

Gail Golden Jewelry

Arroyo Seco, New Mexico
Golden Golden, Owner and Artist



This case study shows the value of a collective Web site for marketing the products of rural artisans. It also demonstrates the importance of evolving a Web site over time and developing a Web presence that serves the needs of a self-employed artisan.

Profile

Gail Golden produces high quality, handmade silver, gold, and gem jewelry for the retail and custom sales markets. A smaller part of her business is mass produced, again by Golden, for the wholesale market, specifically through the Sundance catalog. Golden has been making jewelry since 2002 on a part-time basis and, since 2004, full-time. Golden's jewelry is featured in five galleries, only two of which are in the Taos area. Sales of her jewelry via the galleries in New Mexico are very seasonal, with about three months of strong sales per year. The gallery in Boulder that features her work has generated the best sales and they are more evenly spaced throughout the year. Most galleries take her jewelry on consignment which creates a challenge for an artisan – she must produce thousands of dollars of jewelry that are displayed in galleries without a commensurate flow of cash coming in to the business.

Golden is one of the artists featured on www.wesstartisans.com, a collective Web site managed by WESST Corporation that provides an easy way for artisans, particularly rural artisans, to establish a Web presence and market their products. About 25 percent of Golden's sales, which were \$24,000 last year, come through the marketing on the Web site, mainly from galleries that have contacted Golden after seeing her products on the Web site. This online marketing reduces the time Golden needs to spend visiting galleries to show her jewelry.

History

In 1986, Golden moved to the Taos, New Mexico area for a job in the ski industry. In 2000, Golden, who had majored in Fine Arts, took a jewelry class and discovered a passion and skill for making fine jewelry. She was encouraged to pursue this passion and with the help of a mentor, began to practice her art, first part-time and now full-time. About the time she

was moving to a full-time operation, Golden took the Market Link class offered by WESST Corp. This 45-hour program is designed to help small business owners develop a “perfect pitch” for their products or services. One of the focus target groups for the Market Link program were artisans, and through a Kellogg Foundation grant, WESST Corp was able to develop a collective Web site artists who participated in the Market Link program could join.

Golden took advantage of the opportunity offered by WESST Corp and created her first Web site as part of the WESST Artisans site. She provided text for the site and WESST Corp provided the Web structure and maintains the site. Each artist featured on the site pays an annual fee (\$200) and WESST Corp earns a 25 percent commission on online sales. The opportunity to get online via the Wesstartisans.com site was important to Golden who had a working knowledge of computer graphics and only limited familiarity with the Internet and e-commerce. By joining a collective site, Golden could take advantage of the e-commerce capabilities of the site while still having her own personal Web space to feature her products and her story.

Golden has a strong interest in growing her business, particularly in terms of eliminating consignment sales and expanding her retail and custom sales. She showed a small profit last year and, in the first quarter of 2007, sales were double those in 2006.

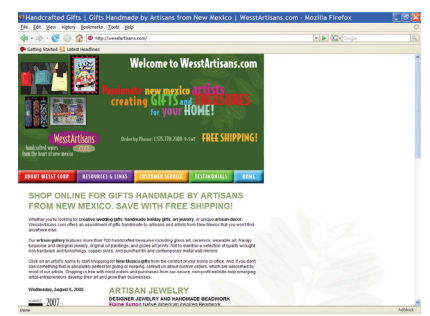
Business Location

Taos, New Mexico is located on a high desert mesa at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Its beautiful and varied environment has attracted artists since the 1920s. Tourism remains a primary driver of the local

Area Population: **4,700**

Web site:

www.wesstartisans.com



economy, with both recreational (skiing and hiking) and historical (Taos Pueblo) attractions. Taos (2000 population 4,700) has a dramatic influx of seasonal population during the peak tourism months. Located in nonmetropolitan Taos County (2000 population 29,979), Taos is 70 miles north of Santa Fe and 132 miles from Albuquerque, the state's major metropolitan area.

Role of e-Commerce

For Golden, who has participated for three years on Wesstartisans.com, the site is primarily a marketing tool, not a direct sales tool. The site currently features 16 artists whose products range from personal care to fine jewelry to punched tin sconces. Her jewelry is among the most expensive items on the site. However, if you Google "Golden Golden", her site on Wesstartisans.com comes up first, demonstrating its marketing power. About 25 percent of Golden's sales have been generated online. Some of these sales come from galleries that find her products online but then directly retail them to their customers. The Web site has not produced custom sales orders; most of these sales come through word of mouth. As a marketing tool, Golden contends that she "has gotten her money's worth." And, for now, it remains her only Web presence. Indeed, Golden indicated that she would be "floundering" without the stream of sales and sales leads that are generated by her participation on the site.

In spite of the benefits from Wesstartisans.com, Golden is in the process of developing her own Web site. While she believes she has outgrown the Wesstartisans Web site, she has not outgrown the services and support provided by WESST Corp. Initially, the new site will be created as a marketing tool and will not have full e-commerce capabilities such as a shopping cart. She is going to focus on site optimization, working on this with WESST Corp as part of another grant program. Golden had several reasons for creating her own Web site:

- The Web site will be designed to more clearly reflect her art – it will be more creative and professional than the collective site.
- The site will reflect both the high quality that goes into the art and the natural influences that inspire the work.
- The Web site will feature more information on Golden Golden, the artist, and what new creative work she is doing.

All of these features could not be added to the current Wesstartisans.com site since it provides a package program that the artists use, whether they are producing natural soaps or fine custom jewelry.

Challenges and Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs

Golden's experience as a self-employed artist and a member of the Wesstartisans.com collective site offers a number of important lessons for other business owners in rural places:

- Lack of capital specifically to invest in marketing her artwork online has put the brakes on Golden's ability to build the business. Golden is using a friend to develop the new Web site and is being trained so that she can administer the site over time. The cost of development is estimated to be \$1,200 and the monthly cost, primarily for high speed access, is \$40-50/month. However, these costs do not include expenses associated with site optimization – purchasing ad words and other ways to improve visibility on search engines. For a start up business where cash flow is a constant concern, covering these additional costs is difficult.
- For an artist, the success of e-commerce on a Web site is highly dependent on having quality photographs of your products. Although WESST Corp provided a photographer to prepare images of her jewelry for the Web site, Golden was not satisfied with the quality of the photos. Now she uses a professional photographer, at a cost of \$150/hour. Without these quality images, however, the marketing and sales potential of the Web site would be limited.
- Golden drew heavily on the services and support of others as she was getting started – her mentor, the WESST Corp staff, her suppliers and her network of fellow artists. Golden suggests that others who are interested in using e-commerce research and work closely with service providers and other community resources. Being able to trust assistance providers, whether they Web developers or suppliers, is critical.
- While Golden has been able to find the support she needs locally, particularly in terms of Web development, high speed Internet access and services through WESST Corp, she does suggest that her rural location makes growing her business difficult. Whether because of the difficulty gaining access to supplies or finding resources locally (the WESST Corp office in Taos has closed), Golden has considered moving her business in the past. And, if she is successful in growing the business to the point where she needs to hire production workers, a move may be necessary.

From e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business Vitality: Lessons Learned from Small Businesses by Deborah M. Markley, David L. Barkley, and R. David Lamie

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