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In it for the Long Haul

Business owners share tips for longevity.

by HILLARY
MATHEWSON

A first-timer walks into a pottery painting studio and is greeted by the owner. After getting the spiel about the studio, the new customer gushes, “How cool! You get to paint pottery all day!”

Everyone who owns a creative-based storefront has heard this kind of sentiment countless times. Similar echoes of “this must be so much fun” and “you’re so lucky” also rattle around in your head. As you know, luck has little to do with keeping the doors open and the lights on.

The evolution of the traditional ceramic shop to today’s pottery painting studio began in the early 1990s. The paint-your-own-pottery (PYOP) studio concept was designed around the desire for a creative activity without a big time commitment, helping make art fit into a busy lifestyle.

Today’s PYOP studios are vibrant and welcoming, ranging from the funky colorful studio to the modern, monochromatic vibe. Walk-ins are welcome, and activities vary from studio to studio. Customers of all ages may



UPaint Pottery Studio



paint bisque (clay that has been fired: plates, bowls, décor, shapes, seasonal pieces), throw pottery on potter's wheels, make glass fused pieces and paint canvases. Parties and celebrations are a big part of the business: Kid's birthdays, team building, ladies' night, classes and themed events all make the creative space even more engaging.

It's no wonder customers frequently gush over their studio experience. But a studio owner faces the same challenges as every other small retailer: managing expenses (rent and payroll), marketing (how do people find me?) and making the most of every day (who needs sleep?).

So how does one get through those first few years of ownership to then cross the 10- and 20-year line? Longtime and successful PYOP studio owners share the decisions they made that played a role in their longevity.

FINDING THE RIGHT LOCATION

You've heard it before: location, location, location. Stephanie Magennis, owner of Ceramics in the City, Denver, Colorado, credits her studio's 20-year success in large part to her high-visibility location on a busy street in a high-end neighborhood.

Margaret Nevill, owner of The Mad Platter in Columbia, South Carolina, opened her studio 26 years ago and says she chose to be located in the middle of three socioeconomic groups. "While we don't have many walk-by customers, we do have 40,000 cars a day that travel past our studio," she says.

Julya and John Myers, owners of Amazing Art Studio, Gaithersburg, Maryland, say they have had fabulous locations for their studios. The first location was stellar, but their lease was not renewed. An even better location was found, and their business is on track to have its best year since opening 20 years ago.

HIRING AND KEEPING THE RIGHT STAFF

Any storefront business operating for more than 20 years isn't run on owner power alone. Employees are a very big part of a long-term business.

Jenn Meyer opened Walls of Clay in McKinney, Texas, 22 years ago. She strongly believes in investing in staff. "During a period of financial constraints, I defied my belief that 'I can't afford to' and expanded my team. Shifting focus to strategic aspects and overall studio development, I worked on it rather than being immersed in day-to-day operations," she says. "This shift emphasized the importance of stepping back to lead and innovate, contributing to my studio's expansive success."

When you find the right people, onboarding and training are critical. Stacey Heltsley and Kelli Singleton opened their first PYOP location 10 years ago. Today UPaint Pottery has four locations in Indiana and Ohio.

"We created our studio to be customer-centered. We put our energy into the customer experience," Kelli Singleton

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says. “Our staff is trained to always put customers first. We view our studio as an experience business masked as a paint-your-own-pottery studio. Most people coming to us are not artists; they are just looking for an activity to spend time with their friends and family.”

They also stress the importance of structure and consistency for training and retaining staff. “Early in our business, we spent a lot of time creating a procedure manual. All our stores follow the same processes and procedures, which creates a unified approach across all stores. These policies and procedures are followed by all staff members,” Singleton says.

Magennis also emphasizes the importance of retaining great staff. “I have been very lucky with amazing employees,” she says. “If your employees can make the guests’ experience a great one, they will come back and hopefully bring their friends.” Those are the kind of people you want working in your business.

IMPLEMENTING THE RIGHT SYSTEMS

Jen Balletto opened Create It! in Sebastopol, California, 18 years ago and credits her systems and staying organized to her ability to maintain a solid business. “Everything in my studio has a place. We have a system for most everything,” she says. “I use a communication binder and mark the priorities of each next day. When employees come in, they know what to do. As they finish the first project, they initial it and go on to the next.”

Managing the demands of running a store means putting workflows and systems in place. Meyer is a testament to the power of investing in herself and her business. “I developed a detailed system for managing thoughts, goals and daily tasks. Planning weeks ahead and maintaining structured notes brought newfound freedom and flexibility. This focused planning streamlined

operations, allowing me to work smarter and accomplish more in fewer hours each week—a testament to the liberating power of strategic organization,” she says.

All these businesses also are woven into the fabric of their community. “I chose to work with our local schools (public, private and early learning) from the very beginning,” Nevill says. “We visit schools to create with students. When possible, we assist schools and parents with class projects in the classroom. It is our responsibility to support them in any way we are able to. This may be through a school auction, ornament campaigns or creating race medals for a school’s 5K. We are honored to be a part of their process. You have to love where you live and show it.”

MANAGING FOR THE LONG HAUL

The work you do running your shop is real. The care and concern you show is genuine. It is a privilege to own a creative shop—until it’s all too much. It’s exhausting and overwhelming. (Quick quiz: Have you ever daydreamed of being a Target cashier?)

Burnout is real and even the best of the best have been affected. It can be the manifestation of problems stacked on top of other problems, topped off with issues and more problems. Or it’s simply the fact that you never leave your store, and it’s not fun anymore.

Self-care for small retailers looks different for everyone—except for one thing: You must take time off and physically separate yourself from your store regularly. Eat well, exercise and sleep. If any part of you is not well, your business is affected. Make a list of your self-care nonnegotiables and stick to it.

Meyer experienced a massive shift when she began working with a life coach. “It wasn’t just a personal revelation; it transformed my pottery studio,” she says. “Armed with tools to dismantle limiting beliefs, I embraced my potential, resulting in a remarkable surge in creativity, growth and profitability.”



Hillary Mathewson opened her first studio, Pottery Works, in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1997; in 2019 she sold her second studio, Art Space Studio in Charlotte, North Carolina, after running it for more than 12 years. She now is a marketing consultant and content creator at TheCreativeRetailer.com.