The Artist and the Internet: The Importance of a Personal Web Site

A Panel Discussion Segment at the Artist and the Internet Panel Discussion
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If an artist is serious about becoming a professional, they must accept that their profession is, in some part, a business. And while we as artists may balk at that reality, there are a few things we can do that will advance our business in dramatic but simple ways. One of the best things we can do as artists and business people is to create a personal web site.

Why a site?

- It's hands down the cheapest form of advertising and showcasing your work that is available today, and infinitely cheaper than print ads, postcards and brochures (at $8/month, you can't find a better business vehicle).

- You can send out emails with your website address as a link (or better yet, use a link to your site as a part of your signature file). You can even send out email newsletters promoting your site... it's free and easy!

- With the address on your business card, you can advertise yourself easily to anyone you meet. People can look up your site at their convenience, and contact you for opportunities. That's how I got in my best gallery in Rehoboth Beach.

- You expose yourself to the world, where people can stumble on your site for any number of reasons and lead you to opportunities.

- It's the cheapest, easiest, and most efficient way to keep current with your collectors and others on your mailing list.

- It forces you to keep a record of your work, however limited that record may be.

Note: Don't expect to make any sales directly from your site. Research indicates this rarely if ever happens. But it can certainly lead to a sale from your studio or gallery, and be used to introduce people to your work that haven't heard of you before.

What you'll need:

- A domain name (yourname.com)
  Register your domain at a domain registration site, like Dotster.com ($15/year).

- A site host
  Think of this as someone's computer where your site is stored and the internet hookup is left on all the time... because that's just what it is. For this service, money changes hands–anywhere from $8/month to $25/month or more.

  There are many site hosts, and some domain registration sites will also host your site for a fee.

  It's important to shop around for this information. For instance, one of the original companies offering these services still does... it's one of the most expensive around, and if you change your mind or make a mistake and order the wrong thing (a client of mine did), they don't give refunds. It's important to know who plays fair and who takes advantage of you.

- A site and a way of maintaining it.
  – You can hire a designer to put one together for you and maintain it for you. For the technically challenged, this is the easiest way to go. Some people claim to be able to build a site for as little as $350... I don't see how, if you do it right (and have alot of art to show). Expect to pay between $500 and $1500 for a site done right.

  – You can hire a designer to put one together and you can maintain it (it will take some learning on your part, and the purchase of some software).

  – You can do it all yourself.
  If you do it all yourself, you'll need:

    1. Either a WYSIWYG editing software package like Adobe GoLive, Macromedia Dreamweaver or Microsoft FrontPage, or know how to hand code a site in HTML

    2. An image editing software package like Adobe Photoshop or PaintShop Pro.

    3. If you hand code the site and/or opt out of using the software's internet connectivity option, you'll need what is called an FTP client, which is software that allows you to connect to your host computer and load/delete files to and from your site. For Mac users, this will be Fetch. For PC users, I hear Cute FTP is great. There are others, but that seems to be the most popular.

       Web design software programs are not easy to learn! They are very complex, and take a lot of time (and frustration) to learn. Having said that, if you do choose to learn how to use them, you'll have the freedom of being in complete control of
       your site and updating it from now on, and that can both save you money and inconvenience, as well as give you greater flexibility and freedom as you advance your career. I just don't want to mislead you by saying, "Sure! It's EASY! Just jump right in!"

7 Things an Artist's Website Should Do:

1. Contain all the information a person might need on you, as you would in the traditional "Artist's Packet". A basic site outline should contain the following pages:
   Home · Gallery · Statement · Bio · News · (Classes) · (Links) · Contact

2. GOOD shots of your art! I'm amazed at how artists present their work! Learn how to shoot/scan your work correctly yourself, or have someone else do it. I recommend Rieger Communications (301.869.8300 / www.rieger.com) here in Gaithersburg.

3. BE BRIEF. Let the work speak for itself

4. Be easy to get around. There should be CLEAR & COMPLETE navigation on EVERY page on the first two levels. There's nothing more frustrating that getting lost on a site and not knowing how to get to where you want to go! Not all artists think this through.

    I personally always prefer to be able to navigate THROUGH the close-ups in a site, and not have to return to the Gallery after viewing each picture at a larger size. At the same time, I should also be able to return to the gallery page easily from any detail page I may be on. You'll realize the advantage of this as soon as you get to a site where you can't do that.

5. Have at least ONE way for the public to contact you. Some people hesitate to put their contact information online for security reasons. I understand. But people have to have a way of reaching you... even if it's just an email address (and it could be a separate email address from your usual one — most site hosts provide at least one address with the site).

6. The site needs to work on both PC AND Mac platforms! Most people use PCs, and alot of web designers only test for PCs because of that. However, a lot of creatives use a Mac, so you really should test for both.

7. It MUST load quickly! Despite the greater availability of broadband connections, most users still connect to the Internet via a dial-up connection. And statistics say that if your page doesn't load in 7 seconds, the viewer will go to another site. Because artist's sites are so image intense, I think we can be flexible on that 7 second rule... but know that if it takes more than a minute or two to load, you will definitely lose the viewer. To accomplish this,

    — Keep the total file size of your page SMALL (this means the sum of all the files that appear on your page... that means every graphic element as well as images of art etc). When I first began designing sites over five years ago, the rule of thumb was to keep a page less than 40kb in total size! (home pages were allowed to be a LITTLE larger). I give some leeway to artist and photographer sites, since they are so image intensive. Still, you must keep them as small as possible.

    — KEEP THE FILE SIZE OF YOUR IMAGES SMALL!!!!!!! DON'T have any image files over 80k (NOTE: this applies to FILE SIZE, not IMAGE SIZE! File size can be optimized by the "Save to web" command in Photoshop).

    I can go to virtually ANY artist's site and find image files of 600k on up. THIS IS A CRIME! If you have a dial up connection, it'll take YEARS for your page to load at that rate.

    If you have multiple large images on a given page, keep it to just a few; have many linked pages rather than one large page. I try not to have any more than six large images per page on any given site.

Optimizing images and pages in Photoshop

1. In Photoshop, you can "save to web", which will optimize your image to it's smallest file size (as distinct from image size), but with the best resolution possible. You have complete control over this step, and you can adjust your image for maximum quality. ANY

OPTIMIZING YOU DO WILL RADICALLY REDUCE THE FILE SIZE OF YOUR IMAGE. Most artists don't do this.

(NOTE: to see the size of the image being loaded, look at the "Status Bar" of your browser – it's the bar at the bottom of your browser window, and it'll list the name of the graphic being loaded and it's size. Anything over 80kb for a large image is obscene. And 80kb is pretty obscene in itself!)

2. Use separate images for thumbnails and close-ups. In most artist's sites, they use a thumb-nail image on a "gallery" style page, which when clicked on, leads to a larger image on a "detail" page. Since the browser must load each image on a page when the page loads, it is best to have two sets of images – thumbnails and detail images – so that when you're on the gallery page, only the smallest thumbnail pictures load, which saves the viewer a lot of time. If the viewer wants to see a larger image, they can click on the thumbnail image and the detail page will load. This way the viewer will only have to wait for the large images to load that they really want to see (which may not be all of them).

   Some people just use one image for both the thumbnail and the detail image. The problem with this is that the viewer's browser must load the full large sized image, and then it must resize the image it just loaded... and this can take absolutely FOREVER. Add to that that most artists don't optimize their images, and you can literally wait for hours with a dial-up connection to see a single "gallery" style page of images on a site. Believe me, I have been to them!

If you do those two things, whatever else you do on your site, you'll be miles ahead of most artist's sites.