

My name is Deb Stoner, and for the past thirty years, I've been making jewelry. You may know me for the jewelry that I make, cast from plants, shown at Taboo Studio, or for my ongoing series of rings and bracelets that I make from old steel jeweler's files. But chances are, because of my involvement in our community represented here at the SNAG conference, if you know my name at all, I am that gal who makes **eyeglasses**. It's my **niche**.

"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times." -Bruce Lee

So Bruce Lee could be thought of as a Niche guy. He practiced till he got good at a very specific thing, and became well known for it. He didn't try to do everything; he just focused on what he was interested in, and what he was good at. That's NICHE in a nutshell.

To make something your niche, you must specialize and narrow your focus. It helps to pick something no one else does. But if you pick something you're not interested in, just because you think it might *become* your niche, it won't really work. It has to be your obsession. For all the other competition to fall away, you have to become the expert in your chosen field. I certainly didn't know any of this going into it, but **here are some ways that having a niche has helped me in my career, things that may help you define your own.**

Teach a workshop, become the expert. When I taught my first eyewear workshop in 1992, I had about a year's experience at teaching myself to make eyewear, certainly far fewer than my 10,000 kicks. So when I was invited to teach at Haystack, I became obsessed with learning everything I could about this fascinating topic, from historical research to contemporary fashion. I took a class in Opticianry from a teacher who was grateful that someone was so excited. I talked to anyone I could think of who might know something about what I wanted to learn. By the time I taught my first class, I knew a lot, but that three week think tank session at Haystack expanded my mind in ways I never would have suspected. That's the beauty of teaching: all those interesting students are interested in *your* topic. Teach a class and watch everyone's brains get bigger! Teach the same class several times and watch how much more sophisticated *your* knowledge base becomes. It takes a long time to own your niche, but with the dedication that comes from obsession with an interesting topic, you'll get there.

Curate a show. If you have any kind of relationship to a college art gallery, or a commercial gallery that features your work, see if you can make *your* interest *their* interest. Curating the show "Op Art: Eyeglasses by Jewelers" was probably the single most influential thing I did to cement my reputation. Even though specific pieces are not always remembered, as a whole, the show was memorable because it was so focused and the topic was so unusual. I was bold enough to invite my idols to participate in the show, and that's a very fun thing to take on. I also had the good fortune to work with a terrific gallery director at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, Kate Bonansinga, who committed not only to making the show look great in Portland, but also to travel the show to several venues, including one in New Zealand. As a result, workshop teaching gigs opened up as I made myself available to the traveling show. What I learned is that sometimes, all you have to do is ask...



Give a lecture. Today's audience is expected to be about 500 people. The pay isn't going to wow my accountant, but the *pay-off* is amazing. I get to present myself, that is, market myself, to a very specific group, which sounds like a really big deal. And trust me, it is. But the biggest deal of it is preparing for it. So you do your homework, and try to make the people who invited you to do the presentation glad that they did. Preparing for a lecture is the most effective way to get you to figure out what you know. For me, doing a seven minute presentation is much more difficult than a 40 minute one. Editing, honing, focusing, all with a deadline, is just like defining your niche. Other interests fall away when you are really into your topic.

Say Yes! Taking on things that I didn't always know how to do has always been a great way to find out how to do them. Saying yes to building prototypes for the fashion industry later landed me design work that was fascinating. At first I didn't know what they wanted, but what I didn't know was that *they* didn't know what they wanted either, and so when I presented my first client with something that was beautiful and timely and useful, a long term relationship was born. Word of mouth goes far, and if the word is that you are creative and on time and maybe even affordable, you will get interesting work.

I am in awe of all of the infinitely connected artists there are in this audience. If you are outgoing and want everyone to know everything you do, Facebook and Twitter and Craffhaus etc. are there for you to join. Although posting all your accomplishments on a blog is very modern and fabulous, I suggest that you try not to be premature about crowning yourself queen of something, as others will see right through it. Just do what you do, and before you know it, others will notice. It takes a long time to figure out what you want to do, so instead of bragging about it, just do it and figure it out.

The concept of niche centers around the idea that your work is different than others. When your work stops being different, that is, if others start to "emulate" your work, you can spend a lot of time trying to sue them, or you can move on. Chances are, it's time to move on anyway.

If you have different bodies of work (or more than one niche) show them in different galleries. Don't confuse your clients, or your galleries. Although I don't do it, it might be a good idea to host different websites promoting one interest at a time. I've found that my niche may really be that I create small businesses out of my curiosities, and in doing so, the umbrella name of my business "small artist at large", makes sense.

Do well by doing good.

Volunteer your time doing something that helps others or an organization, and lets you meet people who might be interested in what you do. Sometimes just showing up at the right time can be the ticket to something amazing...some examples are:

- Penland auction in North Carolina in August
- Haystack pre-session to open up the studios
- Metals Museum Repair Days in October

Or, how about your own community? Local art markets and Farmers Markets are terrific venues! They're filled with energetic, self-employed people who can inspire you.

- Give a demo to anyone who will sit still.
- You get a non-paying, non-judgmental crowd on which to practice your teaching skills.
- You build community relationships while figuring out what your niche is.

You're only one person. Beware of creating a business that needs more people unless you are game to take that on. That said; don't be afraid to take on partners who can help you achieve your goals. They could be people who have money to invest in your idea or business, people who have time, or people who have skills you need. Be clear about where your skills lie, and where you are lacking. Don't be afraid to seek out the expertise of others who have the knowledge that you need.

A note to well established artists who may already have a niche, but haven't marketed themselves for a while: I fit in that category, and am finding that if I don't introduce myself to the new generation of artists who are my potential market (I'm talking about teaching here), my having a well defined niche may not matter. In generational terms, it might be as short as every 4 years that another class of metalsmiths graduates, and if my slides aren't being shown to those students, they have no idea who I am. Someone far less experienced may be taking over my niche right now! In order to be known as the go-to person, you have to make sure people know who you are. I was given a jolt a few years back when the program director at a well known craft school called me to say that she'd seen my name promoting a workshop, and was surprised because she thought I didn't teach anymore! Yikes! I had said no to a few gigs when my mom was ill and I felt I couldn't commit to making plans a year or more out. If the only part of word of mouth advertising is that "Deb Stoner doesn't teach anymore", hmm, not so good. An email, postcard or phone call will go a long way to reminding people who you are, and what you can do for them.

Write a grant to support some adventure you want to pursue. Getting a grant is a great confidence builder—it feels terrific to think that some organization thinks enough of your big idea to give you money to chase after it. Follow the guidelines exactly, and you may just get funded. If you don't get a grant on your first try, contact the organization and ask for feedback. They may be able to guide you to success on your next attempt. You can try for the biggies, the NEA fellowships and the like, but in the beginning, you'll have better luck applying to a smaller, regional organization with less competition. Take my presence at this conference as an for example: in Portland, we're fortunate to have the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC) to act as an advocate for artists and to offer funding for things like "Professional Development. Now, I couldn't just say "I'm going to go to a conference! Woo hoo, wine and dine me!" No, you have to think of an angle that sells the granting organization on the idea that this will be super beneficial to your ongoing development as an artist, and having a niche will really help here. They might not give you all that you want, but you may get what you need, that is, enough that will allow you to jump start your participation in whatever it is that you want to do. Be sure to thank your sponsors so that others will know about such possibilities for their own careers, and be supportive of such organizations in any way that you can. **Thank you RACC!**



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