

By Matt Puchalski

To be successful, frame shops of the future will need to blend the traditional craft of picture framing with modern-day technology

Peer deeply into a crystal ball and try to imagine what your frame shop will look like in 2020. Will it still function as a retail store, or will you have moved your business mostly online? Will your customers still be framing posters and prints, or will they require frames mostly for monitors and digital art? Do you see your business still advertising with print ads, or will the Internet be all that is necessary?

As the future becomes reality, many framers will create new business models and pioneer new industry standards that could change how they do business. Some frame shops will cease to exist; others will adapt and thrive. What can you do to prepare yourself for the future?

What follows is a sampling of views from some successful shop owners, speakers, and writers in the picture framing industry. They would be the first to say that they're not fortunetellers. However, they all have had plenty of experience thinking creatively and keeping their shops at the forefront over a number of years, and they travel and talk with other shop owners nationally and even internationally.

It is inevitable that the picture framing industry will continue to change over the coming years, just as things have changed a lot over the past decade. As Jared Davis, MCPF, GCF, points out, the biggest challenges facing the framing industry will require "accepting change, embracing technology, and learning new things." In this, the framing industry is far from being alone. Here are some of the concepts these framers deem critical to the future success of frame shops.

Websites

A website can be a frame shop's biggest asset. In looking over records for my own shop, Masterpiece Framing in Bloomingdale, IL, I found that more than 50 percent of my new customers discovered us on the Internet. Similarly, Kirstie Bennett of the Framers' Workshop in Berkeley, CA, also has found that the majority of her new business is being generated by her shop's website. "All our new customers come from referrals and the Internet, with most of those from our website," she says.

While there may always be a need for highly custom



Having well-designed and interesting websites will become even more essential in the future as a primary tool for attracting new clients to your frame shop.

frame jobs only attainable by walking into a frame shop, it is a general trend that more and more sales in the coming years will be initiated—and completed—via the web. Ken Baur of Framing Concepts Gallery in Chesterton, IN, predicts, "Websites will become storefronts. You will be able to interact through even the most basic sites. Social media will evolve into the marketing of the future, and blogging will become a key way that people will research the customer experience."

Whether you hire out or design your website yourself, it's not an easy task, but the payoff can be well worth the effort. As James Miller, MCPE, GCF, of ArtFrame in Pickerington, OH, points out, "The Internet is here to stay, and consumers will continue to use websites to browse for ideas and to locate and pre-qualify custom framers before visiting."

E-mail Communications

The frame shop owners interviewed were unanimous that, as the public relies more and more on e-mail communication, it will be essential for frame shops to embrace this technology. Writing—especially in creating e-mail blasts and newsletters—is rapidly becoming one the most important skills a frame shop owner can possess. Learning to draft clean, concise e-mails to help land and secure framing business has already become an important skill, and it will be even more important in the future.

As a key way of communicating with customers, prompt follow-up to e-mail inquiries is already an essential form of customer service. Potential customers who surf the web and send you an e-mail via your website will expect an e-mail or phone call back within a few hours. As Bennett points out, the challenge will be to "check e-mails a few times a day, then answer them, then e-mail designs to customers, then collect



As phonebooks and newspaper and direct mail print ads give way to more electronic communication for small retail businesses, e-mail newsletters will take on more importance in keeping customers up on the latest news, products, and special promotions.

money and ship the final frame job. This takes a lot of time out of the workday."

Shops that succeed at this will need an efficient daily routine for checking and responding to e-mails. A few years from now, people may well be looking for an even quicker response. To only reply once a day to e-mails will probably be looked upon as insufficient customer service. As the



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hours pass, chances are that a would-be customer will have already found another framer who responded faster.

Miller also suggests, "E-mail will grow in importance for communications before the order is placed, especially for commercial business." Corporate clients will expect frame designs and layouts to be e-mailed as image attachments. Visualization software can make quick work of this. Clients will then review these designs, and final frame selection will also be handled via e-mail response. It is quite possible that many corporate framing orders will be handled exclusively via e-mail without picking up a phone—everything from initial contact to scheduling the date of delivery. You can prepare for this change now by investing in visualization software and learning how to create e-mail proposals that you can send to your clients that include frame designs.

Custom Imaging

Digital printing is now gradually making its way into the picture framing industry, and the consensus is that it will continue to become more common. With entry-level price points around \$2,000 for a printer, digital printing has definitely become an inexpensive way to add a new service at your shop.

At the very least, a basic printer will allow you to print oversized digital photos for customers that are suitable for framing. By learning a couple of simple tricks, you can easily adjust a photo's color, sharpen the overall image, and create a very personalized work of art for your customers—all within a matter of minutes. More advanced applications include printing custom designs and textures onto matboard as well as photo restoration. With more and more people owning digital cameras that are capable of outputting quality images,



Custom imaging and custom framing go hand in hand. As the cost of printers and software goes down, many frame shops will find it advantageous to add digital printing services.

this source of art for framing is likely to continue growing in the foreseeable future.

Davis says, "The concept of custom imaging complements a core focus of custom framing, as it creates unique opportunities to allow customers to generate new forms of wall decor. The result is that everything that gets printed needs a frame! For this reason alone, many frame shops have embraced the rapidly growing concept of custom imaging."

If you add custom imaging to your shop, John Ranes II, CPF, GCF, of the Frame Workshop in Appleton, WI, cautions, "the key to any sidebar you add to your business is not only if it fits your image but how well it fits in relationship to the time and energy it takes to market that service/product."

Many framing vendors have already started selling digital printers. Some even offer initial startup consultation and basic training with the purchase of a printer. It may be smart

When You Hang A Custom Frame
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It's ironic that the integrity of every custom frame ultimately depends on its least expensive component. Virtually every item commonly used in creating a custom frame cost more than the wire it will hang on. Bottom line – there's a degree of security in knowing the wire you used was the very best. After all, it serves to protect your customer's fine art as much as conservation glass or archival matboard.

When your store's reputation is literally on the line, is saving two cents per frame really worth it?



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to start researching custom imaging and consider adding it to your mix of offerings. Custom imaging may not be a part of every frame shop's future, but it is sure to become an everyday part of the business in the coming years.

Visualization Software

Visualization software has been a part of the framing industry for the past few years. Today's versions are better than ever, and it is the general consensus among interviewees that they will continue to improve and integrate better with framing software and e-mail programs. Davis predicts,

"Visualization will become an essential ingredient to a successful frame shop because it overcomes the number one question that consumers are faced with when buying custom framing: What will the final result look like?"

"The number of framers using visualization software will continue to increase," adds Miller. "Most of the suppliers will also provide images for more stock items of popular moulding and mats."

More framers will also begin using visualization programs for more than just in-shop design. This software will also be used to create digital images of multiple frame design options

that can be e-mailed to customers to assist in the frame selection process. It will better enable frame shops to do business online, allowing them to compete in the marketplace of the future. By 2020 it is entirely possible that much of the design process could be done by informal videoconferencing, with people using iPad-style phones or similar devices for two-way video communication that can also send you images of what they want framed and receive your designs in return.

Along this line, Raney sees another key benefit of visualization software: its appeal to younger generations. "It will help them relate easier to shops that embrace the concept," he says. He adds that, as with all technology, "Keep in mind that visualization software is only a tool. Like other creative tools, the key to its success has always been in the user's knowledge and in the passion of the concept."

Other Changes

Other observations from the crystal balls of the interviewees include:

- "The importance of social media will continue to grow," says Miller. "The number of social media forms will diminish in the next decade, as consumers and retailers will focus on fewer of them. Perhaps certain specialty industries such as framing will have dedicated social forums."
- "In the future much will be done electronically," says Baur. "You will be able to frame over a large TV monitor from home, watching your designer create ideas."

The screenshot shows the website for Neuberg & Neuberg Importers Group. At the top left, there is a blue banner that says "Visit Our New Website!". The main header includes the company logo, a "Login" button, and a "Register Now" button. Below the header, there is a navigation bar with "Home", "Press", and "Contact Us" links. The main content area features four product categories, each with a representative image and a brief description:

- Framing Fabrics**: Specializing in Fabrics, Hand Wrapped Mats and Liners.
- Easy Leaf Products**: Specializing in Genuine Gold & Composition Metal Leaf.
- Gold Leaf and Metallic Powders**: Specializing in Metallic and Mica Powders.
- Euro Linens West**: Specializing in Fine Belgian Fabrics.

Below the product categories, there is a quote: "Proudly celebrating almost 50 years in business. Where service is our most important product." Underneath this is a section titled "OUR FAMILY OF COMPANIES" which lists the following information:

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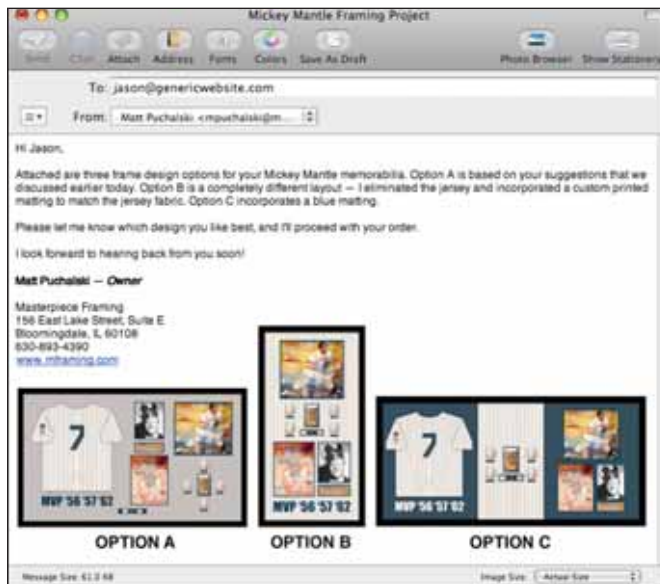
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- "Buying in bulk is the name of the game right now," says Bennett. "Customers became used to lower priced options during the last recession, and those buying habits will not disappear."
- "Word of mouth will always be king for our cottage industry," says Davis. "Website searches are next. After that, those businesses that embrace customer relationship management software will stay a step ahead. You can use it to automate things such as posting or e-mailing a personalized "thank you for choosing us" letter to each customer two weeks after their purchase and for sending birthday gift cards, promo campaigns, etc.—all automatically."

Design Booths

Imagine a customer walking into your frame shop and being greeted with a dedicated frame visualization booth. An oversized touch-screen monitor plays a continuous slideshow of past framing projects you've done. Below the monitor is a place to lay their artwork for scanning. A button on the screen entices them with "Touch Here to Begin."

After pressing the button, customers are guided through the design process by watching and interacting with the monitor. A camera scans the art, and this image is then transferred to center screen on the monitor. If the art warrants matting,

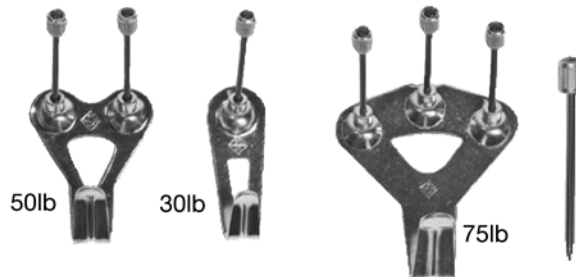


When communicating with customers, especially corporate clients, it will be increasingly essential to offer them the option of selecting frame designs via e-mail. Visualization software makes this easy.

color options are selected by the computer based on color proportions in the art. Algorithms are used to determine various mat colors that will best complement the piece to be framed. Different computer-generated matting solutions could quickly be presented by using horizontal hand swipes

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across the screen—similar to the way you cycle through photos on an iPad or iPhone.

Next comes the frame. Buttons along the bottom of the screen appear, allowing customers to select general frame categories—such as color, finish, width, and style. As with matting options, frames are reviewed by fingertip scrolling. Frames enter and exit the screen after first being shown with the artwork. Customers would also opt to have the computer make recommendations.

The computer would then walk a client through glazing selection using pop-up screens that show the different qualities of each glazing type. Perhaps a physical point-of-purchase glazing display might also be in the booth.

Throughout the process, a running price total would be displayed in the screen corner. A customer could easily see how each frame component would affect the overall price. After the in-booth design selection is done, the sale would then be finalized by a designer who would present physical corner and mat samples of the selected design to confirm the design choices. Monitors could also be used for a variety of other applications, such as displaying advertisements or playing videos on your shop or other framing-related subjects. The software used for such a system could also easily be adapted to computers, tablets, smart phones, or TVs.

Conclusion

Technology wins wars, and that includes business competition. To survive in the future, frame shops must evolve and embrace new technologies, including those that have yet to be invented. For now, this means making sure you have a website, communicating with your customers via e-mail, and helping them conceptualize the final product through visualization software.

Framing in the future will not just be about technology, and it is also important not to lose sight of the essence of picture framing. As Davis says, "Basic emotion-driven concepts will always stay the same—family memories, holidays, weddings, kids, etc. Customers will still expect beautiful custom frame designs for their memories with special attention to craftsmanship and detail." And there will always be customers who will prefer the human touch at the front counter.

To be successful in the future, frame shops will need to have figured out how to blend the traditional craft of picture framing with modern-day technology. The challenge for the new year is to do at least one thing to prepare your shop for the future. My personal goal is to launch a blog to increase website traffic. What will you do? ■

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Matt Puchalski, owner of Masterpiece Framing in Bloomingdale, IL, has been in the picture framing business for 13 years. He also holds a BFA in graphic design from the American Academy of Art.

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