

DAN HOHL

FOLLOWING WHERE THE CUSTOMER LEADS

by Colleen Bryan

During his years as a Delphi management representative, Dan Hohl counseled franchisees to “WLD”: *Watch* your customer. *Listen* to your customer. *Do* what they’re telling you to do. Adjust your store to reflect the way they shop. In practice, this means setting up the store to make it appealing. Above all, it means keeping things clean. And not putting things on the floor. “Women don’t want to get down on the floor to compare or select products.” Putting oneself in the customer’s position and removing obstacles or solving problems from their perspective is a key aspect of effective retailing. In his second life as an owner of his own retail store, Raleigh Stained Glass Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, Hohl tries to put that counsel into practice.

Store Organization

The front two-thirds of Raleigh Stained Glass Center is a retail environment featuring bevels, fusing, supplies, glass, and materials. Front windows showcase finished hanging pieces.

The most profitable spot in Hohl’s store is up front where two large bookcases hold square-foot pieces of glass next to angled counter light boxes, thus following his motto: “Put costlier inventory up front if that is what you want people to buy.” Customers can pick out glass and examine it under interior, outdoor, and florescent lighting. Large front windows allow them to see glass under natural light. “In the retail business we always have one section that makes a lot of money. This corner is the highest revenue producing area of my shop. It is my deli counter. I’m a merchandiser at heart.”

The divas of the glass store, full-sheet glass bins, run down the center and one side of the store. Bins are set up as an angled chevron so shoppers can see a range of glasses rather than just one. Hohl displays every piece of glass as a piece of artwork. All racks have extended counters with a six-to-eight-inch overhang, so customers can shop without bumping up against the glass. Three large light boxes along one wall display samples of all the colors.

The back third of the store is a semi-open tiled and carpeted workroom, the place where people get help to solve their problems. It registers a constant flow of customers coming in to work who ask questions and get answers from a staff person or peers. Drop-in visitors who stop to observe projects underway are engaged and encouraged to sit awhile in conversation or are shown where to find materials for a project that sparks their imagination.

Another worktable spills out into the body of the retail area to handle overflow. Hohl restricts the first session of most classes to enrolled students, but he invites others to join follow-up sessions and work on any of their own projects. “The shared enthusiasm and information that comes from working side by side with others is an incentive for beginning students to work hard for the success that they see can be had. People come with a purpose, or they come just to talk. In either case, they are in my store, not on the Internet.”



Purposeful Artifacts

Finished projects hanging on display are chosen intentionally with an eye to what materials or techniques they exemplify rather than just because they are pretty. “Every piece has to answer at least three questions about glass, technique, style, classes, or other aspects of working in glass. All of the hanging panels or display pieces are meant to sell something.”

That said, Hohl keeps a few selected items around only to provide a conversation starter. “I still have a couple of things in the shop that I brought from Michigan. I bought a big calculator as a conversation piece ten years ago. Every customer who walks in comments on it.” A small collection of toys and wooden boxes for mints engage people and provide the opportunity for them to slow down. Hohl uses that opportunity to ask questions. “Customers are afraid to be embarrassed before experts. Therefore, we retailers have to make the environment as engaging and pleasant as possible. I’m selling entertainment—a hobby—and in order to do that I have to make it fun.”

Engaging the Harder-to-Reach

Hohl estimates that 40 percent of his customers are male, relatively more than most retailers report. He targets outreach, advertising, and project selection to attract men to the store and keep them coming.

“Years ago I ran an ad that said, ‘Cheaper than therapy. Do stained glass.’ It appealed to their delight in finding a deal. Stained glass is a wonderful release for professional men. The biggest complaint I hear from them is that they become so absorbed in the project that they forget about time. ‘I was so focused on my project I worked on it until 2 a.m.’”



According to Hohl, the choice of words is important. “I advertise stained glass *projects*, because guys do projects, not hobbies.” Sometimes, the difference is all in a name. “I am constantly changing things up. For the last few years I couldn’t sell a design class. Then I changed the name to *Pattern Making*, and the class filled quickly.”

Hohl is not afraid to give away tastes for free. He is reinvesting in fusing to reflect that medium’s rise in popularity. “I offer a couple of free two-hour Saturday classes in fusing to whet their appetites.” The design will resonate with many male students as well. “We’ll use a copper foil technique to make an aquarium and make fused fish to go inside it.”

Many men feel lost as they face retirement, and glass gives them an object of focus, challenge, and experimentation. “Male retirees are a wonderful group. They are willing to try all kinds of things. I love teaching couples and seeing them undertake something together. I encourage it by giving a couples’ discount. Beyond making the hobby more affordable in their household, it’s a good business decision. When two people take a class, I can be confident that one of them is going to love the craft, and I know I’m going to make a sale. The reinforcement is powerful. Sometimes the lady of the house takes a class, and her husband shoves her aside and takes over the hobby.”

Sometimes offering customers the opportunity to experiment without heavy investment can help them bridge to a new aspect of the hobby. One longtime customer felt he had tried every area of stained glass when he took Hohl up on an offer to use the store’s kiln to try fusing. “His first project was magnificent. He bought my

used kiln and became my best fusing customer.” The 70-year-old retired chemist and professor now goes online and promotes Hohl’s business to another retiree in Wisconsin, because he wants Hohl to make some money. Suggesting new options to his customers is one way that he keeps them involved and engaged in glass art.

The Power of Community

The next expansion Hohl has in mind is initiating a stained glass guild. He envisions it as a group who can do bulk buying from his store and provide learning opportunities, camaraderie, and a sense of community among the cottage artisans who are his customers. He expects the club will meet regularly and start each meeting with a half-hour demonstration. “I’ll organize and facilitate the first few meetings and bring in my wholesale demonstrators for a couple of classes. Then I’ll turn the guild over to its members, and different students can demonstrate techniques or approaches they like to use.”

Since working together on a project can help build community within a group, Hohl imagines that the guild could work together on successive projects related to glass. One project he has thought of is having the guild create a Girl Scout badge in stained glass. The task would involve developing the criteria for what girls must accomplish to earn a badge and designing projects that would allow them to meet those criteria. Hohl thinks such projects could encourage people to think outside the box, have fun, feel part of a larger glass community, and pass on their love of glass to the next generation of hobbyists. He also would like to see the guild rent a local community hall to periodically show their stained glass creations.

Fostering New Generations of Hobbyists

For his part, Dan Hohl has spent two decades growing and fostering a community of glass hobbyists in Raleigh. He promotes his studio classes through a local university and suburban art centers, generating lots of students at the studio. He also does extensive outreach to children and youth through schools and summer camps.

“I teach two classes a day at a local private school for six or seven weeks starting in mid-January.” He has taught there as a visiting artist since 2000. In 1994 he began lecturing about the history of stained glass at various public schools, where he now engages the students in making a fused keychain or piece of jewelry. “I’ve had 25- and 26-year-olds come in and tell me they remember my presentation to their junior high class.”

Since 2002, Hohl has offered four-week summer camps through a local private school. He introduces students as young as seven years old to stained and hot glass, leading them in making different projects every day. “These are not boring camps. We’ve made kaleidoscopes out of Pringles cans, bead trees, stepping-stones, mosaic panels, fused jewelry and bowls, painted pottery, and a couple of ceramic pieces. We’ve tried silk and acrylic painting, and I’m introducing a new class called *Painting with Glass* that uses fused frit techniques. The students are between seven and ten years old, and my camps fill very quickly.”

In addition to the private school venue, Hohl offers two weeks of camp at his shop and offers a camp through the county ArtSpace in Downtown Raleigh. Both use the same format that he developed for the private school. Taken together, these venues allow Hohl to reach a broad cross-section of the city, from economic elites to its poorer children.

While there are pressures with year-round schools to offer camps throughout the year, Hohl prefers to concentrate his efforts in the summertime. “I have more time in the summer to spread myself thin for these camps. During the balance of the year, my adult classes fill as people come inside away from the mountains and the ocean to focus on their hobbies. I wouldn’t want to have kids in my shop all year round.”



Getting himself into the schools to teach and representing the Visiting Artist Program has been important to Hohl for several reasons. Exciting a new generation of youth about glass is renewing for the industry. The students walk out of his classes understanding the history and science of glass as it has come down through the centuries, as well as having had an opportunity to make something. For himself, Hohl also finds the experience personally invigorating and grounding.

GIA

You’ll find more about Dan Hohl, a former stained glass merchandise manager turned stained glass retailer, and how his expertise guided his choice of location, his philosophy of customer service, and his choice of retail offerings in the May/June 2014 issue of Glass Art.

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