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Ugallery.com helps new artists

Jane Larson

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Alex Farkas saw his fellow art students trying to get their work into galleries, only to have to resort to outside jobs to pay the bills.

"Most galleries demand experience and sales, so they were just finding it way too difficult to do anything with their art careers," Farkas said.

"I'm just thinking to myself, 'Wow, there is all this amazing art out there. It would be wonderful to help these kids.' "

That was the inspiration behind Ugallery.com, which Farkas and two other University of Arizona graduates launched last fall in Scottsdale.

The Internet-based business selects the work of student artists and recent art graduates and offers them for sale on the site.

For buyers, it's a chance to acquire the work of emerging artists at affordable prices.

Younger buyers can furnish their first home or apartment with original art instead of prints and posters.

Experienced art lovers can snap up the works of promising artists early in their careers.

Sales have doubled every month, and Ugallery.com now represents 84 artists from 44 schools across the nation.

Buyers can choose according to genre, ranging from abstract to Western, or by price range, size, color or artist's school.

"There's a ton of great collegiate artists and recent graduates that have this great artwork, but there aren't enough outlets for them," co-founder Stephen Tanenbaum said.

Ugallery.com's business side started as a student project and quickly garnered its own blue ribbons.

Farkas, Tanenbaum and Greg Rosborough met in the UA Eller College of Management's entrepreneurship program and spent long evenings developing their business plan.

They were invited to two competitions, the International Queens Entrepreneurs' Competition in Ontario, and the Enterprise Creation Competition at Ball State University.

They won both.

The prize money and encouragement from successful businesspeople "really got us going," Tanenbaum said.

Balance of finance, marketing

The longer the team worked on the idea, the more serious they became about starting it, said Jim Jindrick, mentor-in-residence at the UA program.

Their balance of finance, marketing and art skills helped, and their focus on the student art market differentiates the firm, he said.

Online art galleries first started during the dot-com boom, when big names like auction house Sotheby's jumped on the Internet bandwagon. They weren't immune from the dot-com bust, however, and Tanenbaum thinks Ugallery.com has learned from other's mistakes.

Unlike auction site eBay Inc., Ugallery.com does not take everyone's work.

It recruits its artists through professors, art fairs, campus fliers and social-networking sites.

Its panel of three curators first reviews artists' applications and electronic images of three pieces. About 70 percent of applicants make the cut, Farkas said.

Prices are based on a piece's size, medium and quality, as well as the artist's exhibition and sales history. Ugallery.com takes a 50 percent commission, which Tanenbaum calls typical for gallery sales.

When a piece sells, artists simply take the work to their local UPS Store, which packs and ships it. Ugallery.com gives buyers seven days to change their minds and get their money back.

Match colors and sizes on Wall

One of the site's most popular features is the View Wall. Buyers can choose their wall and floor colors and wall size, then place their chosen art on the virtual wall to see how it will look at home.

New features on the site include Ulog, where artists and buyers can post comments for each other; Portfolio, so buyers can view all of an artist's available work; and New Art, which displays the 50 pieces most recently posted.

Austin Given, a UA fine-arts senior who has sold six paintings through Ugallery.com, said the site makes it easy for young artists to deal with clients and galleries.

"I've been raving about it to every art student," he said.

"This is a great way to get used to what it's like to part with your work, to be compensated and get your work out there . . . so other people can enjoy it."

The Ugallery.com founders launched in Scottsdale because of its art reputation, the Valley's affordable airfares and its proximity to their UA mentors.

Their big focus now is getting the word out via search engines, alumni and art associations, and interior designers.

As the business grows, they hope to add locations in other regions where they can build relationships with art schools and hold exhibitions of local artists.

Ultimately, the goals are twofold, Tanenbaum said: "To be the place for original artwork, and that the artists that come from Ugallery.com were able to build themselves up and sustain a career by doing what they love."

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