



## Mixing business with ArtPrize

By Mark Sanchez

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What started as a partnership to sponsor an ArtPrize venue led Jeff Lambert to start thinking about the possibilities for the vacant building at 47 Commerce Ave. in downtown Grand Rapids.

The ensuing conversations led Lambert to strike a deal with the building's owner, Prairie Real Estate out of Chicago. He now plans to buy a minority stake in the 10,000-square-foot building, renovate it and relocate his public- and investor-relations company, Lambert Edwards & Associates, there next spring.

"We were looking for space and we started spending time here. We decided this would make a good future home," said Lambert, whose firm co-sponsors the 47 Commerce ArtPrize venue with Internet ad firm Adtegrity.com and Pioneer Construction.

"For us it was really something that came together," he said.

Lambert's move is just one example of the business opportunities ArtPrize is generating.



Photo by Mark Sanchez: Jeff Lambert at 47 Commerce.

Photo by Mark Sanchez: Artprize on the Grand River.



Lambert, managing partner, got involved in ArtPrize at the urging of client Adtegrity.com CEO Scott Brew and sees the event as a catalyst for transactions and future dealings between businesses that have become involved in the event.

"You're creating conversations, which creates relationships — and that's how business gets done," he said.

"It absolutely has and absolutely will facilitate business in West Michigan."

Gregory Gilmore, CEO of the Gilmore Collection, which owns The B.O.B. in downtown, reports a 300 percent increase in revenue during the early days of the event.

The B.O.B. is one of the largest venues for ArtPrize, hosting 160 art exhibits. Gilmore intends to increase that to 200 next year.

Gilmore expects more than 10,000 people to go through his building each day during the 18-day event, which runs through Oct. 10. That's 10 times the normal daily traffic at The B.O.B. — a multi-story commercial building downtown housing restaurants and a nightclub.

"ArtPrize is a tremendous gift to the city," Gilmore said. "It's an 18-day gift to those who do business in Grand Rapids."

ArtPrize involves 1,262 artists exhibiting at 159 venues across the city.

Steve Fry, the president of Concept Design Group who originally conceived of the massive dinner table and chairs atop the blue pedestrian bridge over the Grand River, views ArtPrize as "doing great things for everybody in business," from the business community as a whole to the individual businesses that are sponsoring venues.

Through his participation in ArtPrize, Fry has reconnected with business associates from years past, some of whom own commercial properties in town.

Renewing those old ties could potentially lead to future work for Concept Design Group when those acquaintances expand or renovate their commercial buildings, Fry said.

"They've reconnected with me and maybe they'll say, 'I'll do this project with Steve next time,'" he said.

Concept Design Group partnered with Pioneer Construction and Iowa artist Sarah Grant on the Blue Bridge exhibit.

Overall, businesses are using ArtPrize in a multitude of ways.

Ginny Seyferth of Seyferth & Associates Inc. said ArtPrize has provided her firm an opportunity to launch a new brand globally using social media.

"It really allowed us to showcase our ability," said Seyferth, whose 25-year-old firm is also handling media relations for ArtPrize.

And Steelcase Inc. has outfitted seven venues with its Coalesse brand of premium furnishings.

ArtPrize fits with the Steelcase's brand of "bringing inspiration to work, wherever work happens," Coalesse President Frank Merlotti said. "Participating in an event that celebrates artistic inspiration was an immediate interest to Steelcase and Coalesse."

Many sponsoring businesses are using ArtPrize for client-relationship management, hosting receptions for clients.

Haworth Inc. is taking that a step further, bringing clients who are visiting its Holland headquarters during the event — mostly interior designers and architects — to Grand Rapids to see ArtPrize.

"We know many of them have a passion for art," said Chris Nienhuis, manager of client relations for Haworth. "We felt we could kind of capitalize on what was happening in Grand Rapids."

Nienhuis and her staff are already talking about how they can take even greater advantage of

ArtPrize in 2010.

“We know we can do a lot more,” she said.

For now, businesses involved in ArtPrize are doing what they can to leverage their participation, whether their intent is supporting a large community event or for business development.

While not everybody may see a business benefit, direct or otherwise, Pioneer Construction President Tim Schowalter notes that, at a minimum, ArtPrize has certainly lifted the spirits of people at a time of economic stress.

“There’s an awful lot to complain about with the economy,” Schowalter said. “We’re going to put away all that for a while.”