

Web Presence for Artists

There are primarily four different flavors of web presence: web page, blog, social networks and email newsletters.

- Web page** Think “display board” - like your typical locked glass bulletin board that only you can change.
- Blog** Think “discussion board” - like an open bulletin board that anyone can add comments to.
- Social networks** More personal interactions; sharing interesting information about you and your art.
- Email newsletters** You go out to others; advertising that can be educational.

The web is quickly becoming one of our main sources for information and interpersonal communication. With its many flavors, it offers a sometimes bewildering variety of ways to get our art in front of more people. It works while you sleep. It's less expensive than printing brochures, catalogs or handouts. It is easily updated to keep up with changes. With services such as Google Analytics, you can track the effectiveness of any changes, or different marketing strategies. It offers an easy, less obtrusive way to keep in touch with those who are interested in your work. Blogs and Social Networks allow you to significantly grow your audience, keep touch with what others in your field are doing, stretch yourself by learning new techniques and marketing skills, and increase traffic to your website.

Developing a web presence offers great benefits for anyone who has something to share. It is not, however, a ‘get rich quick’ proposition. Like any other worthwhile endeavor, it takes work and the willingness to make mistakes - and learn from them.

The most common concern beginners voice is around the possible theft of their images. While a really determined thief can find a way around most blocks we put up, most people, once they see a copyright notice, will respect your rights. There's no denying that people can, and do, copy images online. But, there's also no denying that a determined person can steal your art no matter how you display it.

The only surefire way to prevent theft of your art is to never show it or talk about it. Clearly, we've found ways to make theft an acceptable risk in our current approach to selling our work. There are easy precautions to limiting our loss online, too.

Post pictures too small to print well (but big enough to communicate well). Watermark larger images with your copyright info (it can be too obtrusive in thumbnail sized images). Include contact and copyright information in the IPTC (International Press Telecommunications Council) file with each image.

A common practice is to create small thumbnails (up to about 2 inches at 72 dpi), linked to larger images (4 to 6 inches @ 72dpi) that are watermarked with your copyright logo and, if practical, your web address. The watermark should be tasteful and unobtrusive, yet obvious enough to be noticed. Remember, your primary objective is to interest people in buying your art: they have to see it to appreciate it! Don't obscure it with an obnoxious copyright watermark.

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Once you've done what you can to protect your images, encourage people to copy and share them!

“What!?”

Sure, that may seem counterintuitive, but you do want people to see your art, right? The more people who see it, the better your chances of selling it! Once your contact information and copyright logo is on each image, people will be able to find you, no matter how the image is shared. Then anyone who copies & shares your image is giving you free advertising - with an image that sends others to your website, but is too small to make a good print for their wall or desktop.

Yes, the IPTC info can be stripped and watermarks can be retouched, but do you really think anyone willing to go through that trouble would pay for it anyway? Let people spread around your image - encourage it! The benefits of many more people seeing your work will far outweigh any possible loss from theft.

A **web site** is the real workhorse for presenting yourself and your work to the public. It allows your work to be seen by potential customers at their convenience. Your sales options can range from a simple “email me for details” to a full-blown service complete with shopping cart and shipping options.

It's quite normal for artists to envision their website as an online showcase -- an always open gallery of their work. This may be a good place to start, but it should ideally evolve into a more effective business and marketing tool.

Your website represents you; it should build and reinforces the impression that you are courteous, professional and reliable: that you're someone they'd like to work with and worth investing their time in.

Let your work itself grab the attention. While you should have “About you” information, it shouldn't be the first thing visitors see; make it a separate page they can click on when they're interested. A bio can help build trusting relationships, but if they aren't interested in it yet it can seem self-serving and unprofessional. People also tend to lose interest and quickly move on when they encounter web sites with “splash” or “click here to enter” pages.

Your home page is your storefront. It should make people want to “step in” and see more. Give them a good taste of your work up front. If “what's in it for them” isn't obvious, they'll quickly move on.

Browse your website from your customers' perspective. Is it simple and straightforward to navigate, without unnecessary steps or pages to wade through? Is it easy for them to buy your work? To contact you? Do the images truly represent the quality of your work?

To start out with a simple website, you could create your page on another site, like *Portal Wisconsin* (www.portalwisconsin.org), or *Art for Conservation*. This is less expensive and can be a very good way to learn the ropes. Art for Conservation (www.artforconservation.org) is one of the organizations which will, for a nominal fee, advertise, sell, print and ship your 2D work for

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you. They ask that you donate a small percentage of your sales to a conservation organization of your choice.

While having a sub-page on someone else's site is a good way to start out, it does offer fewer options for individual design. The web address is also longer and harder to remember.

Here's an example:

http://www.portalwisconsin.org/online_gallery_artist.cfm?artist=504&sort=medium&medid=3

Creating your own website gives you many more options - and many more things to consider. For one, do you want to create it yourself, or have someone else to do it for you? On the plus side, paying someone else frees up your time for creating and marketing your art. On the negative side, you may have to pay for any changes, or updates. Either way, the design should be visually attractive, uncluttered, and easy to navigate - for your visitors AND for search engines (a whole other topic). You should also choose an address, or domain name, that is easy to remember.

Creating a basic website isn't hard, especially if you enjoy programming. It is less expensive and there are many helpful resources. If you don't enjoy programming, you'll soon move on to other options, but it is a good way to start.

There are also many programs that do the 'programming' for you. *SiteGrinder* from *Media Lab* is a popular one among photographers. This is a plug-in for Photoshop which allows you to create the page as you want it to look, then convert it to a web page ready to upload to your server. This is a lot easier, especially for visual artists; there's still a learning curve, but it's not nearly as steep.

I use SiteGrinder for my "Home" page. When people click on my galleries they are redirected to *PhotoShelter*, which is my image storage and sales service.

One of the really powerful tools for driving traffic to your site revolves around the proper use of keywords to describe each image. Search engines don't know what's in your picture; they need a word description. They use the image's file name and title, as well as descriptions near the picture, but primarily they depend on the invisible keywords that you can use to describe it. Most image processing programs allow you to add keywords, as do web page creation programs. Keywords should be the descriptive type of words (not sentences) that people would use to search for images like yours.

When you tell a search engine to look for something, it usually comes up with several pages of results. People seldom go beyond the first few pages. The most relevant 'hits' are highest on the first page, but not just because they had the most of the keywords you typed in. Search engines also determine relevance by the amount of traffic the site gets and the number of referrals, or links, to the page from other websites.

While a web site is generally more static than a blog, you should still make regular updates and additions to it. Search engines don't rate "cob webs" as highly as more active sites. Monthly updates will probably be enough to keep people interested in coming back to see what's new.

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A **Blog** is an ideal way to create and maintain contact with people who are interested in you and your work. It is also one of the very best ways to get additional links to your website (and increase 'relevance' to search engines). You can include "read more here" links in your posts, which point back to an in-depth article on your web page. Thumbnail images in your blog should link back to the larger image on your website (ideally, with purchase options). Blogs can vary in design from a basic post with list of comments, to elaborate designs that can work quite well as a small image gallery.

A blog is your soapbox, your vehicle for talking about what you are doing and what drives you. It is a great way to develop contacts with peers and keep in touch with what the leaders in your field are doing. The expectations for blogging posts is that they be more educational than advertising. While it is "culturally acceptable" to promote your business in a way that is educational, unofficial guidelines are that you should keep promotional posts to less than 10% of your total.

Plan on updating your blog at least every other week; weekly is even better. Remember, your audience is using it to learn from, and dialog with, you.

Social Networks, like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Flickr, Plurk, etc., offer additional opportunities to network with others. By "friending," or "following" others, they provide an incredible opportunity to spread the word about you, your work, and whatever other benefits you have to offer in your blog and website (ideas, comments, learnings, as well as your art). They, too, are a great way to keep in touch with what others in your field are doing.

Your posts on social networks will typically be short. You can use the opportunity to increase traffic to your blog and website by commenting on (and linking to) your blogs. Again, your approach should be conversational, or educational, not advertising. You have something to offer that people are interested in seeing, talking about and sharing with others. Give them something to spread around and share that can also bring others back to your web page or blog.

Newsletters (email or print) are an additional option for "pushing" advertising, news and useful tidbits out to a portion of your audience. Offering the option of signing up for them, from your website or from art shows, is also a good way to build your mailing list.

Online sales ports like **Etsy** and **Ebay** may not be the place to sell your high end work, but they shouldn't be overlooked for their potential. They may be just right for your 'discontinued' or 'clearance' items. They are certainly additional ways to "get your name out there."

You should treat all your "online presence" routes as a cohesive set of business and marketing tools. They should work for you, move you towards your goals and convey to people that you are easy to work with, courteous, professional and reliable. They represent you. They are your branding, your "face" to the electronic market place, the entrance into your store, the first impression from which people decide if they want to work with you, commission work from you, or buy from you. They can easily soak up your time, so it pays to occasionally step above them for a higher altitude view to make sure they are, indeed, moving you in the direction you want to grow.

Bon Voyage!