



Chicago-based artist Nancy Pochis Bank has dusted off her colored chalk for clients such as Nike, Zagat/Google, and Don Julio tequila. Photograph and illustration by Nancy Pochis Bank.

The Business of Art

Nancy Pochis Bank, '91, left a lucrative consulting career to make chalk art. What do the two arenas have in common? Exceeding client expectations leads to success.

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Booth taught Nancy Pochis Bank the importance of an analytical approach, which she applied to her 12 years of consulting work at ZS Associates. When the art world came calling, she retained her B-school teamwork mentality and her consulting client service approach. Now, she has a thriving art studio on Chicago's northwest side, gaining renown for her chalkboard work for businesses like Nike, Zagat/Google, and Crain's Chicago Business.

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I started painting in 2000, but launching an art business was a huge shift. I'd been painting portraits of my children when their nursery school asked me to donate a portrait to their fundraiser. Interest in my portraits started to build and I realized I loved it. Painting gave me flexibility as a parent, and seeing a critical mass of interest made me feel like I could turn art into a successful business.

I was a manager with ZS Associates full time, part time or contract for 12 years after Booth. I simultaneously took art classes and met with a group of artists every weekend. Consulting helped me save a good chunk of working capital because I knew there wasn't going to be much revenue in art at first. I didn't have an art studio until 2004—before that, I worked in my basement.

Getting into chalk work was serendipitous. I was working on Cool Globes, a public art project highlighting solutions to climate change, when I met an artist who invited me to participate in a pavement chalk art fundraiser. I posted the art I created for the fundraiser on my studio website. Soon, chalk art became trendy, I had good SEO, and I became the artist whom you'd find if you were searching for a chalk artist in Chicago.

I approach my art as a business. I'm always looking for profit centers to develop for a combination of what I enjoy doing and what resonates with the market. My studio recently created an art installation for an event for Don Julio tequila, transforming the chalkboard walls of a banquet room to look like a farmers market to complement their "farm to shaker" theme.

My goal is to always exceed client expectations. I want clients to be impressed and excited, tell their colleagues, and hire me again—that's my business philosophy. Some artists have a "good enough" attitude, since what we do is temporary. The way I do it is more difficult, but it also makes me stand out from other artists doing chalk installation work. At Booth, we worked a lot in teams, and my approach to art is team based. We get better solutions when we build on one another's ideas.

—As told to Gretchen Kalwinski

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