

The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

Selling Your Work

THE WISH

Hardly a day goes by that I don't read statements such as these on one of the woodturning or penturning message boards: "I need to sell my pens to help pay for my hobby." "I need a bigger, better, faster _____ (fill in the blank), and need to sell my work to pay for it." "I'd like to sell enough pens to make this my full-time job." Comments such as these are usually made by a newcomer who is overwhelmed now that he or she is successfully making pens, but has come to the realization of the costs involved. There is the enjoyment of finishing the pen, but now what? With the completion of each pen, the wood and the kit have been consumed along with the time to craft it. If only there was a way to make the hobby help pay for itself, add a few bucks to the coffers, or perhaps be successful enough to make the hobby a vocation.

THE REALITY

I am only aware of a few people who are making a living making pens, and they are high-end, specialty penmakers (see Fig. 1). Almost everyone else I know who makes pens

is supplementing his or her income by selling pens—and/or other turned crafts—but the key word is *supplement*. It is a tough task to make a living by woodturning alone, much less with penturning. Ask yourself this: If you are doing something that someone else can do, provided they have similar equipment and training, what is going to be your edge?—particularly since the hobby has a relatively low cost of entry and quick learning curve compared to many other money-making pastimes. If others enjoying the hobby can buy the same kit, same wood, and process it to the same level of perfection, why are your creations any more desirable? What's your edge? What are you going to compete with?

FACING REALITY

In a simple analysis, there are three different levels of selling your work. First, you can sell your work to subsidize your hobby. You aren't really making money, but some percentage of the out-of-pocket costs can be recovered. Pricing would be what your particular market will bear and some receipts are better than no receipts. If it pans out, perhaps you'll want to continue to develop marketing and penturning skills enough to step up a peg and supplement your income.

If you are honest with yourself, supplementing your income requires factoring in **ALL** the costs before you pat yourself on the back for your apparent hourly wage. Those costs not only include the direct costs of materials and time, but also indirect and overhead costs. It will require a pricing structure that may alter your target market and sales venues. Usually, it moves the price up along with the marketplace and customer affluence. After supplementing your income proves successful, who knows? Perhaps you might be able to make a living at this if you really set your mind to it. You'll probably want to keep your day job and do the turning as a sideline for the time being. If you get to the point where your day job interferes with the outrageously profitable pen sideline, then consider the career change. Now let's talk about some issues to be tackled if you want to make money with turnings. We'll explore some thoughts on the "who, what, where, how, and how much" of selling your work.

WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE IS YOUR TARGET MARKET

Before you launch into this endeavor too far, you might



Fig. 1

The toughest sale for a penmaker is to other penmakers. Here, the Gisi's staff their booth at the annual Penturners Rendezvous.



Fig. 2

Selling into the collectors market requires travel nationally, a far more extensive inventory, and a professional presentation of the product, as shown by Barry Gross' booth.



Fig. 3

Selling at the regional craft fairs takes planning, inventory, and a booth setup. Usually the attendees are interested in the low to modest priced offerings.

want to think through this a bit. Are you currently a kit turner? Are you content with just having a successful outcome to each pen? Can everyone else you know make the same kit with the same level of expertise? You probably can sell a pen to each of your relatives, co-workers, and neighbors, but what's next after that? Usually, they will buy one or more of your pens based on your relationship with them, not on the quality, price, or desirability of the work. Even if your work is exceptional, this immediate circle of friends market is finite and soon saturated. Your horizons will need to expand. If they don't, you'll be back to the problem of making more product than can be sold and using your own money to pay for the enjoyment. There is nothing wrong with that if you choose to do it; however, you were originally trying to avoid that, weren't you?

Is your work a cut above the kit level product? Are you doing something unique as an after-turning enhancement? Do you make special blanks or perform adaptations that not only separate you from the crowd, but move the price point upward? Do you have a niche that can be capitalized on? Now you have the opportunity to sell based on feature, among fewer competitors, not on pricing alone.

If you are at the end of the spectrum where you are making your own parts, i.e., casting fittings from precious metals, machining your own designs, or working with exotic materials, you have a much smaller, but more upscale, market (see **Fig. 2**). You are among a select group of producers who are just as capable as you are of creating something unique. Your competition will be much thinner and your consumer much less price sensitive. Your work may be collectible—one of a kind at this point. Though this is an enviable skill level, from a marketing point of view, it may be the most difficult. You've thinned the

number of potential customers once art has become as important as function. Your price may be up, but your volume will be down.

The target market may be driven by your current skill level and/or by your own choice. If you are new and growing, you'll probably start with the kit pens, producing for the craft show, church bazaar, and family and friends circuit. As your skills grow, you'll have the choice of which market to be involved in. Without something special to offer, you'll be out of your league pursuing the one-of-a-kind collectibles buyer. If you are an experienced and capable producer, you may choose to participate in all three markets simultaneously. You'll have the benefit of having something to offer every potential customer regardless of the season, venue, or affluence of the shopper.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO SELL?

Depending on your day job, you may have a great selling opportunity in the office or factory. You won't need a storefront, website, catalog, or booth. Having a pocketful of pens and a little positive word of mouth will probably carry the day. Just remember that your employer might let you do a bit of hawking on your lunch hour, but will probably be unhappy if you use work hours to peddle your wares. You will likely have little competition in the company, but what if you are selling at the craft show (see **Fig. 3**)? Is there another booth with pens there? Are they better than yours in quality, selection, and price? Is it the high-end craft show or one of the bargain-basement type shows? Are you set up for shows? Do you have or are you willing to create a booth? Are you willing to travel and work the show circuit? Would you rather sell from the comfort of home? A website will do it, won't it? Though website marketing can be a real plus, how much time will



it take to build a following? Just because you build it, doesn't mean they will come. What about the competition? Your reach will be global, but the competition will be global as well. Of course, why not eBay?—same issues, bargain hunters from around the globe and competition from around the globe as well.

There are many ways to sell your wares. You can be a show operation, a brick and mortar seller (your own or someone else's), a virtual operation, or a combination of all of them. Each has advantages and disadvantages. The global nature of the Internet can work for you. It crosses all boundaries and time zones at a very effective cost per view. The personal touch of being in a booth at the weekend craft show can work for you as well. Depending on the market, having your work in a brick and mortar gallery might be appropriate. If you are in it for the long term, you will need to explore some or all of these to get beyond your family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. You'll need to sell to total strangers to sustain the quantity of sales needed to make this more than a passing fad (see Fig. 4).

CONSIDERATIONS

A topic such as this can go on for much longer than space

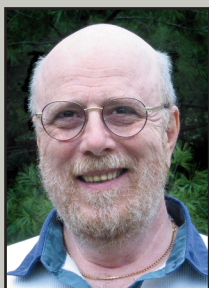
permits here, so we'll revisit the topic sometime in the future; please accept this as a down payment on the subject. In the meantime, I offer the following collection of questions, not all inclusive, as things to think about. Please don't view them as a negative viewpoint, but as ideas that you should be sure to consider.

Questions to ask yourself:

- ❖ What is my money-making goal? Cost offset? Income subsidization? Profession?
- ❖ What is my target market? Co-workers? Friends and family? Craft lovers? Collectors?
- ❖ How much time do I want to spend "working" at this? Producing? Sales and marketing?
- ❖ What can I realistically charge for my current work? Am I willing to accept that?
- ❖ What are my costs? Materials? Time? Sales? Consumables? Overhead?
- ❖ Am I willing to travel? Create a booth? Do seasonal shows? Deal with people directly?
- ❖ Can I create the necessary web-based sales operation? Hire it out to be done?
- ❖ What is my level of production in quantity, quality, and product mix?
- ❖ Will I produce to order or sell from inventory? Accept special orders?
- ❖ Can I afford to put additional money into the "business"?
- ❖ Am I going to make it a business or do it under the table?
- ❖ If a business, can I do it from home—based on space, zoning, insurance, etc?
- ❖ Do I want to risk turning my enjoyable pastime into a job?

A FINAL CAUTION

I'll leave you with one final caution: If you enjoy what you are doing and want to be able to generate income, be very careful that you don't change the complexion of your hobby from enjoyment to work. It is a slippery slope on which you won't necessarily see the transition as it is being made. Once you've unknowingly made the crossover, you may never be able to return and may even blow the chance of enjoying your pastime by pushing harder to get more satisfaction from it.



Kurt Hertzog

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Kurt is a regular feature columnist for *Woodturning Design* and one of the five council members of the Pen Makers Guild. He is a past chairman of the Rochester Woodworkers Society.

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