

Going Pro: a Common Dream but a Difficult Reality

Working wood is so pleasurable and satisfying that it is a rare woodworker who does not dream of quitting the day job and hanging a sign in front of the shop. I know firsthand why this dream is so attractive. I have been a self-employed woodworker for 30 years, and short of being independently wealthy, I would never want to be anything else.

My wife, Sue, and I are constantly involved in helping people make this dream a reality. While most of the more than 400 people who study

with us each year are amateurs, about 20% are already deriving at least some income from their woodworking. Another 10% are in the planning stages of turning pro.

We are well-qualified career consultants. For the 23 years of my career, I was a self-employed Windsor chair maker. I made a



Seven years ago, the author and his wife sold everything and emptied their savings to expand their teaching business. Sue Dunbar insists that the facility always make a first-class impression.

good living and was able to sell everything I made. And since 1994, Sue and I have run a thriving woodworking school. Prior to that Sue worked in public relations/marketing and political consulting. She also had her own political talk show on television. She left that work to run our new business (while I taught) and to raise our son. Besides making our school grow like a mushroom, she still conducts seminars for woodworkers who want help taking the big step or who

are straggling as pros. Sue and I list eight big steps you have to make to go pro successfully. You can get the nuts and bolts of setting up a business from your lawyer, accountant and banker. I'm talking about the stuff they won't tell you. And I know these methods work because they built our business.

How to succeed, in eight not-so-easy steps

1. Prepare yourself

I won't sugarcoat it. Making a living working wood is tough, and most people fail or live hand-to-mouth. To succeed and earn a decent income, you must be willing to pay the price of success and have the attitude that nothing is going to stop you. Ask yourself the following questions, and make sure you give honest answers: Are you willing to work long hours and weekends? Are you willing to take financial risks and make lots of sacrifices? If any other considerations—vacations, trips, cars, security, leisure, hobbies, sports—are more important than your new business, keep your day job and save yourself a lot of grief. Otherwise, you are setting yourself up for a disaster to your self-esteem, your financial well-being and perhaps even your marriage.

For the first four years we were in the teaching business, we lost money. Because everything we owned was tied up in the business, we walked a financial tightrope. With our savings gone, one or two bad months would have sunk us. Today, we still work long hours. Most nights Sue and I are in the office until 6:30—long after our students and staff have gone home. It is a rare weekend that we do not work at least half a day. The business is always on our minds and is our most common topic of conversation.

We recently had a student from a rural Midwestern state express his desire to go home and make chairs for sale. He wondered aloud who would buy chairs in the \$400 to \$700 price range in the hardscrabble area where he lived. We advised that he find a way to sell his chairs in a more wealthy area. "You mean, like a gallery?" "Yes."

"I don't want to get wrapped up in all those hassles," he said. "Then move to a place where the inhabitants have more money." "I don't want to leave where I am."

"Then you really don't want to make and sell chairs," we concluded for him.

2. Prepare your family

Be sure that your spouse and older children share your dream. While it is possible to succeed without your spouse's support, it is a lot harder. We know couples who have divorced over this issue. Your family has to be willing to sacrifice as well. Life is a lot more stressful if you are being pressured to take a cruise or vacation at a time when money is tight or a big job has to get done. Working for yourself takes lots of stamina and self-confidence. There will be days when

Rules of Thumb (continued)

you want to give up. At these low moments you need your life's partner cheering you on, not saying, "I told you so."

Together, examine your financial situation. Is your spouse willing and able to support the family during the lean first years? Do you have enough savings, and are you willing to risk that money? What will you do about health insurance, tuition payments, day care and other expenses?

Marc Blanchette of Hampden, Maine, is one of Sue's success stories. After working from his house he realized that he needed to be in a location with more traffic by his door. He held a powwow with his wife and three teenage sons and reached this compromise. They agreed to mortgage the house and to buy a 12-acre business property on Route 1, at the doorstep to Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park, sites visited by some 5 million people a year. When the kids graduate, Marc and his wife plan to build their new home next to the business. Meanwhile, Marc will commute.

3. Prepare your workspace You probably already have a workspace. But as a pro, you also need an area where you can show your products. And because working wood is only part of the business, you also need an office. The three do not need to be in the same place, though it is handy to have them so. For years, my office was a spare bedroom, and we used the kitchen in our restored 18th-century house as a showroom.

If your shop is in your house or garage, make sure in advance you are not violating any zoning ordinances. The city or town can cause more grief than you can imagine.

When you go pro your workshop becomes your place of business and needs to be treated that way. Most clients want to meet you and see where and how their purchase was made. Don't let your shop's appearance blow a sale. Spend some time thinking about the presentation your space makes.

4. Appear professional Before customers start to call, think about preparing yourself to sound professional and credible. Practice answering the phone in a professional and courteous way. Teach your family to do the same. When you return a call, don't have kids fighting in the background, the television playing or the dog barking.

An answering machine or voice mail is essential. You simply are



The well-equipped teaching area is kept clean and organized. Every tool and template has its place at the Dunbars' school.

not credible if people cannot reach you. Make sure your machine's message is professional, not funny or quirky.

When customers arrive, greet them professionally. It is usually best to schedule visits when the kids are in school. Confine overly friendly or menacing dogs.

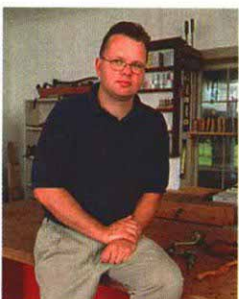
Everyone thinks that "self-employed" do not really work, and your shop can quickly become a hangout. Someone who kills time by wasting yours is stealing from you. This has been a major problem for me for 30 years. Sue and I have learned to subtly but firmly discourage this.

5. Develop an identity for you and your business

The world is full of good woodworkers who cannot sell their products. These people, struggling until the inevitable end, give rise to the old joke: What does a woodworker do when he wins the lottery? Answer: He keeps working wood until the money is all gone.

You will not make a living working wood until you learn to sell—until people give you checks for your work and enough of them to make ends meet. Remember, your commitment in going pro is to make a living, not be a starving artist. Sue advises our students to devote a bare minimum of one day a

From student to successful pro



Former Dunbar student Barry Thompson makes Windsor chairs and good first impressions at his shop and showroom in Virgilina, Va.



Rules of Thumb (continued)

week to marketing. Marketing is a skill that needs to be developed the same way you developed your woodworking skills: through learning and practice.

Take a lesson from politicians—There are lots of woodworkers out there who are as good as you are. So the first thing you must sell is yourself, by developing an image in the customer's mind about you and your work. Sue explains that this is very similar to a political campaign in that voting and buying are both acts of confidence. For a free education, use the next election cycle as a marketing primer.

A politician begins by finding out what the public wants, frequently through polling. Next, he seizes the initiative by defining both himself and his opponent. He controls his image and shapes it in the voters' minds by focusing the voters on the issues that cast him in the best-possible light. He emphasizes his virtues and his opponent's shortcomings. He sprinkles his message with lots of value-loaded words.

Do the same. Begin by knowing your customer. Sue tells our students who go pro that the people who want to buy Windsors fall into two categories. The first is antique people. Old Windsors are so expensive (the record price for a single chair is more than \$50,000) that only the wealthy can afford them. A \$600 handmade copy is a bargain in an antique collector's mind. Another group of potential customers is people who like quality. They buy paintings rather than prints, a Mercedes rather than a Ford.

Determine what sets your work apart. The opponent is factory-made chairs. For a chair maker, the problem is convincing buyers that they should spend \$600 for a chair when chairs are available in many stores at \$79.95. Sue tells students to focus on quality—to point out the joints and engineering that have caused so many 200-year-old Windsors to remain as tight as the day they were made, while factory chairs are at the end of the driveway in a decade. She tells our students to boast that their chairs will be passed on as heirlooms, and to lace their spiel with value-loaded words like timeless, handmade, skill and craftsmanship.

The importance of promotional materials—Even though they are expensive, have good promotional materials. This is so important that Sue strongly advises getting professional advice. Your materials can reflect your personality and be tailored to your line of work. If you do very expensive woodwork for a few select cus-



The Dunbars' showroom and office. Visitors can enter the showroom and take in the antique Windsor chairs and recent reproductions, while the office down a short hallway remains private.

tomers, have an expensive portfolio. Otherwise, consider a three- or four-fold brochure. We have a friend who makes Adirondack chairs and has good luck with a postcard.

Keep some business cards in your wallet and never be without them. Pass them out freely. Have stationery and envelopes printed. Computers are so inexpensive that you should have one if for no other purpose than answering mail. Don't communicate on lined paper crammed into a small, personal-sized envelope.

6. Work the media

You may need to advertise, but it is expensive. And because few publications directly target your potential customers, it is frequently inefficient. Furthermore, most people have a healthy suspicion of advertising. The media, on the other hand, usually are seen as objective third parties, which make them very effective. And media coverage is free.

A good politician and a woodworker going pro need to go to editors and reporters personally. Target the outlets that are read, watched or listened to by your potential customers. This often means the local newspapers and radio and TV stations—above all,



Another success story

Although Windsor chair maker Marc Blanchette is building a new shop/showroom in a tourist area, he will continue to use his Hampden, Maine, home to introduce potential clients to his work. This means keeping the house and grounds in showcase condition. And the former Dunbar student will keep his new workshop as neat and organized as his current one.



Rules of Thumb (continued)

cable. However, for high-end work, it could be architectural and decorator magazines or TV programs with a similar focus. Clip or record the reports about other craftspeople for future reference.

Do not be afraid to approach the media. Remember, editors and reporters have to turn out a newspaper, magazine or show on a regular basis and are always looking for material. It is a lot easier to write about someone who walks through the door than to go out and find suitable people. Do not be afraid to propose yourself as a story. That is how Sue got our business on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*; in *The New York Times* and *Country Living*; and on *New Yankee Workshop*, *Martha Stewart Living* and *The Woodwright's Shop*.

The press release is the easiest way to propose yourself as a story. If you do anything interesting—open your business, get a major contract—or are recognized in any way, send a press release to your targeted media. Including a photo always helps.

If you see a story that relates to your work, call an editor or a reporter. You may be included in a follow-up story. Also, you become a source. The next time the reporter is writing about something similar, you may be called for a quote or for assistance. Being helpful in these ways frequently leads to articles about you.

When an article finally appears, clip it and send copies to all your other targeted outlets. Furniture maker Garry Knox Bennett once told me, "The more media you get, the more media you get."

Get to know a publication's audience and what the audience needs to hear about you and your work. A Windsor chair maker being interviewed by an antique publication should talk about how accurately he or she copies the originals. When talking to a reporter from a high-end decorator magazine, focus on quality.

7. Get out of the shop

We remind our students that a good politician gets out and presses the flesh. He speaks to groups. Do the same. These are some of Sue's suggestions: Join your local woodworking club and do a presentation for them. Contact service groups like the Rotary. Speak to your region's historical societies. Every time you speak you meet potential customers, tap into a network, polish your presentation and create a reason for yet another press release.

High-end craft shows sell booth space and are happy to take your money. However, many of them offer live presentations and demonstrations and will trade booth space for this service. People

are drawn to activity. You will get a lot more attention from the public if you are making a table than if you are standing next to a finished one. Be sure to issue a press release.

A politician knows he can get more done if he has good relations with his colleagues. Do the same. We have a network of past students who have gone pro and all make chairs from our patterns. Working together, we can quickly fill a large order with a couple of phone calls. Even though we work by hand and have limited production, pooling our efforts puts all of us in a position to go after large jobs. Team up formally or informally with other woodworkers. Chairs go around tables, so we have a network of guys who make tables.

8. Clinch the sale

Before you actually have a customer, practice your sales pitch until it is flawless. Enlist someone you trust to act as a customer and to critique you, just as a politician does with trusted advisers before a debate or public appearance.

If there is something about your work that is unique or interesting, prepare a demonstration for your customers. For example, to demonstrate the effectiveness of locking tapers as a leg joint, we clamp a piece of 2-in. pine to the bench. We insert a leg tenon into a reamed hole and tap the leg with a hammer. Then we lift the 300-lb. bench by pulling the leg straight up.

Discuss why your product is best. Mention competitors or alternatives, but do so cautiously. When made in person, such comparisons can seem more harsh than when made in print and can hurt the customer's impression of you.

Your media exposure has presented you as an interesting person. If you are laconic or expressionless, work on projecting a more bubbly personality. Sue had to train one student to not glower when talking to other people. He did not even know he was doing it. I am painfully shy and would rather have teeth extracted than meet new people. Sue worked a long time to train me to appear outgoing even though my guts are churning. Sue suggests videotape so students can see themselves as others see them. Ask whether you would buy from the person you are watching.

And if all else fails, consider this tip from Barry Thompson, of Virgilina, Va. Barry is the most successful student we have ever had go pro. One of his most effective techniques is to have a customer take a chair home and use it.

They fall in love with it and buy it every time.

Good promotional materials speak volumes



Former Dunbar student Randall Henson, of Colchester, Vt., uses promotional correspondence such as this postcard to sell himself and his work. Serious clients get a more detailed mailing that includes photos of Henson's chair types, a milk-paint color chart and a personalized letter that describes construction techniques, prices and shipping costs.

