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are two different formats for the order part of your order form. The simplest is just a blank grid with columns for item #, description, quantity, price, and total, like the example shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>item #</th>
<th>description</th>
<th>quantity</th>
<th>price</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtotal
Shipping
Total

The second option is to list all of your available products, with item numbers and prices, and leave a space for quantity and total. The advantage is that it can save time when writing orders, as you simply mark off which items are ordered. It is also good if you have different per piece minimums for each item – you can list those on the order form. However, it means you will need to reprint order forms each time you add or subtract a product from your line. And if you have a lot of products, you may need a multi-page order form to accommodate them.

The example below shows how you might set up this type of order form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>item #</th>
<th>description</th>
<th>price</th>
<th>min. order</th>
<th>quantity</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GS-N1</td>
<td>Green stone 18&quot; necklace</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS-N2</td>
<td>Green stone 24&quot; necklace</td>
<td>$55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS-E1</td>
<td>Green stone earrings</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS-E1</td>
<td>Red stone earrings</td>
<td>$40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtotal
Shipping
Total

If you take a lot of orders via fax or email, have an order form that buyers can fill out and send back to you. Otherwise, you may end up with some rather cryptic email orders.
Invoice
Once an order is shipped, you will need to send an invoice. An invoice can function as a receipt for orders that are paid in full, or a notice of payment due for Net 30 accounts. If you use Quickbooks or another similar software, you can create invoices using the program. If you want to create your own invoice, use a format similar to your order form. Just make sure there is a space for payment due by, and that the word INVOICE is written prominently at the top in large letters.

Business card
Hopefully you already have one, but if not, now is the time to get one. A business card is a useful piece of information to give to potential buyers, and a must have at trade shows. You can get inexpensive business cards from many online print services. While it may be tempting to go with an unusual size or shape, keep in mind that some buyers and press will want to store your card in some sort of standard holder. If your card doesn’t fit, what happens to it? Instead, rely on fantastic design, colors, images, and text to make your card stand out.

Should you put your wholesale materials online?
Many buyers appreciate the convenience of being able to browse your product line and wholesale information online. However, it’s important that you don’t make this information available to the general public. Only qualified buyers should be able to see your wholesale pricing. Password protect this portion of your website – buyers can gain access after presenting you with their resale information.
Identifying prospective stores

If you’ve gained visibility selling online or at retail shows, you may have already had stores contact you about placing a wholesale order. But if you are serious about growing your wholesale business, you will need to make the effort to contact stores. One of the easiest ways to reach a large audience of wholesale buyers is to attend a trade show. (Much, much more on that later.) But if you aren’t ready to do a trade show, you can still contact stores about carrying your line. First, do a little research on which stores to target. Here are some suggestions to help you find target stores:

- **Ask for suggestions.** Ask your friends and fellow makers for recommendations on stores to approach to carry your products. One good way to do this is to ask for suggestions on your blog. Ask your readers to suggest stores in their area that would be a good fit for your products. Try to get them to give you as much information about the store as possible. (Such as name, city, owner, address, and website.) You could offer some kind of prize as an incentive. You could also do this with your Twitter followers or Facebook fans.

- **Look at other designers/makers.** Many makers will have a list of retailers on their website. This can be a good way to find stores that are friendly to indie makers and designers. Keep in mind that it’s bad practice to poach a store – never ask someone to stop carrying a certain designer and carry you instead.

- **Check local, city, and regional guides for stores.** If there is a certain city you’re interested in breaking into, check various guides and travel websites for a list of stores. Many will even feature descriptions of the types of products a store carries. Design and shopping guides are a good place to start.

- **Keep track of prospects in your daily travels (online and off).** Develop a system for keeping track of potential retailers. That way,
if you come across a great store on a blog or while out shopping, you have a way to refer back to it the next time you’re working on store outreach.

Many stores want exclusivity in their city (if small), or more likely, their neighborhood. It’s important to identify your dream store in each area, and then several others stores, in order of preference. Make sure to target your dream store first. There is nothing worse than writing an order to a smaller store, only to have your dream store approach you and have to turn them down due to exclusivity with another store. Just because a store has a big name or fancy reputation, doesn’t always make it a dream store to work with. You want a store that moves a lot of product and pays their designers on time. Check with a few other designers they carry to be sure they are someone you want to work with.

**Contacting stores about carrying your product**

Never walk into a store cold, product in hand, and ask them to purchase. For one thing, the buyer for the store may not even be there. More importantly, when the store is open, particularly when it is busy, the staff are focused on selling.

Instead, begin by getting the contact information for the buyer. You may be able to obtain this from the store’s website, or you may need to call the store. In many smaller stores, the owner is usually the buyer, but don’t make that assumption. Always ask. Your next step should be a brief email or phone call to the buyer explaining that you are a designer interested in submitting your product line to the store. Do not attach a line sheet, catalog, or images at this stage in the game, as the email is more likely to end up in a spam folder. Instead, simply inquire about the preferred method to submit wholesale materials. Some buyers may want an emailed line sheet, while a few may still want you to mail them a hard copy catalog. If the store is local, they may want to set up an appointment to look at samples.

If you have an appointment, dress professionally, arrive on time, and bring your line sheet, catalog, order form, and product samples. A buyer may not want to order on the spot, so it’s important to bring copies of your materials that you can leave with them. When you meet with a buyer, be prepared to talk about how your products are made, what materials you use, what your minimums and lead times are, and which pieces are your best sellers. Buyers are interested in knowing your best sellers because they want the products most likely to succeed in their
stores. You may also talk about ideal display methods, packaging, and anything else that could help sell your products. During the meeting, plan on asking questions of your own. Find out what other designers the store carries, if any of their current products compete with yours, and how well the store is doing financially. (You don’t want to waste time on a store that is going to close next month.)

If you can’t visit a store in person, then you’ll need to send them your wholesale materials. Be prepared to promptly answer any questions they may have, either through email or over the phone. And give them a way to order easily, either through your website, email, phone, or fax.

Approaching stores is a great way to get your feel wet wholesaling. But if you want to grow your business, meet many potential buyers, and maximize your time, you should look into doing a trade show.
Part 2
Trade Shows
5.

Trade show basics

What are wholesale and trade shows?
Wholesale and trade shows are typically shows that are not open to the general public, but to buyers who will come and place orders for your product. At most trade shows, you set up a booth with samples of your products. Buyers will write orders, which you will ship at a later date. (There are a few shows that are cash and carry, in which buyers purchase your product onsite to take back to their stores. I would recommend you start with a traditional order writing show, since it requires less inventory up front.)

In addition to buyers, other trade show attendees may include press, PR agents, interior designers and architects, event planners, and many others. Check with the show organizer to find out who typically attends the show.

Why should you do a wholesale or tradeshow?
Trade shows can be one of the easiest ways to attract buyers for your products. At a trade show, you have an entire group of buyers whose main goal is to source products for their stores. Other benefits include:

- **Discovering stores you never knew existed.** It’s difficult to find every potential store while researching on your own. At a trade show, you’ll meet buyers from stores you might never have targeted on your own, some of which could become your best customers.
• **Building your mailing list.** At a trade show, you’ll meet lots of buyers and store owners. While they all won’t buy right away, you’ll gain lots of new contacts for your mailing list that you can continue to target in the future.

• **Meeting the press.** Many members of the press walk trade shows (especially the bigger shows). This is a great way to get your work in front of both print and online journalists who you would not have met otherwise.

• **Opportunities for learning and networking.** In addition to meeting press and buyers, you’ll connect with many of your fellow exhibitors, some of whom may be trade show veterans, and all of whom have different experiences from yours. This can be a great opportunity to make new friends and gain valuable information.

• **Added credibility.** Exhibiting at a trade show can give you a sense of professionalism that a buyer may not feel if you were to approach them cold. (But keep in mind that some buyers may want to see you at a few shows so they know you’re in it for the long haul. Remember that building a successful wholesale business is a process, not a one-time event.)

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**Are you ready to do a trade show?**

Do you have:

• a set of established terms and policies?
• a line sheet, catalog, order form, and promotional materials?
• retail packaging for your products?
• a minimum of a few months to prep for an upcoming show?
• the budget to cover booth fees, display, product samples, promotional materials, travel, lodging, meals, and any miscellaneous expenses you might incur?
6. Selecting and applying to trade shows

Selecting the show (or shows) that are right for you

Every year, there are hundreds of trade shows that take place around the US and many more internationally. Your success at a show will have much to do with whether or not a show is good fit for your and your products.

Begin doing research as soon as you become interested in a trade show. If it's possible, walk a show once before attending. Most shows will offer visitor badges for prospective exhibitors. If the show you are interested in is too far for a visit, and you've never attended a trade show before, I recommend walking something local. You should really have some frame of reference before diving into a show.

Trade Shows to Checkout

- New York International Gift Fair
- Buyer's Market of American Craft
- National Stationary Show
- ICFF
- POOL Trade Show
- San Francisco Gift Fair
- Accessories the Show/Fame
- Museum Store Association Show

Questions to ask about a prospective show

When looking at potential shows, make it a point to speak with a show organizer either by phone or email. (If you visit a show, it may be difficult to track them down while the show is going on. Arrange for a follow-up conversation after the show to discuss details and ask questions.) Questions to ask the show organizer include:
• **What are the fees?** What is the price per square foot? Is there a premium for a larger, smaller, or corner booth? What is the payment schedule? What payment methods are accepted?

• **What are the application deadlines?** Some shows accept applications on a rolling basis. Others review them at certain points throughout the year.

• **What types of products are sold at the show?** Some shows may specialize in one area or category (like Accessories or the National Stationary Show), while others may focus on just handmade or products produced in a geographic region. Others may feel like a free for all (like the New York International Gift Fair) but have sections to help differentiate products.

• **What is the average product price point?** If you sell $500 earrings but the average product at the show costs $30, it’s not going to be a good fit for you, even if the category is right.

• **What types of companies exhibit at the show?** Is it just independent designers and makers, or are there large companies and rep groups at the show as well?

• **How many booths/exhibitors are there at the show?** Will you be a big fish in a small pond, or a tiny fish in an ocean?

• **How many buyers where in attendance at the last show?** Try to get this data for the last several shows. You want to know if attendance is increasing or decreasing. You can also divide this number by the number of exhibitors to get a feel for buyers per booths. This will allow you to compare shows of different sizes.

• **What types of buyers attend the show?** Are they mainly small boutiques? Craft galleries? Large department stores and catalogs? The types of buyers should match your goals and desired marketplaces.

• **What were the total sales for the last show?** Not all shows will have this data. (And some, like New York Gift are so large that the data would be almost meaningless.) But for a smaller show, if you divide the total sales by the number of vendors, it could give you some idea of what sales are like at that show.
If you visit a show, plan on asking similar questions of some of the vendors. Find out how long they’ve been exhibiting, how successful this show is compared to other shows they do, and whether they think the quality of the show and the number of buyers seems to be getting better or worse. Just be sure to follow trade show etiquette when stopping to ask an exhibitor for their thoughts. Never interrupt an exhibitor if they are talking to a buyer. If a buyer enters the booth, politely excuse yourself and come back later.

The application process

Every show has different requirements about when they review applications and what materials they require, so always check with the show promoter on what is needed. At the minimum, any show will want to see images of you work. Now is the time to put your best foot forward. Choose high-quality images that show a cohesive product line.

Many shows will ask you to submit a line sheet, catalog, or other wholesale information. This does two things – it shows you are serious about wholesaling, and it allows the show organizers to evaluate your price points. It is also helpful if you can include recent press and any current wholesale accounts you have in your application.

Before applying to any show, take a look at the types of designers and companies that typically exhibit. Ask friends and fellow makers if they think your work would be a good fit for that show. (Choose colleagues who will answer honestly – don’t waste time applying to shows that don’t make sense for your work.) In the end, your chances of getting in increase dramatically if you choose shows that make sense for your product line.
Congratulations, you’ve just been accepted to your first trade show. Ideally, you’ve found out about your acceptance several months in advance, so you have plenty of time to prepare. Even if you haven’t been accepted to a show yet, it’s a good idea to start thinking about details like booth design and pre-show marketing. If you do get in, you’ll be that much more prepared.

Always create a trade show timeline and budget to help during the planning process.

- **Timeline** - Creating a detailed timeline can go a long way towards preventing stress as the show gets closer. Develop a plan for each of the key areas of show planning – booth and display, product development, wholesale materials, marketing and PR, and travel and transportation.

- **Budget** - It’s easy for trade show spending to get out of control, so set a budget early and stick to it. It may be tempting to overspend on a fantastic booth fixture or some great new promotional materials, but if you overspend now, you’ll really feel pinched when it comes time to pay the hotel bill at the end of the show. Build a buffer into your budget to cover unexpected expenses that might occur once you get to the show.

**Setting trade show goals**

When planning for a show, you should also create a list of goals for the show. Some of these goals may be very concrete, such as $15,000 in sales, write twenty orders, or pick up ten new accounts. If you are doing a show for the first time, it may be difficult to make such specific predictions. Instead, create goals like collect a business card for every person that walks into your booth, or meet three members of the press.

It’s important to write these goals down early in the show planning process – they can help you stay focused if you are pressed for time or
money. (For instance, if you are more focused on order writing than attracting press, than you might focus more on your line sheet and less on your press kit.) It’s also useful to have these goals so that you can do an honest evaluation of the show after it’s over.

**What should you bring to a trade show?**

Packing for your first trade show can be stressful. You don’t want to forget something important, but if you don’t want to drag a lot of stuff to the show that you don’t end up using. I tend to err on the side of be prepared – for instance, I bring five different types of tape to every show. While this may seem like overkill, I can honestly say that I’ve used them all. (And endeared myself to a few neighbors who were frantically looking for duct tape.)

I recommend making a packing list early, and continually add to it as you think of items to bring. I keep a trade show packing list on my computer – a few things may change from show to show, but the bulk stays the same. When it comes time to pack, I just print it out and cross things off as they go in the car.

Here are the items to bring along for your first trade show:

- **Product samples.** Bring at least one of every product in your line, as well as anything that will help your products look good – polishing cloths for jewelry, a lint brush and iron for clothing, glass cleaner, etc. Create a method for clearly labeling and pricing your items.

- **Booth display and tools.** This will vary greatly depending on your set-up, which is why it’s a good idea to set-up your booth ahead of time. And don’t forget the tools to put your display together. Even if I don’t think I’ll need them, I always bring a hammer, screwdrivers, a utility knife, and a level – just in case.

- **Wholesale and promotional materials.** These include your line sheets, catalogs, postcards, and business cards. It can be tricky determining the number of line sheets and catalogs you’ll need, and it varies greatly from show to show. Contact the show organizer for their recommendations. I always bring more business cards and postcards than I think I’ll need.

- **Order taking.** In addition to your order forms, you’ll want something sturdy to write orders on – like a clipboard. Have several clipboards on hand, this can save you time if you need to write back to back.
orders, and is a necessity if you’ve got more than one person working the booth. Most buyers want to have a copy of the order to take with them – easily create duplicate orders by slipping a piece of carbon paper between two order forms. You keep the top copy and give the bottom one to the buyer. You also need something to store orders in – a 3-ring binder or accordion file works well for most people.

• **Office supplies.** You’ll have a hard time at the show without pens and pencils, scissors, a calculator, and a stapler. A stapler is a critical trade show tool – use it to attach business cards to order forms, and buyers will often ask you to staple loose materials together. If you do a lot of shows – either wholesale or retail – keep a separate bin of office supplies just for shows. This can save you the headache of searching for your calculator only to realize you left it sitting at your desk. (And for the record, it is easier and more professional to use a regular calculator than the one on your cell phone.)

• **Press kits.** Hopefully you’ll meet some press at the show, so have some press kits on hand. Most shows have a press office where you can leave a stack of press kits – this is a good idea, because the press office is typically the first stop a member of the press makes. It can be a good way for them to learn about your products before even hitting the show floor.

What should I include in my press kit?

• A press release announcing new products or participation in shows.
• Images of your products. (These can be as simple as a few print-outs, or as in-depth as a disc with hi-res images.)
• A catalog or line sheet with suggested retail pricing.
• A company or designer bio.
• Copies of recent press.
• Your business card.
• A pocket folder (with your image or logo on the front) to hold it all together.
• **Snacks and water.** While you don’t need to pack like you’re heading across the desert, having a few snacks and a reusable water bottle can be a much cheaper alternative to the cost of convention center food. And they can make your day a lot easier if you’re too busy to leave the booth to get lunch.
8.

Booth design

The design of your booth can really make or break your tradeshow experience. This is your opportunity to build your brand and showcase your product, so it’s worth putting in the time to plan it out. A good booth design will:

• **Attract attention.** You need to draw buyers in to look at your product. Trade show buyers are busy, and they see a lot of products in a lot of booths. While it may be tempting to do a fantastic, eye-catching display on the back wall, most buyers won’t look that far into your booth unless something catches their eye in the first two feet. The space from the aisle to about two feet into your booth is critical for attracting buyer attention, so use it well.

• **Communicate your brand.** A good booth display will use the same visual branding elements that you employ in all the other aspects of your business.

• **Help the buyer visualize how the product will fit in her store.** Create a display that could translate into a retail environment. Showcase your products and any relevant packaging in a way that helps the buyer envision those products in her store. And if you’ve got a great display fixture, you can offer that for sale as well to boost profits.

• **Demonstrate the product.** Think about ways you can showcase your products in action. If your products are wearable, wear them. If a purse is reversible, continually demonstrate that. Think about how photos and video can also show your products in action.

• **Communicate information effectively.** Spell out your products clearly. What are the prices? What materials are they made from? Where are they made? How are they used? Use signage and photos effectively so that the buyer understands a product before they talk to you.
• **Enable you to conduct business efficiently.** In addition to displaying your products, you need to be able to conduct business in your booth. Make sure you have room to talk to buyers, write orders, and organize your office and promotional materials.

• **Be portable.** Sure, your grandmother’s hutch may be beautiful, but if it’s heavy, it’s probably not ideal for your booth display. Aim for fixtures that are lightweight and that break down into smaller pieces for transport.

**Know what’s included**

When you sit down to design your booth, make sure you’ve confirmed with the show organizer what is in your package. In some shows, your booth fee covers only your space on the floor, while at others the fee may include pipe and drape, hard walls, lighting, or electricity. Knowing what will be included up front can help save time and money in the long run. Also, be sure to check out the union rules at the site where your show will be held. Some prohibit using certain types of tools when assembling your booth, so make sure you are aware of this before you begin planning that elaborate booth.

**Using show rentals**

Depending on your budget and the distance you are traveling, you may also want to contact the show organizer about rentals. Most shows have a service where you can rent anything from backgrounds to furniture, and it’s worth knowing what is available when you are planning for the show. If you are traveling a long distance, it may be cheaper to rent hard walls or fixtures than pay to have yours transported to the show.

**Communicating your brand through your booth design**

You should already be working with a consistent brand identity throughout all of your products and promotional materials. It is important that you carry this over to your booth design as well. You want buyers
who may be familiar with your line from other venues to instantly recognize the booth as yours. Some keys to your visual identity include:

- **Color** – Chose a color palette that attracts attention but relates to your brand.

- **Signage** – This will include your name and any other communication material in your signature font or fonts.

- **Photography** – The styling and mood of any product photography should be consistent with your brand.

- **Displays and fixtures** – Think about ways you can move beyond generic product displays to help tell the story of your brand. And if you’re going to use the ubiquitous IKEA furniture for your fixtures, think of ways to customize them to make them your own.

- **Dress** – You are part of your brand. While it’s important to look professional, don’t feel the need to sacrifice your personal style. You want a look that is consistent with your brand. If you have assistants helping you in your booth, it is perfectly acceptable to give them suggestions on what to wear. Remember, they represent your brand too.

**Ways to make small products pop**

If you make jewelry, note cards, or other types of small items, it can be challenging to make your pieces stand out. (And to fill a booth.) Here are some suggestions for making small products pop:

- **Use photography to highlight your products.** This is a favorite trick of jewelers. Large photographs not only highlight your products’ interesting details, they can help show your products in use.

- **Create a retail sales fixture.** Creating a product specific retail fixture can draw attention to your products and help continue your brand identity. Best of all, you can offer it as an up-sell item for buyers, or as a gift for purchasing a large volume of merchandise.

- **Remember the two-foot rule.** Most buyers walking by your booth will only notice the first two feet, so place the most eye-catching of your small products front and center.

- **Display in groups.** While a buyer might miss one necklace hanging on the wall, a group of fifty creates a much more dramatic focal point. Try displaying groupings of similar small objects in interesting arrangements to attract attention.
Tools for booth design

The more time you spend planning your booth design up front, the less stress you will feel as the show approaches. Here are some tools to help you design your booth:

- **Get the lay of the land.** Use paper and pencil or a computer design program to create a booth layout. Remember to account for furniture, and give yourself, and buyers, room to maneuver.

- **Create an inspiration board.** Just like interior designers use to visualize a room, create an inspiration board to help you get a feel for the colors, theme, style, and fixtures to be used in your booth.

- **Visualize the booth.** Make a model of your booth, either virtual or three dimensional, to get a feel for how the space works together. Free computer programs like Google SketchUp allow you to easily design three-dimensional spaces. (You can learn a lot by watching the free tutorials online.) If you aren’t comfortable designing on the computer, grab some cardboard and create a scale model of your booth. Think grade school diorama grown up. Anything to help you visualize the space.

- **Get a feel for it.** If you have the space, plan on setting up a full-scale version of your booth at home prior to the show. Nothing will give you more information about how the elements look together,
and how much space you (and buyers) will have to navigate. If you can’t set up the full space, try to test out smaller sections of your display. If you’re planning on displaying products on tabletops or another similar fixture, setting that up, photographing, and rearranging elements will save you a lot of stress when it comes time to set up at the show.

Keys to remember when designing your booth:
- Remember the two-foot rule – keep the most important/eye-catching items at the front of your booth.
- Design for portability
- Give yourself space to conduct business.
9. Getting there

Getting your stuff there
When designing your booth, always think about weight and portability, because you will need to transport your display, samples, and promotional materials to the show. There are two different ways to get your stuff to a show – bring it yourself, or ship it.

Transporting your own display and materials
Brining everything to a show by yourself can seem like the cheapest and easiest option, but after schlepping stuff from show to show, it doesn’t feel so easy. When deciding whether or not to transport your stuff to a show on your own, consider the distance you will travel, the amount of stuff you need to bring, whether or not you have help, and what the regulations are for hand-carrying work into a show.

• **Travel distance** – If you are a short drive from the show, bringing your display and materials yourself is probably the smartest option. The further you have to drive, the less cost-effective it becomes. However, there are ways to do a long distance show without shipping anything. If you sell smaller products, like jewelry or stationary, you could rent your fixtures from the show provider, and bring your samples and materials in a large suitcase or two on the plane.

• **Amount of stuff** – If you’ve got eight-foot walls and three display cases, but you drive a Yaris, you may need to reconsider how you are going to get them to the show. Try renting or borrowing a larger vehicle, reducing the amount
of stuff you bring by renting walls and fixtures at the show or rethinking your display, or using a freight company to bring your display to the show.

- **Will you have help** – This may seem obvious, but if you’re setting up a show by yourself, don’t bring anything for your booth that is too heavy to lift it by yourself.

- **Show regulations** – Read the show set-up manual very carefully. There are often rules that prohibit hand carrying if you have items, a booth, or a vehicle over a certain size. If that is the case, you could still wind up paying drayage fees. Know the rules before you go. (It also might help to email a few veterans of the show to find out how strictly those rules are enforced.)

**Shipping your display and materials**

Shipping items to a show can range from sending a few boxes to hiring a freight company to ship a large crate. In addition to the shipping fees you incur, be aware of the cost of drayage. Drayage refers to the cost of moving your shipment from the loading dock to your booth. And with the cost of union labor, this can get expensive quickly. Consult with the show organizer, or check the show set-up manual for an idea of what drayage will cost and include that in your budget. If you just have a few small boxes, you might want to look into alternatives like shipping directly to your hotel. While most hotels have a fee for accepting packages, it usually isn’t as high as convention center drayage.

Most shows will also have a targeted freight arrival date. These are the dates during which your shipment must arrive. If your shipment arrives before or after these dates, you may incur heavy penalties and possibly run the risk of your shipment not being accepted. Pay attention to these dates well in advance – sometimes target freight arrival dates are as much as two weeks before the actual show.

When deciding what to ship your display in, there are several choices. Cardboard boxes are cheap and simple, but don’t always hold up well. I’ve seen some pretty mangled boxes arrive at a show. If you’ve got a lot of stuff, or stuff that’s delicate, consider using a crate. You can make a crate yourself out of wood, or buy one made from wood or plastic. Most convention centers will store your crate for free during the show. However, when the show ends, you could spend many hours waiting for your crate to be delivered to your booth before you can begin
packing up. One way to get around this is to design a crate that can be used as part of your booth display.

(Image credit Amuck Design)
10. Pre-show marketing and PR

The key to trade show success is putting in the time and effort before you get to the show. In order to maximize the time and money you've spent preparing for a show, develop a pre-show marketing campaign to help drive traffic to your booth. Your pre-show marketing might include pre-show mailings via email and direct mail, press coverage on blogs, and advertising in trade show mailings and directories.

- **Pre-show mailing (via email)** Sending pre-show emails is a cost effective solution to contacting existing accounts and contacts. Send a simple email with upcoming show dates, booth locations, product launches, and any show specials you might be offering. If you send a mass email, make sure you type all the email addresses in the BCC field to protect everyone’s privacy.

- **Pre-show mailing (via direct mail)** Never underestimate the power of a dynamic postcard. Sending out a captivating postcard is another great way to attract buyers to your booth. In addition to sending cards to your current accounts and contacts, send them to all the retailers on your dream list. This can be a good way to initially introduce your products to those stores. Any postcard you send should have a strong graphic and your company name on the front, with additional information, including show dates and booth numbers, on the back.
• **Press coverage on blogs.** When looking for blogs to target for pre-show coverage, focus on blogs that match your product categories and blogs where the blogger is likely to attend the show. Which means, for a New York show, keep an eye out for bloggers in the Northeast who might be attending. You can also Google a show to see what blogs have covered it in the past. There’s a good chance they’ll cover it again, so make sure to include them in your media campaign.

  You’re goal is to try to get coverage in the week or two before your trade show that mentions you will be exhibiting *at that trade show.* You’re goal is to have buyers walking into your booth, going, “I just saw you on that blog.”

  Never send a mass email to press of any kind, bloggers included. Instead, send a short, personalized email with details about your company and products, the show or shows you’ll be exhibiting in, and some eye-catching images.

• **Advertising in trade show mailings and show directories.** When you sign up to do a show, ask about opportunities for advertising. Shows send out bulletins and other information to pre-registered buyers ahead of time, and there are usually advertising slots in these. Additionally, shows publish a directory of all the exhibitors that is available onsite. Many shows include a standard directory listing in the cost of your booth fee, but offer the chance to pay extra for a premium listing or ad. There may also be advertising opportunities on the show’s website, so be sure to ask early.

  Most shows have resources for exhibitors on their web site. Check these for additional pre-show promotional opportunities and suggestions.
11.

At the show

Show set-up
   Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to get to the show and set-up. It will always take longer than you think, and you don’t want to start the show feeling rushed and frazzled. Most shows will give you a specific day and time when you are allowed to move in – there is a method to this madness, so it’s best if you can adhere to that schedule as much as possible.

   When browsing your show set-up guide, you’ll notice various rules about labor and other union activities. These can include restrictions on which tools you can use to put your booth together or requirements like only a union electrician can plug in your lights. Be aware of these rules before you go – you don’t want to have to pay an electrician double time just to plug your lights in on a Sunday night. If you can, it’s worth asking a veteran exhibitor or two how closely those rules are enforced. I wasted a lot of energy stressing about some of these rules my first trade show, only to find many that were pretty much ignored throughout set-up.

Bringing in buyers
   Ideally, your booth set-up and pre-show promotions will go a long way towards bringing buyers into your booth. But there are additional ways to bring buyers into your booth, and they have to do with your appearance and attitude:

   • **Wear or demonstrate your product.** If you make jewelry, clothing, or accessories, wear your products throughout the show. Have any
assistants do the same. If you can’t wear your product, be prepared to demonstrate its features throughout the show. The more you interact with your products, the more likely you’ll be to draw a crowd.

• **Look happy and interested.** Yes, you’re tired and your feet hurt. But no one wants to interact with an exhibitor who looks grumpy or miserable. Fake a smile, if that’s what it takes. And leave your book in the hotel and your cell phone off – you want a buyer to feel like she has your full attention.

• **Say hello and make eye contact.** You’d be surprised how many people walk the show with their eyes on the floor. But the simple act of saying hello can bring a buyer’s eyes where they belong – looking at your booth. You shouldn’t stand in the aisle and block everyone’s path so they enter your booth, but you shouldn’t hide in a corner and not look at anyone either.

• **A crowd attracts a crowd.** People always want to see what other people are looking at. Everyone wants to know what’s in the busy booth. The more interaction and energy you create in your booth, the more people will want to see what it’s all about. And more people will want to see what those people are looking at. It’s a virtuous circle.

**Interacting with buyers**

Once a buyer is in your booth, now the show starts. Working a trade show booth is different than working a retail craft fair booth. Keep in mind that buyers aren’t there to browse, they are there to buy – and they’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Quickly and clearly communicate all the critical information about your products to a buyer so they can make an informed decision about your products.
If you are uncomfortable presenting your products to a buyer, than you need to practice, practice, practice. Make a list of all the key features of your products that you think a buyer needs to know. Practice talking about these features out loud, while interacting with your products, in front of a video camera or mirror. Once you are comfortable on your own, ask friends and family members to practice being buyers. Have them ask you questions. Remember, no question is too dumb – you can be asked anything at a trade show, so the more prepared you are, the better you'll do.

You’re interactions with buyers will go a long way towards whether or not the write an order. Remember, they are buying you as much as your product. So the more prepared and confident you feel, the greater your success.

Collecting leads

While your ultimate goal at any trade show is to write orders, you will spend a lot of time collecting leads. A lead is any contact you make with the potential of becoming a sale.

Always ask for business cards! Never give out your line sheet or product information without getting a business card in return. This allows you to add to your mailing list and follow up with prospective buyers and press. When I get a business card from a buyer or press at a show, I write notes directly on the card. These notes range from the types of products they are interested in to anything else we might have discussed. Making these notes can go a long way in personalizing follow-up communications with a lead.

Some companies create a form that they staple business cards to with additional space to make notes. Others staple them into a notebook. Whatever method you choose, make sure you have a method to organize the cards you collect, and always take notes about the lead.

What a buyer wants to know when she walks in your booth

- How your products are used.
- What your products are made of.
- What the top selling items are.
- What your minimum order is.
- What the price points are.
- Where the line is made.
Some buyers or press will tell you they are out of business cards. This is not uncommon at a large show – but don’t let them go easily. Ask them to write down their name and contact info for you. Even if you don’t leave a show with a stack of new orders, you want to leave with a stack of new contacts.

**Writing & scheduling orders**

There is no sweeter sound at a trade show then when a buyer says, “Let’s write an order.” Whether it’s your first order or your five-hundredth, you want to be prepared and professional. Have order forms ready to go on a clipboard or other sturdy surface. It will save time if you can create a duplicate copy of the order form as you are writing the order. Most office supply stores will sell sheets of carbon paper. Simply place one between two order forms. The top copy is yours and the bottom copy will go to the buyer.

When you are writing an order, you will need to discuss an estimated ship date. When you receive orders outside of trade shows, the ship date is based on your typical lead times. When writing orders at a show, you will want to be more deliberate about scheduling. Space out when orders are shipped so that you can spread out your workload (and revenue stream). Buyers will also want to spread out when they receive orders from different vendors so that they don’t incur all their costs at one time.

Devise some sort of calendar system to keep track of the orders you receive at a trade show. Be realistic about your production capabilities each month. It is unprofessional to write more orders than you can fill in a given period of time. Before the show starts, come up with an idea of how many orders you want to fill in a given time frame (whether it’s a week or a month) and stick to it. For each order, choose a ship date that works for you and the buyer.

**Receiving payment**

Your payment terms should be clearly spelled out in your wholesale materials. For most first-time orders, collect payment up front, usually by credit card. When you are writing orders at a show, you will see two scenarios. Some buyers will give you a credit card number on the spot. Others will ask you to call for a credit card number when the order is ready to ship. Both of these are common practices. Just be sure to process the payment before shipping the order.
A larger store may place an order stating that they can only process payment through Net 30 or similar terms. If this is the case, they should have a sheet with credit information and references ready to give to you at the show. Make sure you do a credit check and follow up with references before shipping their order.
12. After the show

Order fulfillment

Once the show is over, now the real work begins. It’s time to fill those orders. Ideally, you spaced out ship dates so that you aren’t bombarded with work the second you return home from a show. It’s important that you adhere to your specified ship dates as closely as possible. Unless a buyer has told you to ship “as ready” you don’t want to send an order too early. Buyers need to plan out their inventory and spending, and sending them pieces too early may cause trouble. Of course, you don’t want to ship orders late – this is extremely unprofessional. If you must ship an order late – perhaps you are waiting on a shipment from a supplier – contact the buyer to let them know the situation. They may ask you to send what is ready now, or they may want you to wait and send everything together.

When packaging an order, make sure everything is labeled with the item number. Use appropriate packaging and cushioning - you don’t want pieces to arrive broken or damaged. Always include a packing list inside the box so that whoever opens the order can confirm everything is there. Typically, an invoice is not included in the box with shipment, but mailed separately.

Following up on leads

Ideally, you left a show with so many orders that you don’t need to spend much time following up on leads to generate more orders. If this happens, congratulations! Add those leads to your mailing list and look forward to seeing them next show.
It is more likely, especially after your first few shows, that you will have more leads than orders. In this case, devise a plan to follow up with leads to generate more sales. Here are some methods to help entice those leads:

- **Create an incentive to order.** Offer a post show special, perhaps free shipping, a small discount, or a free display fixture if they write an order within a certain amount of time following the show.

- **Send a personal follow up.** It’s one thing to dump all those emails in a database and send a massive blast. It’s another to send a personalized email or handwritten note that includes details about the contact. (This is why you took notes.)

- **Add them to your mailing list.** Some buyers may want to see you at several shows before ordering from you. Always add any leads to your mailing list to send them information about upcoming shows they can find you at. Always include your booth number, whether you’ve changed locations or not.

**Assessing the success of the show**

Of course, the easiest way to assess the success of a show is to total the number of orders you have written and compare that to your expenses at the show. But remember, wholesale is a process, not an event. Stores may write orders after leaving the show. You may get featured in a magazine because a member of the press saw your work – and that feature might appear six months after the show!

Use the goals you wrote prior to the show to assess your success at the show. Take notes during and after the show so you know what to improve upon for next time.
13.

What next?

Creating a plan

Maybe you just completed your first trade show. Or your efforts to contact stores are paying off, and you’ve landed a few accounts. But where do you go from here?

A single trade show or a few stores will not sustain your business forever, so it’s time to develop a long-range plan for your wholesale business. In order to grow your business, plan on doing each of the following:

• **Introduce new products.** Your existing accounts will always want to see what’s new, and new products might appeal to previously uninterested stores. New products also provide additional opportunities to contact the press. Determine a schedule for launching new products. Perhaps you want to launch five new products at each trade show. Or maybe you want to create a new line each season. Decide on a system that fits your design process and start planning new products well in advance of any upcoming trade shows or product launches.

• **Continue to seek new accounts.** Always build time for seeking new accounts into your schedule. For some, this may simply mean an active trade show season. For others, this means continued mailings and working to build connections.

• **Take care of your current accounts.** Treat your current accounts as valuable assets. It’s always easier to sell to a current customer than acquire a new one. Be prompt in your communications and ship orders on time. Check in on a regular basis to see if a store needs to re-order, or if some products aren’t selling well. Send them updated line sheets and catalogs when you introduce new products. You could even offer incentives or gifts to stores who purchase on a regular basis.
• Seek out new trade shows and constantly assess the success of your current shows. Determine how many shows you want to do in a year. You may only want one a season, or perhaps you like to do five or six in a row. Determine what your schedule and budget will allow. Constantly assess your current shows to determine if they are the best fit for your company and your products. Make it a point to regularly visit other shows to see if you want to exhibit at those in the future.

Remember that building a wholesale business is a process, not an event. Each time you contact a potential retailer, create a new catalog, introduce new products, or participate in a trade show, you’re helping grow your business in remarkable ways.
About the author

Megan Auman is a designer, maker, and educator. She received a BFA from Syracuse University and an MFA from Kent State University, both in metals and jewelry.

After graduate school, Megan launched her production jewelry line, selling mainly through retail craft shows and online through Etsy.

After doing her first trade show, the New York International Gift Fair, Megan transitioned the bulk of her business to wholesale. Her work is sold in stores across the US, including the museum stores at SFMOMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Arts and Design. In 2009, Megan launched a line of laser cut home accessories and the cozy/cuff, a bracelet that doubles as a reusable coffee cup cozy. Megan’s work has been featured on Apartment Therapy, Design*Sponge, Decor8, and numerous other blogs, and the cozy/cuff was recently featured in Cooking Light Magazine.

In addition to running her business, Megan teaches Metals + Jewelry and Interdisciplinary Object Design at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland. She has presented various craft and design business related topics at the SNAG Professional Development Seminar, Arizona State University, and Kent State University. Megan’s love of teaching led her to found Crafting an MBA in late 2009, with the goal of helping other designers and makers build their own business skills.

Megan lives in Jonestown, Pennsylvania with her husband Joe and their 80-lb mutt Grizzly.
About Crafting an MBA

Crafting an MBA asks, what would business school look like if it was geared towards crafters, designers, and makers?

Crafting an MBA was founded in late 2009 with the goal of helping designers, makers, crafters, and indie artists develop their business skills.

Crafting an MBA features daily posts on topics like business planning, marketing + PR, making + manufacturing, numbers + finances, sales, social media, and so much more. It is an essential tool for makers looking to start or grow their business.

Visit craftMBA.com for more tips on growing your business.