

# Backroom Efficiency

By Juanita Robinson

If you think your backroom doesn't have to be organized because your customers will never see it, think again. Having a backroom that allows orders to move through your shop as smoothly as possible is crucial to a profitable business (not to mention preventing headaches). And although there are different approaches to this task, the basics are pretty consistent. So, listen to what these industry experts have to say. It may help you determine if your backroom is up to par.

## Where To Start

If your backroom looks a wreck, the thought of whipping it into shape is probably the last thing you want to think about. However, an organized, efficient backroom is a necessity for a successful framing business. And knowing where to start can make the whole task a bit less daunting.

Tim Dykstra, Framers Gallery, South Dakota, suggests getting as much space as you can right from the beginning. The limitations on how big a project you can do efficiently will show if your space is inadequate. Electrical and air hose placements are important—they need to be strategically placed for quick and safe usage. And make sure you have plenty of lighting in your matting, mounting, frame making, and fitting areas. These are all things that can be taken care of before you move into your space, or after.

If you've already established your business and the state of your back room isn't making your job eas-

ier, start by cleaning up and discarding unnecessary items—mat scraps, short pieces of moulding, etc. "Utilize overhead storage for items you do not use every day," says Greg Perkins, Merchandising Manager, Larson-Juhl. "Buy length moulding in patterns you use on a regular basis and use chop service for other items. Order matboard as you need it

## A CHECK LIST

- Discard unneeded items.
- Determine the bin space needed for length moulding, matboard and glass.
- Evaluate whether those items should be inventoried or ordered on-demand.
- Sketch a proposed work flow diagram using the circular pattern approach. If a circular pattern isn't possible, keep everything together that you need to complete one task. (Store matboard by the wall-mounted cutter for sizing; the mat cutter where you cut the opening.)
- Have your employees look over the sketch to incorporate their ideas.
- Try your new approach, and continually re-evaluate its effectiveness.

instead of stocking large quantities. Call customers to remind them to pick up their orders ."

Making a sketch to scale of your back room, tables and big tools is also a good idea, Dykstra says. Figure out how much area each needs, cut them out and play with different layouts. Work from the beginning of a project to the end. Save steps and space and plan for future growth.

## Setup Advice

"Having an efficient backroom saves you time, money and frustration,"

Perkins says. "You save time and frustration because you can find things faster. And it saves you money because you are less likely to make errors and you can complete projects more quickly. You may also find that an efficient back room reduces your need for more people."

Inventory control and storage: It's important that you know how much of a particular matboard and in-stock mouldings you have and when to get more. Adequate storage space is another must, otherwise items tend to pile up or get lost. "You need to remember that inventory is money, and if you can't find it or if it is damaged, you lose time and money," Dykstra says. Storage racks and a system of inventory are important for moulding, fillet stock, matting, foamboard and all supplies. Well-built work tables: Make sure they fit your (or your employee's) height. In addition, the matting table should be higher than the fitting/assembly table. Each has its own purpose and should reflect that in height. A matting table should be 2" to 3" shorter than the distance from the floor to your elbow. This will give a comfortable height to work from. Also, Dykstra suggests buying anti-fatigue mats for the areas you stand in most. Have the supplies for matting (blades, cleaning products, touch-up tools, pencils, erasers, etc.) nearby for quick usage. Drawers, shelves and even old cans serve as storage. "If you use it, keep it close by, and if you use it in several places, buy two or more to save steps."

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**Order tracking system:** The way an order form is set up is very important, Dykstra says. It should not only be easy to work with in the retail sector, but it must be easy to follow and understand in the back room as well. Essentially, it is the recipe for the custom project and must be filled out completely. The order form tells the story at all times—where a project is (either by computer order or hard copy). He organizes his orders by “products to order” and “products coming in.” When the orders come in, they go into “production orders” and “today’s projects”—a set list of orders that need to be done that day. Dykstra also clips together the projects for each day that week to make sure each gets done before the due date. When it comes to the frame itself, a tag is made in order to keep the projects separate.

Ken Frank, Ultramitre, California, organized and sponsored the Technology Pavilion at the West Coast Art & Frame Show. The pavilion demonstrated a “high volume production cell,” with actual work orders received, processed, and completed. The computer POS program was an essential element of the production cell. “We’re used to thinking of POS software in terms of the good it can do at the design counter,” Frank says. “Here, it’s being used to organize production. Each element of the work order is sent to the appropriate operator.” Mat specifications were sent to the computerized mat cutter, frame dimensions to the computerized saw, joining information to the underpinner, and so on. Each element for the work order was also given a label so that the fitter would know which mat and artwork went with which frame.

**Traffic and product flow system:** Creating separate areas for matting, mounting, frame cutting and assembly and fitting is essential. The matting area should have hand cutters, wall cutters, computerized mat cutters, matboards, foam boards, etc., close at hand. Heat presses, supplies and tables need to be in the mounting area. The frame cutting and assembly area—saws, vac-system, moulding racks should be in a place where dust can fly. Fitting tables need to be large and flat and have the following nearby: glass cutter, hand-fitting tools and projects that are ready to fit. “In general, you want to have a setup that saves footsteps and that keeps unnecessary items out

of the way,” Perkins says. “One setup that we have found works well is a circular pattern. Start with a spot to store incoming orders. Then move in a circular pattern to a second station where matting and mounting is done; next, to a cutting and joining area. Then fitting; and last, storage of the completed project. Be sure to utilize overhead space for items that you do not use on a daily basis.”

## Moving Orders

It is also important that you move orders through your shop in the most efficient manner possible. Each order should flow easily, Dykstra says. He offers this model:

- Order form completed
- Final sizing of project taken (when possible)
- Special parts ordered, then received
- Order forms filed by due date
- Daily projects written up for mouldings to be made
- Matting and mounting done on daily jobs
- Fitting done as frames are made for today’s projects
- Finished projects filed in storage near retail area
- Orders ready to call given to retail personnel
- Customers notified of projects ready to be picked up

With a well organized work flow, it’s even possible to accommodate rush orders. Frank explains, “Many framers are reluctant to take on high volume jobs because they don’t know how to accommodate individual orders at the same time.” At the Technology Pavilion, this problem was resolved by completing orders in sets of ten. “Individual “rush” orders enter the queue at the end of the current batch of ten. Once that order is complete, each worker returns to the next batch of ten.”

According to Dykstra, the importance of an organized backroom can be summed up in one simple equation—Backroom Efficiency=Productivity=Profitability. The fact is if you’re wasting time searching for a tool or matboard, you’re losing money. And although getting your backroom in shape may be hard work, it will pay off in the end—literally! ■

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