

## Retailer Profile

# Prism GlassWorks, Ltd.

## Supporting Resurgence of the Art Glass Industry

by Colleen Bryan

Sharon Carothers of Prism GlassWorks expects that as the national economy slowly improves so will the art glass industry. But she sees that some of the adaptive choices that were made at every point along the supply chain bear rethinking if the industry wants to rebuild a healthy, vibrant future. “I would like to see us circle back around to a cleaner three-tier system. I appreciate the distribution channel and hope that we can work toward a better mutual understanding of the roles we all play in improving the market.”

### Valuing Direct Customer Contact

Carothers previously worked as a district sales manager for Rain Bird, an irrigation manufacturer. “They paid us handsomely to run all over the country visiting our whole-sale distributors, working to coordinate our programs with their needs. Often, I would visit a distributor’s branch and his top ten customers in a single day. Larger manufacturers in larger industries understand that personal communication creates sales for them. A buyer needs to feel that someone understands his needs, cares for him, and wants to work for him. The glass industry needs to clearly define and appreciate the importance of each other’s roles in the supply chain. Talking directly to somebody is a winning strategy.

“Manufacturers do a great job of making product. They would struggle to do a great job of teaching Joe Schmo who wanders in and wonders why his solder lines aren’t smooth. Manufacturers cannot see enough end users to have a broad influence, because they don’t have enough face-to-face eye contact with them.

“Distributors used to talk to me often on the telephone. Now they have beautiful website carts. Online ordering systems have made those websites easier to navigate and much more functional, but essentially, they have removed much of the personal contact with the retailer or the end user. The cart does it all. I occasionally get a call from a distributor, but whereas they used to call once or twice a week, now they call less frequently. No one calls and says ‘Have you used Ray’s bottle cutter? It is really easy.’ They aren’t staffed to make those calls. Their website cart is working to represent all products. As a result, new products may sit on distributor shelves longer before retailers and customers learn about an innovation. Distributors can’t reach the customers across the counter to answer questions about materials face to face.



*The Prism staff, past and present. From left to right: Leslee, Sharon, Amanda, owner Sharon, Julie, and Melissa.*



*An attractive storefront is an important factor in drawing customers to Prism GlassWorks.*



*Sharon Carothers, a leaded glass restoration project.*

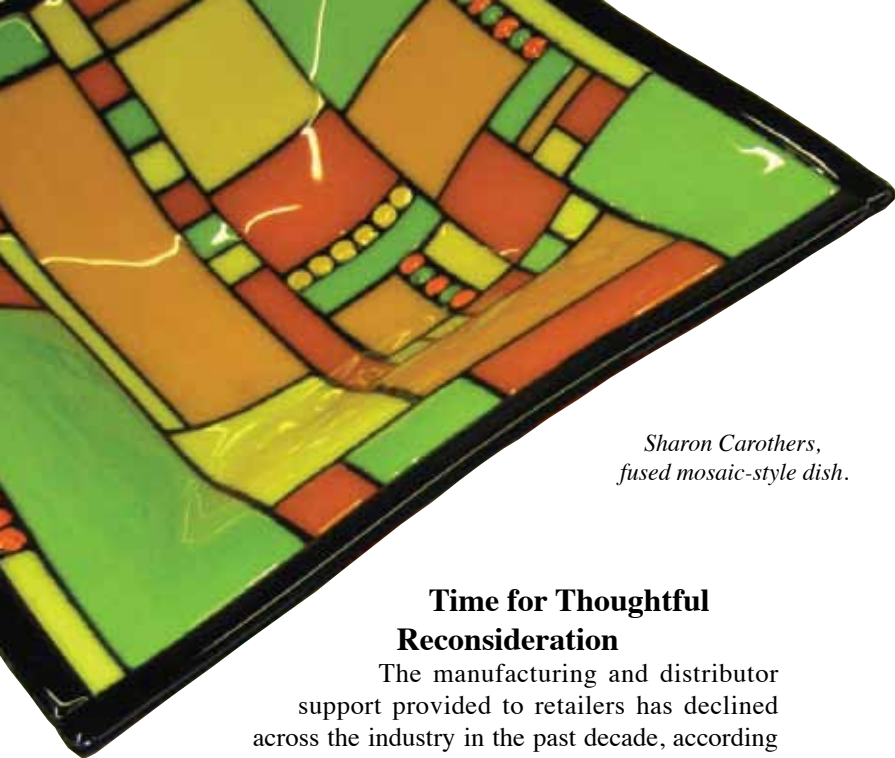
### What Video Can (and Cannot) Teach

Carothers observes that distributors only teach sporadically, and people pay \$300 or more for a visiting-teacher class. “They can periodically assemble great experts, but they can’t be there for the novice customer who is trying to work his way through a troublesome project. Only storefront retailers are there at that critical moment when a customer is deciding whether to work through the problems or abandon glass altogether. Storefront retailers who see thousands of end users and focus specifically on end users make individual crafters think their projects are important. The retailers generate more business for the entire industry, because their interface with end users helps them resolve blockages, generate enthusiasm, and empower creativity. What’s more, economic recovery always takes place from the bottom up, not from the top down. In the same way that you never get promoted by your boss but rather by the people below you, retailers will create the recovery.”

With so many YouTube and training videos available on the Web, we asked Carothers whether videos offer a viable end user learning experience. She acknowledges that it is simple for retailers, distributors, and manufacturers to load training or demonstration videos on YouTube or their websites or sponsor Webinars, and a lot of good information is out there. “Those media can help someone who knows he needs to be educated, who knows what he doesn’t know. Otherwise, the customer won’t even know what to search for. The way people learn that they need to be educated is to be exposed in a face-to-face conversation or demonstration with an opportunity to interact and question, with a chance to see and touch and feel real materials. There has to be a spark. I don’t believe that online tools are adequate to create that. Almost always, when two people get together chatting, something sparks. In my long career I’ve learned that creation happens when two or more people get together.

“There is a lot of good that happens with automation, technology, online seminars, and YouTube videos. These are all good tools that can support the relationship building that was the hallmark of the older style of business. But they should support the relationship, not replace the relationship.”





Sharon Carothers,  
fused mosaic-style dish.

### Time for Thoughtful Reconsideration

The manufacturing and distributor support provided to retailers has declined across the industry in the past decade, according to Carothers. “Retailers are the feet on the street, the teachers, the generators for the industry. That support needs to climb again. Online e-tailers warehouse their materials, ship them out, and never answer a question. If they have the gross margin advantage going forward, the industry will keep losing teachers as they retire. New people aren’t going to buy companies that come up for sale if their gross margins are so narrow. Nobody will buy a business that doesn’t show a profit anymore, so those businesses will be forced to liquidate. Then everybody loses.

As a retailer, Carothers observes: “We used to do a full-blown 11-by-17-inch stained glass project. The manufacturers won, the distributors won, and the retailers won. Now we do a project that measures 8-by-10. I reduced my materials usage to save money. The materials costs are lower. The students still experience working through an entire project and process, but we invest less in materials and time. It is easier for us to teach the class. During the recession, decisions like those helped my store to survive. But the fact that my materials load is so small is not good for any other part of the supply chain. Margins are shrinking for everybody.

“Now as I see that I am able to offer some intermediate stained glass classes, I’ll continue offering make-and-take classes for cash flow. I would like to be able to further increase my professional classes, but that will take some time. And as my store moves back into better balance, it benefits everyone along the supply chain, including distributors and manufacturers.”

Carothers notes that each player in the supply channel has a different cultural orientation. “Every part of the channel tends to think the other players are not doing an appropriate job and are failing their partners in the other positions. The industry as a whole needs to recognize that everything has changed, and we need to be really creative to see how we can make the new realities work for all of us. If the economy circles around and gets a little better, we might all be more creative in the functions that we’re best at. But I don’t think we will benefit from trying to collapse the tiers and work across all the functions. I believe the art glass industry will be best served by having manufacturers, distributors, and retailers playing to our own strengths in our primary roles and understanding the critical ways in which each tier supports the ongoing health of the industry.”



Sharon Carothers, Circle of Life sanctuary window created  
for Maumee United Methodist Church, 7'-diameter.



Sharon Carothers,  
fused mosaic-style dish.

### The Achilles’ Heel of E-tailers

Foremost among the changes Carothers sees is Internet retail. Across industries, storefront margins continue to shrink as online e-tailers provide low cost, no service products. This has the effect of shrinking the total available market for glass and related materials and supplies. Carothers addresses online competition by focusing on its Achilles’ heel—the lack of personal connection.

“I believe that my customers want to be seen. They want to know that their project is as important to me as it is to them. They enjoy the *Stained Glass News* and other literature I provide to them. They appreciate all the sample projects that I build for them to demonstrate what they can accomplish. They enjoy that I take the time to make the projects that are promoted in the Spectrum Glass *SCORE*, and the *Bullseye Education Forum*. They appreciate little tips that help them be successful, and they reward me by patronizing my store.”

Carothers herself was a bit amazed to note that people travel great distances to visit her store. “We always had the occasional vacationer who landed in town and found the local glass shop, but I’m now discovering people who go on quests. They are willing to drive farther to get their glass fix along with a connection, a personal relationship. I have people from Cincinnati who drive past existing retailers and distributors to visit me in Toledo. Some of the places they bypass have a hundred times more glass than I have. The customers come to the store where they can show me a picture, tell me how they made the project, review the challenges they tackled, and describe their success. They want to talk to somebody, and they want to be heard. They want to tell their stories to someone who appreciates the project they made. I think that the value of having a relationship is so overlooked. One of the first responsibilities of a retailer is listening to the customers.”

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*See the March/April 2014 edition of Glass Art for more information on how Sharon Carothers and Prism GlassWorks of Maumee, Ohio, survived the latest economic downturn and to review the evidence that signals an economic recovery.*

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