

CRAFT EMERGENCY RELIEF FUND
National Craft Artist Research Project
Focus Group Results
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Methods

Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) staff and board members convened ten focus groups of 83 craft artists in the late winter and spring of 2004 throughout the United States. These gatherings supplemented information gathered through a national survey and other studies of craft artists. The participating craft artists were all professionals and a mix of well established and early-career artists. Meetings were convened in: San Francisco, California; Woodstock, New York; San Antonio, Texas; Penland and Asheville, North Carolina; Montpelier, Vermont; Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and St. Petersburg, Florida.

Purpose

CERF is assessing the needs of professional craft artists by gathering information through a national survey, interviews, and focus groups. CERF is planning to expand its emergency relief assistance as well as broaden services beyond emergency relief. The study will help CERF plan appropriate support that may include: information and referrals about health, safety, and insurance, technical assistance and advocacy for craft artists.

This study is intended to accomplish three results:

1. Gather information that will inform the field, CERF partners, and craft organizations and businesses about the population of professional craft artists;
2. Inform CERF's program planning; and
3. Alert the craft field to a potential broader service role for CERF.

Executive Summary

Validation -- Craft artists get validation and define success in variable, yet consistent ways. Artists often think of their craft work as a business and define success in terms of sales and the ability to sustain self employment. Many craft artists also, or alternatively, define success in terms of artistic quality of their work and the opportunity for self-expression. For most, the affirmation of positive feedback from peers and buyers is important. Acceptance into shows, exhibitions, and galleries is another tangible evidence of success. Many artists found validation of their success through a combination of these factors, making a living at doing what they love.

Material support -- The challenge of acquiring insurance is a persistent and growing problem among craft artists. Securing operating capital and maintaining adequate cash flow is another frequently reported challenge. Artists work very hard to get by, especially in this economy and in this political environment. Most craft artists also report that they were unprepared for the challenge of running a small business and sought continued training and assistance to learn marketing, finance, legal, information management, and other business skills. Many were frustrated with how much time the business side of their work required. Finding affordable studio and/or living space is a significant challenge for many, especially those starting their craft

careers. A few found it difficult to find information for marketing, grants, equipment, and materials.

Marketing and audiences -- Craft artists report a changing market place, but different artists and craft media experience the changes variably. Important market factors include a flood of cheap imports, declining purchase power of the middle class, a growing upper class, and more conservative purchasing by consumers and galleries. The Internet is a growing force in marketing and this requires yet another business skill.

Networks/community -- Most craft artists are part of peer networks, most often through their specific craft media. Focus group participants described the information and support provided by their extended craft community as critical to their growth and success. Some, but not all, took good advantage of virtual networks.

Craft organizations -- Artists value craft organizations for information, public education and advocacy, and business skill support. They appreciate opportunities to convene and network. They use craft organizations for referrals to business service providers. Many artists hope for help to fight unfair competition from knock offs and cheap imports.

Advice to CERF -- Focus group artists appreciate CERF and encourage CERF to continue its critical emergency relief to artists. They asked for help to find affordable insurance. Some asked CERF to provide links and referrals to other sources of craft business information and services. One group suggested that CERF create adaptable instructional materials that could be used in workshops to teach skills to reduce risks

Key Point Summary of the Focus Group Discussions

Validation (how craft artists define success)

The craft artists consistently reported three key sources of validation or affirmation:

1. **Sell work** -- People buying the work is critical, for some “Success is sales” and it is especially validating to sell to knowledgeable collectors, “Being collected by a ‘collector’ vs. a Christmas shopper.”
2. **Sustain self employment as a craft artist** -- For many, being able to support themselves and their family was the ultimate validation, “...doing what you love and making a comfortable living.” Longevity in the business is validation, “If you can die making work...now that’s validation!”
3. **Positive feedback** -- Supportive comments from peers, customers, and gallery owners was very important. Customers who return to say how much they love the work is affirming “...get paid twice by money and positive comments.”

Two other sources of validation were often cited:

4. **Making quality art** -- Competently working with tools and materials to produce good work was the highest affirmation for some artists. “Success is the making of good art.” A few artists found a conflict between creating challenging, quality work and success in the marketplace. More often, artists had reconciled these and found it “possible to make compelling work *and* make it in the marketplace.” For some, “success comes from

within; it's about making the work and not compromising on a piece...that represents what I'm trying to say."

5. **Acceptance into the marketplace** -- Being accepted into craft shows, exhibitions, and galleries was the bottom line for many craft artists.

Material supports

1. **Insurance** -- Health insurance was a critical concern. Also fire and business insurance coverage was important and hard to find or afford. Some were so perplexed they simply ignore the risks of being uninsured.
2. **Access to capital** -- Financing craft business through profit and loans was a critical challenge to many artists. For many, cash flow is a persistent problem. It is common to finance business and personal expenses through credit cards. Lenders do not understand craft businesses that are unconventional borrowers.
3. **Second income** -- Some artists reported the need for a second income, either from a family partner or part-time work.
4. **Business skills training/mentoring** -- Most reported that their schooling had not prepared them for running a small business. Even established artists need continuing help from training and/or mentoring to enhance their skills in marketing, finance, insurance, taxes, employer requirements, translating legal language, and information technology. For some running the business required as much time and energy as did making the work.
5. **Affordable studio space and/or housing** -- While most focus group participants had established studios, they reported that acquiring affordable space had been a critical challenge in their careers. Those who owned their buildings saw this as part of their retirement planning. Some rented space to other artists within larger buildings and this was important to their cash flow.
6. **Information technology** -- It is hard to keep up with learning software, hardware, web design, and other aspects of IT.
7. **Information** -- With the Internet and craft service organizations, finding information was less of a problem than indicated by earlier studies. Artists newer to the craft business still reported the need for information about marketing opportunities, grants, equipment, and materials. Many found information about insurance difficult to find.

Marketing/audience demand

1. **Changing marketplace** -- Craft artists described a changing marketplace. Some found the low end had disappeared with a global economy flooding the U.S. with cheap imports. Others found the middle price points had disappeared along with a smaller middle class. High-end crafts were a significantly growing market segment for many. Others reported a trend toward lower price points. Some artists describe buyers to be more conservative, picking safer colors and less expressive crafts. Some artists are marketing internationally.
2. **Craft shows** -- Access to craft shows was critical for many artists. Some complained of a jury system that made access to shows unpredictable. Others found craft shows to be increasingly competitive and decreasingly profitable and they were shifting to direct selling. Others were doing well at shows and these were an important to their income.
3. **Electronic marketing** -- The Internet is becoming an important means to market for many craft artists. Others are thwarted by inadequate skills to design and update web sites

and use electronic marketing. Getting and paying for good photography is a challenge for many.

Networking/community

1. **Most artists network** -- Most artists are connected with networks of peers in formal or informal ways. A few without networks of support report a sense of isolation. "It is awesome to be in such a respectful community [of metal smiths]"
2. **Networks critical** -- Networks and a sense of community are critical to most artists' success and growth.
3. **Discipline groups most common** -- Peer groups within the same media are common and maybe most effective for support, information, and encouragement.
4. **Cross-discipline connections important too** -- Buildings with multiple studios, craft shows, and artist residency programs provide useful built-in networking across disciplines.
5. **Virtual networks** are very useful for some and ignored by many others who use the Internet only for information or marketing.

What can craft organizations do to help

1. **Provide information** -- Host artist bulletin boards or list serves. Provide information about insurance, marketing opportunities, grants and loans, equipment and supplies, etc.
2. **Advocacy** -- Provide public information and advocacy on behalf of crafts.
3. **Business support** -- Provide business training and/or mentors to help with business planning, marketing, bank loans, grant applications, and insurance.
4. **Convene** -- Artists value opportunities to convene for networking, information, and support.
5. **Referrals** -- Connect artists with providers of insurance, legal advice, and merchant services, e.g. credit cards
6. **Fight unfair competition** -- Some artists are threatened with knock offs, buy/sell vendors, and imports at craft shows.

Advice to CERF

1. Keep up the good work. Emergency assistance to craft artists is critical. Craft artists need and appreciate CERF! Some urged CERF to stick to emergency relief.
2. Help artists find affordable insurance, especially health insurance. This is a critical problem. Advise artists about risks and help them learn to talk to insurance agents as informed consumers. Most people who know CERF did not expect CERF to provide the insurance, just help artists find it.
3. Create instructional materials to support risk-management and business development workshops designed to promote emergency-prevention practices: acquiring adequate insurance, business planning, loans, health and safety, etc. These might be customized for specific craft disciplines. These workshops could be presented by others as short courses or evening seminars at craft shows, craft schools, conferences, etc.
4. Be a referring clearinghouse for information provided by other organizations.

5. Time is a critical problem for artists who both make and market their work. Any information or services that will take time will be a problem; services that save time will be a help.
6. Share what you've learned in this study.

APPENDIX

Focus Groups Meetings (location, focus group facilitator, number of participants & date)

- Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, Craig Dreeszen, 9 artists, January 26, 2004
- Philadelphia, PA, at the Clay Studio, Cornelia Carey, 9 artists, February 13, 2004
- Montpelier, VT, CERF staff, 10 artists, March 3, 2004
- Woodstock New York, Stacey Jarit and Jorge Arango, 8 artists, March 4, 2004
- St Petersburg, Florida, CERF Board, 7 artists, March 22, 2004
- Penland, North Carolina at Penland School of Crafts, Jean McLaughlin, 6 artists, April 7, 2004
- Asheville, North Carolina at Odyssey Center, Gail McCarthy, 6 artists, April 16, 2004
- San Antonio, Texas, at SW School of Art and Craft, Paula Owen, 8 artists, May 4, 2004
- Pittsburgh, Jim Wilkinson and Jane McCall, 4 artists at Society for Contemporary Craft, May 25, 2004
- San Francisco Bay Area, Jan Schachter, 16 artists, June 1, 2004

CERF Focus Interview questions

(note: focus group facilitators were required to ask the questions in **bold** type, the other questions were optional/if there's time)

Welcome and why we're doing the field inquiry and what we will do with the information we learn today.

1. Brief introductions

- In 30 seconds: **Who are you, where do you live, what kind of work do you do, and about how long have you worked as a professional craft artist?**

2. Validation

- **How do you define success in your career and from whom do you get affirmation that you are succeeding?**

3. Material supports

- **What critical elements are required to sustain a career as a craft artist?**
- How confident are you about the future or your craft career?
- Do you experience difficulty getting adequate insurance? If you have a good insurance, can you give us the name of the company (collect later)?
- **What can craft service organizations do to help craft artists strengthen and sustain their careers as artists?**

4. Community and networks

- **What associations or organizations are helpful to your career as a craft artist? Are you well-served by these organizations?**

- Do you feel adequate connections to other craft artists and people in the cultural sector?
- Do you feel there is need for an organization such as CERF?

5. Demand/markets

- What barriers do you face getting your work out?
- What trends you see impacting crafts and your business over the next five years?

6. Information

- **Is there information you need that you have trouble finding?**
- Where do you get most of the information important to your career?

7. Training and professional development

- **What training or professional development do you need?**
- Does anything prevent you from getting this?