



Bluestone's by Marc Bluestone Retail Strategies

We All Need An Education

Since my first day in this industry, something has always struck me. Everyone thinks they are an expert. It's fascinating, really. During my years in the camera business, I met few salespeople who believed with all their heart that they were better equipped to serve the customer than anyone else. Ditto for the shoe business and the outdoor clothing and equipment business.

But the minute I entered the framing business, I met many people who felt that their store was the best and that the store down the street was awful. It is almost as if we imagine that there is a zero-sum game running in the background that allows only a limited number of "good" frame shops within a given geographic area. In a zero-sum game, if we are "good," then the other store is, of necessity, less good. Framers seldom speak well of other framers in proximity to their store.

I suppose it's a good thing to have confidence. After all, we are selling a product that is unique in retail in that it requires a knowledge of design as well as a talent for craftsmanship. Having a high degree of confidence in one's abilities is probably helpful for being successful.

However, it causes me to wonder, how do we know if we really are good? What standard is there that lets us know if we are good designers, good business managers, and good craftspeople?

Too often, I have heard "years-of-service"

held up as a mark of excellence. However, I am always suspicious of "experience." I know of framers who have been in the business as long as I have been alive. One in particular uses spray mount to affix artwork to chipboard. Has experience made him a better framer?

In my travels around the country I have met people whose idea of a fashionable outfit was a striped shirt with plaid pants. Yet, somehow, miraculously, they lay claim to the best design skills in town. They have, after all, been in the business for a long time.

The problem as I see it is that we are a largely self-taught group that has had little formal education in what it is that we do for a living. We learn things the hard way. Sometimes we become masters at certain aspects of what we do. Other times, we simply find a way to get by. But often we really have little idea whether we're good or not, so we compensate by proclaiming ourselves "the best."

In many fields, you can't keep working unless you keep learning. Doctors, teachers, pilots, police officers, pharmacists (and the list goes on) are all required to continue their education to increase their knowledge and prove their proficiency. What do we do? Sadly, very little.

How can I say that? There are, after all, a series of huge industry trade shows backed by numerous education choices. Clearly we are an industry that cares deeply about getting better at what we do. That might seem the case until you

look at attendance statistics. The majority of custom framers in the United States *do not* attend a trade show each year. Worse yet, the majority of framers attending most trade shows *do not* attend an educational seminar.

So if we don't go to trade shows and don't take advantage of educational opportunities, then how do we keep up with trends, learn about new products, and develop new skills? The answer is, quite simply, we don't. While there is a small group of progressive framers who seek knowledge, the majority don't. However, in my experience, that slight omission of knowledge doesn't seem to slow anyone's professional pride.

So, if you thirst for knowledge, here are some ideas to get ahead of the pack...

- 1) **Attend Industry Trade Shows.** There are several major trade events that occur each year. These shows feature hundreds of vendors who are excited to "show-and-tell" their latest offerings. It seems that advances are made every year in moulding styles, matboard offerings, equipment, and supplies. There are things out there that many of us have never seen that would help us serve our customers better while making our life a little easier. An inquisitive shopper can learn a lot at a trade show.
- 2) **Attend Industry Education.** Most major trade shows offer an impressive array of educational opportunities. The upcoming National Conference in Las Vegas will offer dozens of different seminars covering a wide range of disciplines from design to business. Taking advantage of educational opportunities is a way to build upon your knowledge by learning lessons from others. We all learn through experience. Why not accelerate the process by drawing upon others' experiences?
 - a) **Take Classes About Things That Are New To You.** Do you use Mylar-D® to encapsulate objects in shadowboxes? Do you use a computer for your mat cutting or point-of-sale operations? Take a class on a subject you don't know much about! There are all kinds of new horizons out there to be explored.
 - b) **Take Classes About Things You Already Know.** I regularly send staff members to seemingly basic classes. And guess what? We have almost never left a class without some morsel of knowledge that covered
- 3) **Network With Other Framers.** By meeting and communicating with fellow framers, you can have a chance to develop a sounding board for your ideas. You might also find people who have had similar challenges and found a way to deal with them. The wheel has already been invented. Why do it again? Find friends and colleagues that are willing to share with you.
- 4) **Look Outside The Industry.** Attend a trade show for a different industry. See how the rest of the world lives. It's easy to get tunnel vision. Fight it! There are numerous trade events held each year that although technically outside of our industry, are directly applicable to our business. Shows for retail store design and technology, home furnishings, and gifts and accessories all attract vendors that offer products that apply to you. Best of all, these events can sometimes offer a fresh take on retailing and merchandising that can give you a competitive advantage over someone that stays home.
- 5) **Go Shopping.** Go to the mall or a furniture store. Visit a model home. See what the trends are in home décor and furnishings. Figure out how they apply to you. When you design a frame for a customer, you're not a framer but a designer. By broadening your knowledge to include everything that is happening in home fashion, you can add value to your customer interaction.
- 6) **Read Trade Publications Cover To Cover.** There is a lot of information to be had in each of the major

our time and tuition. Sometimes a fresh approach or a new twist can make all the difference.

- c) **Take Classes That Round-Out Your Knowledge.** If your strength is craftsmanship, take a class about design or business. Assess your skill set and fill in the blanks.

- d) **Take Classes About Things You'll Never Do.** Go ahead... indulge! How about gold leafing or some other seemingly esoteric pursuit? Even if it has nothing to do with your current business, imagine the benefit of broadening your knowledge. It might even spark a new passion within you.

trade publications. Read them carefully. You will find something useful in every issue.

- 7) **Read Consumer Magazines.** Do you read *Metropolitan Home*, *Elle Décor*, or *Southern Living*? These magazines, and dozens like them, contain really interesting and directly applicable information related to the environment in which your product will hang. The magazines are also regularly read by many framing customers and being on the same page with your customers is always helpful. While you're at it, read business publications like *Inc.*, *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, and *Selling Power*. They are loaded with interesting stories of ideas, successes, and failures. Again, why reinvent that wheel? Read about what others have done and, perhaps, learn from it.
- 8) **Read Business Books.** Your local bookstore is filled with books about marketing, useful and productive advertising campaigns, employee incentives, or maybe a better way to renegotiate a lease. The point is that information is out there to be had. We just have to get better at seeking it and applying it.
- 9) **Take A Design Class At The Local Community College.** Many colleges offer night classes in interior design or business. Learn something new about your business or a related field. Knowledge is a powerful tool. But it doesn't always come easily. We have to want it.

We all need an education. Yet few of us pursue it. We're too busy considering ourselves experts. Yet experience, while undeniably valuable, is not a substitute for continued learning and exposure to new ideas.

I live my life believing that no matter how much I know about some things, there is far more that I don't know. We're all just newbies when it comes to knowledge.

After eight years of business during which time my company has framed almost 150,000 pictures for 37,000 customers, I believe more than ever that there is a ton I don't know.

So, when you know something, share it with others. When you don't know, work hard to fill in the blanks. Always expose yourself to new information. Excellence is not a zero-sum game. We can all be great. It just takes hard work, persistence, and an inquisitive mind.

Will I see you at the National Conference in January? I'll be there. I'll be the one attending a seminar and taking notes. ■