

The Art Of Success: Stained Glass

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The Art Of Success: Stained Glass

"I really didn't know much about stained glass, only what I'd seen in gift shops," said Hal Williams, owner of Eagle Mountain Stained Glass Studio in Ridgecrest, California. So it was back in 1976, with "zero artistic background" that Williams and his wife Mary decided to take a class on stained glass at the community college. At that time they were both working as paramedics in Las Vegas, Nevada, and had extra time between shifts on the job.

Soon they became good friends with their instructor who owned a stained glass studio. By the end of the year, Williams was hired on at the studio as an apprentice. He stayed there for the next two years, learning most of what he would need to know to start his own business.

Then Williams moved to Houston, Texas, and started to work in his own studio part-time while holding a full-time job in the steel business. When Williams was laid off, however, he and his wife decided to move back to their hometown Ridgecrest, California -and start a stained glass business full-time. "Mary knew people here, but I didn't know a soul," says Williams. "But since I'd had some sales experience, I just started knocking on doors.

Williams started a large studio at his home and worked out of it for quite some time. He gained more experience and training by attending various seminars and workshops around the country.

STARTING OUT SMALL

"All I had was the bare necessities - my hand tools and a bench," says Williams. Eventually, for about \$100 Williams purchased a glass grinder used to grind glass down for precision fitting. Next, he bought a diamond band saw for about \$700. This he used for tricky cutting such as 90 degree angles and cutting that cannot be done by hand - it gives the glass worker a professional cut. To round out his studio, Williams bought a glass kiln for \$2,000. The kiln is used for glass painting and fusing. It is a necessity when one is restoring the windows of old churches, which Williams has done. "Most of these tools are not necessary when just starting out, but they do save a lot of time for the professional," says Williams.

Initially, Williams made a large purchase of glass, lead, solder and other supplies because he felt it was necessary to keep these supplies on hand and ready. Since Williams was making so many time-consuming trips to Los Angeles for his materials, he

decided to purchase a month's supply at a time. A month's worth of supplies costs him between \$1,000 and \$1,500.

Other essentials for Williams office include a work table (which he built himself for under \$100) and a bench equipped with a built-in light. He uses this bench to trace patterns onto the stained glass pieces.

WHAT IT COSTS TO START

"Taking everything into consideration, if you are really creative, you can start up for about \$2,000," says Williams. "That is if you start with a home studio." When you are building the stained glass business from scratch, one of the first things you should do is check your competition. This will tell you exactly what supplies to carry. It is obvious that if you don't have a wide pallet of colored glass to choose from, you will lose your business to the guy that does.

If you do have competition, be sure there's enough consumer interest to justify your new business. To attract customers to your shop and widen your customer base, offer to teach what you know. Williams went to the local college to offer to teach his skills in stained glass, which they cordially accepted. He is licensed and now teaches twenty-five students a semester.

He also approached local housing contractors and explained that not only could he provide excellently crafted stained glass, but he could also install it and do any necessary repairs on the job. This appealed to them because it would save a considerable amount of money. Their first contract was for stained glass work on twenty-five new houses. Williams created stained glass for front doors and side-lights. Popular colors are various hues of blue, mauve, and desert shades for floral, animal, or desert scenes.

Williams has a regular business license to do stained glass work, but if you also do the installation, work yourself you must have a contractors license.

GETTING THE JOB

"Proper bidding, I think is very important in stained glass," said Williams. "If you underbid, you are going to eat it, and if you overbid you are going to lose the job." Williams started out bidding very low so he could get the jobs and prove himself. As time went on he raised his prices, but he is still lower than his competitors. Now he is well known in his area, and gets a lot of good jobs.

Williams makes approximately \$3,000 a month on custom work and the sales of supplies, a figure which does not include his contract work and teaching. Williams also has a gift shop in his downtown studio. "To make a decent wage you have to charge a decent price," says Williams.

SPREADING THE WORD

Although he gets excellent exposure at his street-front location.. Williams still advertises. He has tried radio and newspapers, but finds that he gets the best results from the local swap sheet. He also carries a large ad in the Yellow Pages. Word of mouth has also been a very important advertising factor.

"We listen to what the customer wants, show him what we can do, and do the job right," says Williams. The Williams may expand even further someday, if they ever get the time, but right now their prosperous stained glass studio is keeping them very busy.