

Time for mass production in craft industry

Bias against large-scale manufacturing prevents business growth, writes Leonard Shapiro

LARGE-scale production and economic growth in the craft industry is being stifled by an insistence within the National Craft Council of SA (NCCSA) that "mass-produced" goods cannot be "handmade".

In addition, there is a demand to define and favour "relevant" craft as needing to be ethnic by design.

The following excerpt is taken from an August 1999 proposal by the Crafts Council of the Western Cape: "Craft is a reflection of techniques and design elements specific to a national culture (and) is a natural tool for the production of high-quality memorabilia. Carefully developed in order to avoid the dangers of over-commercialisation through mass production (thereby losing the individuality which makes it so marketable), SA craft could provide large numbers of people with sustainable income."

Many in management in the craft industry in the Western Cape as well as in the NCCSA have an irrational prejudice against what they call mass production of craft. This prejudice and lack of economic sensibility hurts the growth and

development of individual crafters and the industry as a whole.

Craft is seen as separate from the development and manufacture of other products that ultimately reach the shelves of small shops as well as chain stores.

Clicks stores often have an array of handmade craft products from India, Spain, Italy, China and Vietnam. Why do they not stock craft products made in SA? Because in SA craft is not manufactured according to production parameters, nor are craft products made in sufficient quantity to accommodate even small orders.

The bias against large-scale manufacturing guarantees that craft production remains at a level where it will not grow.

Enforcing this misunderstanding about craft via policy means that craft production, product development, marketing, sales and the betterment of the lives of crafters will not occur.

These are all the normal steps that should take place in the devel-

opment and growth of all products.

An example of imported, hand-blown glass vases can be found on the shelves of Clicks stores. They are mass-produced. However, if one looks at a group of them on the shelf, one will see that they are all different in certain respects and it is easy to see that they are made by hand. Yet there are crucial aspects to this vase, like its height, that remain fairly constant. Reason? They need to fit onto a store shelf and in a cardboard package, both of which are constant in size.

In India, wooden combs are made by hand in very large quantities. As a result, orders are generated globally. These beautifully made wooden combs do not reflect an Indian aesthetic. They are not ethnic by design. If one were to see this comb in a shop in New York, one would not be able to tell at a glance that it was made in India.

By refusing to understand and recognise the need for large-scale production, the NCCSA is preventing the growth of craft as a viable

business. This stifles business creativity and growth levels and ensures that crafters remain at the bottom of the economic ladder. Crafters are relegated to small-scale manufacturing with no chance of expansion.

By growing their businesses, crafters would be able to employ more people and separate the manufacturing process from the selling process. In most cases it is the crafter who makes and sells the product. If proper business principles were put in place, growth would occur, resulting in increased productivity on all levels.

A contradiction in the argument that mass-production makes craft less marketable is illustrated by the case of Carol Boyes, who has a company that produces decorative metal cutlery.

Boyes' cutlery is an example of a successfully mass-produced and marketed product; the handles of her cutlery are mass manufactured using the casting process.

The cutlery is sold in many

tourist shops in SA as well as in larger retail outlets. She has a website and exports her product.

Here is a case of mass production with annual turnover that runs into millions of rands. People are employed as factory workers, sales representatives and distributors. As the product sells very well it means that the profits generated benefit all those associated with these products.

There are many cases where the link between a craft product and the appropriate manufacturing technology is missed. An example is a group of people who merely print their designs onto paper, employing appropriate technology to print their designs onto a wide range of paper products.

There is a factory in Cape Town that produces paper cups, paper plates and paper serviettes, as well as wrapping paper in rolls and in sheets. If the lino-cut designs were printed commercially onto the above-mentioned items, they could be distributed to supermar-

kets and sold nationally.

There are constant pleas from the NCCSA for the arts and culture department and the National Arts Council to fund a craft showroom. Yet what will this achieve when such small volumes are produced? If Clicks or Boardmans stores wish to order a product, the crafters will not be up to that sort of production speed.

When crafts are being produced in sufficient quantities, this will justify a showroom where buyers can place medium to large orders with confidence. To have a showroom first would amount to putting the cart before the horse.

One has to ask: "What craft products are being produced in the Western Cape that drive successful businesses and create employment? What are the success stories?" Other than Boyes, who employs realistic business principles, none spring to mind.

While the NCCSA recognises Boyes as a crafter and represents her product, it contradicts itself by opposing the same principles of mass production when it comes to other crafters.