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Wednesday, 01 August 2012

Ctein Does Not Have 1000 True Fans

By **Ctein**

It's been nearly three and a half years since I started my "1000 True Fans" experiment and a good two years since I've written about its progress. Here's the latest—and probably final—update on how it's been going.

People who don't know or don't remember what this is all about should read the following two columns and associated comments so they'll have the background for this column. (This is one of the great things about the Internet; writers don't have to repeat themselves ad nauseum. Unless they're getting paid by the word, that is. I'm not.)

> 1000 Photographic Fans...Maybe?
>
> Does Ctein Have 100 'True Fans'?

Here are the summary results of this experiment: Economically, it was a success. I've netted about $30,000 from it; that's the real income in my pocket, less taxes of course. On a dollars per hour basis it was excellent money and paid for many, many hours of creative time.

Strategically, it was a failure. As a long-term stable source of income it did not work, and it failed for reasons I predicted in my earlier columns. (People who want to read the intermediate reports can read these three columns:)

> Tips for Finding '1000 True Fans'
>
> Supporting 1000 True Fans
>
> Keeping 1000 True Fans

The real issue was not whether I could get the initial Contributors, but whether I could maintain and even increase the level of support. There is inevitably subscriber rot, well known to anybody who's run a subscription business. One problem is that no mechanism exists for doing this as open-ended ongoing billing; all the subscriptions have a finite run time and then you have to convince people to sign up again. This is the well-known "opt in vs. opt out" problem.

The larger problem is that tangible art works differently from experiential art; people will eventually decide they've added enough Ctein work to their collection and choose not to renew.

The first year, "1000 True Fans" brought in about one third of my living expenses, and that brought me a lot of free time to work on my art. The second year worked better than I predicted. Although the renewal rate was at about 70–75%, I picked up new subscribers and people moved to higher tiers of support. My final net was 95% of what it was the first year.

The third year the amount of money coming in dropped by over 50%. The 2012 level of support is negligible; the total money is under $1000. That's not worth it to me. Unless there is a huge uptick in Contributors between now and December 31st, I'm going to let it die (if someone wants to join in on this, they can do so by going here). This is unlikely.

Most of that meager income is still profit for me; there is no fixed overhead to this project and all the startup costs (in terms of both time and money) were taken care of in the first year. It's just that it's not serving the purpose intended, which was to buy me free time to work on art. The amount of time I get out of this level of money, spread out over a year, isn't enough to matter, and there is the mental distraction of having to track and take care of the occasional subscription fulfillments. It simply isn't worth the bother.

The solution to subscriber rot is to expand your audience. It's nice to think that as time goes on your existing audience will grow to like you more and more and more, but that's not the way it mostly works in the real world of arts and entertainment. You will not convert many of your existing audience from "fans" to "True Fans."

In my case, audience expansion failed. I tried several different kinds of incentives to bring in new people or to produce more of what are what are referred to as "Raving Fans;" fans who are so enthusiastic about what you're doing that they go recruit others. None of these incentives produced any measurable rate of return.

Emphasizing the difference between "fans" and "True Fans," with each of my print sales (save for the most recent) I included a promotional flyer (a version of the copy that appears on the CollectCtein webpage). Over the past several years over 500 of these flyers went out, mostly to people who were participating in the TOP print sales I ran here.

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These are all people who laid out $100 and up for particular prints of mine that they liked. They're established as folks who like at least some of my work. So, what fraction of them do you think were interested in laying out $9.50 a month in return for two 11x14 prints of their choice at the end of the year?

Zero. Or it might be I picked up one or two Contributors this way, I honestly can't remember. Essentially, none of these folks who were happy to buy specific works of mine qualified as True Fans.

As I said, a palpable economic success; I'm entirely glad I did it. As a long-term strategy, still not proven to work. And please don't get me wrong. I am grateful to each and every person who ever buys a photograph of mine, for whatever reason, because you keep me going as an artist. You're all wonderful in my book.

That's the rap. And the wrap.

Ctein

Ctein's <1000 true fans can find his weekly columns on TOP on Wednesdays.

Featured Comment by **Ben Marks:** "Ctein's experiment has produced some very interesting results and I think his candid post is a huge benefit to folks who are trying to understand how to use social media to market hand-made objects. My instinct is that the initial enthusiasm and success of his project was some intersection of the worlds of folks who like his photography and those who like what they know of him from his technical articles and interactions here, which are always informative and respectful.

"However, most of us have a finite amount of space to devote to art display and storage. I, for instance, live in a 1,100 square foot house and much of the wall space is already spoken for (art of my genius children, friends, my own photography etc.) I did not sign up for Ctein's experiment because I just don't collect or display art in the way that a successful subscription run would produce. Also, if I wanted one of Ctein's prints—a single purchase that *does* fit into the way I purchase and display art—I could always go to his website and satisfy that need. So in that sense, I am not a 'true fan,' and not the target audience for this experiment. Paradoxically, because of my space limitations, I am not sure it is a different answer even if you were to collect 50 artists and generalize the subscription terms so that it wouldn't be just the work of one artist that comes to the house.

"Still, Ctein's experiment seems far from a failure, as $30K ain't chickenfeed and there are many folks who now have his prints who might not have purchased otherwise. I am sure that one of the motivations was that in the past (say, during the Renaissance) most great art was produced for patrons (church, Medicis, kings etc.). I view Ctein's experiment as an attempt to democratize this...successful, but only to a point. I think he did show that it is hard to hold the attention of 1,000 people (or even 10 people) over a sustained period of time for this kind of photography. (Question: Same answer for, say, cartoons (Doonesbury, Calvin & Hobbes, Larson), essays (insert your favorite syndicated columnist here) etc.?)"

Featured Comment by **Gato:** "It strikes me that the True Fans model may work better for intangible or ephemeral work than for physical work such as prints or sculpture. How many Ctein prints does a person want, unless one sees them as an investment? Hell, if I could afford Rembrandt paintings there are only four or five I'd really want. After that I'd move on to Van Gogh or somebody.

"The True Fan model seems more suited to writers or musicians, whose work takes up less physical space and doesn't require display. In the past it has worked for any number of newsletters and, of course, magazines. (Most people don't save magazines.) It seems to be working for a few blogs and websites. *The New York Times* finally got even a cheapskate like me to put in a credit card.

"Subscriber churn is a part of the business. No matter how compelling your product some people will lose interest or die off.

"If someone wanted to go for this model I think Mike would have a much better chance with TOP than Ctein with print sales. And a tech site like Strobist might have the best chance of all."

Posted on Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 01:16 PM | Permalink

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Comments

I thought I might just mention, though, that I believe Ctein has made more money from my blog than I have, if you count everything. As I always say, I'm just sayin'.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 01:19 PM

It may be that like in all things internet, words do not mean what they mean: to "like" is not to like, similarly a "fan" is not a patron.

20x200 is a similar venture here in NYC and is a mechanism for bringing affordable artwork to a large audience, on its face it is successful, however there are no published metrics for this private company as Ctein has given us here, I feel part of it is pyramid-esq in the sense that there is an ever growing supply of new artists who would sell through this mechanism and take whatever they could get, once the overhead (significant) has been amortized and a large enough email database of buyers has accrued there should be enough sales to sustain if overhead can be kept low enough.

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Yearly pay for play contests are held to drum up support for new artists with the promise of gallery shows. Whether or not these artists ever realise significant sales or career advancement is beside the question; the idea turns gallery representation on its head, the artists sell the scheme not the other way around.

If Ctein had opened his subscription up to other artists that he would "recommend" I think he might have been on to something, it seems the best internet models are (appear) selfless; accrue followers simply by galvanizing attention with a steady supply of "new" and then that attention becomes valuable in itself or to an advertiser.

This might be the way to increase subscribers and deal with attrition. Selling the sizzle and not the steak. You then as the top person in the pyramid make money incrementally. That's why I said it was pyramid-esq. Actually the word might be "capitalism"...!

True patronage is very hard to come by, the old ways are the best ways, be the person that people want to meet and have the best (wealthiest) friends you can. The rest of us subsist through various means that shrink every day, ie; workshops, editorial, corporate, moonlighting/consulting.

Posted by: robert | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 02:38 PM

Honestly, it was impossible to achieve. First of all, your work is good, but not great, which means that, probably, one very quickly have enough Cteins. Secondly, you site sucks - really. It looks like from the 90's. Which leads us to the last - your marketing sucks. Your columns here are really good, but they do not really attract art buyers, because they market you as technical guru, not artist. Print sells on this site could not help either, because they were rather about technical aspects (a dye transfer print, a technically good inkjet print, etc.). So, as I see it - you are much better tech guy than artist. But if you still want to sell you prints - market your work on this site. Make a banner with your best photos, let people see them. And create a site which is about photos - photos in the first place. A customer must say "wow, this guy is good, I want one!".

Posted by: Lukasz Kubica | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 02:56 PM

Well, keep in mind that the budget art approach now has 20x200. I'm curious how that's doing economically.

Posted by: Tom | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 05:42 PM

Interesting! I read every article listed today. I had always wondered how this idea worked-out in the real world.

Someone I knew worked for Peterson Publications in the late 1980s (Petersen's Photographic, Guns & Ammo, Motorcyclist, Hot Rod, Teen Magazine, etc). Their readership turned over every 18 months. Seems like people wear-out their hobbies at a rapid rate. So I'm not that surprised at your results. Maybe your subscribers have moved-on to purchasing vinyl records ;-)

Posted by: c.d.embrey | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 07:12 PM

Ctein, I'm interested less in the economic return than the artistic - no doubt you provided a good selection for subscribers to choose from at the end of the year, but do you feel you made better work with the benefit of gaining ~30% free time than you would have otherwise?

I guess the return is not immediate though, you might need more years and see a delayed return/improvement? And I guess it is also hard to fully realise the extra time, did 30% expense coverage really result in 30% free time for art or some smaller amount?

Sorry this is a bit academic now, just interested in the results vs expectations of your experiment :)

Posted by: Nick D | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 07:21 PM

I would be more inclined to subscribe to some kind of photography organization that perhaps distributed prints from you and others as bonuses, rather than a single artist. One of the earliest and most successful independent, non-commercial subscription supported websites on the internet, Znet (radical left) went through many iterations before finding the sweet spot with "sustainers" giving at various levels. But rot is ongoing, always a battle for such a model, and the rot is from both dropped payments and dropped participation, which can make websites seem dead, or deadly slow.

Posted by: John Krumm | Wednesday, 01 August 2012 at 07:23 PM

Dear Nick,

The objective wasn't to make me a better artist, it was to give me more time to be one. I have no idea whether doing more art makes one a better artist. I might imagine that it does for some and doesn't for others. It wasn't part of my goals nor expectations.

Bringing in a third of my living expenses from this experiment did not mean that a third of my time was devoted to my art that wouldn't have been otherwise. What I *need* to live on is substantially less than what I prefer to live on. So what it really bought me was more like 15% time. Still, several additional days a month that I could devote to art was a considerable chunk of time; normally most of my energy has to go into making a living.

During this experiment I actually turned down the occasional job. Not often, it really runs against my instincts to ever turn away paying work. But one of the purposes of this was to free up time for my art, after all, and so I disciplined myself to occasionally say "No." A mildly liberating and mildly terrifying, simultaneously, thing to be doing, as one of the self-employed.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 12:28 AM

"The third year the amount of money coming in dropped by over 50%."

Which is pretty much unsurprising when you haven't mentioned it something like two years... People can't subscribe to what they don't hear about. Making your model work requires marketing - not mailing a relative handful of flyers to what amounts to random people.

And, as someone else said - having a website from 1998 that seems to have stopped being updated in 2002 doesn't inspire confidence.

Posted by: Derek Lyons | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 12:35 AM

If people are subscribing to a steady stream of tangible objects, eventually they have more than enough and it becomes a storage problem.
(my mom has about 80 years worth of National Geographics I'm supposed to be getting rid of if anyone is interested)

Subscriptions seem to work best for ephemeral experiences like the opera or ballet or at least something that's perishable like the fruit of the month club.

Maybe if you rented the artwork instead of selling it, and it was really unwieldy to transport because it was mounted on 3 inch thick plates of stainless steel it would be too much hassle to opt out, quit renting and send the work back. Sort of the cable tv model.

Or you could limit the number of new subscriptions per year and create a secondary market where new subscribers would have to buy an existing subscription from an old subscriber. That would be the NYC taxi license model.

Actually that second idea seems not entirely crazy.

Posted by: Hugh Crawford | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 12:41 AM

Dear Derek,

That's an incorrect analysis. First, the last two columns I wrote on the subject produced almost no new subscribers. I pretty much tapped out this audience with the first three columns. More columns would not have substantially changed the results.

Second, I did not mail out flyers to "what amounts to random people," they went to people who were already buying my work! You can't get more targeted than that.

And, as I alluded, there were other marketing efforts, quite a few. None of them worked to expand beyond my existing audience, and without that expansion there aren't going to be many new True Fans.

Marketing, in the traditional and mass sense, simply isn't appropriate nor effective for this particular scheme. The returns are way too small and it costs way too much. An artist does not acquire True Fans by doing the equivalent of buttonholing people on the street, which is what traditional marketing boils down to.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 01:39 AM

Ctein, I think Lukasz' comments on your website and marketing, blunt as they are, are spot on.

Posted by: James Sinks | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 01:56 AM

Dear Lukasz and Derek,

Uhh, you both overlook an important detail.

I netted $30,000!!!

Economically, that constitutes a big success, and no matter what you may personally think of my work, my website, or my marketing, a sufficiently-large number of people felt otherwise. (Maybe this is time for you to reread "Art is a Popularity Contest, Not a Democracy").

The failure was in the long-term viability, not the initial popularity. Subscriber rot is a problem whether you're starting with 100 supporters or 10,000. (Well, OK, if I'd started with 10,000, I wouldn't much *care* what happened after the second, year {greedy grin}, but you get my drift.)

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 02:09 AM

You have run into the reason art is so expensive; basically you can only sell a limited number of work. It is the main reason why with most artists (I must say I am thinking of painters and sculptors here), their work gets more expensive and at the same time their output drops.
In your first instalment, I remember you mentioning street artists. And they have one option that is a lot harder in the web; they can move to another town. As they meet their fans out on the street, moving to another place is pretty much instant audience expansion.
My personal solution for 'more art time' has been to minimise my financial demands in general and get a steady job (teaching). I have no car, I live in a small, rented apartment, and this allows me to work part time. After my latest pay raise, I was able to cut my job to 20 hours a week.

Posted by: Jan Kusters | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 03:40 AM

As others have stated, I see you more as a technician than an artist. Perhaps the most viable revenue stream could come from printing others' work rather than your own.

Posted by: John Roberts | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 04:43 AM

Mike,

you should have been creaming it off the top like the Apple apps mode !

Paul Mc Cann

Posted by: Paul Mc Cann | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 04:58 AM

With all due respect, Ctein:

I'm reading your post and I live in Spain, within a specific economic context. And I think that, from that perspective, your post sounds, to put it mildly, a little bit out of place.

But hey, you're entirely free to complain for this lack of success after not finding 1000 true fans.

Posted by: Cateto/Jose | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 11:39 AM

What really shocks me is that this has been going on for 3 years. Seems like yesterday.

Posted by: Robert Roaldi | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 12:23 PM

"The objective wasn't to make me a better artist, it was to give me more time to be one. I have no idea whether doing more art makes one a better artist."

Then I'd assess your "subscription" project was a success, perhaps beyond what might have been expected, eh?

The patronage model in art is many centuries old. I know two men, both well-renowned photographic artists, whose early careers were launched principally through patronage. In both examples the patrons were highly-regarded art collectors who, by virtue of buying the artists' new works, simultaneously funded and publicized the artists. In both cases an accounting would certainly show that these were very good financial investments, although that was not the motivation of either collector. Works which were probably acquired (1970's - 1980's) for 3-figures would certainly sell for 5-figures or 6-figures today. (And both artists are still living.)

Patronage support still happens today, although rarely on such a devoted, long-term basis and more rarely for photographic artists. The strongest marketing model in the art world has long been, and continues to be, that of *representation* through galleries. The representation model, when done well, represents a partnership that affords the artist the same goals as you cited: time and money.

But galleries and representation are are very expensive undertakings. An ambitious agent will get your work into shows and in front of key collectors, will get it into the art world's buzz, will get it published and, sometimes, loaned for exhibitions. No sane agent will go to such efforts unless they're confident they're representing what is commonly referred to as a *committed artist*. Any schmuck can buy a camera or paintbrush and make a pretty picture or two. Successful galleries and agents became so by ignoring those folks and concentrating on talented *committed artists* devoted to life-long careers in art. Dealing with someone without a strong educational and/or exhibition pedigree just is not worth the risk. Part-timers are common in the craft-art fair world -- which is fine. But they're not welcome in the serious art world.

Which brings me to a key closing point. Success in the art world has always been, and continues to be, dependent on personal relationships. Technician-origined folks tend to believe that all they need is the all-powerful Web site to be successful. That's true for porn but not true for art. Igniting and maintaining an art career requires spending lots and lots of "offline" face time -- with gallerists, with collectors, with writers, with exhibition curators, with educators, et.al. . This is what outsiders to this world really do not understand or expect to discover.

Congratulations on wrapping what I think was a pretty successful Internet sales project, Ctein. Given your printing skills I'm sure that subscribers received works of good value for their investment.

Posted by: Kenneth Tanaka | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 12:34 PM

Dear James,

I honestly think this website business is an irrelevancy, but let's make this issue fact-based rather than faith-based. The only question that matters is this:

Were you seriously considering becoming a Ctein Contributer until you took a look at my website?

In fact, I'll put that to the whole readership:

If you were considering becoming a contributor but my website put you off from doing so, please send me an e-mail (ctein@pobox.com) to that effect. I'll tally up the results and report back here.

Please don't post your response as a comment; Mike really doesn't want these comments to turn into discussions, and it would bore the hell out of the other readers to have to read them. Just e-mail me. Also, for the purpose of this particular discussion, if you were never seriously considering becoming a Contributor then your opinion about the website doesn't matter.

Now, let's declare this subtopic dead (or at least tabled) until we see what the real data says.

By the way, as a general matter, I'm always happy to get e-mail from people who find bugs or errors in my website (several have shown up this week, sigh) or have **specific** suggestions on how it could be improved. While it never feels good to be told that someone doesn't like what you're doing, I'd rather have the information. It frequently gets incorporated into revisions.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!
]==========
-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 01:35 PM

Ctein,

I'll have to be really, really careful here not to come across as making an *ad hominem* attack (see TOP Rule Number One), which truly I am not, and doubly so since Mike recently had cause to fire a shot across my bows, to introduce a military term. Perhaps I should start out with lots of Smilies and mild reminders that the internet is well known for not allowing subtleties and nuance to be perceived by readers?

My thoughts and perspective below are from someone who is a marketing professional (or at least I am paid for it, so professional in that sense. Whether I am any good or not at marketing is another matter).

I followed your original posts, read the follow up articles as and when you first posted them, and still was not tempted. I was a potential customer - interested in photography, with enough disposable income to not particularly notice $9 a month, and by nature always interested in owning some lovely object no one in my circle has ever seen before). The reasons for me passing by on your offer were multiple, and ranged from the philosophical down to the practical / administrative. So, in that rough descending order:

A "True Fan" has some aspect of the enduring enchantment about it, and I am afraid I don't get that from your publicly available catalogue - it is "all over the place", which in a positive sense reflects your multiple interests and showcases your talent in all sorts of disciplines, but also in a negative sense put me off becoming a Ctein collector. I'd have a choice at the end of the year, but it may well be a choice between images I have no interest in. Some people collect street photography, some landscape, some portraits etc. Very few collect all genres. With a Ctein, you never know if it is going to be a leaf or a rocket launch. That is all fun, I can find enjoyment in a leaf even if I am interested in rockets, but I don't want to pay $9 a month for the lottery. I can get my enjoyment for free by looking at your website.

You destroy your own artistry with your extremely detailed exposition of the making of each photograph. Please, have a think about whether you are a teacher and astonishingly talented digital producer, or an artist. I think it is not really possible to be both.

I live in the UK. I have not checked since your first post, but as at that first post, you made it not possible for non-US bank account holders to take part. The world's population is 7 billion, that of the US about 340 million. You excluded a lot of people. (Related, you much more recently made an offer for some prints that again did the same - you made some amends by offering an in-country agency deal, but that was only after pressing by lots of commenters).

Now, I am extremely glad that Ctein is a poster, mentor, teacher and greatly respected contributor to TOP, and there are some Ctein images that I would love. I'd also like for you to post some more stuff about space travel, even is that is some way off Mike's photography reservation. But you do make it really difficult to be a "True Fan" :):);) (is that enough smilies?

Anyway, many thank for what you have done.

Posted by: James B | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 03:36 PM

I tried posting this last night, but I'm guessing it got caught in Mike's Spam can. It's off topic, but I think it's worth repeating, since good work is worthy of recognition...

Robert Wright (second comment on this post) - your "Flyover States" project is brilliant!

http://www.robertwrightphoto.com/projects-flyover.html

Posted by: Dave | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 04:03 PM

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the solution to having "enough cteins" on the wall: photobooks.

focused, tightly edited photobooks in series' and one-offs are a great way to keep people coming back for more.

Posted by: raizans | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 04:51 PM

I considered becoming a "true fan," and I wasn't put off by the website.

Basically, I like a subset of Ctein's work. I appreciate his project, but some parts of it speak less to me than others. I keep a list of a few images I'd like to get eventually--the famous portrait of Klaus Nomi, a Dorfman portrait of Zukofsky--and a Ctein is on my list; I just can't afford it yet. But I decided that I'd rather have the print I want than selections by the artist.

A good example is Tillman Crane. I like his work--but not all of his work. I bought a full-price Crane print rather than one of his quarterly specials because, well, I prefer the print I wanted. Even though I could have bought an entire year's worth of the specials for less money than the print I bought, and gotten a surprise print for free.

Random chance has its place in art--google Jackson Mac Low--but less so on the walls of my house.

Posted by: Softie | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 06:40 PM

Hallo Ctein. It is your favourite ask-too-many-questions fan again. I am sorry in advance if I appear to patronise you herein. I am not. I love your work and I can't wait for my parcel.

My opinion as quasi businessman is that you made two mistakes here. The first issue is that try to do too much yourself. You are not a bookkeeper and nor should you be. You should pay a bookkeeper/accountant to manage your monthly billings etc. To track a thousand monthly accounts are really child's play and something all of us have to do. Pay someone to handle it for you and let them collect the money as every business needs to do. I an recommend one or two that will gladly handle this for you for a good price.

Second, as James B wrote earlier, and I think I wrote the same to you a few months back, is that people prefer photography in a certain style or subject area etc. Sometimes a surprise would be nice, but I would rather give you a brief of what I would like (perhaps by saying I don't like rockets, but I like leaves) and I am touchy about composition (as you well know by now) and that you use my preferences to turn your concept into a service that delivers something that I will probably like. A service with mutual value. You get my money and I get art that I would love to display.

Personally, I want to pay you X a month. But I am too distracted with work to take the time to figure out how I am going to persuade a certain English bank to somehow drop the payment into Ctein's bank account on the prescribed time.

What I think you should improve on is to try and continually refine the business model and kept at it until it became a consistent revenue engine.

You have all the ingredients. A great product. A swathe of fans. Don't stop what you are doing, but take advice and farm out some of the drudgery and you will easily succeed. Fan rot? Yes that will happen if your product does not evolve with your customers. You will need to experiment with new concepts of value and you will be able to solve that big drop off. That should be fun. It teaches you to be creative in another way.

Best, Rudolph

Posted by: Ryg | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 07:58 PM

Dear John R.,

Strictly speaking, you are correct, as I am widely regarded as one of the best color printers who has ever lived and I am sure I am not so regarded as a color photographer!

On the other hand, averaged over time, my income has come pretty equally from my professional writing, selling my art, and selling my printing services (James B take note). In other words, I can make decent money off of my art. I just can't make it with THIS scheme, not long-term.

This is probably as good a place as any to mention that much as I do appreciate the support and well-meaning intentions of folks who are suggesting various kinds of businesses and careers that could make me a living, I am already making a living. Currently, a better than decent one. As explained back in the first columns, the idea of running the True Fan experiment was to see if it could provide a long-term stable source of income to support the artistic side of things.

Anyway, so sincere thanks to everyone who's been making career suggestions, I mean it. But I don't really need them at this time.

But life is uncertain; I will file them away. (And also eat dessert first.)

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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 09:25 PM

Dear James B,

No offense is taken, I assure you!

You're entirely correct that a clearly identifiable genre/style is a big assist to an artist becoming successful. I know one very famous and very successful art photographer whose representatives have essentially forbidden them to show work outside the rather narrow genre for which they are known and lauded. They have a much larger range and corpus of equally good artwork but they are famous for their "brand." (I'm not mentioning names because I don't know if this is public information or not.) As you neatly explain, this applies just as well, if not more so, to the True Fan model as to normal art sales.

Now I have to correct you on three factual errors:

"You destroy your own artistry with your extremely detailed exposition of the making of each photograph..."

I hardly ever do those expositions. I have a strong aversion to them and I never present my work that way unless there is some secondary reason for doing so. Go back and read my column, "No One Cares How Hard You Worked".

I've done it for exactly 2 of the 10 prints Mike and I have put up for sale on TOP, and one of those was a runaway bestseller. I don't do it at all for any of the photographs on my website. All that accompanies the photographs is a short description of what they look like (because there are many vision impaired people who are interested in and buy artwork). To find any technical information, you have to go to the separate paper that explains what a dye transfer print is.

"...at that first post, you made it not possible for non-US bank account holders to take part..."

Not so. From day one, both US and non-US folks have been able to contribute. Go check out the webpage and confirm that for yourself. In fact, about the same percentage of Contributors as normal TOP buyers (40%) have been non-US folks. I DO require a PayPal account, if you're paying monthly, because no other mechanism exists for handling that, but PayPal's not limited to the US!

"Related, you much more recently made an offer for some prints that again did the same - you made some amends by offering an in-country agency deal, but that was only after pressing by lots of commenters."

I don't know where you get the notion that I am anti non-US folks, but the "agency deal" was part of the original article (I just went back and checked my own draft copy of it to confirm that); it was not something that was added in response to complaints. I came up with it ahead of time because I knew there would be out of country people who would be upset and I wanted to make some kind of alternative available to them.

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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 09:54 PM

Dear Ken,

Life has taught me to have high hopes and low expectations (wry smile), so I think you're right. I didn't do any where as well with this as I hoped to, but I certainly did better than I expected to.

The whole personal connection thing is hugely important. I don't recall if I've written about that or not (if I haven't, I should), but I know I've commented on it frequently. Buyers want a piece of the artist.

Patronage has been pretty important to my artistic career, although it hasn't made me a raging success. I started doing dye transfer printing in the first place through the urgings of a patron who paid me to learn it so he could get "good prints" of my work. All the largest buyers of my artwork are people who have been personally known to me. At the extreme, my most enthusiastic patron, who is a very long-standing close friend, owns somewhere between 45 and 50 of my dye transfers (I've lost count).

People who think all they need to do is put up a website to make money are like people who think that all they have to do is open a storefront to have a successful retail operation. They are quickly disabused of their charming naïveté. At least with the website they don't end up hundreds of thousands of dollars in the hole (unless they are really, really stupid about it). But, honestly, if it was a magic key to riches, there'd be a lot fewer starving artists the world.

Okay, that's all been said before, but I just had a NEW thought about this personal connection. It's yet another reason why the True Fan model was invented around musicians and performers and why it's not as suitable for photographers.

It's back to that thing about experiential vs. tangible art that I wrote about early on. But it's not just about the insatiability for experiential art, which is true enough. It's that when you enjoy a performing artist, you DO feel like you have a personal connection to them. It works best in person, but it can work well enough off of recordings (one of the big reasons I just love Frank Sinatra is that it sounds like he's singing personally to ME). That "personal relationship" that is part and parcel of developing serious fans comes with the territory. Like James Taylor wrote,

" Fortune and fame, such a curious game. Perfect strangers call you by name..."

Anyway...

I don't think one experiment–– mine ––proves that the True Fan model can't work for some tangible artist, somewhere, but the more information I collect, the less encouraging it seems.

Still, how many failed experiments actually make money?! Can't complain. Boy, if I could only make a career out of that...

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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 02 August 2012 at 10:13 PM

Had nobody mentioned the down turn in the World economy that has wreaked havoc in the general business world.

It would be very surprising if this had no effect on Cteins fan rot. It surely must have had some affect.

Paul Mc Cann

Posted by: Paul Mc Cann | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 01:14 AM

Hi Ctein,

Some S words:
Sorry
Sombre
Sobering
'Sperience
Sheeet
Sympathy

I understand. I get it. I wish you well.

Not sure if this is similar or not, or too off topic. I'm trying to say that hoping people will like and buy your work is a lost cause from my experience.

In 2008 I travelled to Scotland to visit a high school friend, Sue. In 2009 I spent 6 months making a DVD of hi-def video and stills set to Local Hero by Mark Knopfler (non-commercial use) showing how Sue lives in her beautiful locality near Kyle of Lochalsh (Yes! Eilean Donan Castle just down the road) and the Isle of Skye.

On completion, I sent out 44 emails to school friends (I organise our reunions) saying, "Here's a DVD, made with the aid of a former TV producer friend of mine, pro standard, of how Sue, your former school friend lives."

All I asked was 3x $1.30 stamps (disc, cover, postage) and a letter to tell me where to post it. This was a gift, made with my own hands.

Result? Only four people responded. The other 40 never replied. Two of the four did send a letter with stamps and got my DVD. Maybe three, my memory is cloudy.
One other in Canberra asked enthusiastically for a copy, but never sent a letter or stamps or followed up. One other guy in my neighbourhood (a former admirer of Sue) came to my house and took a DVD, but never gave me any stamps.

One said, a year later, "Oh yeah, never got back to you, did I? Nah. Seen enough of Scotland."

The other forty never bothered to even reply! I was and still am pretty upset. Even Sue, the lady herself, stayed silent for months, then on a gentle enquiry, said, "Oh yes, I've watched part of it. Must get around to finishing it." It's only 38 mins, FGS!

Even my own sister, who had been listening to my 6 month saga of making it, stayed silent after I gave her a copy. It turned out, she never bothered to watch it! Her own brother, too much trouble! "Oh, I never watch TV." What??!!

The lesson? My conclusion? I retire from the field. Like van Gogh, forget it. No-one cares. Waste of time. Never again. As an artist, you will be appreciated eventually, but probably not now. Keep trying, but you'll need a tough hide.

I'm now making pro-level HD Blu-ray slide/video shows using Photodex Proshow Producer. I'll try selling them on eBay with a 2 min SD promo/teaser. Sales will tell if I'm acceptable or not without having to know the buyers. Proshow lets you set a trial period and require a serial number if you want. Blu-ray means they'll be difficult, if not impossible, to copy and steal.

Me? I'm in another country and with no income except the pension, I can't afford to buy others' work at the art level, sorry. I like your Scotland images, but I can't afford them. And I have an Epson 2880 and limited wall space and my own images.

As another poster said, photobooks may be the answer. I've done one and I find it's the only way people, even siblings, will look at your work. I've found with DVDs that about 5-10 secs is the max attention span before they look away and start talking. NO, my pictures are not that bad! I'll stand them up against anything. People just aren't that interested!

Posted by: Peter Croft | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 01:16 AM

Hi Ctein,

It was a brave and reasonable experiment.

What I take from it is that probably very few people have 1000 true fans, if "true" means permanent. I can think of many times in my life that I would have been willing to support an artist at $100/year with no expectation of getting anything back except the knowledge that I was helping that artist have the ability to be an artist. However, I can't think of a single artist that I would have wanted to support in that way at age 20 and also at age 25. In that sense, I was never a "true" fan.

Those who actually have 1000 true fans probably don't need the 1000 true fan model. They have many times that number of semi-true fans--enough to make money from t-shirt sales, performances, banner ads, etc.

As a doctor, I can't help but think about "boutique" or concierge practices. You may be familiar with them: a doctor cuts his or her pracice down from a crazy, hectic panel of many thousands of patients to perhaps 1,000 patients who pay cash for visits. The doctor gets to take more time with each patient, and each patient gets to spend more time with the doctor. Its the closest that those in our profession come to the 1000 true fan model. I won't go so far off topic as to share my thoughts about concierge medicine, but I thought it was an interesting parallel.

All best,
Amin

Posted by: Amin Sabet | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 04:43 AM

Peter,
I'm rather stunned by your story, but I think you're misinterpreting the evidence. You have to look at it from the recipients' point of view. What you're saying in essence is, "I made this nice video with loving care, yet it's not worth a couple of measly stamps to me to send it to you." I might not have responded to that either. If you had asked for $20, you might have gotten more replies.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 10:27 AM

Ctein, I just read my post again and realised that I said:

...To track a thousand monthly accounts are really child's play and something all of us have to do...

Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that it is an easy thing to do. I meant that it is a common business function and a service you can buy.

Rudolph

Posted by: Rvg | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 12:58 PM

Peter,
I agree with Mike's comment. It is a hard lesson to learn. If you sell your product too cheaply, people will think it is a cheap product. It is incredibly demotivating to work that hard and then to get exactly nothing back. And the best advice someone can give you is to recognise you've learnt a valuable lesson and then to try again.

My background is in telecommunications (i.e. some kind of IT) and I build products too. The best technique I can recommend is something called "Lean startup" (a book by Eric Ries). In your case, you invested a lot of resources into a product and afterwards you tried to sell it. And as you learnt, your customers didn't want to buy it. So this technique is to proceed with very small, calculated risks and to make scientific measurements upon which you base the next try. You only proceed with something if you know it will improve your product and if the risk is low.

If you had to apply it, you would have sent a letter to everyone describing your video and asked them to pay you with stamps. But most importantly, *before you made the video* and spent all that time and energy. Sending emails costs nothing. If you got 3 back out of 44, you learned something. Then you try to send the same letter but asking them to pay you $20 and you send it to 44 different people. If you get 9 back, you learnt that $20 will work better than 3 stamps. In the same way you can test the interest in a specific topic. Etc.

And if you can't get the model to work, then you should try something else. Like targeting the video for broadcast by the BBC. Or making prints. Anyway, I think you'll get the idea.

Best of luck.

Rudolph van Graan

Posted by: Rvg | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 01:10 PM

Dear Paul,

That's a very good question, but my educated guess (and I emphasize GUESS) is that the Great Recession isn't having a big effect.

My evidence is circumstantial. The Dot Bomb Recession of 2000 took two years to trickle down to me, but when it did the effect was devastating. My income dropped by two thirds and it stayed pathetic for four years. Almost drove me out of business and came within six months of having to prepare the home for sale. It turned out almost all my business was coming from people who were in the tech sector or were themselves dependent upon customers in the tech sector.

The Great Recession has not had a measurable effect on my business. I mean, I'm sure it must have had some, but it's buried in the noise. It's not like the GR isn't much bigger than the Dot Bomb, globally. It's just not concentrated in my sector. The way I describe it is that the Great Recession is like a hurricane, but the Dot Bomb was like a tornado that went through my neighborhood. The former does a lot more damage overall, but the latter is a lot more destructive personally.

Since the majority of my True Fans are pulled from the same customer base as my regular business, I don't think the effect is large there, either. I can't prove that, but my instincts say that externalities are not the problem (the same way my inherent popularity is not the problem). You can't compensate for that kind of subscriber rot by doubling the volume of business... or even by a factor of 10.

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Posted by: ctein | Friday, 03 August 2012 at 05:08 PM

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