

The Online Indie Craft Community

• An exploration of an Art World •

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Abstract

This paper will explore the art world associated with the community of online craft-makers and alternative artists. I will focus on how craft artists use the internet to create community, share ideas, and market and sell their wares. This art world is significantly represented on the internet by community websites, blogs, online stores, and more. I explored the community by visiting websites, conducting an online survey, reading articles and related literature, and subscribing to The Sampler (a promotional tool for handcrafters). I found that the internet is an invaluable tool for indie artists and crafters for networking, marketing, and spreading the ideas of the “do-it-yourself” movement.

Rationale

“Fifty-eight percent of all American households had a member who participated in a craft last year, and those crafting consumers spent a record 30.6 billion on their projects” (Wadley, 2006). These impressive statistics represent all types of crafts, from traditional quilting and floral arranging to scrap booking and knitting. This paper will explore a distinct area of crafting that is not divided into its own category by genre, but by attitude. This specific category is made up of a hip new generation of crafters and artists who express their individuality through unique and expressive creation.

“The young, hip crafting segment is all about individuality. It's very different approach than the industry has typically taken (e.g. here's the end product and here's the pattern and instructions to make an exact reproduction). Carbon copy make-it/take-its are the antithesis of how this group crafts. Boomers and older grew up with strict fashion, style, and behavior rules Gen Xers and Echo Boomers haven't just ignored the rules, they have developed their own new paradigm that focuses on, and values, creativity and individual expression” (Temares, Joos & Hartnett, 2005).

This segment of the crafting community can be described in many ways, such as renegade, punk, or next generation crafters. In this paper I have decided to label the group as indie. The term “indie” stands for independent, and reflects similar trends such as indie music and independent film. The Independent Design and Craft Association (see figure 1) defines indie as “any business or designer that is not associated with a large company. Indie can also define the indie shopper, who chooses to support small business rather than big-

box stores. It has come to symbolize originality and forward-thinking, especially in music and design” (Dourney, 2005).

Indie crafts may sometimes be considered handicrafts, “a type of work where useful and decorative devices are made completely by hand or using only simple

tools” (Wikipedia, 2006, *Handicraft*), although many creators consider their work artistic expression as well as useful objects. Some crafters are formally trained in art, while others may consider themselves outside or folk artists. Becker (1984, p. 247) describes folk artists as “art done by people who do what they do because it is one of the things members of their community or at least most members of a particular age and sex, ordinarily do.” The participants of the indie craft community may conform to this definition of folk artists, but many more may be more closely related to mavericks - stretching the boundaries of what traditional craft people would consider acceptable.

Maverick Greg Der Ananian (2005, p. XI), creator of the popular Bazaar Bizarre craft shows (see figure 2), explains why he became an indie crafter:

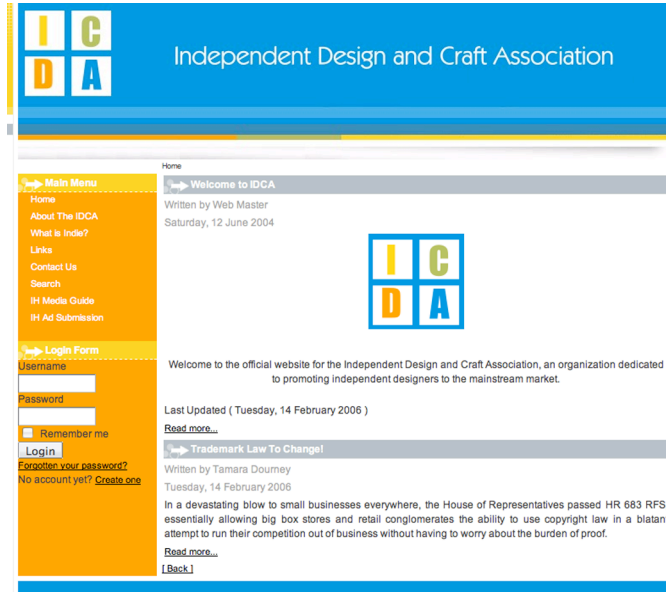


Figure 1 - Screen shot of the Independent Design and Craft Association website (www.indiedesignassociation.com)

"I was but a wee flaming homosexual when my mother wisely took me under her wing and taught me the ladylike skills of knitting and cross-stitch . . . and so began my love affair with crafts. I learned at an early age that being able to make something from nothing was extremely rewarding. As I got older, my interest in crafts waned because the spectrum of traditional craft imagery didn't represent me.

Dissatisfied with stencils of country ducks and painted wooden slices of watermelon, I decided to use what I'd learned as a child to express my own interests. To my surprise and delight, a lot of my friends were experiencing the same kind of personal renaissance. How exactly to share these objects de craft was a project upon which we embarked."



Figure 2 - Screen shot of Bazaar Bizarre website (www.bazaarbizarre.org)

Research Question

As an artist and craft-lover, I find myself being dissatisfied in the same way as Der Ananian with both the traditional cookie-cutter-type crafts and the ultra-competitive and serious world of professional fine artists. I wanted to find a community in between, where artists could create expressive things with their hands, sell their work, and interact with other like-minded people. During my research into this type of community I became interested in the role of the internet, more specifically how the internet helps to create community and how

independent artists and crafters use the internet to market or gain exposure for their work.

Method

I used many different avenues to conduct my research on the indie craft community. On top of reading published books by leaders of the new craft movement and articles about crafts in general, I visited dozens of indie craft websites. Following is a list and description of the most informative sites:

- **The Sampler** - www.homeofthesampler.com (see figure 3)

“The Sampler is a promotional/distribution tool for indie businesses. Each month, indie crafters, shops, zines and record labels who run web-based businesses send samples and promotional materials to a contribution pool. I portion out the goodies, put them in little packages, then send them off to Sampler Subscribers and back to Contributors!” (Kare, 2006). The



Figure 3 - Screen shot of The Sampler website (www.homeofthesampler.com)

Sampler is basically a free promotional tool for crafters. Sampler Subscribers pay for subscriptions to the monthly groups of samples sent in by indie businesses and

crafters. As part of my research, I subscribed to The Sampler for three months (see figures 3.1-3.4 to see examples of what I received) and also sent in samples of my own handcrafted stationery to The Sampler.

- **Etsy - www.etsy.com** (see figure 4)

“Etsy is an online marketplace for buying and selling all things handmade. Etsy lets you shop by color, place, time and material. Etsy was launched on June 18, 2005” (Etsy, 2006). Like eBay or other online shopping sites, Etsy allows sellers to list their items on the site and buyers to purchase them through the site. The unique thing about Etsy is that all of the items listed on the site are handmade. There is a small fee

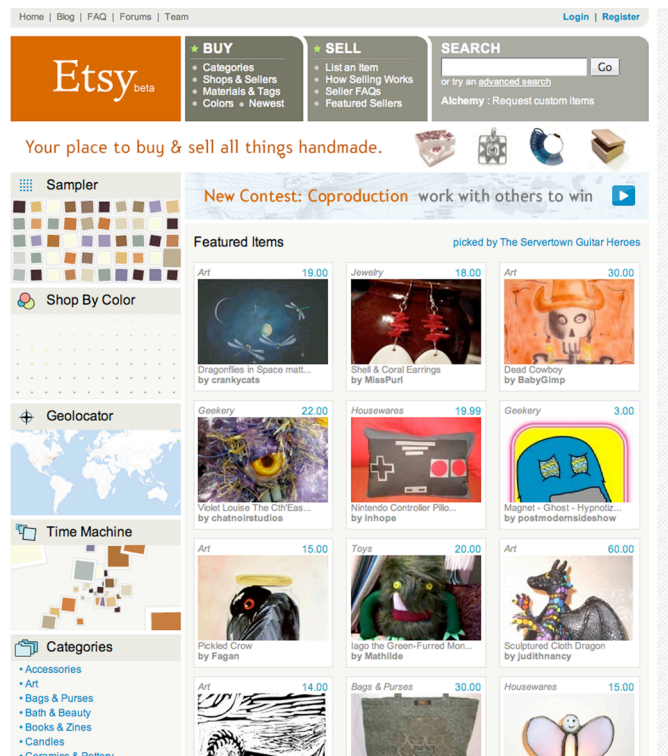


Figure 4 - Screen shot of Etsy store (www.etsy.com)

for artists and crafters to sell items through Etsy, but it offers a great opportunity to those who do not want to operate their own online store. Each seller gets their own “shop” within Etsy and they can write a profile and upload images or logos to represent their business. The most innovative thing about Etsy are the interactive search methods that are incorporated into the site.

- **Craft Mafia - www.craftmafia.com** (see figures 5, 5.1, 5.2)

“The first Craft Mafia was founded in 2003 by nine crafty business women in Austin, TX. The group originally came together through a shared love for craft, DIY ethics and mutual respect. As the Craft Mafia developed it became a



Figure 5 - Craft Mafia logo from the website (www.craftmafia.com)

forum for networking, promotion and shared ideas. Since it's development in Austin, other Mafias have popped up across the globe” (Craft Mafia, 2006). The many different Craft Mafias based in cities around the country (and world) are simply communities that support crafters and artists. The many different groups each run their own websites with varying amounts of content.

- **Craft Revolution - <http://www.craftrevolution.com>** (see figures 6 & 6.1)

The Craft Revolution website defines itself as “the ultimate guide to the new world of craft” (Craft Revolution, 2006). The community website contains articles about the online craft movement as well as what it means to be indie. The site also includes a directory of indie businesses and crafty blogs, and also sends out a weekly email newsletter.

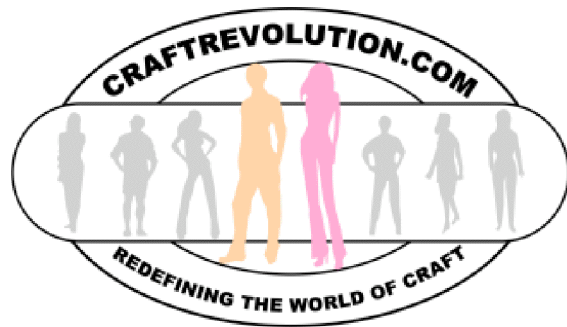


Figure 6 - Craft Revolution logo from the website (www.craftrevolution.com)

- **Indie Collective - www.indiecollective.net** (see figure 7)

The Indie Collective is a free listing service of crafty and independent designers (Indie Collective, 2006). The shops are divided into ten categories from “accessories” to “services.” Every business that is included in the directory gets to display a logo, their website link, and short description. The Indie Collective website also includes a blog that the business proprietors listed in the directory can post to with current information about their shops.

The screenshot shows the Indie Collective website interface. At the top, there is a logo for 'indie collective' and a tagline 'A CRAFTY COLLECTIVE OF INDEPENDENT DESIGNERS'. Below this are navigation links: 'VIEW ALL SHOPS', 'ABOUT', 'BLOG', 'JOIN', and 'LINKS'. A date stamp reads 'March 6, 2006'. A prominent notice states: 'PLEASE NOTE: We are not currently accepting new submissions for the Indie Collective directory. All sites which have been submitted for review and inclusion should be reviewed and activated, if accepted, within a month. Submissions will open again in the near future; please check back for future submission announcements.' The main content area is titled 'Designer Categories' and lists ten categories with their respective shop counts: Accessories (383 shops), Apparel (147 shops), Artwork (72 shops), Bath (60 shops), Handbags (171 shops), Home Decor (96 shops), Kids (92 shops), Miscellaneous (126 shops), Paper Goods (111 shops), and Services (37 shops). Each category includes a brief description. On the left side, there is a 'Newest Shops' section listing individual shops like 'Citrus Blossoms Digital Art Studio' and 'Whirled!', along with their categories and dates added. At the bottom left, there are links for 'JOIN THE INDIE COLLECTIVE BLOG!' and a 'PayPal' logo.

Figure 7 - Screen shot of the Indie Collective website (www.indiecollective.net)

These websites as well as many others that I was led to through them helped me get a sense of the size and scope of the online indie craft community. To expand my research I also conducted an online survey for artists and crafters (see figure 8 and appendix A for complete survey). I invited twenty-five participants via email to participate and also advertised the survey on my



Figure 8 – The banner I created for my Internet Artists and Crafters Survey (<http://survey.rljart.com/>)

personal website. The short web-based survey was only five questions long, so as to keep it quick and easy for the respondents. A total of twenty-eight artists and crafters completed the survey. The main goal of the survey was to get a broad understanding of the ways in which crafters and artists use the internet, and how they feel it inspires them or helps them market their work. The results are discussed in the next section of this paper.

Survey Findings

My online “Internet and Artists and Crafters Survey” consisted of four multiple answer questions and one open answer question. Twenty-eight people responded. Following are graph interpretations of their responses (see figures 9-12).

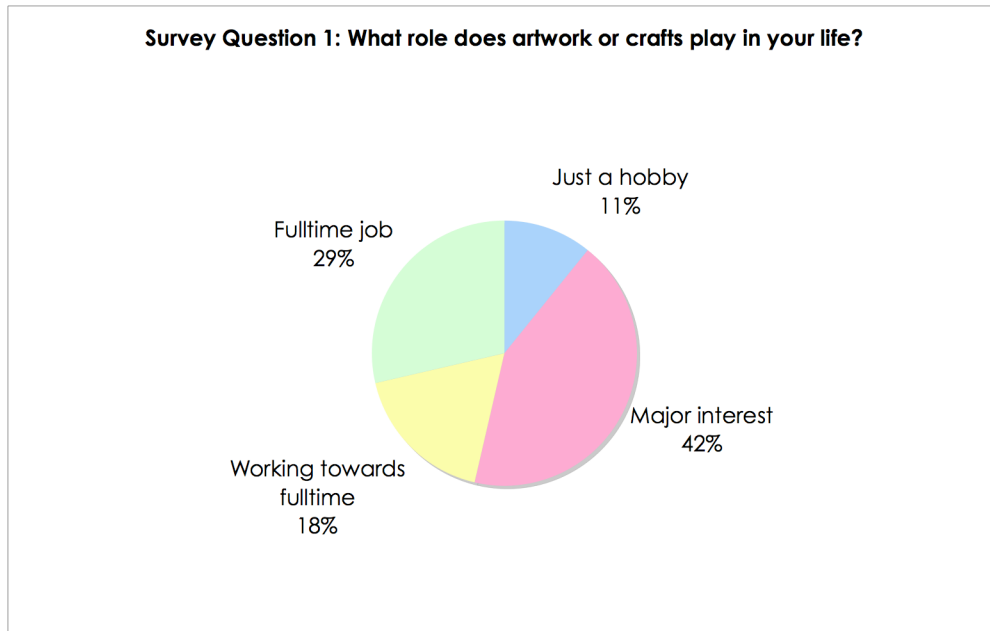


Figure 9 - Results of Survey Question 1

The first question (see figure 9) was included in the survey in order to give me an idea about how important crafting was to each respondent. I knew that I could not have a completely random sample of participants because they all choose whether or not they would participate, but this first question gave me some perspective on their answers to the other four questions. The majority (89%) consider crafting or making art more than just a hobby. Almost half (47%) already make their living with their art work or would like to in the near future.

The second question (see figure 10) of my survey was a multiple answer question in which the respondents could mark all of the answers that applied to them. It asked how they use the internet as an artist or crafter. Obviously, all of my participants are avid internet users because not only did they have to take my survey online, but I found many of them through their blogs or online stores. Even though I knew they were all internet-savvy, I still wanted to find out what online activities were most common.

Nearly all (26 of 28) read other crafters' or artists' blogs or online journals. A majority (21 of 28) also have their own blog and visit community craft sites (22 of 28). More than half sell their work online, either at a community store (like Etsy.com), or on their own personal online store, or both.

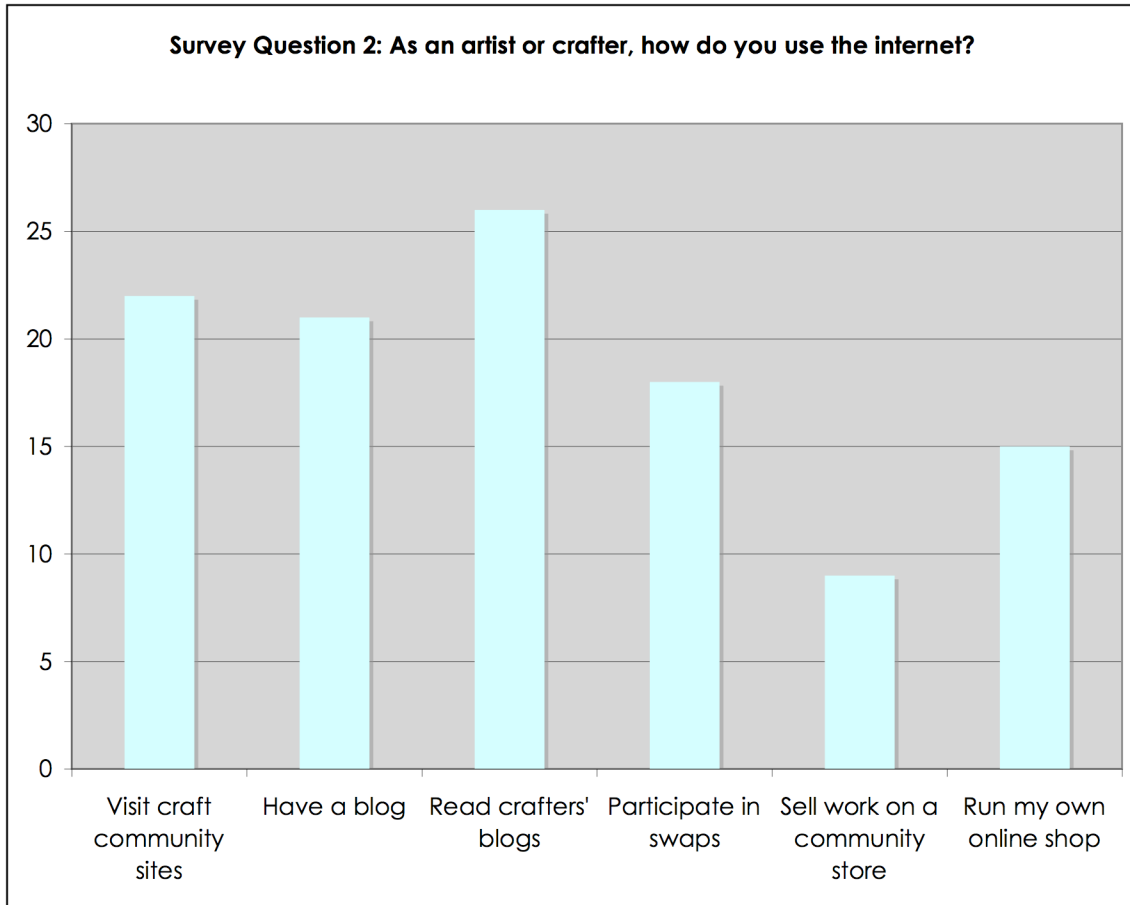


Figure 10- Results of Survey Question 2

The third survey question (see figure 11) addressed how the artists and crafters are inspired by what they see or do on the internet. A large majority (86%) responded positively to this question indicating that they are either are inspired a lot, or at least somewhat, by other crafters and artists on the internet. Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated the top level response ("inspired a lot") to the question.

An interesting correlation that is not represented in the graphs, but I discovered when reviewing the responses, is that of the four respondents who marked "not much" for their level of inspiration, three also indicated for question

one that they make their livelihood selling the art or crafts that they make. Perhaps the established artists no longer gain as much inspiration as the newer indie craft community participants.

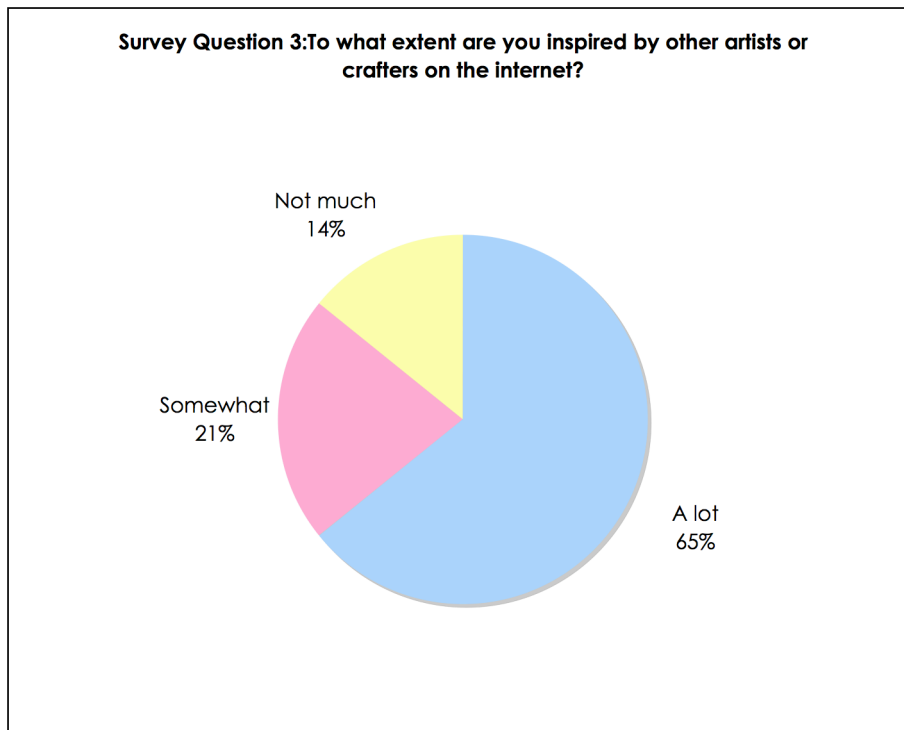


Figure 11 - Results of Survey Question 3

Survey question four (see figure 12) addressed how the respondents felt the internet helped them to market their work. Only one respondent indicated that the internet did not help much with marketing. A large majority (86%) of the respondents that considered the question applicable (meaning they sell their work in some way) said that the internet helped them acquire customers that they could not have gotten without it.

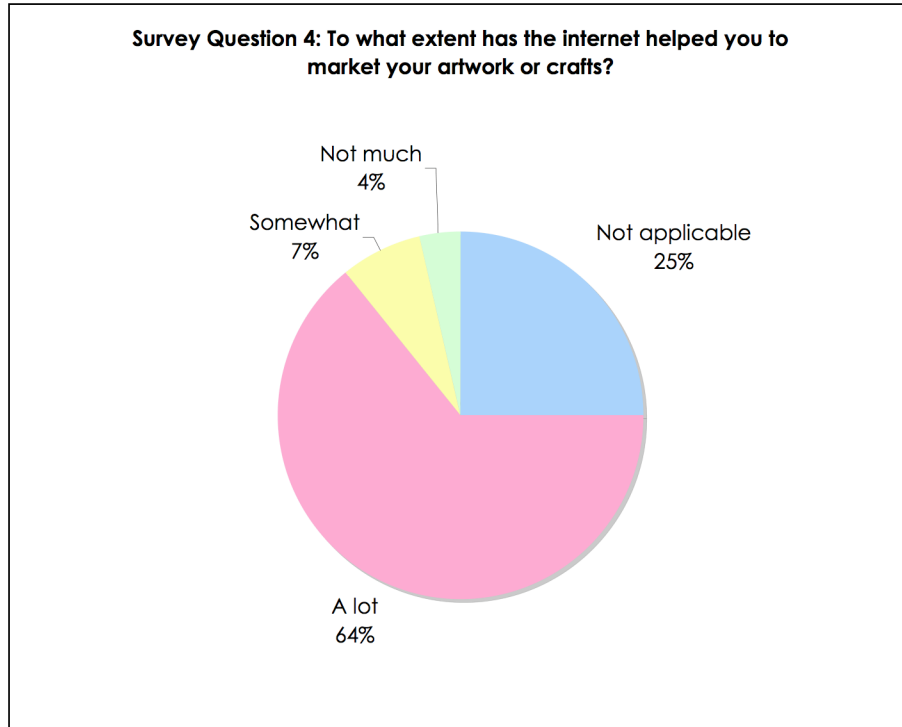


Figure 12 - Results of Survey Question 4

My last survey question was open answer and asked the respondents to give any other ways that the internet has helped them with their art or crafts (see appendix B for a complete list of responses). This question was optional, so not every participant answered it. A few of the observations that the participants gave on how the internet helps with artwork and crafts include:

- It gives their work exposure to people all over the world.
- It helps them display their portfolio to clients.
- It creates an online support group.
- It is an alternative to selling your work at craft shows.
- It helps them appreciate handmade goods even more.

- It exposes them to ideas and perspectives that they may not have been able to find in other ways.

More Findings

On top of creating and announcing the online survey to explore how artists and crafters use the internet, I also immersed myself in the community by subscribing to The Sampler and even contributing some of my own stationery samples. The Sampler is mailed out to paid subscribers every month and each person gets a slightly different combination of the craft samples that were contributed that month. Some of the items I received over the four months that I participated include: greeting cards, 1" pins, small handmade soaps and bath products, hair clips, earrings, stationery, bookplates, "plushies" (small stuffed felt critters), key chains, zines, and much more (see figures 3.1-3.4 for photos of what I received).

Marie Kare, creator and proprietor of The Sampler, started the website/promotional idea in August of 2004 on a whim, and it soon became so popular that she made it her full-time job. Sampler subscriptions are limited (but the number of subscribers has reached 400) and they sell out every month, selling for \$23 per month (Kare, 2006).

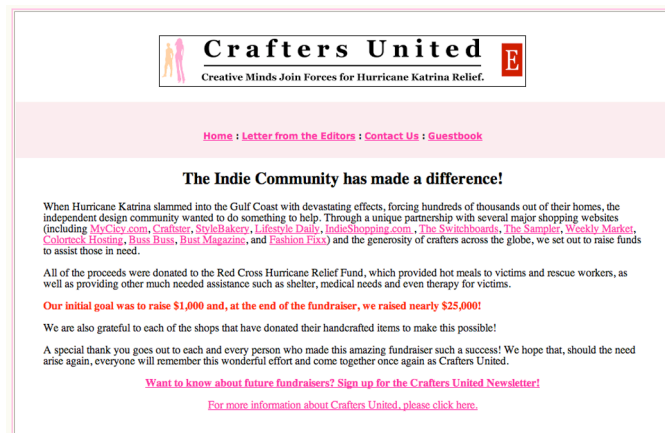
I submitted my own small stationery samples to the February Sampler. My online store, I Love Cute Things (www.ilovecutethings.com) was only



Figure 13 - I Love Cute Things store logo
(www.ilovecutethings.co)

opened in October, 2005, and my daily visits were only at about thirty per day before I submitted to the Sampler. After my submission and the mailing of the February Sampler, my daily visits spiked to about sixty visits per day, and they stayed at that level for two weeks. Promoting my work through contributing to The Sampler doubled my store's daily visits. I feel like it is a fun, easy, and inexpensive way to advertise your artwork or crafts and expose your work to a broader audience.

The main purpose of the online craft community is not just to market and sell artwork. The community also helps support each other and important causes. The indie craft community has worked together to promote and help raise funds for various charities.



**Figure 14 - Screen shot of Crafters United website
(www.craftrevolution.com/craftersunited.htm)**

After Hurricane Katrina, a charity group called Crafters United (run by Craft Revolution) was formed (see figure 14). "Crafters United is a unique partnership between many different websites that cater to independent designers and crafters across the world. Crafters United is not a company, but simply a group of crafters, designers and those who are related to independent design and crafts joining forces to help where there is a need" (Crafters United website). The group encouraged crafters to donate items to be sold online. The proceeds went to

Red Cross Hurricane Relief Fund. Crafters United raised nearly \$25,000 for hurricane relief (Crafters United Etsy Store).

Crafters for Critters (see figure 15) is another online store that gives the profits from the sale of donated craft goods to

animal rescue organizations. Twice a year they send the proceeds to different organizations. Crafters for Critters has raised over \$7,000 for animal charities since early 2004 (Crafters for Critters website).

Another community craft site that runs a store and also helps to support and nourish the online indie craft community is Purple Pink and Orange (www.purplepinkandorange.com). The site runs a shop that sells the work of many different independent



Figure 15 - Screen shot of the Crafters for Critters website (www.craftersforcritters.com)



Figure 14 - Screen shot of Purple Pink and Orange's Swapmeet website (www.purplepinkandorange.com/swap)

artists, but what makes the site unique is that it also hosts monthly swaps between crafters (see figure 16). Participants sign up for the swaps they are interested in and then they are each assigned a random partner (or multiple partners) to send items to based on the theme for that month's swap (Roche, 2006). The swaps are free to participate in and are simply a fun way to meet other craft-oriented people.

There are so many more online craft shops and community sites that it would be impossible to list them all. The indie craft movement is growing so quickly on the internet that you can always find a new store or blog that expresses the attitude of the new generation of craft artists.

Conclusion

The world of crafting is changing. There is a generation that learned crafty, domestic arts as children, but then may have lost them in order to pursue more "important" things in life. Now these same people are using the skills they learned from all parts of their lives to express themselves by making things with their hands. Some sell their work, others just enjoy



Figure 15 - Screen shot from Getcrafty.com

making things and interacting with the fun, radical, indie, craft community online. Jean Railia (2004, p.6), creator of the online zine Getcrafty.com (see figure 17), explains the new generation of craft this way:

“Being crafty means living consciously and refusing to be defined by narrow labels and categories. It’s about embracing life as complicated and contradictory and, out of this chaos, constructing identities that are feminist and domestic, masculine and feminine, strong and weak. It’s painting racing stripes down muscle cars and driving them in homemade skirts and high heel shoes. It’s getting together to knit in cafes and building intimacy online. It’s swapping clothing. It’s about being fashion-obsessed and simultaneously upset by sweatshop labor practices. It’s about being well read and a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It’s not about being quiet or demure, but it means always trying to be nice. It’s about making things with your hands. And, most important, it’s about living life artistically, regardless of whether or not you are an Artist with a capital A.”

The internet has been an igniting and uniting force for this indie craft movement by giving its participants an arena to connect and encourage each other, as well as a place to market and sell their wares. The art world of indie crafters may have been alive but disjointed before the arrival of the internet, now this art world has spread to include everyone from the artist, to the casual reader of a crafty online blog, to the consumer looking for fun, one-of-a-kind creations. As the Craft Revolution website states, “The quiet thought that once whispered in the minds of a few women has quickly become a booming drumbeat that unifies hundreds across the globe. The true, magnificent meaning of craft is becoming alive again. Clearly, it is time for a revolution” (Craft Revolution, 2006).

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