

From the Austin Business Journal:

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Exec shares Great Recession lessons that can help during coronavirus pandemic

Art + Artisans president preaches transparency, positivity, open-mindedness for other small businesses

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Through this unprecedented pandemic, Art + Artisans Consulting Inc. founder and President Jennifer Seay is staying positive and harkening back on what she learned during the Great Recession.

“We just have to control what we can control and do what we know we can do every day,” she said, “and I can’t get bogged down in too much negativity.”

Started in 2002, Art + Artisans offers a wide range of art consulting services for offices, multifamily, health care, higher education, student housing and hotels. Art + Artisans sources the artwork and manages its creation and installation.

Seay’s company has reaped the benefits of Austin’s red-hot commercial real estate boom. Art + Artisans doubled its revenue in 2018 and last year doubled the size of its East Austin office space.



ARNOLD WELLS/STAFF

Jennifer Seay founded Art + Artisans Consulting in 2002. During the last recession the company diversified away from just office projects to sourcing art for higher education buildings, health care facilities and apartment communities.

Having exceeded first quarter goals, Seay had hoped 2020 would be another strong year for revenue. The pandemic, which hit Austin in mid-March, has put a damper on that.

Now, she is keeping close track of cash flow and existing contracts and staying in front of clients. She is also researching what loans and grants she can apply for through the U.S. Small Business Administration, The Red Backpack Fund from Spanx and others during this uncertain time.

Receiving a loan through the SBA's Paycheck Protection Program on April 14 and knowing payroll will be covered for the next two months is a huge weight lifted off her, Seay said.

"It was a huge relief," she said. "Just knowing that my team was going to be covered for an additional two months and that we are going to have a cushion ... because there are so many unknowns. I just thought it was imperative that we get the PPP, that I have that in my back pocket."

Art + Artisans applied for the PPP loan through [BBVA](#). Seay declined to say how much her loan was for but she said it will cover payroll, health insurance and the mortgage on the office space for two and half months.

Seay said she is thankful for the relationship she has with her banker, who kept in close communication with her on when the application for the PPP loan would be live and what would be required.

"It was the most nerve-wracking process I have been through in a long time," she said. "Waiting to hear back felt like an eternity."

The SBA approved more than 1.6 million PPP loans from April 3, when applications opened, until April 16, when it ran out of its initial \$349 billion in funding, [according to data from the agency](#). Texas had the most loans of any state, 134,737, for nearly \$28.5 billion. PPP recipients [span a wide range of sectors](#) from technology to retail and restaurants to real estate.

Lessons from Great Recession

With the PPP loan and the projects Art + Artisans has active — though many have hit pause — Seay said she thinks it will be enough to get the firm through the

downturn.

“We are doing the best we can to get over this hump,” she said. “I feel encouraged that I have a really strong team. I am encouraged that we are still getting calls. We have a really strong community of designers, project managers and clients that when they do need something, they will turn to us. We are just trying to stay in front of people. That is all we can do.”

Seay admitted that weathering this pandemic is more stressful than the Great Recession because her team is larger now. And, her six employees have become like extended family. Seay said she doesn't want to ever be in the position where she has to lay anyone off.

“Keeping the team together feels very personal,” she said. “It's been a source of anxiety. I have to make it through this. It is not just about me.”

For Seay, the Great Recession felt like it only impacted the office market, but this pandemic has put a temporary halt on all sectors.

“The quiet feels so different,” she said. “We are working from home. No one is going to the office. There's no human interaction. The whole world feels so weird. It didn't feel like that in 2008.”

The key to weathering the Great Recession was having a few large projects that carried them through, Seay said. The company also began to diversify from solely working on office projects to sourcing art for higher education buildings, health care facilities and apartment communities.

“I think 2008 opened us up to some new opportunities that I wouldn't have necessarily seen if the downtown had not happened,” she said. “In a lot of ways, I think that is what will get us through now is that we are serving clients in a number of different areas.”

During this pandemic, Seay advises other business owners to stay in communication with their team, be transparent and be a positive influence.

“I've been trying to keep it focused on what our goals are,” she said. “I have been talking to each of my team members every day. We do several weekly meetings where we are all together just to stay connected.”

Sticking to a routine is also important, Seay said. She said it is very easy to get distracted when you are working from home and have to take care of children during the day as well. Seay said she blocks out time in her calendar for what she needs to get accomplished each day to create some structure.

Since her employees are working from home, Seay said she's been going to her office most days during the week from about 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. "It's super helpful to put me in a more focused mindset," she said.

Plus, she said people want to network and connect through the pandemic. She networks through LinkedIn and schedules Zoom meetings with people she has never met in person before.

"We can't stay isolated," she said. "We have to keep seeing faces."

Overall, Seay said she feels encouraged about the future and that projects will move forward in the third and fourth quarters.

"I don't think this going to last forever," she said. "I think it is just being able to survive until the economy starts running again. I'm trying to look at it and stay positive and just remind myself that this isn't going to last forever."

Erin Edgemon

Staff Writer

Austin Business Journal

