



Welcome to the Wonderful World of Wholesale

By Diane Sulg

Have you ever dreamed of seeing your handmade creations in stores or galleries? It can happen!

The mantra of retail is “what’s new,” so store owners and buyers are always looking for great new merchandise to please their customers. You might be making just what they need to light up their store.

If you are a creative person producing art or craft items, you most likely sell them in person at art fairs or on a digital platform like Etsy. If you have developed a devoted following of customers, that is an excellent sign you have popular products that could sell very well in stores.

Can your mind’s eye see your products displayed in a shop? If so, read on!

In this series of articles, we are going to thoroughly explore the wholesale market, so you can understand it and be prepared to flourish in it. Selling wholesale may not be right for everyone, but thousands of artists have transformed their businesses by selling dozens of their products to shops and galleries.

It is worth your time to learn if this is right for you as an artist, a maker, and a businessperson. You truly can become “the creative wholesaler.”

Let’s begin by defining what “wholesale” means. Simply put, it is selling your goods to retailers who will resell them to their customers. The first important

word there is “selling” — meaning you are getting paid, usually upfront, for your goods.

Some of you might have put your work into a shop “on consignment.” However, technically, that is not wholesale because you will only be paid if and when the store sells it.

One of the big advantages of wholesale is knowing you will be paid before you make the work. Yes, you will need samples and probably some printed materials. However, based on just a few samples, you can get an order for dozens more. A wholesale order lets you invest in materials with confidence, and you know your time making the items is compensated as well.



Pictured is Maddi's Gallery, Diane Sulg's former store in Charlotte, North Carolina. It is an example of the type of shop that has wholesale opportunities for artists.
Photo courtesy of Diane Sulg

There are many other advantages to doing wholesale. You may be tired of the art fair circuit, where you pack up your wares, travel to an event, and hope both the crowd and the weather are favorable.

Many artists are shocked when they closely analyze the time and money they spend driving to shows, staying in hotels, setting up and taking down their booth, and risking bad weather or poor crowds. You can sell wholesale and still go to art fairs to sell retail.

But if you have a solid wholesale business, it means you can spend more time in your studio producing and less time traveling. Many successful wholesale artists do three or four of their favorite shows annually.

You also do not have to wholesale your entire line of work. You can reserve intricate, expensive, or time-consuming work for your retail market and only wholesale those items you can produce efficiently.

For example, if you are an artist who paints, you might consider selling prints of your originals. Taking some of your popular artwork and applying it to toys,

home décor, fabric, and paper products might catapult you to fame!

There is no doubt having your work in stores is prestigious. Adding a list of quality shops and galleries to your resume may open doors to other high-end shows, exhibits, and stores. Plus, your faithful customers will be even happier knowing your fame and success are spreading.

Selling wholesale can make you a better businessperson because you are officially in the business of selling in volume. That will stretch you to become more analytical about your materials, both in terms of costs and sourcing.

By necessity, your studio or workspace will become more organized. You will be more attentive to small product details such as size, shape, and packaging.

Very likely, you will be hiring help for packing, shipping, and prep work. If you want to be rewarded with a consistent and substantial income stream, a wholesale business can be the answer.

Right now, you might be asking, "So what's the downside of wholesaling?" First, it is hard work. It takes

commitment, organization, and persistence to consistently produce high-quality goods.

You will need to develop excellent marketing skills to reach store owners and buyers because they are your new customers. In the beginning, you will face a huge number of new challenges.

However, the good news is thousands of artists have faced these same problems, and there are so many ways today to learn how they solved them. Just enter your query into a computer browser and you are off to a good start.

One of the biggest fears most makers have is pricing their goods for the wholesale market — "How can I afford to cut my prices, perhaps more than 50%?"

That understandably translates to "I will only have half as much income!" Let me squelch that fear right now.

Yes, the wholesale price will be a lot lower than your retail price. Yes, you might have to examine and adjust your costs, materials, sourcing, and overhead.

Most importantly, you are going to learn how to arrive at a solid wholesale price that covers all your costs and makes you a good profit because you are selling in volume. We will devote an entire article to the art of wholesale pricing in a later issue, so stay tuned!

One of the most important adjustments in selling wholesale is truly understanding who your new customer is. Up until now, you have been dealing with individuals buying your goods.

Most likely, very few of them are repeat customers, especially if you have been traveling to a lot of art shows. Naturally, you have given them good service and a fine product, perhaps with an artist bio and a business card so they can contact you to purchase again.

When you begin to sell wholesale, you have a whole new set of customers. They are retailers, and you want them to become repeat buyers.

Yes, the end user needs to be attracted to your product and satisfied when they purchase it at the store. However, they are not your customer. They are the store's customer.

Your customer is the store, and your mission as a wholesaler is to build a solid, long-lasting relationship with the retailer. Just as you sought to please the individual at the art fair, now you need to work to please the store buyer.



Market Success Story

“The Atlanta Market is my only wholesale show. I have been exhibiting there for 17 years and in the Handmade section for the past seven years. I create fused glass jewelry and glass sculptures for the home and garden, items like birds, flowers, and Christmas trees. My current retail buyers faithfully return to the show to see my new work and to place orders, and I also have new buyers at every show. My sales have been so good, my production calendar is full. I do not need to do any other shows, and my business has been growing steadily. Initially, I chose Atlanta Market because it was a day’s drive away for me to try it. It ended up being the best decision I ever made!”

— Toni Chirico



Juelerye, in Mooresville, North Carolina, features handcrafted items from a variety of artists.
Photo courtesy of Diane Sulg

The goal is to have the retailer place an order and repeatedly reorder your merchandise. You want the retailer to be so pleased doing business with you that reorders are placed several times a year and for many years to come.

That is the inherent beauty of wholesale. You stay in your workshop making goods and taking orders on your computer without having to travel.

When you truly understand that the retailer is your customer, you adjust your pricing, production, policies, and marketing to support the retailer. Not that every retailer is always right, but if you are a new wholesaler and your customer has been in business for many years, they’ve probably survived a recession, a pandemic, skyrocketing rent, and a lot of demanding customers with a high degree of intelligence and grace. So, by all means, pay attention to their advice and suggestions.

Make retailers your new friends. Listen to them. Prove yourself and your product to them. Make your minimum order reasonable.

Give them the information and the marketing materials they need to sell your merchandise. Give them your story. Tell them what is unique about your work.

Give them great service. Ship exactly what they ordered and do so

on time. If you have a problem, give them a heads up.

Work to upgrade your product and your business so they are continually pleased and impressed. Thank them for their business. It is the foundation of your business success!

Hopefully, you are interested in learning more about becoming a successful wholesale artist. In the next chapter of this series, we are going to examine your product line to discover what might make it special and appealing to retailers.

Along the way, if you have questions or comments, feel free to email them to me at the address below. Hopefully, we can all share excellent ways for you to become the creative wholesaler! ✨

Are You Ready to Wholesale?

See page 32 for upcoming webinar with Diane Sulg.

Diane Sulg is executive director of CRAFT and founder & co-chair of American Craft Week (ACW). She is a handmade advocate who



provides valuable information in her one-day seminars at wholesale shows throughout the United States. She can be reached at dianesulg@gmail.com.