

SYSTEM REQUEST – Artisan's Co-op North

Project Sponsor

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Opportunity Statement:

I have been working with a talented group of part-time artists for a while now. They create amazing objects which are then sold at various venues. Currently they either bring or send their art to my home and I store this inventory in my basement between events. I also keep track of what is available – and what has sold – in a vaguely automated way. When there were only a couple of artists and we only exhibited at a few arts and crafts fairs, this worked just fine. However, we have a lot more members now and are taking part in a lot of fairs and shows...even talking about a weekend-open store front or market stall. We are going to need some technology to make *that* happen!

Proposed Product:

Background and Context:

Artisans' Co-op North isn't a "company" per se, but rather a group of part-time artists and craftspeople brought together by a shared desire to create and sell objects that are both beautiful and useful. They are homemakers, students, grandparents, and people with other fulltime day jobs. Their talents include woodworking, jewelry making, quilting and needlework, pottery, visual art...in other words the wide range of artistic items one finds at an arts fair, craft festival or even a county fair or farmer's market.

My (Ms. Weltz) role is as a type of business facilitator. The "warehouse" of objects is located in my basement. I coordinate fair booths, keep track of the inventory and make sure each artisan is paid for what is sold. Each member artisan pays annual dues, and a percentage of what is sold remains with the Co-op to cover expenses (including a small amount for my time and effort). Costs of participating in a given show are split among those wishing to be represented therein, and all members are expected to volunteer their time "manning the booth" at a few events each year.

Our record keeping and sales processing are SO last century. I hope you can build us a computer application that will bring us up to 2017!

Initial Vision and Scope:

➤ *Automating the Co-op*

I don't see this as particularly revolutionary. We need to be able to keep track of objects by type of art/craft, description/name of the item, and name of artisan. Each piece has a current selling price. Right now I use Excel as a kind of ledger to handle that; could that all become more computerized in some way? Similarly, I'd like to explore having inventory tracking, sales and paying artisans more automated. Maybe even introduce bar codes to our operation (?).

Another thing that we hope to gain by using a computer is the ability for each artisan to track their own object sales any time they want to. Currently they either need to call or email me and I have to send them a listing, or they wait until I send them a monthly update. Several have said they would like to be able to check in more often, thus being able to make more of the items that are currently most popular (and avoiding making more of things that are selling more slowly). Artisans don't need to see each other's sales and we obviously don't want outsiders seeing our private business, but I know there are ways to handle that sort of thing on the Web.

➤ *Receiving Objects*

Right now I do all of the inventory check-in. What I'd like to see is some kind of app that would allow others to easily record new objects as they arrive. Or even allow artists to enter via the web what they are sending (or bringing) to the warehouse ahead of time. That way when the objects actually arrive all we'd have to do is check them in. That would save SO much time!

➤ *"In-store" Point of Sale support*

➤ *Sales Support via Tablet (and/or phone?)*

We need to be able to handle cash or credit card sales at events more efficiently. It would be great to get away from writing paper receipts, and into a situation where we could use mobile computing devices to support sales transactions. It would also be helpful to have good descriptions of products available to people working in our booth. Sometimes all one can say when asked for details about someone else's art is "Gee, I really don't know!" I know there are devices and apps available. Could something like this be integrated into our processes?

➤ *Virtual Arts and Crafts Fair* – We have a web site (ACoOpNorth.com), but it is currently minimal: information on who we are, what we do and where, and how to contact us via email. Oh yes, and a few pictures to introduce us and give people an idea of what we sell. We think now might be a good time to *really* move into the 21st Century with Internet shopping, but have a feeling that some of our needs (dreams?) might be a bit unusual.

Our shoppers are browsers. They might come to the booth hoping to see certain types of objects ("I'd love to pick up a wooden paper towel rack or some knitted dishcloths this year."), but mostly are "just looking". They want to look around the booth in a leisurely manner. If something catches their eye, well that's a sale about to be made. The problem with a lot of typical Web shopping sites is that they are geared towards looking at a single product (or product type) at a time. It seems to me they even assume shoppers know pretty much what they want to buy before they ever visit the site. That is efficient shopping, to be sure, but is just not the way an arts and crafts show works. What we're looking for is more the ability to move around the display area, view objects far away or close up, and then select what you want to buy.

What about the possibility of doing something with cameras that would allow an online customer to view the range of currently available items as if they were in the store? The room we currently use to warehouse objects can likely be used for this, although I realize things will have to be more "on display" than they are right now. (My husband and I can handle that end of things as long as we know what is important for the camera.) What I don't know is exactly how the automation would be accomplished. Would it be multiple cameras that people would control with their mouse? One of our artisans suggested small robots that could move a camera around the room. I'm not familiar with that sort of thing, but thought I'd pass along his idea. I also don't know how people would actually select an item, although I know that is done all the time with a simple mouse-click on typical Web shopping sites.

Stakeholders Identified:

- Artisan Members – who would like a more efficient and modern way to track inventory, make sales, and track sales.
- Myself and others who help out on the business end. We need to be more efficient (and accurate).
- Our customers – people who enjoy browsing through and buying beautiful things.

Expected Benefits:

- Opportunity 1 – preserve my sanity; reduce paperwork; provide better reporting to member artisans. Make it easier to reconcile inventory and payments with artists at the end of each year (for income tax purposes, for example).
- Opportunity 2 – improve our sales experience.
- Opportunity 3 – "seize the day"; widen the scope of our sales via Internet shopping.

Special Issues or Constraints:

We're not made of money. Member artisans are willing to contribute to the cost of new equipment and programs, but we're talking a few hundred (not thousand) dollars each from maybe 15 – 20 people. Similarly, I'm not sure everyone is going to be excited to run out and buy a new phone or tablet computer just to manage sales or use this system. (Although maybe we could handle that with a few purchases "by the co-op".)

Also, our artisans represent a wide range of computer skills and types of computers they know and use. Some are really into their smartphones and others aren't. And some are Macs and others are Windows. Pretty typical people.

I don't think we are on a particularly tight time schedule. We've missed the Christmas craft season already, so the goal for fairs and events is the Spring or Summer season. The sales-via-web piece could be more down the road if that would mean the rest could be finished sooner.