

Ep.89 Jenny Halstead Podcast Transcript

Whiteknights Studio Trail: How to Build a Successful Event from Scratch

Maria: Hello everyone and welcome to the My Local Marketer podcast. I'm Maria and today I'm speaking with Jenny Halstead, a painter and illustrator and organiser of the White Knights Studio Arts Trail. Jenny, hello and welcome to the podcast.

Jenny: Hello.

Maria: Well, it's White Knights Art Trail just around the corner, so no doubt you are very busy.

Jenny: Yes, there is. It's sort of like 12 days to go and this is when panic starts to set in.

00:26 | What is Whiteknights Studio Trail

Maria: For those people who aren't familiar, what is the White Knights Studio Trail?

Jenny: It's artists, craftspeople opening their studios or if they haven't got a studio, they're given a venue. So it's a walking tour. The whole point of it is a walking tour because that keeps it all much more of a community and friendly and people bump into each other, neighbours and things that they haven't seen for a whole year. So it has a very, very good buzz about it.

00:55 | How the trail came about and how it's kept fresh every year.

Maria: The thing I found interesting when you explained it to me before is that the trail differs every year, which I wasn't aware of.

Jenny: Could you give a bit about how you've organised the trail because you do have familiarity but people have to apply to be part of it. Yes, well, when we started it, there

was three of us that started it, Susanna Beer, Pip Hall and myself and we met in my garden and it really came about, so this was the 2000 millennium, everyone thinking of new things and we were talking and discussing about things in particular, where can artists exhibit in Reading? So bad is the facilities and actually, 26 years on, they're no better. In fact, I think they're probably worse.

So we decided, yeah, everybody needs to show their work and people love seeing it and organising an exhibition is expensive and if there's no venue to do it in, it's impossible. So then we started thinking, studio trail, what about it? So we sat there and we said, oh my goodness, there's so-and-so up the road who is a printmaker, somebody else who does weaving, somebody else who does bookbinding. So we started to think, oh goodness, we've already got the basis of our trail.

So that was the beginning and then we sat down and started doing the proper business side of things and working things out. But that's how it started and still goes today. So second year, third year, we introduced selection because what happened was suddenly, after the first year, we were very successful and everybody wanted to be in on it, which meant, A, you can't have too many people because then that negates the fact that it's a walking tour because people will never get round.

So we wanted to keep it within a tight area and we wanted to keep standards high. So we do select, we try to select a good balance of different arts and crafts. This happens in January each year and then new people are selected.

We have a core of people that live very much in the area and they are doing jobs. So that's our core and then we put out applications or these people can apply. This keeps it fresh because it means every year we've got half of the core and half of new people coming in.

So it's a lovely feeling of, yes, placing them appropriately in different venues and welcoming them. It's a good balance of having the people that know what they're doing and new people coming in.

03:58 | Steps needed to set up the trail

Maria: I think that's such a good way to do it. Not only because then you can maintain that quality level that you want to do every year, but it makes it different. Every time someone comes, there's going to be something different, a new artist and they know that it's going to be someone worth seeing if they're actually on the trail and they've gone through the application process.

Jenny: Yes, yes, quite. I think it works really well. What happens now is we have our AGM, which is just for the core people. And then in January selection, the end of January, a meeting, informal meeting. First of all, they come to my house and that allows me to get to know them, tell them the history, how we function, what is going to be required of them. Obviously, it does say that on the application form and they can ask questions because it's informal. And then that's followed the following week by a proper meeting.

The end of February, everybody has to have all their images, the image for the brochure and images for the website sent in. So that's the 28th of Feb, last day of February. Then everything goes to the press, to the printers.

And then the next meeting is the proof meeting where everyone, everybody has to proofread their own piece. I will not do that for them. And also, it's nice for people to see what's going on.

So we have proofread meeting and that's usually April. And then it all goes to print. We've had the same printers right from the very beginning, which keeps the continuity.

They love it. They know how I work because I present to them. And it's really good when you know who you're dealing with. They've been great.

05:14 | Funding the trail: University of Reading sponsorship and artist subscriptions

Maria: You do this in conjunction with the university, don't you? WhiteKnights Trail?

Jenny: The university sponsor us. So they've been doing that since 2015, which is lovely. So it means we don't have to go outside for sponsorship. The artists themselves pay a subscription. And then with the sponsorship, it does mean that we have that kind of nice feeling of a comfortable balance.

Our main costs, of course, are printing. Well, that's just it. Even when you do an event and everyone's volunteering to do it, there are costs, as you said, having a website, printing costs.

I know that there'll be a design cost or other costs in there somewhere. It's amazing how the costs add up. So you do need someone there.

05:56 | How the University of Reading sponsorship started

Maria: So how did the university sponsorship come about?

Jenny: It was somebody who worked in the university. So I wasn't privy to that. And the then vice chancellor or the vice chancellor's office, I'm not quite sure who she went through. She just said, this is going, this has been very, very successful. And because it's called community and the university loved to be part of the community, they thought it was a good thing to sponsor, I guess. And we think it's a lovely thing for them to sponsor.

So every year we have their logo and their sponsorship and thank them on the front cover. I think that's a great way to do it.

Maria: It just shows do what you do, do it well, get the name out there and then people will naturally come to you.

Jenny: Yes, absolutely. Yes. I mean, certainly for new people, we never go out to ask because they can't be sure whether they're going to get in. So it has to be the individuals and they know what they're involved with and how to apply, send their portfolio in.

07:01 | How Jenny has avoided big challenges in running the Whiteknights trail/advice for people wanting to organise a trail

Maria: Over those 26 years that you've been running the trail for, have you come across any particular challenges? I can think of a few, but what challenges have you come across and how have you gone about fixing them? Because I imagine they're the same challenges for anyone else organising any type of event.

Jenny: I can't think of anything disastrous. They've always been quite positive, really. People are suggesting things. Sometimes they're not going to be possible. You look at it and you think, it's going to be tricky. We have a kind of way of working. It has evolved. And somebody said, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. You know, it works. And it's only once a year.

So to start reinventing things is a waste of time and it takes too much energy. I think it's just keeping it as simple, as good as possible. But if it's working, then you can nudge the little refinements. I think it sounds like because you've been so organised from the start, I think those two things, keeping it simple and just making sure you're organised, you know exactly what's happening. Those are the two key things that have helped you to continue to progress. Yes, absolutely.

When the three of us were sitting down in my garden and discussing it, we wrote down what we liked about Studio Trails and what we didn't like, which is very good. And then we discussed why and we were more or less thinking the same. A lot of the county ones are on for three weeks with artists only opening Sundays and Wednesdays and another one is Thursdays and Saturdays.

And so you can never see everybody. So we agreed one weekend in June, everything open.

Maria: I think that's a nice way to do it. And I love the fact that you had that meeting, you decided what worked, what didn't work. And it goes to show if you put the effort and the prep in at the very start, you can avoid potentially a lot of problems.

Jenny: Absolutely. And we, you know, we agreed on our aims and objectives, promote and encourage interest in the artistic activities. Of our local people working in the arts and crafts. And it seems to work by the fact that we had hundreds and hundreds of people coming in and enjoying.

09:29 | Advice for businesses/artists who want to collaborate

Maria: I was going to ask you what advice you have for any business owners or local groups thinking about doing events. But I think that advice in itself is perfect. So keep it simple. Be really clear from the start what you want to do and be very organised. I really like what you said about how the trail started to begin with, because you agreed between you that there was nowhere really in Reading to display art. I do see that there are lots of businesses like pubs, especially who do these little collaborations with artists where, for example, in a pub, they'll have like local artists work hanging on the wall and things like that. So I think collaborations are a really good idea. Do you have any advice for businesses or anyone keen to collaborate and why they should do it?

Jenny: Yes, there used to be quite a lot of businesses that were very happy. They would perhaps have two or three artists. They would need someone to organise it. So when we've done it on odd occasions, they've come to me and I've selected a few artists or asked the artists if they'd like to show. And then it goes up for so many weeks and then they can change it or we can change it. So absolutely. I mean, it's perfect. If they've got a reception area and it's got a hanging system, that is important. Then, yes, it's perfect. Perfect for them and perfect for us.

We've had two exhibitions in the Estate Agents, Haslam's. They were excellent. They had a downstairs floor. They gave us a whole area to have an exhibition and they did. I don't think they do it so much now, but I guess management changes. They used to each June or coming up for June, they used to put someone's artwork that was on the trail and advertise the trail in their window. So, you know, it doesn't take much. Just a sort of way of saying we are supporting the arts in Reading.

And I think probably it's up to the artist to go to their local whatever and say, you know, I've noticed you've got a wall that's empty and would you like some of my paintings if I come and show you my work? They can only say no.

11:30 | If you don't ask, you don't get!: Jenny's Harris Garden collaboration

Maria: Well, as we said before we started recording, when I was asking you about something else, you know, if you don't ask, you don't get. I think we were talking about the Harris Garden. You've got that book, haven't you? I'm just holding it now. I'll include a picture online for anyone who's actually listening.

So this is what you did, an artist's year in the Harris Garden. So could you explain about this? Going slightly off tangent, but I think this is a very good example of how you can just ask and you don't know what you're going to get.

Jenny: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, absolutely. Harris Garden is a 12-acre beautiful garden, like a private garden almost, situated in the White Knights campus of the University of Reading. And so it's on one corner of it. People go there and they go, didn't know this was here. And it was originally part of the garden of the old Marquess of Blandford's house. Of course, longer there.

So the Harris Garden is there. It's run by volunteers who volunteer to garden every Thursday morning. And I thought, you know, it's fascinating what people are doing and how it's evolving, actually, because it was one garden that they decided they'd make into a gravel garden.

So I contacted the friends of the Harris Garden, which no longer exists, alas, but I contacted them and I said, I'm an artist and I would love to do, say, a year in the garden. So capturing the year through the seasons of what goes on, how it changes and how it's maintained, and perhaps a book.

So I went to Two Rivers Press, which is a local publishing company, and they said, lovely, would love it. So was I happy to write the text and to do the illustrations? And I said, I'd

love to do it. So it was a year there. It took about 18 months to actually produce, but it was lovely. It was really lovely.

Maria: And then you did something at MERL following that, didn't you?

Jenny: Yes. When this was published, MERL then had, it's now the studio, but they then had one sort of room, which was a kind of a studio, but an exhibition area. And I made contact with them and said, hey, look, I've got the original artwork. If I framed it all, there's an exhibition that goes with the book. How about it? And they said, that sounds great. We had a wonderful private view with hundreds of people, and it was a great success.

Maria: And just because you asked, the book and the exhibition you did was just because you went to someone and said, would you like to do this?

Jenny: Yeah, absolutely. Not costing you anything. I'm doing it. You know, I mean, otherwise, if you need funding, that's another area. You've got to go out there and get funding. Not impossible, but you need to have a good idea of what the costs are going to be.

14:21 | What Jenny is showing on the 2026 arts trail

Maria: Well, we should say as well that obviously you're exhibiting on the Arts Trail this year. So could you give us a sneak behind the scenes overview of what you will be sharing?

Jenny: Yes, I work in pastel, also in oil, and some watercolour. So it will show landscape, figurative stuff, a bit of everything. You know, you try to keep it fairly varied so that it has an interest for everybody. I always put my sketchbooks out, and that's a talking point.

And I know that last year there was a 12-year-old boy who came round. He spent ages looking at the sketchbooks, and then he said, why do you sketch in ink? And I said, well, I can tell you, because ink does not smudge, and you cannot change it too often. So it makes you make decisions and work fast and keep the energy going. Try it.

15:18 | Purpose of the Whiteknights Art Trail & communication tips for businesses

Again, there's a talking point, and people ask questions, because the whole point of the trail is to communicate. And that's what we said right from the beginning when we wrote these things down.

It's not a hard selling point. Lovely if you do sell work, prints or cards, as well as paintings or whatever your medium is. But it is to communicate.

It's to make, welcome the guests, to be able to show them how you work, have stuff out. Sometimes people are demonstrating, and show them the tools. So there's a communication, and they feel they're learning something.

And I think that's what we've always felt, and I still tell the new people, it's to communicate. I think that's a really lovely way of looking at it.

Maria: And again, just linking that to businesses and other groups as well. We normally think, oh, here's the finished product. But most of the time, what people would find most interesting is the process. What did you do behind the scenes? What conversations did you have? How did you come up with that? So knowing the process behind something is often actually more exciting, not only than just having the final piece itself.

16:24 | Jenny's dinosaur cards connected to the Reading summer trail

Jenny: Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. Oh, another thing I'm showing this year will be some dinosaurs, because I used to do some illustrations. My late husband was a palaeontologist. So we did children's books, stories of dinosaurs and various things. And they have used some of my illustrations for some cards. There's going to be a dinosaur summer trail in Reading, 24th of July for a month, various dinosaurs and some cards to collect.

Maria: Seven of my designs have been chosen to go on these little light playing cards. So if you're interested as well, you get a behind the scenes peek for the summer trail that's going to happen in Reading this year. I was so blown away when you showed me your dinosaurs and the books.

Maria: It just amazes me all the things and the projects that you've been able to do. And that's a wonderful one as well with your husband, his palaeontology expertise and your art expertise to combine them.

Jenny: Yes, they were great fun. He wrote the story I illustrated. But you know, it's always interesting when you're illustrating to say, yeah, but what do they look like? What was her feet? You know, how did they walk? How did they move? And of course, you know, it is based on fact, some guesswork, but intellectual guesswork.

17:42 | University of Reading centenary exhibition popup on Whiteknights Summer Trail

So this year, we've got a special exhibition, more of a pop-up exhibition, which is actually going to be in my garden. Because I live very close to White Knights and the University, we've been collaborating with them. And it's their centenary, so 100 years. And I live on Christchurch Road and the shops there were built in 1906.

So we thought it would be really nice to look at the shops just to see how they've changed. So we've got some old photos, and we're going to be showing those and some people's memories of how they remember when there was a butcher's there, when sweets were measured out on scales and all sorts of things like that. So I think it will be fun. And the shops themselves are interested in being part of it. So we've got a sticker going to be in the shop windows, which also echoes what is in the exhibition. So that's a little extra thing for this year.

18:42 | How Jenny can keep people on track and to deadlines for the summer trail

Maria: That's another great example of how businesses can collaborate with local artists. Yeah, absolutely. One thing I've not asked you about, how do you organise the White Knights art trail when you have that big group of personalities and make sure they're all in line and they're working towards the same goal?

Jenny: Yeah, I don't know. This hasn't really been any problem. I mean, if there is, they can opt out. As I say, because it follows a process during the year, you can explain that so they know what they are required to do, the deadlines, and then we also explain what to do.

Maria: That's a good point, actually. If they have a process in place, there is nothing to push against because they know exactly what's expected of them.

Jenny: That's it. And it's explained, as I said, when we have a very informal meeting, which is, you know, over a glass of wine on Sunday evening sort of thing. So they can ask the questions and if they don't like it, that's their chance to pull out. I think only one changed and that was over Covid. So only one over 26 years is not bad. I imagine that would actually work with quite a lot of people, actually, or in businesses, anything, that process of knowing exactly what you're doing and when. We've discussed the trail, how it's been going for 26 years.

19:49 | Jenny's plans for the trail moving forwards

Maria: What are the plans for the trail moving forwards? Do you have any other sort of big events planned or is it just keep going as it is?

Jenny: Well, we are open to what happens and you never quite know what's happening the next year. But we have lots of different things. I mean, we are aware that we can tag that on to our White Knight Studio Trail weekend.

Last year was our 25th year and what I asked all the artists to do, we had enough funding to make little white frames, 25 centimetres by 25. They were given to all the artists and I asked them if they would be kind enough to donate one of the pieces of

work to fill that frame. And we showed it in the Turret Gallery in the Abbey School and they were for sale and all proceeds were for the Royal Berkshire Hospital charity.

20:58 | Jenny's step by step guide on how to set up your own event

Maria: I think that's a really good idea, community again, to just do something and to support other local groups or charities at the same time every now and then. Is there anything that we've not mentioned so far that you think, oh, we need to get that in?

Jenny: I think when you're setting something up, as we did, it's very, very useful to write down your objectives and how to achieve, even if it's small and then it starts growing. What we did when we were very first starting, we put together all our ideas.

We then notified the artists that are around, said, you know, we've got this idea, what do you think about it? If you're keen, we're going to have a meeting in December. And we had about 20 artists, I think, suddenly came. So what we did then was we asked them for, I think it was £10, to get us going and just to show their commitment.

And then we set up a bank account. There was a bank across the road then and we had to have a chairman, a treasurer and secretary because we needed that to be signatures on the then checks. So that's the fundamental beginning of it.

And then, you know, you've got so much and you work out how much money you're going to need, how you're going to, if you're going to print, then contact the printers, how much is that going to cost? So, you know, you feel your way, but you feel it in an intelligent, careful way, what you're going to be trying to do and how your money allows you to do it. We actually did get some funding the very first year from Southern Arts, but it didn't come through. All the paperwork took so long. It didn't actually come through for that first trail, but we used it for the second trail.

22:34 | Funding: allow enough time before your event to apply for funding

Maria: I think that's a very good point to mention because sometimes funding, it says it takes a 12 to 14 weeks and you need to make sure you get the thing well before you even start. So, yeah, do allow months and months and months on either side.

Jenny: Absolutely. It took over a year.

23:01 | Consider what's free and what's paid

Maria: What I really like as well, which I didn't mention before, but you said that the artists pay, but one of the reasons they pay as well as because there was sort of the printing of the cost to cover is because they feel invested then. Because the number of times people do things for free, but actually people do things for free, they're not invested. They may do it, they may not. But if someone's put a little bit of money, it's not much, but a little bit of money towards it, it makes it more front of mind.

Jenny: Yes, absolutely. I think it shows commitment and then as administration, you know what you've got and what you're dealing with. Yeah.

So, if anyone's doing any events or anything, free is nice, but think very carefully about what's free and then what's paid in order to get the right people motivated. Even if it's just five pounds, they're committed. It's very, very different from people just if something is free. Put your name down. Might do, might not. You don't know what you're dealing with.

Maria: Oh, I imagine then trying to get people to meet your deadlines would have been a bit of a nightmare.

Jenny: Absolutely. Whereas now, they're always fantastically on time.

24:04 | Jenny's final thoughts

Maria: Oh, Jenny, you've given so much brilliant advice today. Thank you so much. Is there anything you would like to leave our listeners with?

Jenny: Well, just go for it. If you have an idea, think carefully, write it down, sleep on it, discuss it with someone else because that's always a good idea. You get feedback, you bounce off each other and then go forward.

Maria: Jenny, thank you. So, everyone, please come to the White Knight Studio Trail. It is Saturday the 13th and Sunday the 14th, 2026. Obviously, different years, different dates. But yeah, Jenny, thank you again and hope to see you all on the White Knight Studio Trail 2026.