



# Bluestone's by Marc Bluestone Retail Strategies

## *Shopping for Computer Software? Pain Reduction Tips From Someone Who's Been There*

**R**emember reading the business magazines in the late 80's and early 90's? Their covers were frequently plastered with headlines like "Technology Revolution" and "Computers Come Of Age." Well, the revolution is over and those who participated are now embracing and using their computers. Are you?

Overall, framers have been slow to adopt technology. This is due to a variety of factors. Chief among them has been the delayed development of suitable software. I remember 1990. Every category of retail store was using computers for point-of-sale and inventory management. Packaged software was readily available for most industries. But, if you wanted to run a frame shop, you had to write your own.

Other factors that delayed framers from adopting technology were cost, resistance to being an early adopter, and a failure to recognize the upside. The good news is that a number of vendors are now offering very capable software for taking and pricing orders and for managing a custom frame shop. The upside of embracing software is felt in many ways.

### **Enhanced profitability through more consistent pricing**

Using software to take orders assures proper pricing. This is further aided by the fact that computers make price increases easier. Therefore you are more likely to do them more often. Software allows you to precisely understand your pricing and how it affects your bottom line.

### **Better ability to sell beautiful framing**

Customers tend to be more at ease when the pricing of their order is done by computer. Few things make a customer more anxious than watching while you add a stack of numbers on a pad or listening to a calculator grind out the destination of their next paycheck. Computers and software relieve anxiety and add a measure of validity to your pricing methods. A confident customer is more likely to buy.

### **Better customer service**

Software can lead to more accurate order taking. It helps reduce math and data entry errors. It also helps by providing a wealth of information related to your customers and their preferences.

### **Better management through information**

Some software can provide information regarding sales performance, financial performance, and even framing productivity. Compiling and analyzing information can help you make decisions and adjustments to your business. Making adjustments to your business as a result of information and analysis is vastly preferable to defusing emergencies (which is what happens in the absence of information).

Granted, most of the upsides of using software can also be achieved in some measure with manual systems and compiling data. However, that process is infinitely more complicated, time consuming, and fallible than computer-based alternatives. In other words, take the plunge.

Step into the 21st century and embrace technology.

How? Great question. There are many vendors selling a variety of products that all promise to make your business more efficient and profitable. How do you evaluate them and decide which program is worthy of betting your business life on it?

There are dozens of aspects of any software that you must evaluate. However, in my opinion, three considerations rise above all others: ease of use, reliability, and the company behind the software.

### **Ease of Use**

When evaluating any software, I would want to see every aspect related to the following operations:

- Entering inventory items into the database.
- Establishing prices and updating prices.
- Writing framing orders (both basic and complicated).
- Taking money and understanding daily sales reports.
- Ordering inventory items to fulfill orders.
- Quality of the worksheet output and its usefulness in crafting the order.
- Moving from screen to screen within the program.
- Generating reports on sales, items sold, and customer information.
- Generating reports on individual salesperson performance.
- Producing information that can be output for accounting purposes.

It is important that for every item listed above, you thoroughly understand the systems limitations *before* you buy. In almost every

instance, you will have to compromise by changing aspects of your routine to meet the needs of the software. However, it is also important that you be confident that those compromises are acceptable to you and do not create an unnecessary burden or hardship.

Your move to software is most likely to succeed if you thoroughly understand its limitations and feel comfortable with its interface.

### **Stability/Reliability**

Two things that distinguish the software vendors and products currently available is stability and reliability. When you commit your company to a software system, you must be comfortable that the product you are choosing is stable and reliable. This means that the software functions consistently, and that the data it produces is accurate and dependable.

When shopping around, look carefully to see if the product you are considering is fully functional. You should expect to see the software perform all of its advertised functions smoothly and without error. If the software is behaving in an unreliable manner when you preview it, chances are it will be worse when it is in your store.

Buy a software package based on your experience with it and the experiences that its users share with you. *Do not buy based on promises.* They rarely come true in a time frame that you will find acceptable.

### **The Company**

There is nothing more important than the quality, experience, and reputation of the company you are

buying from. If your experience is a good one, it will be good because of the company behind the software. If the experience is bad, it will also be because of the company and the people behind it. I would want to know:

- How long have they been in business?
- How many people do they have on staff?
- How long have they been marketing the program you want to buy?
- How many updates have they made to the program?
- How many systems are installed and operating?
- How do they support their program?
- How many support staff do they have in-house?
- What hours is support available?
- What plans do they have for the future?

### **My Big Tip Of The Day...**

*Get references! Get big time, detailed references!* Ask the software vendor to give you the names and phone numbers of people who are using the program. Even more important, do some detective work and find out who else uses the program. Software companies are typically happy to refer to you some users that they think are happy. You want to make sure there aren't less stellar stories out there.

A good way to find out about user experiences is to post a message on the various online forums for framers—Framer to Framer at [pictureframingmagazine.com](http://pictureframingmagazine.com), the PPFA Hitchhiker site, and The Picture Framers Grumble site. You can ask people who use the soft-

ware to call you or e-mail you privately with their phone number.

Another great resource is to talk to people at trade shows and ask them what software they use. Ask them for their business card and a good time to contact them. Arrange a time to speak on the phone and ask questions including the following:

- Are you happy with your decision to purchase the software?
- Is your experience similar to the sales pitch they gave you? If not, how is it different?
- What has been your best surprise with the software?
- What has been your low point?
- What was it like to install and set up the program?
- How long did it take to get it working?
- What was it like to set up pricing?
- Is it difficult to take orders?
- Can it handle complicated orders? What kinds of orders give it trouble?
- What kind of information does it give you?
- Do you use all of the capabilities of the software? If no, why not?
- Have you ever owned any other framing software?
- If so, what was it and why did you switch?
- What kind of problems have you had?
- What kind of support do they offer you?
- How long does it take to respond to your concern?
- How long does it take to fix your problem?
- Are there any issues outstanding?
- Have you ever felt ignored or mistreated?

- Did the vendor make any promises that have not been kept?
- When they tell you something, do you believe them?
- What would you do differently if you had another chance?
- What questions would you ask now that you didn't then?
- What tips can you offer that would help?

Now, you have the difficult job of evaluating the vendor's sales pitch in context with your hands-on evaluation of the software and your detailed conversations with current users.

### **A few words about hardware...**

You may have noticed that this whole article has been about software. I specifically have referred to software instead of saying "computers" because it is the software that will make or break you. The computer itself is a much easier decision. With that said, here are a couple of suggestions...

- 1) Buy real computers. As tempting as it may be to buy the "cheapo" computer at the discount store, remember that you are betting your business on it and a couple of extra bucks *will* buy you better components, reliability and service. Buy computers that are meant for business from vendors that offer support to businesses.
- 2) When you buy a real computer, you will have choices to make regarding operating system, file format, processor speed, RAM, hard disk size and speed, etc. Work closely with your software vendor to make the right choices. They will be in the best position to help you if you help them by selecting the most appropriate hardware.

3) Keep your computer clean of extra programs. With the exception of a business suite (i.e. Microsoft Office), avoid the temptation to add software such as games to your computers. Every piece of software you add to your computer increases the possibility of compatibility problems and decreases the likelihood of stability.

4) Plan for backups. Buy your computer with removable media drives, like ZIP drives or recordable CDs. These devices make back-ups easier and therefore increase the chance that you will do them regularly. You should backup your computer *everyday*. If you have multiple computers on a network, consider adding a RAID array (a system of hard drives that preserves data should one or more hard drives fail). Building a reliable system costs less than recovering from a major failure later on.

5) Use uninterruptible power supplies (UPS). These battery devices will preserve your data even in the event of a power failure. With a UPS, a small blink of the lights will not cause you to lose what you are working on.

6) Hire a professional. Unless you are a closet computer genius, get referrals to a local small business computer person. Find a network administrator who regularly works with small businesses. You don't need a high dollar consultant, just a very knowledgeable grunt. They can help to setup equipment and load software. They can also serve as a translator with the software people if the going gets rough.

Good luck! Let me know how it turns out. Write to me at [bluestone@framegroup.net](mailto:bluestone@framegroup.net). ■