

fig&me

HOW TO START SELLING YOUR DOLLS

The Dollmaking Business Series



INDEX

We will start our Doll making Business Series by discussing this from the angle of ground zero, building your business from the ground up.

The first chapter will be How to Start Selling Your Handmade Dolls and we cover the best practices for starting your business, as in using a pattern that is of your own design. We talk about store and payment options and how to list your doll products with important information they must contain. We also cover setting some boundaries for yourself and your customers through company policies. How to market your dolls, what happens when you make a sale and important things to think about when packaging your dolls, plus what sort of information you need to keep for your records.

Let's go right in.

1

YOUR DOLL PRODUCT

2

STORE + PAYMENT

3

PRODUCT LISTING + PHOTOGRAPHY

4

COMPANY POLICIES, SETTING BOUNDARIES

5

MARKETING YOUR DOLLS

6

MAKING A SALE +
PACKAGING YOUR DOLLS

7

KEEPING YOUR RECORDS STRAIGHT

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Let's Start with:

YOUR DOLL PRODUCT

- **Use your own design**
- **Tested for durability and high quality**
- **What safety concerns to consider**
- **Age appropriateness**
- **Labelling requirements**
- **Certification concerns**
- **Permits and regulations**

1. Use your Own Design

I highly advise that you start your doll making business adventure using a doll product that is of your own design, versus using the pattern (with consent obviously) designed by another doll maker. This way your doll will stand out from the crowd, as it speaks more closely about who you are and the things you find endearing in dolls.

2. Durability and high quality

You need to make sure your doll is safe to play with (either by children or adults), all seams are reinforced, everything is attached properly and the quality of everything you are putting forth is the best you can achieve at this point in time. Do not worry, you will grow and evolve and find better ways to create your dolls but you must start this business feeling like you stand a 100% behind the quality of your product.

3. Safety concerns

Some safety concerns to consider are small parts, type of fastenings, the length of the threads you are using to sew the doll, length of hair, in one word: playability of the doll. This will vary depending on the age appropriateness you are choosing for your dolls, or who is the intended final customer.

YOUR DOLL PRODUCT

4. Most of the safety concerns are intimately related to the **age appropriateness** of the doll you will be selling. So if you are selling art dolls not geared towards children, your doll must resemble an art doll and have a disclaimer that it is not a toy. If you are making dolls for children, then you need to take in considerations what small parts (if any) you are using, playability of the clothing (that it is removable and has a lot of ease so children can dress the doll comfortably), of the hair materials, etc.

5. Labelling requirements

Depending on where you live, and which country you forecast you will be shipping to most often, your dolls must come with certain labelling requirements. For most instances, you need to have a non-removable label (sewn-in) that states your business name and place of origin. In certain countries you must include more information in your label so it is always advisable that you research what exactly your doll label needs to state in order to be compliant with doll/toy regulations and also what kind of label you can use (a simple tag, a branded bag, etc).

6. Certification concerns

In some countries, if you are selling dolls and toys you need to be compliant with using products that are lead-free. Since we are talking mostly about Natural Fiber Art Dolls and Waldorf-inspired dolls, the use of natural materials sort of grants you some freedom

STEP 1. YOUR DOLL PRODUCT

ORIGINAL. UNIQUE.
YOURS

- YOUR OWN DESIGN
- TESTED FOR DURABILITY + HIGH QUALITY
- SAFETY CONCERNS
- AGE APPROPRIATENESS, OR WHO IS YOUR MARKET?
- LABELLING REQUIREMENTS
- CERTIFICATION CONCERNS
- PERMITS + REGULATIONS

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in not having to provide certificates. But is always a very good idea that you do as much research as you can regarding what you need to do in order to **legally** sell your dolls as toys. Please know that I am not a lawyer and I am not giving you legal advice, I am just stating best practices when starting to sell your dolls but the onus of being compliant and selling a safe product lies with you as you are the one making the doll and selling it. Research your materials and when in doubt, don't use them. Research your legal requirements, your labeling requirements, everything you need and must do before you start selling your dolls to the public.

If you want to find out about the toy regulations in the USA please visit this Facebook group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/719964664719424/>

In Canada:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/toy-safety.html>

and for the CE European regulation you can buy this guide that can help you learn more about it:

<https://feinslieb.net/en/manual-ce-marking/>



When starting a creative business from your own home, you might need a business permit that grants you permission to run the business from your home. You might need a special permit to sell toys using stuffing or textiles, depending on where you live. So please research what are the permit requirements to run your home-based business

and doll making business before you set up shop. It is always advisable to register your business name and to operate under it so that as your business grows, you already own everything under that name (domain name, website, copyright, store, bank accounts, social media, etc).

Step 2

STORE + PAYMENT

- **Store options abound: Etsy, Shopify, (Dawanda was bought by Etsy), Ebay, Bigcartel, Squarespace commerce, Indiegart or even hosting your own shopping cart in your website.**
- **For payment you can use: Paypal, Stripe, Square, Etsy Payments (if using their platform), e-transfers, or accept credit cards using your own shopping cart.**

When you are ready to set-up shop, and if you are starting from ground zero, I advise you to start small and perhaps open an Etsy shop or Ebay. These platforms have inner search engines and are full of customers looking to find the right thing for their needs, so you would be potentially found through their searches.

Hosting your own shop on Bigcartel, Shopify, Squarespace, Indiegart, etc means that you will have to work a little extra to create traffic to your shop. This is necessary anyways, but being in a platform like Etsy and Ebay does help you a *little bit* more with visibility. Maybe for the beginning you would like to start there.

Depending on the option you choose for your store, you can then use different providers to receive payment. They all charge different fees and costs per transaction so research them well and figure out which one will work for you best. You can always start with one and expand as your business grows. In some cases, in order to operate a shopping cart from one of these platforms you must have a business account (bank or Paypal business for example, which means you need to register your business name in your country and obtain a business license).

Step 3

LISTING + PHOTOGRAPHY

LISTING:

TITLE
KEYWORDS + TAGS FOR SEO
CREATIVE DESCRIPTION
LIST OF INGREDIENTS
SHIPPING QUOTES
LEGAL REQUIREMENTS
PETS | ALLERGIES

PHOTOS:

GOOD LIGHTING
DIFFERENT ANGLES
DISPLAY AT BEST ADVANTAGE
BRANDING

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When you are ready to list your first doll, depending on the selling platform you are using (Etsy, Squarespace, Bigcartel, etc) you need to consider the following:

a) Your product's title. It is important that you use keywords in your title, that means: words that might be on the searches people are using to find dolls: for example, "Doll Name, Natural Fiber Art Doll, Ready to Go, Waldorf Inspired, 15" tall". All these words are *keywords* and when someone makes a search, the more of your keywords that match their search, the greater the chances your doll listing will be found. Your title must not look like a robotic thing though, take time to craft something that makes sense.

b) Keywords and tags for Search Engine Optimization. Equally, it is important to include some of your main keywords (the words you want to rank higher for, or higher up in the search list of results) immediately in the first paragraph of your doll description. Using them in a way that makes sense, do not just copy and paste. This tells the search engine that whatever your title says it is also included in the description, therefore you "might" be actually selling/talking about this. The keywords and tags are there to help the search engines make informed decisions regarding who to show your listing to.

c) Creative description. Now you have your title, and keywords you want to rank for, it is time to properly describe to your customers everything you can about your doll. It is important to be creative in this part, because they cannot feel or see the doll in the person so you must work hard to give them as much information as possible in order to make them feel: welcome, informed, trusting and comfortable with you. You want to speak from an honest place but also a knowledgeable place. Expand in detail the areas where you are most proud of in the creation of your doll, if something took you long or was especially hard to create, say so. You also want to list all the items this doll comes with and describe the manner in which they can be removed and properly cleaned or taken care of. Think of all the questions you can possibly have about if you were buying a doll, what concerns you may have and address them as best you can in your listing description. From techniques used, to construction, to quality, size, feel, weight, etc.

d) List of Ingredients. It is also important to list all the materials used in the creation of your doll and clothes as some people are concerned about allergies (for example, if you own a pet and you must disclose this to your customers, are allergic to wool, or silk, etc); some people are vegan, looking for organic toys, they try to live a zero-waste lifestyle, are looking for sustainable and ethically-made products, etc. Addressing the ingredients used to make the doll is very important to a customer who doesn't have a label in front of them.

STEP 3. PRODUCT LISTING & PHOTOGRAPHY



LISTING:

TITLE
KEYWORDS + TAGS FOR SEO
CREATIVE DESCRIPTION
LIST OF INGREDIENTS
SHIPPING QUOTES
LEGAL REQUIREMENTS
PETS | ALLERGIES

PHOTOS:

GOOD LIGHTING
DIFFERENT ANGLES
DISPLAY AT BEST ADVANTAGE
BRANDING

LISTING + PHOTOGRAPHY

e) Shipping quotes

You will need to find out the approximate cost of shipping your doll from where you live to different worldwide destinations. Now you can get quotes online for different service providers, so this information is readily available but you will need to know the dimensions of the box you will be shipping your doll in as well as the weight. You will also need to state the type of shipping service you are providing the quote for (Air Mail, Tracked Packet, Express Post, First Class, etc).

f) Legal requirements

You need to state the size of the doll, the age appropriateness of the doll, the materials used in his/her creation, your place of business, whether it is made by you or other people working for you, any potential allergy concerns, small parts or not, whether this is a certified toy, etc.

g) Photography

You will also need to take product photos to best display the doll to your customers, use different angles, good daylight, and try to take close-ups and full views of the doll and all her/his clothes.

I will go more deeply on the subject of Doll Photography in Part IV of this Doll making Business series.

Step 4

SHOP POLICIES

BOUNDARIES

- RETURNS & REFUNDS
- CANCELLATIONS
- CUSTOM WORK IF AVAILABLE
- DEPOSITS
- LAY-AWAY
- SHIPPING TIME

I call these having boundaries, for yourself and for your customer.

a) Returns and refunds

In the policy section of your store or website, you need to address whether you will accept returns, in case a customer is not satisfied with their purchase; what is the suggested period of time for you to offer a full refund, or a partial refund and to what extent, and under what circumstances you accept potential returns. This gives your first-time customers more trust in purchasing from you.

b) Cancellations

If you will be taking custom orders, what is the period of time you will accept an order to be cancelled. What amount of the initial payment will your customer have to forfeit and under which circumstances you can cancel an order or a transaction. Please know that depending on your payment processor you will be bound to a different set of rules than the ones you set publicly for your customers, so it is important that you know this so they are somewhat congruent with each other.

c) Deposits and Lay-away

If you are taking custom work, will you initially charge a deposit to get started? or offer a sort of lay-away system to first-time customers so they can provide payment within a period of time? You need to state said amount of time and the amount of the payments, and what will happen if a custom doesn't pay for a lay-away product.

d) Custom work

It is very important that you set guidelines for yourself regarding the options that you offer your customers: style and size of doll, items of clothing included or that can be purchased as an extra, time of delivery, skin and hair options, etc. It is best to have this as a file you can email your clients as it cuts down on the amount of emailing between the two of you and makes the process more professional and efficient.

d) Shipping time

As a side note, I consider a good idea that you let your customers know how often you ship. This way they know when their order will be sent on its way and will not start harbouring bad feelings if it's been three days since their purchase but you haven't shipped their doll yet. Just state (even in your product listing) how often you ship your products and how they are packaged.



Step 5

DRIVING TRAFFIC TO YOUR LISTING



This is just another step in the process of selling your dolls and one that is very important, you cannot forget about marketing your dolls. I will go into marketing a bit more widely in Part III of this Doll making Business series, but for now let's cover the basic options you have to drive traffic to your product listings.

a) Blog

A blog is a great way not only to document your journal, but to create a long-term presence and give you some good SEO juice. It is time consuming, but a great way to connect with your future customers, as you can go in more depth regarding the creation of your dolls. Stories, snippets of the creation, behind the scenes looks, etc.

b) YouTube channel

You can also create small videos as you go about creating your dolls, or make little stories of them, vlog your process, etc. Anything that you think might entice someone to click through to your shop. Video editing is even more time consuming than blogging but it is a great way to show your customers what your dolls actually look like in real life.

c) Pinterest

This is a great way to drive traffic to your shop as you can Pin directly from your shop listing, saving you hours and hours of time; no need to create a thorough blog post or edit video footage, you just need to take good photos that entice shoppers to leave their cozy Pinterest browsing and travel to your shop.

d) Social Media

You can create a facebook business page and/or an Instagram account to share your dolls and create more online presence for your work. You can tag your suppliers, your friends, things you find interesting and include your dolls in the doll making hashtags everyone is using so that others find your dolls as well. This is a free way to create more awareness for your dolls and hopefully connect with potential customers.

e) Newsletter

A newsletter is a great way to drive traffic to your new products, letting people know when you have something fresh in your shop. You will need a means for capturing people's email addresses (a landing page) and they must subscribe themselves as now we have a lot of privacy rules due to spammers. Most email marketing providers have free accounts to begin with as you build your list but they all eventually cost you some money, depending on your list size or frequency of emails sent.



f) Network of friends

Now, don't underestimate the power of word of mouth from your very own network of family and friends. If you have already sold some dolls in person, please ask people to share your work, your shop, your social media or even your product listings.

Asking nicely goes a long way and in my experience most people are happy to let others know that you are creating beautiful dolls. If they have first-hand experience of your work, your professionalism or how passionate you are about creating said dolls, it will be much easier for them to recommend you to their network of friends and little by little you increase the amount of people who know about you.

g) Facebook Groups

You can join cloth doll making groups, Waldorf doll groups, natural fiber art doll groups, knitting groups, sewing groups, local craft groups, etc. Any craft involved in the creation of your doll will have a dedicated Facebook group, and some even local, that you can join and maybe eventually share some of your own work or list to one of your products. It is very important that you know the rules and proper etiquette in these groups, please don't just

show up sharing your work on the main feed as you most likely will either be banned, removed or generate a yucky spammer feeling in those that actually witness your actions. Facebook groups are not there for you to profit from, they are there for you to share and interact. So do that in a way that is professional and kind. Most groups have a spam thread, or "share your work" thread where you can then link to your store or website without any "shameless plug" feelings.

Above all I want you to know that there is no one that starts doing all the marketing tactics from the very beginning and all at the same time. We all take the space to know a platform, to use it to our advantage, and then we adopt another one or learn something new. You do not need to blog if you don't feel comfortably writing, maybe video is your thing. Or maybe you will become a Pinterest witch or a Facebook group owner where you will actually moderate and encourage participation from potential customers. The world is your oyster my friend, choose your avenue and dive into it with passion. Dominate the logistics, then evolve and keep on learning. Do what comes naturally first, but don't put all your eggs in one basket. In this day and age, we must all juggle a few different marketing hats in order to cut through the noise and make our work known.

Step 6

SALES + PACKAGING

Yeah! You sold your first doll, or maybe this is the third one in line, once you have some sales or in anticipation of said sales, there are some points to cover:

a) Your invoice details

Such as your business name, address, price of the doll, tax and shipping. It is advisable to include any proper tax ID numbers as well as your website or store online address, as well as some details regarding returns/cancellations. Normally this is information you input in your online shop set-up, but if you choose to send your dolls with a printed invoice, you can include it in a “prettier” way, using nicer paper, etc.

b) Customs declaration and shipping labels

If you are shipping the doll out of country, you have to use a customs declaration. In some instances you can fill all the information online, to save you time when you go to the post office (price, contents, weight, etc). You might need a special code depending on the item you are shipping, but it is easily found through a browse system in the online shipping service of your choice. You will also need shipping labels that contain all the necessary information for your doll to travel to his/her destination.



PACKAGING

a) Care instructions

It is a good idea to include the care instructions for the doll. This can be done in a postcard format or even business card format, depending on the process you advise your customers for taking care of the doll. For my art dolls the process is more involved, so I send this as a PDF file via email.

b) Labels

You can add all proper labels to your doll and clothes, as tags, fabric ribbons, etc. You can have them printed professionally for you or you can make some yourself at home.

c) Marketing materials

It is always advisable to send some extra marketing materials with all your dolls, like a photo card of the doll, your shop address, stickers, a business card with your details and social media, etc.

PACKAGING

- CARE INSTRUCTIONS
- LABELLING
- MARKETING MATERIALS
- THANK YOU NOTE
- GOODIES
- PROTECTIVE MATERIAL
- BRANDING
- ALLERGIES/SENSITIVITIES

d) Thank you note

Very important to thank your customers in your very own handwriting. Thanking them for their support and also encouraging them to give you a review or to spread the word about your shop if they find the doll to their liking.

e) Goodies

Sending your dolls with some little “extras” goes a long way to ensure you have “raving” customers who appreciate not only all the work that went into the creation of this doll, but the care and effort you put into sending their new doll home. This can be something as extravagant as more items of clothing, or something simple as a lavender sachet, a doll re-blusher, extra buttons/thread to take care of the dolls clothing, you name it.

f) Protective materials

It is very important that you package the doll beautifully but with safety in mind. Some layer of extra protection in case the box or package gets wet, bubble wrap or eco-friendly filling material so it is not bouncing inside the box all over the place. If you do include a bag, make sure you label it as a choking hazard or that you poke a few holes in it in case a little kid happens to find said bag, etc. Think of possible scary scenarios and prepare for those.

g) Branding

If you have gone all the way as to set branding guidelines for your work, then you can be very creative and also invest in using packaging materials that match your brand aesthetic and colours. Printed boxes with your brand’s name, stickers, tissue paper, etc.

h) Allergies, sensitive materials

When packaging your dolls is important that you take in consideration that some people are allergic to certain things, for example sensitivities to smells. I ship my dolls with a lavender sachet to discourage little bugs from setting shop inside the box, but I also tell my customers of this practice so they can discourage me if need be. Also, shipping certain materials is forbidden to some countries, for example: shipping dried lavender to Australia. So it is a good idea that you review what you are allowed to ship and where. For example, if your doll is weighted with glass beads, you might have to include a small package as a sample for custom officials and also state it in the shipping label, so they don’t go slashing the doll open to find out what’s inside her!

As a final step when you start selling your dolls, you must consider what records you need to keep for when you have to file taxes for the income accrued during the year.

a) Cost of your Goods Sold

Every single purchase you make towards the creation of your dolls is considered in the overall cost of your goods sold. We are talking about the actual ingredients here: doll skin fabric, wool, sewing thread, yarns, wefts, embroidery thread, fabrics, elastic, buttons, etc.

b) Tools and supplies

All the tools that you buy and the supplies you need to create your dolls: sewing needles, felting needles, tape and shipping supplies, office materials like paper and ink, marketing products like postcards or business cards, labels, etc.

In some countries you must divide them by sector (office supplies, tools and equipment, marketing supplies, etc).

c) Shipping and cost of delivery

Usually you must keep this separate even though your customers pay this on top of the price of the doll, you must disclose which part of that income is the cost of delivery for you.

Step 7

RECORD KEEPING



d) Business expenses

Some other business expenses to keep track of: your website fees, your domain cost and registration, newsletter fees, any ads that you pay for, organizations that you belong to regarding doll making or business, monthly software subscriptions to run your business, etc.

b) Store and payment processing fees

Your store provider will most likely charge you either a monthly fee or fees based on transactions, your payment provider will also charge you. So all those costs need to be accounted for, as well as your bank fees.

c) Sales tax

When you are selling dolls online you must charge sales tax depending on where you live and where your customer lives. Once you collect it through the sale, you then must remit it to your tax agency within a certain time, so it's important to keep track of what, how much and when to do this.

b) Batch numbers / ingredients relating to certified toys

If you have a toy certification, you will need to keep track of your batch numbers and suppliers' certificates as well.

c) Inventory

You will have to take physical inventory of your existing supplies at the end of the year, and then start with that amount (\$) in the following year as existing inventory. You will then add/subtract from the year's purchases.





So you are probably aware by now that starting to sell your dolls is not for the faint-hearted. A lot of effort, research, preparation, leg-work and intent goes into the setting of a new business, however small or large your vision is. It is time consuming in itself due to all the steps that go into selling the dolls, never mind the actual doll creation.

Most doll makers I am prepared to say, do this because it is their passion, not exactly their idea of a *profitable* business. Not to say you won't be profitable, with some hard work and smart procedures you most certainly can have a full-fledged business out of your doll making, but a big part of the equation lies in your unwavering need to create dolls. This burning passion creates, most often than not, the need to find a suitable means of earning an income through it. It

should not be your only reason for selling your dolls, but it will certainly play a part if you want to keep learning and if you want to stay in it for a long time.

I am full proof, I'm certainly not the exception, that you can sell your dolls, find purpose through it and create a business and a life for yourself rooted in your convictions as well as your creative needs. I am not a professional business adviser, so take all this information with a grain of salt and consider it my personal (not legal) advice to you, from doll maker to doll maker.

Peace be with you and yours truly in wool,

Fabs