

The Giving Economy: Caroline Woolard of OurGoods.org

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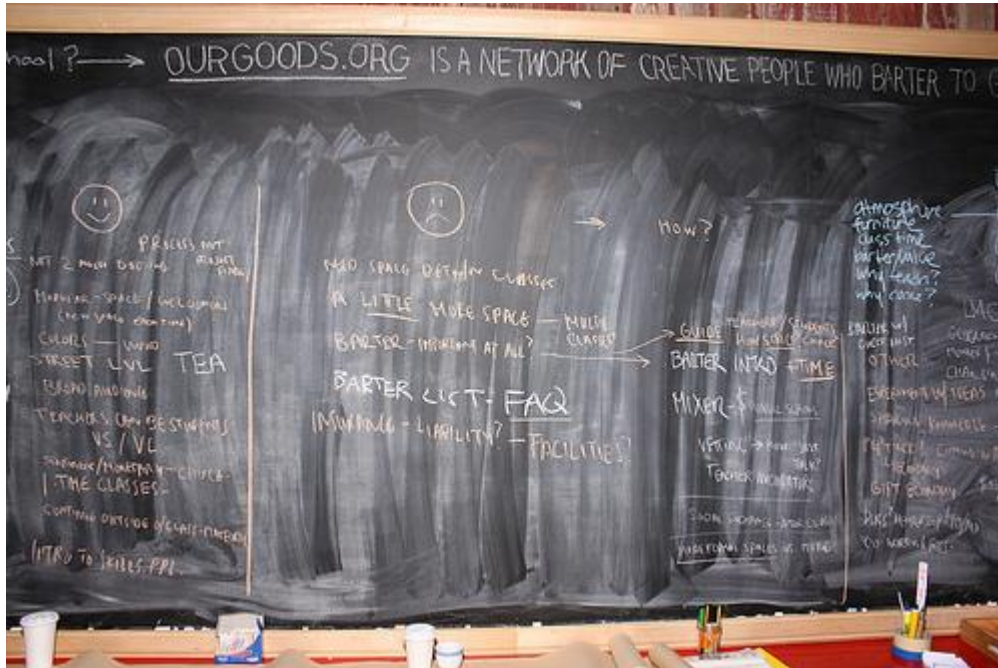


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In this month's inaugural [Life in Beta column](#) I wrote about how the Internet can enable our natural generosity. Caroline Woolard, a visual artist who manages a cooperative artists' space, is putting this insight into her life's work for the creative community with [OurGoods.org](#), a site that enables artists to barter space, material, and services, and [Trade School](#), a cross between a 1960s "free school" and a performance art piece, currently running in New York City's NoLiTa neighborhood.

Q. What is your background--educational and work and avocational?

A. Original Trade School co-founders Rich, Louise, and I all went to Cooper Union (the last free school in the US). I also participated in the following alternative education experiments : [Anhoek School](#), [Mildred's Lane](#), [School of the Future](#), and [The Public School](#), and I live with people who run [Secret School](#). I also went to Cooper with the [Bruce High Quality Foundation University](#) organizers. Last year, I put together a dinner with all of these organizers to discuss what works and what doesn't.

Q. How did you get the idea for Ourgoods?

A. The team consists of myself, choreographer and arts administrator Jen Abrams, graphic designers [Rich Watts](#) and [Louise Ma](#), and former Senior Site Engineer for ZipCar, Carl Tashian. As the 2008 financial crisis hit, OurGoods' co-founders asked two questions:

1) How can we facilitate a stronger, more sustainable network of cultural producers?

2) How can we value cultural abundance in an economy driven by scarcity? OurGoods shifts the focus from "How can artists get more money?" to the deeper question, "How can artists get more resources?"

The traditional foundation funding model is a zero-sum game – if you get a grant, I don't get it. With a barter model, the higher the participation, the more resources are available for everyone, and the more value is created.

Q. How does the site work?

A. Users post "Needs" - what they need to get their creative projects done - as well as "Haves" - the skills, spaces and objects they have to offer. For example, performing artists can find video documentation, a visual artist can find a specialized tool, a musician can borrow a vehicle, a writer can get graphic design help, and an actor can find rehearsal space. A search engine connects users with matching "Haves" and "Needs." Users work out the details of the barter on the site and then create a contract. Upon completion of the barter both users leave feedback, creating a trust rating. Users can decide who might make a good barter partner based on trust ratings, tenure on the site, number of completed barter, and their profile, which includes a bio and information on the projects they are working on.

Q. When did you launch? how have the responses been so far?

A. We have been open to the public since November, and we now have 1287 members. Most people are based in NYC because that's where we live and that's where we've been organizing events.

Q. What about Trade School? Where did you get the idea for that, and how did you get the space? What are some things going on at the school?

It all started because three of the five co-founders of OurGoods (Louise Ma, Rich Watts, and myself) were given an opportunity to work with GrandOpening, and we had a wild brainstorm session about many possible barter storefronts. We decided that "barter for instruction" had a lot of potential.

So, from February 25th to March 1st, 2010, we ran Trade School at GrandOpening in the Lower East Side. Over the course of 35 days, more than 800 people participated in 76 single session classes. Classes ran for 1, 2, or 3 hours and ranged from scrabble strategy to composting, from grant writing to ghost hunting. In exchange for instruction, teachers received everything from running shoes to mixed CDs, from letters to a stranger to cheddar cheese. We ran out of time

slots for teachers to teach and classes filled up so quickly that we had to turn people away. This made us think, “we should keep doing this!”

We raised money on Kickstarter because most venues will not barter for storefront use for longer than a month. Last year, GrandOpening bartered design work from Rich Watts in exchange for use of the space, but they couldn't do it for more than a month this year. We were approached by an old school in Nolita, so we used our Kickstarter money to secure that space from February 1st through April 17th, with an option to stay open longer.

See a list of current classes [here](#):

Q. Why do you think there's so much energy right now around sharing and barter and peer-to-peer practices?

A. The sharing explosion is related to a rough economy during an information revolution online: peer to peer technologies make the organizational headaches of sharing (the "coincidence of wants") possible. But our site serves a specific community (creative workers), who have always produced work for reasons other than profit. We are motivated by curiosity, mastery of craft, and the need to share truth, produce beauty, and connect with a wider community. Exchange via barter can satisfy far more than practical needs.

Q. What are some resources (books, people, parties, websites, blogs) that inspire you around sharing and generosity?

A. This summer, I found out about an international movement: The [Solidarity Economy](#). I am now working with the Solidarity Economy's NY branch as the Community Outreach volunteer. Beyond that, I'm inspired by [Community Economies](#) and also list more [here](#).