



Art gallery owner turned consultant Cheryl Numark helps executives select office artwork that coordinates with the image of their companies that they want clients to see. "It helps them define their business," she says. Photo by Joanne S. Lawton

An artful idea

Former downtown D.C. gallery owner now helps businesses see a piece of art's ROI

By Missy Frederick

Companies already know that when it comes to marketing themselves, image can be everything. But how many of them take that philosophy all the way to the artwork they hang on their walls?

It's Cheryl Numark's job to convince them that they should. The art gallery veteran's new company, Cheryl Numark Art Advisory, helps both individuals and companies learn how to buy art, whether for investment purposes or just personal enjoyment.

She helps her clients — individuals decorating their homes and businesses outfitting their offices — focus in on their tastes in art.

"Everyone has an aesthetic," Numark says. "It may be nascent or may not be fully realized, and it's my job to pull it out."

Companies, in particular, often put a lot of thought into what hangs on their walls, she explains. Does the company have a long history in business and want to show what a serious, trustworthy, establishment it is? Does it want to display a cutting-edge risk-taker approach through modern, experimental art? Or does it want to point to its deep ties in its community?

Numark works with a divorce attorney who uses soothing, meditative works, particularly Asian art, to decorate an office. Real estate companies sometimes gravitate toward architectural images. A performing arts company might take an interest in photography of old theaters.

"It's amazing what a company can do with even \$50,000 to invest," Numark says. "And in return, it helps with retention, it helps

The basics

Company: Cheryl Numark Art Advisory

What it does: Advises clients, both individuals and businesses, on buying and selling visual art

Leadership: Cheryl Numark, president and founder

Location: D.C.

Employees: Two full time, plus contractors for publicity, installation, etc.

Clients: About 10 in the first month of business, including law firms, individuals, interior designers

Startup costs: About \$40,000

Source of startup funds: Self-funded

Website: www.numarkartadvisory.com

them define their business, and it helps them attract clients and express who they are."

Numark spent upward of a year preparing to open her art advisory business, but the idea had been brewing in her head since 2006, when she closed Numark Gallery in D.C.'s Penn Quarter after 12 years and two locations.

The gallery did business with scores of artists, including Michal Rovner, an Israeli artist who had a summer exhibition at Paris' Louvre Museum, and Glenn Ligon, whose modern, text-based painting inspired his own midcareer retrospective, which was held at a New York museum and hung in the Obamas' private quarters in the White House.

Numark's reasons for closing the gallery

were personal rather than business-oriented, she says. "I reached a point where I was burned out."

Numark ended up taking off more time than she had envisioned, mostly spending it with a teenage daughter. But she is no stranger to career change. Numark worked as an attorney before opening her gallery.

"Life is a series of chapters," she says. "I know some people do one thing continuously, but that hasn't been the case for me."

Since she committed to the art advisory idea, Numark has been quickly gearing up her entrepreneurial effort.

It took her about six months, and countless connections, to develop an art library of about 250 images. They cover a wide range of prices and a variety of artists, from well-known figures worldwide to up-and-coming local artists.

Clients' reactions to an image can give Numark a better idea on where to concentrate her efforts to match their tastes.

So far, she's had some adventures. She is helping an individual client sell an original Matisse drawing. Another has purchased two sculptures from artist Roxy Paine, whose works often focus on the life cycle of, well, mushrooms. Some requests are less specific, like finding a nice sculpture to sit atop a fireplace, Numark explains.

She makes most of her money from commissions, usually around 20 percent for a work sold. Many galleries build that commission into the price of the work, meaning Numark's client doesn't pay her directly for it.

Numark also charges an hourly fee when hunting for an artist's work — \$175 per hour with a cap of \$2,500 — to ensure she doesn't spend hours upon hours helping a client and get nothing in return if there is no purchase. Sometimes that hourly rate gets applied toward a purchase if the buyer spends a significant sum on an art piece.

Numark's goal is to shift her client base so that the emphasis is on corporations rather than individuals. She's found the recession has had an interesting upside: People want to invest in something more permanent, such as gold. Or, in this case, art. The question is, Numark says, which piece to pick.

mfrederick@bizjournals.com