The ways in which contemporary art is produced, circulated, and sold is in a constant state of flux. This guide offers some useful advice for growing your gallery business, navigating the art market, and maintaining strong relationships in the sector.

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Broadly speaking, the gallerist’s role is to manage confidence; confidence that the artwork is of quality, that the artist is and will continue to be culturally significant, and that the artwork will have lasting value. The gallerist also manages confidence in the gallery itself to ensure that clients trust their judgement and advice.

Network

The art market is by definition a networking or a social market that relies heavily on personal relationships between the various players.

The dealer model has always been personality-based, and the effective functioning of a commercial gallery relies upon the gallerist’s reputation as a knowledgeable individual whose judgement on contemporary art can be trusted.

It follows that maintaining and sustaining a rapport with clients is crucial to the success of a gallery. It is through these conversations that collectors (and collections) are kept updated with an artist’s progress and made aware of new work.

Ideally private clients will have a positive experience and will buy progressively more, and more expensive items, as they develop their collections.

Casual networking can be done face-to-face in the gallery and at art events, and followed up via email and phone.

Website / Social Media

All galleries, but especially galleries operating outside of a major centre, require a strong online presence. This includes an elegant, image-forward website, and a social media presence.

A crucial asset for a gallery’s online presence is professional photographic documentation of exhibitions and, typically, artworks that enter the stockroom.

Most galleries have at least an Instagram account, as the image-forward format lends itself to the promotion and circulation of visual culture.

A simple rule of thumb for Instagram is to establish a house/brand style for posts, and use the ‘story’ function for candid / casual images.

Be active with your Instagram – make regular posts, like other organisations posts, and share material from your artists, and projects you have affinity with.

Mailing List

It’s important to grow and maintain a mailing list of people and organisations connected to your gallery. Campaign Monitor and Mail Chimp are popular and easy-to-use platforms for database management and generating marketing emails.

Typically, email announcements are sent 10 days prior to the opening of a new exhibition. These eDMs should include a high-quality image that is indicative of the work on display, a short text introducing the exhibition, bio, and full exhibition details.

Further to this, a regular newsletter for clients is a useful tool for keeping in touch.

A monthly eDM could feature a selection of news (upcoming shows at the gallery and by affiliated artists) as well as good images of new works that are available for sale. This may be a segment of your larger mailing list, targeted at clients or potential clients.

eDMs can either replace or compliment printed matter – for example, a card with details of the exhibitions scheduled for the upcoming season can be sent to collectors, curators, gallerists, museums, libraries, noticeboards etc.

Generally speaking, the aim is to get people to visit the gallery or, if they are out of town, the website, so you have the opportunity to strike up a conversation.

Advertising / Editorial

There are various strategies that can be used to secure exposure in both art-related and mainstream media.

Advertising often encourages/ensures editorial content in art and art-adjacent magazines and allows your gallery brand to reach a greatly expanded art-engaged audience.

Advertising in the right publications also aligns your brand with older, more established galleries, and positions your artists as serious participants in the market.

It is difficult to measure the success of advertising spend, as typically new clients hear about galleries (and artists) by word-of-mouth, through a friend’s recommendation, that is backed up by something they may have read in the media, or by seeing an artist’s work in a private home or public gallery, and making the connection.

Consignments

Most galleries consign work from artists on an unofficial basis. That is to say: artists retain ownership of the artwork, and the gallery sells it on their behalf (and title transfers to the collector when full payment is made).

The terms of this agreement are at your discretion. In Aotearoa currently galleries keep at most a 50% commission, and at least 30%, depending on the kind of service they offer the artists they work with.

You may also be required to consign work from other galleries. For example, if you want to make a show with an artist who is represented by another gallery it is standard, for the first exhibition with that artist at least, for the work to be consigned through the artist’s primary gallery.

Practically, consignments are designed to ensure that price and work details are consistent, that artworks are insured against damage, and will return at the close of the consignment term.

The terms of gallery-to-gallery consignment vary, and are typically negotiated case-by-case. The commission split acknowledges an existing gallery relationship, and should reflect the unique circumstances of each project. The consigning gallery might be happy with 10%, or they may request up to half of the gallery’s total commission.

It is typical in consignments for freight and insurance to be care of the consignee. If a consigning gallery has already invested in production costs of a certain artwork, they may also include this in the commission split equation.

Art Fairs

Art Fairs can be useful platform to create opportunities for the gallery and its artists to engage with, and gain exposure in, the national and international contexts, to develop and maintain audiences for their programme.

Art fairs are essentially trade fairs that are open to the public, and the booth fees can be costly. When choosing which art fairs to participate, think about alignment (what kinds of galleries do you want to be seen in relation to) and audience (what new markets can the fair help you access), and whether it is a context will be beneficial for your artists.

Select artists for particular fairs based on your knowledge of each context – what kind of artist and work do you think will resonate, grab attention etc.

Assess the fair’s selection criteria – some fairs state a preference for solo or group presentations with less than three artists, as it makes for a more cohesive, purposeful looking fair overall. If you think you might have difficulty being admitted to the fair, call the director and ask what kind of booth would appeal to the selection committee. It may not be your most profitable option, but it may be a means to securing your place in that fair in the future.

When deciding how to approach art fairs it is important to balance all the different kinds of benefits – if you make a busy group show you may sell more, but your booth may not make the same kind of impact. Art fairs are short, intense events, and word spreads quickly around them, so it’s good to do something distinctive.

Public programmes – most art fairs will have an associated public programme and VIP programme. Participating in these, whether it is hosting a talk at your stand or agreeing to speak on a panel, is a good way to engage with new people and raise your profile as an expert.

Art Fair Funding

Historically Creative New Zealand recognised the importance of local galleries participating at well-regarded art fairs, to develop new markets and audience for New Zealand contemporary art. CNZ has a dedicated fund - International Art Fair Fund – but it is unclear whether the will continue post-COVID. CNZ publish regular updates on their website, but if you are seriously considering applying for funding, make an appointment with one of their advisors and seek advice.

Freight

Freight of a sold artwork is generally a cost borne by the client. In certain cases you might consider paying for freight in place of/as a form a discount.

There isn’t one easy solution to freight (both domestic or international). Each work you send will have its own special requirements.

As a rule of thumb, if you are not using a specialist art shipper, ensure that the artwork is well-packed in a custom crate or sturdy box.

Some collectors like to keep their crates, especially if they have art storage. It’s useful to check what their requirements are longer-term.

Some mainstream freight companies have fragile services (slightly less regular, but worth waiting for).

Always be mindful of the environmental impact of your shipping activities – reduce, reuse, and recycle where possible.