

Cory: Hey there everybody, this is Cory Huff from The Abundant Artist, and I am here with Jeffrey Stoner, a wildlife, animal, and nature photographer, and trained photographer, lots of different things photographer. We are here today to talk a little bit about how Jeffrey's built his business, and we're gonna dive straight into that. I want to talk a little bit about how I met Jeffrey and a little bit about his background. So Jeffrey's been on our Abundant Artist mailing list for a little while, I don't know exactly how long, and earlier this year I sent a survey out after we opened up enrollment for a class saying "Hey, we noticed that you didn't enroll, why not?" And he's like "I don't need it!" And he's like, "My sales were 30% higher than any previous year and then through this year they're doing so well!" And I was like "Well, what happened? What did you do?" And he emails back and he's like, "My business plan is a combination of gallery and website sales," and he's in multiple galleries and we can talk a little bit about that. He's got a real specific strategy about how he picks the galleries that he goes into. And then he also sells his stuff online on his website and in a few other online marketplaces, so Jeffrey Stoner is, I think you said you're most well-known for the Goats of Roan, and we'll throw out some links in the comments here so you can see his website, it's jeffreystonerphotography.com. And Jeffrey, thank you very much for being with me here today.

Jeffrey: You're welcome! Thanks for the invitation!

Cory: Yeah, awesome! So as you said in your email to me, you've got a specific strategy for the galleries that you approach. I'd love it if you could just expand on that a little bit. How do you pick the galleries that you go into?

Jeffrey: Absolutely. When I first started, I was pretty much just trying to get into any gallery that would take me.

Cory: Sure.

Jeffrey: And luckily, several of them did well. And I got kind of this a little bit roundabout, but when I wanted to go full time I was working for a very good company, and the best company I'd ever worked for. But I was, because I did a lot of traveling I could only take it so far. And I just had this bug that I really wanted to try to do photography as a business. So my wife and I talked, and we were like "Yeah, we'll do this." And we ended up both leaving really good jobs, and we joked that we loaded up the truck and moved to Tennessee. But the reason was that there was a lot of tourism. We moved from central Pennsylvania.

Cory: Was that a Beverly Hillbillies joke?

Jeffrey: Yeah, kinda. And in theory I guess we could have approached galleries in Philadelphia. But it just seemed with the amount of tourists that were coming into the Smoky Mountain region, that that was the place to go. So we moved there, and got into, luckily got into a really good gallery that I had visited before we had ever even talked about moving here. And at that point then, so I had this gallery, got into a couple others, but what I started to notice was the galleries that were successful were the ones that had tourism. And specifically, tourism, let's say adult tourism. So the area in Western North Carolina, for instance, there's a lot of adults with some kids, but they really come there for vacation, hiking, but also for the art.

Cory: Right.

Jeffrey: So what I found was the galleries that have that type of tourism, adult tourism, versus let's say Gatlinburg Tennessee, which is just tons of families with young kids. I'm at a gallery in Gatlinburg, it does okay, but just nothing compared to the galleries that are in tourist areas.

Cory: Right.

Jeffrey: So I dropped some galleries last year, early this year, and was really just focusing my efforts even more in getting representation in the galleries in the tourism areas.

Cory: Nice. So you go into these, you're looking at places that have a lot of family tourism and putting your photographs there. How do you even figure out what places have galleries that also have, are also popular family destinations?

Jeffrey: And again, it's mainly looking for adults, so couples versus couples with kids.

Cory: Right, yeah.

Jeffrey: But it's, it's a good question. I think it's really if you're just looking at the area, talking about let's say Gatlinburg or Pigeon Forge, if you just drive through there, I mean it's just- the main attraction is miniature golf and Bollywood and so you can see that, versus if you go to another town, let me drop back. I really look for areas within probably 200 or so miles of my home, and then look for towns with galleries, and initially do an online search of galleries. And then try to find the galleries within those areas that I think have potential, cause you want galleries that fit you. So you know, I wouldn't want to try to get into a gallery that just does oil paintings. Just wouldn't fit. And once I target a number of galleries in an area, then what I do is I visit the gallery as a customer. So I walk in there, I want to see how they greet me, once they initially greet me do they come back and follow up with me? Just how they handle themselves. And my most successful galleries are in Western North Carolina. And one of the top two's in Asheville. So I really wanted to get into Asheville, cause Asheville probably has 80 galleries. I mean it's just this huge art town. It probably took me 5 years to find the gallery I wanted there, cause I'd walk into a gallery and they wouldn't look up from their laptop, or if they did they'd go back to their laptop. Or they just, they'd look at you and just assume well you're not going to buy anything.

Cory: That's interesting. So the, you're mystery shopping the gallery essentially.

Jeffrey: Basically, yes

Cory: And there's so many good things to pick out from what you just said. Especially the- sort of the assumption that you're not gonna buy something, right? Like you walk in and maybe you don't, you're not wearing a tuxedo and you don't look like you have cash falling out of your pocket, so they ignore you. And that is so interesting to me, because living in Portland, we have like- Portland rich people all look like they're, I don't know, like homeless or on vacation. And when I first interviewed for a job when I first moved here, the CEO of the company interviewed me in jeans and a ripped up t-shirt. Right? And like, that's just sort of the culture here. And so there's these differences between the East coast and the West coast, and you know, you can meet very wealthy people here who look like they can barely afford a place to live. And that really cracks me up, so it's really observant of you to sort of pick up on that.

Jeffrey: I think partly- I worked for a company for a number of years that the owner, chairman of the board, decided at one point, I guess when the company got successful enough and he could delve into his hobbies, his hobby was farming. So he went out and bought hundreds of acres, and then he bought the best equipment, but when he went to the bank or when he went shopping, he went in in his dirty bluejeans and boots. So I think maybe it was at a younger age I learned that you can't judge a book by the cover. It just, anyone could be your top customer, no matter what they look like.

Cory: Yeah. That's super interesting. Okay, so you're going around, you're mystery shopping, you're seeing how the gallery staff interacts with you, what their reactions are, anything else that you look for?

Jeffrey: That's really it. And hopefully there's other customers in there.

Cory: Are you looking to see whether or not the art on the walls is a good fit for your work?

Jeffrey: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And I try to do that even before I visit them. But then visiting them of course is even more important, because you can actually get- there's a certain feel, you know, I was trying to get into a gallery in the Hendersonville NC area, and there just wasn't anything that struck me. And then this past spring my wife and I were driving back from South Carolina, and we stopped in at Hendersonville, and there was a new gallery and I walked in and just immediately knew that I wanted to try to get into that gallery. It was just, it was a feel about it. The art looked appropriate, you know, naturey, quirky. And as you mentioned, the goats, the goats are kind of quirky, so you want to find something that you know, the quirk fits. And luckily they accepted me in there. And the timing was good, because they were just had an artist who was leaving, so the timing worked.

Cory: Okay. So you're really, it sounds like you spent quite a bit of time figuring out where you want to be, what galleries you want to be in, and being really strategic about it, which is a different approach than a lot of artists take, I think. A lot of artists sort of take a spray and pray approach where they try every gallery and hope that one of them works.

Jeffrey: And I probably did that, years ago.

Cory: Yeah. You mentioned in your email to me that a growing chunk of your sales are coming from the web. Can you kind of give us an idea of what that looks like for you?

Jeffrey: Yeah, sure. The- some of the web sales, and a lot of times it's really hard to tell exactly what's driving the people to your website. So there's times I can tell that, you know, the person saw my images on Instagram or saw them on Facebook. But there's also one gallery in Asheville that, it's just a different model, cause most galleries don't want you to promote yourself. Because if the person buys from you online, then they're losing the sale. But one of the galleries in Asheville wants you to heavily promote your work, and it's just a different business model. Instead of the 40% or 50% commission, it's a much lower commission, but you pay a monthly rent. And normally I would probably discourage people from going that route. Because usually a gallery needs to work hard because the only time they're going to get money is if they sell something for you. But this particular one just has an incredible amount of street traffic and I think they feel that, you know, I'm not sure what drives them. But they want you to promote yourself. And

they don't mind if you sell online. So I've also gotten quite a bit of business from them, where somebody comes in, buys something or just picks up my card, goes home, and then ends up ordering online. So it's just been interesting to see.

Cory:; Yeah, I was just gonna say in my book I highlight a couple of galleries that are moving more towards that model of encouraging the artists to promote their own work, and to promote, theoretically, to promote the work that's in the gallery as well. And they themselves are acting as gallery, but also curators and tastemakers through their own social media, promoting all the artists that are in their stable of artists. So I love seeing that, because it does, it feels more collaborative to me. I don't know, what do you think about that?

Jeffrey: Absolutely. And I think one of the things that I've done, try to do differently, I guess maybe because I was in business before I did art, what I try to do with a gallery is I try to be the easiest artist to work with ever. So, I mean if they want information, I try to give it to them before they ask for it. Cause I've seen galleries that have heavily promoted an artist's show, and they need images by certain times so they can get them into advertising, and the artist doesn't get them to them in time. Or they show up, you know, they're supposed to have art to the gallery on the first of September, and they don't show up until the 2nd. So what I try to do is just be really really easy to work with. And then what I've found is when they need something, when they need a quick image to throw in a publication, they'll call you because they know they can count on you. So I try to collaborate kind of that way too, just that I just want to be easy to work with. So anything they need, I try to give to them, you know, follow their rules. And I try to promote them as best I can, too. So you know, if I take an image to a gallery a lot of times then I'll post it on my Facebook page and reference them like I just took it. So I really want to promote them, too.

Cory: Nice. Yeah, those basic tenets of professionalism. Showing up, being easy to work with, being fun to work with, all of those things are great. And I can't emphasize enough how often I tell people, like just do the basics and show up.

Jeffrey: Well what's funny is several years ago a nonprofit ended up asking- they were considering opening a gallery. It was a gallery that closed, you know, the business was empty. They just thought that gallery needed to be there. So they invited me to meet with the board and maybe give them some ideas on what they could do. And by the time I left, I was recruited onto the board, and asked to start the gallery. Okay! No more board meetings. But they ended up recruiting all the artists for the gallery, hanging the art originally and working with them for several years after that. And what you do find is it's very very rare that an artist actually does things appropriately.

Cory: Interesting.

Jeffrey: Gives work on time, shows up when they say they're going to. So if you can do that kind of thing, like you said, do the basics, you actually stand out if you do the basics.

Cory: Yeah. Yeah that's really fascinating. I remember I started college a little later than most of my classmates, right? And I did some other things for a few years before I went to college. And I was always amazed when I was in college, like the other college students just didn't quite have the

show up and do the work kind of attitude. And I find that to be true for a lot of younger emerging artists as well.

Jeffrey: Yeah.

Cory: Okay. So your website, like I looked at your social media and stuff, and you're not somebody who has like a million followers on Facebook. You've got I think like 1200 or something like that. But you're getting significant website sales you said. And some of those come from Instagram, Facebook, whatever. I also noticed that you have a- you're on a lot of different websites, right? Like you're on a couple different print on demand sites, and some site called iprintathome and things like that. What drove your decision to place your work on all these different sites?

Jeffrey: What's interesting about that is I didn't know that work was there, so I'm gonna have to research that. Cause actually, what I- I actually didn't target some of those, because I just have [unintelligible] and others who will print it and ship it to customers. And I like it, even though it's more time intensive, I like to ship it myself.

Cory: Interesting.

Jeffrey: So I like to sign the piece. I like to sign the front so that they can see the signature. And then especially when someone orders online, what I try to do is do something extra. So I'll give them, I don't sell gift cards, but I create a couple gift cards, so for instance if somebody buys one of the goats I'll send them a couple gift cards that are landscape images of where the goats hang out. People that order bigger items, I'll send them signed copy of my book. And the reason I did that is my wife ended up buying something, I think on Etsy years ago, and that order sent them a handwritten note and something a little extra. And boy, that was great! Because you know, she wanted to buy again. So that's one of the things I just like to do. I like to try to do something a little bit extra.

Cory: People do appreciate those little handwritten notes or whatever. They like to feel like people are thinking about them, I guess. Awesome. Okay. So there, maybe there's somebody out there putting your work on websites without your knowledge. We'll figure that out later. But I notice you also, you've done a pretty good job with putting Pinterest boards together. Like you've got mood boards set up specifically on Pinterest for each of your different collections. Did you do that yourself?

Jeffrey: I did.

Cory: And have you found that to be useful at all?

Jeffrey: It has. And it's one of the things that I probably really need to devote more time to. You know, I was posting to Pinterest from my website so if somebody clicked on the image it would take them back to the website. And you find you have only so many hours in a day. And I probably focus more on Instagram of late, versus Pinterest. But that actually has worked out for me well. I think partly because when they click on an image it takes them to the website.

Cory: Yeah. Interesting. I notice that you're also, you've got a couple of essay, like photo essay books. There's one called Current Essays on the Passing of Time in the Woods. How did those, how did those books come about?

Jeffrey: And that's a good question. The first one, Current, I had a publisher who had these essays. And originally it was from Nashville, [unintelligible], and any time that he was struggling with things to write with he would talk out into the woods and he would write these essays. So his goal was really to have them published as a book and he had had them in different magazines, one story at a time. And so he had a publisher, and the publisher was looking for someone to illustrate the book. Initially I think she was looking at having multiple photographers, illustrators. Which is kind of [unintelligible] and she actually found me on LinkedIn. So I thought that was just fascinating that she found me on LinkedIn. And then I ended up showing her some images and she ended up just, she ... [unintelligible] so it was a fun experience in picking images that went with the essays. It was a neat experience. And then several years passed, and it was a gentleman who did poems. And it was called Natural History, and it was released in 2016. And she contacted me again to see if I had an interest. So that one was kinda fun, because it was again, I'm not a real poetry person, I thought well I don't know, and so she sent me the poems like "oh my gosh, these are great!" Cause they were like 10-15 line poems, and I could relate to them. So I said yes, here's, I think I sent her back like 6 or 8 images that went with some of the poems, what do you think? She showed the poet, he said that's fantastic. So then it was picking the images to go with the poems. So some I already had that I had published, others I had taken and researched. For instance, there was one poem, as bizarre as it sounds it was called Snake in a Tree. And like okay, I'm thinking like Photoshop a snake into a tree, like how do I do it? And it ended up, one of the poems had to do with winter, and I thought I had this perfect image, went back, well here in that same area of pictures, I had taken a picture of a snake in a tree and totally forgot about it. So that's how that one came about. And this next one that's coming out next spring, it's tentatively titled Trails of Tennessee, and it's a book about all the Tennessee state... and that was one that I teamed up with an author, and the author just kept pitching the idea, the concept of the book. And then the University of Tennessee press picked it up.

So that was going around all the Tennessee state historic sites, but the images had to be in black and white. So it was kind of fun, so I was doing some straight black and white, so I'm excited about that one.

Cory: Very cool. Well Jeffrey, I really appreciate you taking the time to sort of break things down for us and tell us a little bit about your photography business. Anybody who is an up-and-coming artist who's still trying to figure stuff out, what kind of advice would you give them?

Jeffrey: Well, I think from- a couple ideas. Let me just take a look down here at a note I made, I think I had sent the note to you. But there's a guy by the name of Barney Davy that does some marketing stuff too, and it was I think he had 4 tips, but two of them really seemed to apply to what I was doing- and the one was making art that resonates with a large group of collectors. So, and that of course that's easier said than done, cause I sort of stumbled into my goats. But the other ones was the willingness to create art with a thematic theme. So the Goats of Rone took off, but again it was the willingness to keep that going. So every year, make another goat image, another goat portrait or two, retire a couple of them. But I think those are two big things. To try to find art that connects with people. And a lot of times, it's really paying attention to that. You know, cause sometimes, this is probably not the best example, cause it's not specifically directed to art, but when I was first photographing the Rone mountain area where the goats are, it was a cold foggy morning and I ran into another photographer, and that

photographer said to me, “Hey there is this great place in the mountains of Southern Virginia where there’s wild ponies.” Sure there are! Yeah, in the mountain. And I blew it off, like he was just pulling my leg. And then a year later I looked, and oh my gosh, there’s 130 wild ponies scattered in mile-high mountains of Southern Virginia, and that was another series. But it’s little things like that. Pay attention to what people are saying. So if people are commenting on your art, really think about what they’re saying and see if there’s somewhere to go with that.

Cory: Yeah. Yeah, that’s interesting. We’ve published a few pieces on making art in a series or making art with a theme, like you were just talking about. I just posted on CrowdCast and Facebook links to a blog post that we wrote on creating art in a series, because I found that that is probably from, on an art-marking side, probably one of the most important things for the artists that we’ve worked with, is making art that has a cohesive through line. So, yeah, that’s good stuff. Well Jeffrey, thank you again so much. We’ll let you go, but thank you to everybody who tuned in, Jean, Ann, Nicolette, Joe, all the rest of you that are on and leaving comments and stuff, we appreciate it! And we’ll have a blog post up in a week or two with the transcript of this as well as some links to some other things that we talk about on the call. Jeffrey, thanks so much and have a wonderful day.

Jeffrey: Nice to meet you in person Cory! Keep up the good work.

Cory: Alright, take care. Bye.