

WHY DO PEOPLE BUY ART, ANYWAY?

by Todd Bingham

I have now officially been in the art gallery business for a quarter of a century (yipes!) and for nearly three quarters of that time, I've been training salespeople.

One might suppose that in all that time, I would have solidified the answer to the question: why do people buy art?

I haven't.

Actually, addressing the issue itself has become a staple of my sales training workshop, during which I routinely pose the question,

"Why do you think people buy art?"

As the class tosses out the first thing that comes to their minds, I list their answers on the flip chart. The answers are typical, every time I ask the question:

Because they love it.

Because they want to decorate.

Because they want what the Joneses have.

Because they want what the Joneses <don't> have.

Because they're thinking of it as an investment.

Because they can.

All great answers and all correct, if a little specious. And even though I haven't come up with the one, single most compelling reason people buy art, I do have one that does not occur to most salespeople. It is also one I submit would help them most in doing what they are called to do.

People buy art as a <benchmark> to their lives.

WHAT IS A BENCHMARK, EXACTLY?

Webster's says: "a standard by which something can be measured or judged." The more colloquial usage, however, is one of suggesting a high mark, something memorable, something so meaningful that the experience of it is imprinted on our consciousness. Like a wedding. Or a birth.

As I look back over all those years of selling artwork I recall conversations I have had with collectors about the art they purchased, and the significance the purchase had — and more importantly — continues to have in their lives, I maintain one indelible truth about art: even though they might not

have thought so at the time, the acquisition of a work of art for most collectors is a high mark for them. A benchmark.

“Oh, Harry, remember when we purchased that little landscape?” one can imagine Mrs. Jones saying, “We were on holiday in Carmel, weren’t we? Gosh, that must be ten years ago, now. What a wonderful trip that was....” And at the mere mention of it, Mrs. Jones is right back in Carmel again, on holiday, reliving a memorable and significant experience with her husband.

What other purchase can do that?

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR US?

“Sure, Bingham,” you’re thinking, “But I’m not selling expensive landscapes to well-healed collectors in a tony Carmel gallery.”

Right. I’m not either. But here’s the point: as salespeople, to <whatever degree possible> , the more <we> think of their experience with us in that context, the more compelling the experience becomes, and the more irresistible the artwork appears. The more we understand that concept, no, the more often we <remember> the concept, the more effective we will be.

Because we are just our customers, aren’t we? Haven’t we all got a story like Mrs. Jones’? But we tend to forget how exciting it is to acquire artwork. We get complacent.

Here’s a word picture to drive the point home:

Years ago, my wife had an ectopic pregnancy and we lost the baby during surgery. Afterwards, in the post-op room, I came to see her. I was understandably a little anxious (read: about to throw up on my shirt). Here’s the scene as I walked in: she’s unconscious, an IV in her arm and her doctor, with his feet up on her bed, was talking about putting his boat in the water that weekend.

Bad doctor? Unfeeling? Inconsiderate? Maybe. But probably more to the point is that for my wife and me, it was a horror. For the doctor, just a day at the office.

We, as salespeople, need to remember that our collectors come into our galleries infrequently. We’re there every day. They come in looking, <whether they realize it or not>, for a high water mark. We, by contrast, are often very likely tired of the looking at the same old art.

This is more than just being an enthusiastic salesperson. There are shades of nuance to this concept that go beyond just being polite and upbeat. This is what <professional salespeople> are about.

There is temptation on the part of many salespeople to think of themselves as order-takers.

“Look,” they seem to be thinking, “they’re in an art gallery. If they like it, they should buy it.”

But the customers don't know that. They don't know they're looking for a benchmark experience. That doesn't occur to them until afterward. The customers aren't even <looking for art>.

We know that. We're professional salespeople. We know that if we present the experience of purchasing artwork as every bit as important as the art itself, then the collector's enjoyment of it will be that much more enduring. And so will our relationship with them.

WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE?

So, do people buy art to decorate? To keep up with the Joneses? As an investment? Sure they do. But they won't do it as often <with us> as they will if we ensure that their "collecting experience" was uplifting and memorable.

I train salespeople to be patient. I tell 'em "Don't talk so much about the art in the gallery. Talk about <art>. Talk about collecting. Talk about the joys of having a collection of art."

Not unlike putting footings in the foundation of a house, if you take the time to do it right, the house will stay standing a lot longer.

We can't give our customers a benchmark experience with just product knowledge. Or measurements. Or frame choices. We have to give 'em Barnum and Bailey! We have to give them the E Channel!

Remember what Oscar Levant said:

"Happiness isn't something you experience; it's something you remember."

You want to be part of what they remember the next time the topic of artwork comes up.

Todd Bingham is a consultant and sales trainer to the art gallery business. He has often stood on a chair and sung a few bars from "Fiddler on the Roof" while in the throes of a sales presentation. In association with Art World News, he has written five books on the subject of selling art. He can be reached at: www.toddbinghamfineart.com, or at 800/697-8935.