

The following is a blog entry written by Joe Bennion, a well-known woodfire potter who runs Horseshoe Mountain Pottery in Spring City, Utah - www.horseshoemountainpottery.com.

On Community and Commerce

Joe Bennion, 2009

Nineteen years ago I had my work in 15-20 different galleries across the country. The work was all on consignment. I got checks when the work sold but not until they did. The checks trickled in. I sold at a few craft fairs and at my studio on selected open house days. I was slowly starving to death. I had just quit my part time teaching job in hopes of making it on pottery sales alone. It was not working.

One day as I was standing in my studio looking out at Main Street it occurred to me that I should start a newsletter. I remember the moment very clearly. I had been receiving a newsletter from one of the galleries that carried my work. It was written by Joanne Onaga at the Little Tokyo Clay Works. It was very simple. It appeared to have been Xeroxed, hand-colored, and stapled together. It told about the gallery and profiled some of her artists. It was very inclusive and invited the reader to become part of what was happening at Joanne's gallery even from afar.

I set out to write something like that for myself, and Horseshoe Mountain Pottery News was born. I started writing at the cafe in town as I sipped on a Coke. The cafe owners took an interest in what I was doing. They were retired graphic designers, and asked if they could help with it and get some pottery for the cafe in exchange. The result was satisfactory and our studio sales doubled with the first edition. When the second one came out six months later the sales doubled again. Since then we have dialed back to once a year and sales have grown more modestly but steadily. Soon I no longer had enough work to spare for the galleries and all of that went by the wayside.

The HMP News invites people to come to our town and spend a day soaking up the atmosphere here. It tells people about how we found the place as young starry-eyed idealist bohemians just married and looking for a place to nest. It tracks our lives and those of our three girls. People evidently read it cover to cover because they come into the shop acting as if they know us. When people visit the shop I always send them out with some newsletters to share with their friends and coworkers. Those newsletters often come back just like spawning salmon under the arms of new recruits. The newsletter drives word of mouth.

I have found that as I have developed a following of people who feel invested in our work and life, my work really sells best here at the point of origin. The recent gallery show that Lee and I had in Scottsdale was more or less a bust. Lee sold nothing and my check was about enough to cover expenditures. In the first week after bringing the work home I have sold more pottery than during the whole month the pots were in Scottsdale. I don't think it's because there is anything wrong with the gallery. It's because my work plays better here in its natural habitat.

When I teach workshops I always talk with the students about marketing. I encourage them to take control of their markets and quit depending so heavily on developers and gallery owners to make their

living for them. I talk about the power of artist groups organizing their own events and the importance of building community.

When I attended the NCECA conference last month and talked to other potters, I heard about how poor sales have been and how some trade show are off 30-40%. I have not seen that kind of drop off here at my shop which is where I sell most of my production. Things have slowed down for sure, but there is an encouraging flow of customers still. I think that the years that we have spent building a community of friends as customers have paid off and that we will come through this slow down OK. Thanks to all of those who came to our home show yesterday. It was pretty successful, and both Lee and I sold enough to get us through until the next sale.