

## AN ARTIST'S ROAD TO LICENSING ART

by Rene Griffith

I'd like to state up front, I'm not a licensing guru. I'm an artist with a vision and dream. What I've learned about licensing in the last two-and-a-half years, I've learned one step at a time—by reading, attending workshops, going to shows, exhibiting at shows, talking with vendors, and asking a lot of questions. Sometimes I have felt like a puck in an old-fashioned pinball machine—being bounced from peg to peg, lights flashing, buzzers sounding, ideas flying, and bells ringing when I make a few good hits, but ultimately ending up nowhere and losing my quarter. Now, with a few licensing contracts under my belt, I'm beginning to see more positive results. It's become a little easier but it's always challenging. It's a journey I intend to stay with, pushing myself to higher and higher levels. In this article I will tell you some of what I've learned along the way, perhaps saving you some time and frustration.

### **Become aware of trends**

The licensing industry is driven by trends—style, subject as well as color trends. As an artist delving into this market, you will need to study these trends. One of the best ways to survey the latest trends in style, subject and color is to “walk a show.” Walking a show—a licensing trade show, gift show or home decor show—can help answer many questions: Is your particular style viable for licensing? After showing your portfolio, are there companies who express an interest? Did you see other artwork similar to yours? Is your subject matter popular? Is your color palette compatible with today's trends? Are you ready to begin licensing your artwork?

There is also an organization you should know about ([www.colorassociation.com](http://www.colorassociation.com)) that forecasts color trends in apparel, architectural and interior design, and decorative home accessories.

### **Walking a show**

I decided to go to New York and walk both Surtex—a licensing show—and the National Stationery Show (they occur simultaneously). I spent three days walking those shows from 9-6. I was able to see firsthand how other artists displayed their work, how publishers promoted their stable of artists, as well as study some of the players in the game called licensing. I talked to as many art publishers and greeting card companies as I could (keeping in mind that they were there to do business, not talk to artists). I also attended a seminar on licensing and some other networking events. I left with business cards of 22 companies and the names of their creative or licensing director. Within three months, I had my first contract with a greeting card publisher.

### **Exhibiting at a show**

I've been an exhibitor at the San Francisco International Gift Fair where I sold my framed photography. This was a good experience to learn about selling a wholesale “product” to gift stores, small galleries, and souvenir shops. Prior to the show, I had substantial expenses such as booth design, booth rent, signage, catalogs, order forms, business cards, as well as manufacture of the samples I would be selling. In addition, I would be working the booth for three days. Gift shows are “order-taking” shows. After the show, you fill the orders and ship your product to customers. A month after that show, I decided it was far too much work for too little money. I didn't break even, but the lessons I learned were invaluable—it's really difficult to be artist, manufacturer, graphic designer, salesperson, bookkeeper, and shipper in the wholesale market, or for that matter in any market.

This past year I decided have a booth at Surtex to see what kind of contacts I could make by showcasing my photography. After three days, I left with business cards of 26 companies who had stopped by the booth and showed an interest in my artwork. To date, I have not gotten any licensing deals from that show. However, I am still pursuing follow-up with these companies by sending out e-mails, promotional materials and portfolios.

I have decided to exhibit at Surtex again this year. From the feedback that I've received from other artists who have exhibited at Surtex, most say that manufacturers don't take you seriously until they've seen you exhibit at the show for at least a couple of years. They want to work with artists who are reliable and committed to pursuing this business. This year, I will be displaying prints and posters of photographs that are already being published by fairly large companies. I will be looking for manufacturers of products such as paper goods, puzzles, calendars, note cards, and textiles who would be interested in using the same imagery for their products. Now that I have a track record, this might be more viable.

#### Follow-up

Sometimes follow-up can be the toughest part of marketing. Don't neglect this. Licensees are busy and they appreciate someone following through with a contact from a show. I usually follow up with a short e-mail reminding them of our meeting at the show. I attach a couple of small jpgs of my artwork to refresh their memory. More often than not, I get an e-mail response. If they seem interested in viewing more images, I may call to find out exactly what imagery they want to review. If they're not interested at this time, I ask them if I can keep them on my e-mail list. Remember, even if you get a rejection at this point, it doesn't mean "No," it only means "Not at this time." Being tenacious is a good quality to have in this industry!

#### Learning from a rejection

Getting a rejection letter after submitting artwork to a company that you feel your work is quite appropriate for should not be taken personally. Sometimes we think it means our artwork isn't good. Most often, it means that the artwork isn't what they're looking for presently. Perhaps it's not in keeping with the latest trends. Creative directors often have a "shopping list" of the types of images and colors they are seeking for their next catalog. If they are seeking coastal imagery, especially in cobalt blues and seagrass greens, and you send them wildlife images in natural tones, you will likely get a standard "thanks, but no thanks, please continue to send new work" letter. Keep that contact in your database and from time to time send them new imagery and a short note. You never know when they may have a "hole" in their catalog of images they need to fill, and that hole may be filled with your art.

#### Submitting artwork

Often companies post guidelines for submitting artwork on their web site. Make sure that you follow their requests to a T. If you have questions, call or e-mail to ask for clarification. Printed art pieces in a portfolio? Low-resolution jpgs? A PDF slide-show presentation? How many pieces would they like submitted? Should they be grouped by theme? Also, try to find out whether they have an upcoming project or art review meeting so that your materials arrive in time for their review cycle.



Artist and author Rene Griffith creates photographic art using vintage Polaroid and digital cameras. Currently she is writing a book about licensing art from the artist's perspective. Read more about Rene's licensing experiences on her blog at [www.renegriffith.blogspot.com](http://www.renegriffith.blogspot.com) and view her artwork at [www.renegriffith.com](http://www.renegriffith.com). ©2007 Rene Griffith. All rights reserved.