

Finding and Selling Your Expertise in Unlikely Places

— by Colleen Bryan

Alan Toy, owner of the retail glass store Stained Glass Connection in Sarasota, Florida, is proficient at pulling together disparate strands of life experience to weave new and continuously changing business opportunities—and he thinks you can do it too! Even abrupt and apparently discontinuous career changes come together within the cauldron of the individual to shape a distinct and unique package of expertise.

Beginnings in Glass

“I learned the glass trade just after returning from the Vietnam War. A fellow veteran, Al Brum, was working in glass, so I completed his six-week stained glass class and we worked together side by side for eight years. He is an expert technician. I credit him with all of my technical capabilities. At one point we had forty employees producing three hundred Tiffany panels and lamps each week. We sold that business in 1978. I got a corporate MBA going to night school and was recruited by a Fortune 100 company that liked the assortment of experience I’d had so far as a noncommissioned officer in the military and as a small-business man with a technical undergraduate degree in chemical engineering and an MBA.

“For the next twenty years, I worked in the chemical industry and spent a significant time on the international side of the company. I was also the head of purchasing, authorizing hundreds of millions of dollars in yearly expenditures and directing special programs that allowed me to be creative. I had a free hand to direct my career and write my own ticket for most of my career.

“During all this time, I kept glass in the background, fabricating significant pieces for our home. After twenty years the company was downsizing, and I wanted to spend more time with my family. I returned to glass full-time in 1997. My old partner made good on his standing offer to split his business in two and have each of us run a part of it. That is what we did. Since 1999, our respective storefronts have been five doors away from each other. His store is Brum Art Glass, and he specializes in commercial and home entryways. I focus Stained Glass Connection on retail sales of glass and fusing supplies, education, and giftware. Since we split the business both sides have grown. Working with someone who has been your best friend since 1970 is kind of neat.”

Helping Others

More recently, Alan has found a way to use his blend of experience to help other companies grow. One such example is with a large international glass manufacturer. They make commercial glass that is used in business and an art glass line that is wonderful for fusing. In the United States, they have been successful as a source of raw



material for stained glass but not so much with the launch of its line of fusible glass. Toy carved out a role for himself in helping the company develop a platform for increasing sales into America.

“I pull in my business acumen from working in more than forty different countries and from my background running a retail business in America. I bring my perspective and understanding as part of the distribution chain [glass retailer and educator] to help them understand what it will take for them to be successful.

“Because I am multilingual and understand different cultures, a number of companies have chosen me to act on their behalf in this capacity. I am a market consultant and a technical consultant for fusing and kiln development and design [user and retailer].

“For every company I serve in this capacity, I first meet with them to understand their core strengths; overall business strategy; backgrounds and abilities of their key players; and their time, investment, and profit goals. I put together a set of initiatives that outlines what the industry needs and where the company might fit in solving these needs. The company can choose to pursue any or all of these initiatives or not. I get paid as a consultant for giving them advice and a roadmap. On each initiative, I define roles that are needed and a role that I could play to help them get where they want to go more quickly.” Toy breaks down each project into milestones and timelines. He identifies issues, anticipates trouble areas, and makes suggestions for mitigation strategies. Based on the abilities and time of the personnel of each company, the company can take over some or all of these functions. I’m available to fill in the gaps if needed.”

Seen from this point of view, Toy’s expertise is transferable across a host of different companies and business opportunities. Another prospect that has him intrigued these days is working with a kiln company to invent a new kiln that uses computer software differently to increase throughput. He handles about four such consultancy contracts each year.

Alan Toy thinks that many of his peers in glass retail could create similar opportunities themselves. "I've met many of my peers and find that they all bring different strengths to the table because of their unique mix of life experiences. They should not short change themselves in terms of how those experiences could be valued and used." Some technical companies, however, are not good at marketing and vice versa. Finding consultants with complementary strengths and perspectives can make all the difference in achieving success. "I serve as a bridge in the area of fusing, but other retailers have other strengths to bring to the table. I encourage them to explore such possibilities because it helps them and it helps the industry."

Finding Opportunities

How does a person identify potential opportunities? Toy recommends that you start by taking a clear-eyed inventory of your own strengths built from a lifetime of experience. Then look outward at the world around you. For example, where you see it might be to your benefit for a specific company to get into a particular business or refine a particular product, raise the opportunity to that company and explain your idea in a way they'll understand. This is Strategic Marketing.

"When a silicone valley company came up with a new adhesive system to replace cement in old windows, they needed a home for a new line of business. Who knows better how these products should be presented than a person who fabricates and sells glass? I am in a position to do both. I used the products and liked them. The new adhesive had many fine attributes (i.e., heat melts the product; it hardens with cooling, is not messy, and doesn't require a lot of cleanup; can be reheated multiple times; and saves you time). But I also saw some opportunities to improve the product. I contacted the company and offered to work with them on ideas for marketing and ideas for negotiating terms."

Alan also advises his peers to look for opportunities to convert the excess product that you own into increased revenue for yourself and others. "I own kilns and equipment that sit at my store 24/7 that I use only part of the time. When I negotiate to rent that capacity round the clock to other artists and get fair return for its use, I increase my revenues and the renters generate more income for themselves without having to invest in duplicating capacity. Sometimes it is better to simplify your life by utilizing other people's equipment more effectively."

Sharing Talent as a Consultant

When it comes to valuing his work as a consultant, Toy and the companies with which he works agree upon a fair charge for his time. He documents the hours he spends working on the project and bills for his hours with a detailed report that logs discussions, decisions, and deliverables.

How does he juggle the day-to-day responsibilities of keeping the retail doors open with the intensive bursts required by consulting? Toy does not wander into superhero tactics. "My job as the owner of a retail store is to train and direct my staff so they can handle day-to-day stuff. I'm big into teaching people how to fish, how to generate a large enough revenue base.

"I run the retail store along with three permanent part-time people. They are all very dedicated and smart. We have thought together about what each person brings to and gets out of the job beyond a simple paycheck. Time-sharing of jobs, managed properly, generates more energy and coverage than a simple sum of paid hours worked. This is actually the opposite of what people fear when they first approach the idea.

"Drawing from a military analogy, a general decides which hill an army will attack, but the sergeant decides how to physically get up that hill. There are many right ways to tackle any problem. Our culture values a high degree of choice. There may be some approaches that are more efficient and some that are more successful, but my staff can usually find a right course through any problem." Toy paints no illusion that these strategies chart a path to instant wealth. He does, however, think them a sound foundation for reasonable comfort, satisfaction, and adaptation to an ever-changing milieu.

"Are we making a killing financially? No. Are we doing better than making ends meet? Yes. Are we stimulated and interested in our work and relationships? Yes. Are we demoralized by the rough economy? No. It is all part of the environment in which we live. Carrying on about tough economic times is like being in an ocean and complaining about a wave. Success comes from recognizing its character and learning to move gracefully and smoothly to handle whatever comes our way, a chop one way and a swell another."

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You'll find more about Alan Toy's retail operations and his participation in a farmer's market artists' cooperative in the Fall 2008 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.



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