

SITE ASPECTS OF LARGE-GROUP ART SHOWS

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This study is the second of two treating the geography of art shows. The first discussed the frequency of art shows by locale and season of the year, along with the concomitant transhumance of artists who follow the show circuit.¹ This study considers the specific site aspects of art shows with respect to their economic success, success measured as the artist's ability to make sales.

The desire of artists to sell their products has produced several marketing mechanisms. Gallery exhibitions are one important means, but their cost and space limitations restrict the number of artists and art pieces which can be accommodated. Gallery commissions usually run about 30 percent of the article's sale price, and occasionally reach 50 percent. Many artists cannot afford such high commissions and consequently avoid galleries. Some artists sell their merchandise out of their own private studio/gallery, but usually cannot make an adequate volume of sales in that manner alone.

The most popular art marketing mechanism is the large group show, in which normally about 50 to 350 artists congregate hoping the appeal of the show will attract potential buyers to view their works. These shows tend to be scattered in many different locations and have various site and situation attributes.

I have attended art shows in various locations under differing organizational and administrative conditions, and have wondered which shows are likely to yield the greatest profit. This study is an attempt to investigate formally those circumstances and examine the importance of show site as a factor in determining the show's sales potential. Data are derived from my own personal business records for art shows which I, or members of my family, attended over a two-year period. The sample consists of sixty-eight organized group art shows which combined to make 154 show days. The lengths of individual shows vary from one to six days. Most of the shows occurred in Florida, six took place in Southern Georgia and one was in Eastern Tennessee. One-man showings or sales made from personal contacts are not included.

TABLE I
WAYS OF CLASSIFYING ART SHOWS

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. SITE | 5. SIZE OF CITY |
| CLOSED PUBLIC STREET | (PERMANENT POPULATION |
| PUBLIC PARK | WITHIN 10 MILE RADIUS) |
| COLLEGE CAMPUS | SMALL TOWN (UNDER 5,000) |
| SHOPPING MALL | LARGE TOWN (5,000-25,000) |
| PARKING LOT | SMALL CITY (25,000-100,000) |
| RENTED CIVIC CENTER | LARGE CITY (OVER 100,000) |
| 2. ORGANIZER | 6. EXHIBITOR FEE |
| NON-PROFIT | COMMISSION |
| PROFIT | FLAT RATE FEE |
| 3. SPECTATOR ADMISSION | COMBINATION |
| FREE | FREE |
| FEE | 7. VALUE OF FEE |
| 4. INDIVIDUAL SHOW OR PART OF TOURING SERIES | |

Various attributes of art shows might be used to classify, categorize, or otherwise distinguish between different shows by types. Table 1 lists seven classifying systems. It is possible to classify the same show seven times, each time by a different set of criteria. Thus a given show might be classed as (1) an outdoor show in a park, (2) put on by a non-profit organization, to which (3) spectators were admitted free. The show was (4) part of a touring series which took place (5) in a small city. The artist paid (6) a flat fee for his exhibit space of (7) a certain amount. Limitations in the data prohibited evaluation of three of the seven categories. The matter of a show being an individual local production or part of a touring series could not be evaluated because there were none of the touring series type in my sample. Likewise, the effects of the exhibitor fee category could not be studied because the sample contained no commission or combination of commission and fee type shows, and very few free shows. Furthermore, there were only four shows at which the spectators were charged for admission to the show. Exclusion of these parameters from the study is, however, justified because they provide little significant information to distinguish between individual shows. Of the four remaining, two (show fees and size of city) are continuous quantitative variables. Pearson correlations were calculated between each and the gross sales value per day for each of the sixty-eight shows. The r value for size of city paired with gross sales per day is $-.07$ ($r^2 = .005$): not statistically significant. The r value for show fee per day is $.32$ ($r^2 = .10$). Although these values may technically be statistically significant, they are not sufficiently high to warrant their use as a dependable guide to find profitable shows.

TABLE 2
TYPE OF SHOW SITE & MEAN GROSS SALES

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|--------|--------|--------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| SITE | STREET | CAMPUS | PARK | CIV. CEN. | MALL | PARK. LOT |
| \$/DAY | 133.74 | 74.00 | 59.63 | 43.81 | 40.80 | 21.57 |
| SHOWS | 9 | 10 | 27 | 1 | 18 | 3 |
| DAYS | 17 | 17 | 48 | 3 | 62 | 7 |

TABLE 3
TYPE OF SHOW ORGANIZER & MEAN GROSS SALES PER DAY

| | 1 | 2 |
|-----------|------------|--------|
| ORGANIZER | NON-PROFIT | PROFIT |
| \$/DAY | 79.26 | 38.08 |
| SHOWS | 44 | 24 |
| DAYS | 81 | 73 |

TABLE 4
PERCENT OF PROFIT AND NON-PROFIT ORGANIZERS
RESPONSIBLE FOR EACH SHOW SITE TYPE

| | STREET | CAMPUS | PARK | CIV. CEN. | MALL | PARK. LOT |
|------------|--------|--------|------|-----------|------|-----------|
| NON-PROFIT | 100 | 100 | 81 | 0 | 17 | 33 |
| PROFIT | 0 | 0 | 19 | 100 | 83 | 67 |

The remaining two categories (site and organizer) were grouped by type with total gross sales supplied for each type. Sites were divided into six types (Table 2). Art shows held in temporarily closed public streets yield much higher sales values than shows at any other site. Other publicly owned locations rank second and third, and various types of privately owned locations rank fourth, fifth, and sixth. The shows were also classed according to organizer (Table 3). Shows which were organized by non-profit groups such as local art associations or civic booster groups produced twice the sales values as shows organized by commercial promoters. The actual success of the show is probably most dependent upon the efforts, competency and objectives of the organizers. As it works out, the organizer's background is closely related to the choice of site (Table 4).

Street shows are organized exclusively by non-profit organizations. Commercial promoters simply cannot obtain permission to close the streets for their private use. Furthermore, it is only those non-profit organizations with the most clout which manage to get streets closed for their use. Thus, the most well organized groups, which have managed to obtain the most community cooperation and participation, are the producers of the most successful large group art shows, and their preferred location is a temporarily closed public street.

Other non-profit organizers, which cannot or do not obtain public streets as show sites, seem to lack the overall ability to promote a successful show. A show occurring in a park will usually not be as successful as a street show, even though most park shows are also promoted by non-profit organizers.

Shows occurring on college campuses are promoted exclusively by non-profit on-campus organizations. Those organizations apparently do their jobs well and thus the artist can expect moderately good sales in such locations, assuming the prices of the goods are within reach of student budgets.

Commercial promoters usually are unable to obtain the use of streets, parks, and other public land for their shows. Consequently, "promoter shows" are usually held in shopping malls, parking lots, or civic centers. The worst feature of the promoter show, from the artist's viewpoint, is that the promoter usually puts little or no money into advertising. The shopping mall show relies on the attraction of the mall to draw people past the art exhibits. Unfortunately for the artist, the mall patrons usually come for purposes other than purchasing art. When they accidentally discover an art show in progress, they glance curiously at the exhibits and walk on. If the show is held in a shopping center parking lot, visitors linger for an even shorter time.

Shows held in civic centers actually deter visitors. In an effort to recover the cost of renting the civic center, or perhaps simply because of the opportunity to control entrance, most promoters will charge admission for spectators to enter the show area. This practice reduces the number of show visitors and decreases the amount of money available to spend on art.

It may be seen that type of show site is an effective indicator of the probable sales generated by art shows. Once I made this observation I began to apply it in making my decisions about which shows to attend. I have been able to substantially improve my sales record during the past year. There are, however, too many exceptions to the above generalizations to hope always to choose profitable shows on that basis alone. Some street shows are ineptly organized or poorly advertised, while some mall shows are well publicized and consequently quite profitable. Further improvements in the process of deciding which art shows should yield high sales will probably have to rely on knowledge of the local territory. It remains, however, that lacking other direct information, site is an excellent indicator of the sales potential of a large-group art show.

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1. Donald Brandes, "Seasonal Fluctuations of Art Show Location and Frequency," The Florida Geographer 13-1 (1979): 18-23.