

Your homestead business:

Love what you do

The pitfalls of turning a hobby into a business

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When I was in high school, I was particularly fond of a certain fast-food restaurant's, er, "cuisine." In 1980, during the summer before I went to college, I had my first official job—working at this same fast-food restaurant.

I haven't eaten there since.

It was a true case of familiarity breeds contempt. After making this food, day after day, week after week, the last thing in the world I wanted to do was actually *eat* the stuff.

Could this happen to you? Could familiarity breed contempt?

It is a little-imagined shortcoming of turning your hobby into a business, particularly a business that provides your major income and supports your family. You no longer have the luxury of *not* making the product. You may get to the point where no longer love what you do.

Got a headcold? Tough. Feel lazy today? Too bad. Want a weekend off? Uh-huh. Want to go to a New Year's Eve party? Ain't happening, especially if you have a shipment due January 2.

Your hobby is no longer a hobby. Your hobby is a business. Welcome to the real world.

Love what you do?

Imagine that you have a hobby of, say, quilting. You spend hours working on a particularly lovely quilt. You feel great pride as you display it at

a craft show. You feel even greater pride when some grateful customer plops down hundreds of dollars for your unique hand-crafted item.

Great, you think. It's time to turn this hobby into a business!

Fast-forward three years. You've burned out two sewing machines. Your back aches from hunching for hours over the quilting table. You got stiffed from the idiot whose custom-quilt wasn't quiiiiite what he was hoping for, and so backed out of the deal. Your spare bedroom is filled to the brim with finished quilts, unfinished quilts, and fabric scraps. You're frazzled because three customers want their quilts *now* and don't understand why you can't produce them this instant. Your kids are whining for food/medical care/attention. You're on deadline to make 16 quilts for the show/fair/store when your fabric supplier says there's a glitch in the shipment and your new fabrics won't match your prior purchases...

Arrgghh! Quilts quilts quilts! You never want to see another damned quilt in your life!

It's one thing to imagine how nice it would be to turn your beloved craft into a business. It's quite another thing to actually *succeed* in that business...and then have to face the idea of making that craft item hour after hour, day after day, year after year.

Flip sides of the same coin

Prepare to have a love/hate relationship with your home craft product after awhile. On the one hand, you'll streamline your production

techniques until your production runs are like a well-oiled machine, you'll support your family, and you'll get to work at home.

One the other hand, you now loath the particular craft item and, if your business suddenly failed, you would be happy to never make another such item in your life.

My husband and I manufacture wooden tankards. Over the past 14 years we've honed this item into a wholesale business that supports us. It's been a struggle, but we now have the satisfaction of having succeeded as a business.

Do we *love* our tankards? I'm not sure.

Don't get me wrong, we are immensely proud of our product. Even now we can stand back and say, "This is a particularly handsome batch." We'll walk around, say, a Renaissance Faire and see dozens of people walking around with them, which makes us burst our buttons with pride.

It's just that the tankards are now...well, a business. Not a hobby. We've gone on to other hobbies. We've had to.

So do we love our tankards? Of course we do. Sort of. Maybe. In a manner of speaking.

A change of attitude

When you're no longer doing something for fun, but instead for a profit, you lose something. Don't worry, you also *gain* something, but it may take awhile.

Let me relate a slightly unrelated story as an illustration. Many years

ago, I worked as a wildlife biologist for the Bureau of Land Management. I spent my days traipsing through the woods, surveying various species of animals. Hot or cold, raining or clear, in good weather and in bad, I was out in the woods. In many ways it was a rewarding and even exciting job (remind me to tell you about the time I met a bear). Other times it was a job filled with drudgery, physical discomfort, and even danger (remind me to tell you about the time I met a bunch of drunken rednecks).

One weekend I got together with some dear friends from college. These friends were avid backpackers, as was I in my college days. They showed me a photo album of their latest backpacking trip full of photos of glorious vistas and athletic hikers.

That photo album stayed on my mind. Later that week, while surveying red tree voles, I criss-crossed a section of forest and wondered, "Why haven't I been backpacking in so long?" I felt left out from an activity I had thoroughly enjoyed in my college days.

I had a "duh" moment as I waded through an area of waist-high ferns. Oh yeah...I now backpacked, so to speak, for a living. I had "lost" my hobby because it had become a business.

On the other hand, it was time to consider what I had "gained" — namely, the opportunity to work in the woods on a daily basis, something my college friends would have envied as they commuted through traffic-clogged highways to their office jobs.

That's what will happen with your home craft business. You may lose the sheer enjoyment of making your product for fun. You will gain satisfaction in knowing that you are living every corporate office-drone's fantasy dream of living and working at home.

To hobby or not to hobby

Should you avoid turning your hobby into a business because you'll lose the enjoyment of it? Not necessarily.

If your hobby has the potential to

supply you with an income — perhaps enough income to replace your day job — then it would be a foolish thing to reject such a God-given opportunity just because you'll lose some of the original pleasure you had. There are many other advantages to replace a possible loss of enjoyment.

The opportunity to work at home. The freedom (in our case of being able to move to the country) that this opportunity may give you. No commuting. More time with your kids and spouse. Being your own boss. The pride of success. The list is endless....and surely these benefits outweigh the loss of enjoyment of your original hobby?

Get out of the rut

So how do you recapture the love — or at least the enjoyment — of your craft?

You may need to find things that will continue to feed your interest in the basic product. If you make quilts, for instance, every once in awhile make something wild and wacky just for fun — a quilt made out of fluorescent nylon, for instance, or a Star Wars quilt. What the heck.

When my husband Don gets tired of the same ol' thing when it comes to wooden tankards, he starts either making wacky variations on a theme (three-pronged handles, for example) or he starts making weird alternative products.

In other words, do something that recaptures that spark of creativity that led you to making your craft to begin with. Fancy something up. Stretch your imagination.

Every year we do the Kansas City Renaissance Faire. Our booth managers work their fannies off selling hundreds and hundreds of tankards. While they're doing that, we are furiously busy at home trying to keep up with them. We get grumpy, exhausted, and burned out by the endless work.

So every year we try to supply the booth with something new and strange and wacky. It adds zest to an otherwise butt-hard few months of work.

We can't stop making our basic

styles in favor of the wacky ones, of course. That would be killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. Besides, we never know what wacky item will sell, and what won't.

One year we came up with this spiffy idea that we were sure would sell by the hundreds. Get this: a tankard mounted on top of a walking staff. Great idea, right? *Not*. The contents of the tankard sloshes as people walked, and every time you wanted to take a drink, you were in danger of whacking passersby with the staff part as you lifted it to take a drink. Oh well.

Last year we made shot glasses, or miniaturized versions of our tankards. We had requests for these but had resisted because we were certain that no one in his right mind would pay \$12 to \$15 apiece for such a tiny item. Still, our booth managers begged, so we put together a hundred of them and sent them to Kansas City.

The booth was mobbed. All 100 sold within two hours. Go figure.

So sometimes your wacky variation-on-a-theme can turn into an additional money-maker. And sometimes it won't. Either way, though, you've had a break from routine and had a little fun, so it's worth it.

Continue your education

Here's a tax-deductible way to recapture the love of your craft: get more education.

No, you don't have to go back to college. But half the fun of originally learning your craft was to learn something new, and then applying it. Now's your chance to continue that venture.

If you make quilts, for instance, you can take that speed-quilting class you've heard about. If you do woodworking, you can attend that seminar on the latest whiz-bang tool selection. You can subscribe to appropriate magazines or purchase relevant books. You can take a business or marketing class. You can attend shows and conferences — not necessarily as a vendor, but for "professional development" (remember, tax deductible!).

Pass it on

Have some specialized knowledge? Pass it on to someone else who is interested!

The thing about turning your hobby into a business is that you become an expert in that craft. I mean, c'mon... how many six-sided wooden tankards makers are there in the world? We have become experts in the manufacturing of this specialized crafts. Gee.

So, to keep your interest up, try giving away some of your expert knowledge. Teach.

I don't mean you have to give away your trade secrets. But finding an eager teenager or a new stay-at-home mom who is interested in learning some basic skills (sewing or quilting or woodworking or welding) can do wonders to add zip to your life. By watching someone else express enthusiasm for your craft, you can rekindle some of the enthusiasm with which you went into this business to begin with.

Besides, you may learn something by teaching others.

When all else fails...

Take a break. Go on vacation. Get away from it all (even if you don't leave home).

I'll admit, this is one of those do-what-we-say-not-what-we-do pieces of advice. We haven't been on a vacation in years. However, since our business is seasonal, we have down times during which we don't have to work as hard.

Even a "busman's holiday" can jumpstart your batteries.

Since we are primarily a wholesale business, we seldom leave home. However, every so often we'll do a retail show just for a change.

For example, every year I do the Oregon Brewer's Festival in Portland, Oregon. (I like to joke that I'm the perfect person to run a booth at a beer festival because I hate beer.) We work long hours preparing stock for the show, it's a 10-hour drive away, it's a lot of hard work to set the booth up (and pack away our stock every night to avoid theft), and I have to deal with mas-

sive crowds (something between 50 and 70 thousand people attend the festival). I smile a lot and talk for four straight days about our product (my mouth literally aches at the end of the show). I'm exhausted by the end of it, but I still have to break down the booth and drive 10 hours to get home.

Yet I love doing it. I get away from home, I get to be in a big city (a novelty), I get to mingle with people, I get to attend an extraordinarily well-run and well-monitored event, and I make some money. What's not to love?

The bottom line

So what's the bottom line? Is it an automatic thing that you will grow to hate your craft if you turn it from a hobby into a business? Well, yes and no. I have bad news and good news.

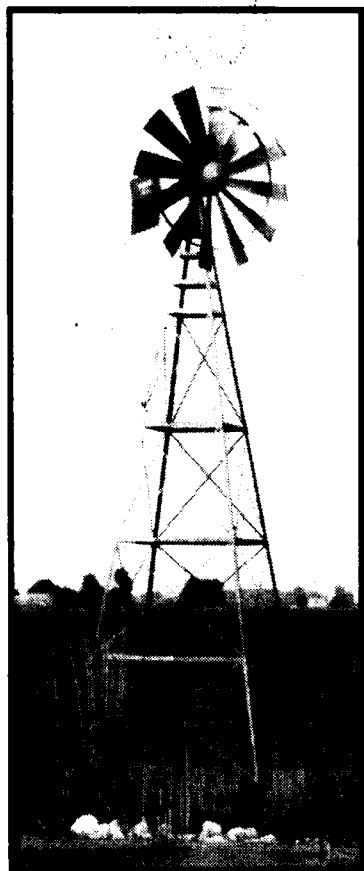
The bad news is that your relationship with your craft product will forever be changed once you turn it into a business. You will seldom, if ever, make that product just for the sheer enjoyment of it.

The good news is that you will, eventually, get a "second wind." You will discover techniques that will streamline your process and allow you to produce a higher-quality product in less time (which, trust me, is a rush). You will learn all the peripheral parts of running a business—marketing, advertising, money-management. You will experience great pride in your business as your customer base expands. And you'll make money (enough said).

As far as loving what you do... how many of you can say, truthfully, that you "love" your day job? Wouldn't it be more satisfying to derive your income from a business you've built with the sweat of your brow?

Now *that's* something you can love.

Patrice has also written a book: *Life 101: 101 Lessons in Simple Living*, which will be available soon! We'll announce further updates as we receive them.



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