

As picture framers, we invest in training, materials, and tools to help us become better preservation framing specialists. But how can we *sell* preservation framing? How can we help our customers understand the destructive effects of ordinary framing, and the benefits of preservation framing? How can we help them recognize the value and not just the higher price?

I consider selling preservation to be among the highest aspirations of a frame designer because it requires both the highest level of technical expertise as well as the highest level of skill in buyer/seller communications. This is because customers may have no idea what we're talking about. They may not see preservation as a reason for framing, or framing as a reason for preservation. And many consumers, hardened by a lifetime of gimmicks and deceptive claims, are skeptical of anything that increases price. Preservation framing specialists who meet the challenge earn the rewards of loyal customers and healthier businesses.

Selling Preservation Framing

by James Miller, CPF

The Buyer/Seller Relationship

The principles of selling are essential to selling preservation framing. Remember these five keys to a successful business relationship: *Mutual respect* between buyer and seller is the foundation of agreement. *Communication* is the vehicle that brings understanding. Listen and watch carefully during talks with customers, and help them do the same. *Integrity* is the sum of good intentions, sincerity and honesty in buyer/seller

communication. *Realistic expectations* assure satisfaction when the job is done. Avoid exaggeration and help customers understand what they are buying. *Positive input* means relating ideas positively rather than negatively. For example, it is better to say, "UV-filtering glass will slow fading from light," rather than, "Ordinary glass won't slow fading from light." It's a bit of human nature best explained by a psychologist, but the essence of it is that decisions are influenced by the form of input; affirmative customer decisions come most easily from positive input.

First impressions count. Make it easy for customers to respect you and your business. We can't hope to please everyone, so formulate the profile of a "typical customer" to target. The look of the store, product mix, merchandising, personal behavior, and appearance—everything should be groomed to suit that customer profile. Anything that might give target customers a negative first impression represents a hurdle that must be overcome before real progress can be made toward the sale.

Keep your eye on the prize. Focus on customers' interests. Work to understand their needs. Address their concerns, and help them make the best decisions. Encourage customers to express their preferences, rather than helping them adopt yours. Work for customers, not for their money.

What Is Preservation Framing?

For our purpose here, it is important only to establish the preservation concept and a few definitions. This article is not about methods and materials, and since preservation framing is highly technical, a comprehensive, preservation-specific education and experience are necessary. To sell it, one must be able to *do* it. Knowledge is power, so take advantage of every opportunity to learn more.

Preservation framing should maintain the present condition of the item and protect it from anticipated hazards. This should not be confused with the work of conservators (who practice conservation), which involves treatment to improve condition. Preservation framing should be completely reversible at any time in the future. All of the framing materials should have long-term stability and be inert in order to avoid chemical reactions within the frame package.

There is often confusion and misunderstanding among framers about what is, and what is not, preservation framing. This comes from incomplete or fragmented information, conflicting opinions, and misleading or mistaken marketing. In the past, there has been no common voice; no universally applicable standard or guideline to follow.

However, the Fine Art Care and Treatment Standards Institute (FACTS) has researched, developed, and published the first comprehensive guideline that we can all use for the preservation framing of just about anything. It is reviewed and revised regularly to keep up with industry changes. Approaching the topic in a new way, FACTS considers every frame part and procedure to have some limited value toward preserving the item within.

When customers say, "Your price is too high," or, "I can't afford that," avoid the temptation to offer an unearned discount.

A benchmark "Maximum Preservation" standard was developed, which would give an item the best preservation available in a frame. The concept is for frame designers to use the "maximum" standard as a starting point, and then list exceptions to that standard for each frame design.

So, now we have a standard that can be universally applied. It does not restrict the use of any parts or procedures; rather, it is a point of comparative reference. FACTS standards help us explain preservation to customers, and help

customers understand how each frame design feature would affect preservation of their valuable items. When properly applied, these standards serve to eliminate confusion and promote understanding on both sides of the design table. What could be more useful in selling preservation framing?

A Framer's Responsibilities

The first responsibility of the preservation framer is to be well informed about methods, materials, and principles of preservation. Attend courses and lectures; the investment of time and money will come back many times over. Achieve PPFA certification. Monitor new developments in preservation; study trade publications and authoritative books. Study manufacturers' published data and recommendations for use of their products, but be cautious about claims of a product's suitability for preservation framing.

Customers often confuse *presentation* with *preservation*, so make the difference clear. That is, presentation is about visual preferences, but preservation is about technical choices and methods. Customers' lack of knowledge may be revealed when they are asked whether their items of value have been preservation framed.

Replies may be something like, "Oh, yes, they were beautifully framed by an upscale gallery." The question was about preservation, but the answer was about presentation. Mistakes in presentation can be changed at any time. But mistakes in preservation usually have permanent consequences, and customers need to know that.

Know your legal liabilities. Preservation framing is for items of high sentimental or monetary value. If a framing mistake results in damage to a valuable item, or if a customer misunderstands the promises of preservation, then the framer may be held liable. It is most important to follow generally accepted framing practices, such as FACTS and PPFA guidelines.

Educate customers about preservation framing in general, and about the specific features applicable to their items. Preservation framing may be foreign to customers. Consider what may be happening on their side of the design table. They may feel overwhelmed, vulnerable, and unprepared to deal with all the choices. They may expect you to decide for them.

Avoid that, however, as it curtails their understanding of the value that comes with preservation. Take the role of consultant rather than decision maker. Help customers to make informed decisions.

Cautions

Watch out when customers say, "You're the expert. What's your opinion?" That is usually an invitation for you to guess what the customer wants. But what if you guess wrong? Why take the risk? In the role of consultant, a better approach is to educate customers so that they can confidently make informed decisions for themselves.

Avoid written price estimates. Customers who want to shop competitive framers should do so on the basis of value, not just price. Your valuable knowledge and design time should not be a gift to the competition. Instead, offer to

save estimates until they return. If a customer insists on a written estimate, collect a fee for your design, and credit it to the order when it is written.

Maintain price integrity. When customers say, "Your price is too high," or, "I just can't afford that price," avoid the temptation to offer an unearned discount. If you do that, customers get the mistaken idea that you can afford to "give a little more" and sacrifice profit—a mindset that hurts your credibility as well as your bottom line.

Instead, talk about alternatives that would save the customer money. Perhaps using three mats instead of four, reducing mat margins from 9" to 7", or using a less costly moulding would reduce price sufficiently. What about a layaway plan with scheduled payments? Give choices to customers. In this way, they understand that each part and procedure of the framing has a firm price. At any point on the price spectrum, they get what they pay for.

Selling preservation framing requires a willing buyer, a prepared seller, and a valuable item to frame, all in one place at one time. Trying to do the job by telephone rarely works. And if the person across the design table is a third party, not the one who decides the order, educating him/her is probably a wasted effort.

If you are out of the gallery and do not have your samples, published data, and other sales aids at hand, educating the customer is difficult. In such circumstances, explain that preservation framing is more complex than ordinary framing. Designing a preservation frame involves

alternatives not associated with ordinary framing. It is best done face-to-face, so arrange a time when all elements of the equation are together.

Make sure customers understand how preservation framing works. Explain the limits of protection provided. Explain that handling and environment have direct effects on all framed items.

Avoid hard-sell tactics. The best approach is to educate customers. Customers who may feel intimidated, are truly undecided, or cannot afford preservation framing at the moment need not be turned away to competitors who sell cheaper, less preservative framing. Focus on building customers' confidence in your abilities, preserving their valuable items, and increasing your profitable business.

Don't Just Stand There, Sell Preservation!

Customers pay a preservation framing specialist for knowledge and advice, not just framing. As a consultant, foster communication by asking questions, such as: What is the monetary value of this item? Does it have significant sentimental value? Are you interested in preserving it—and for how long? What are the environmental conditions where this frame will be displayed? Do you anticipate special circumstances like frequent handling, storage, or transport? Will it be subjected to extremes of temperature or humidity?

Even if you already know the answers, this kind of conversation demonstrates your concern for preserving customers' property. Replies will reveal customers' priorities, concerns, and level of understand-

ing about preservation framing, thereby laying groundwork for further discussion.

Explain why preservation framing matters. Help customers understand that any collectible maintains its best value when it is in pristine condition. Whatever happens to change its condition reduces its monetary and sentimental value. Standard framing methods and materials permanently change condition and thereby cause damage. Preservation should not be left to chance. Instead, it should be designed into the frame.

Demonstrate, illustrate, and explain the specific preservation features appropriate for the project. Focus attention on preserving the item; discuss how each feature helps preserve it. Support your technical recommendations with clear reasoning, published information, and samples. For example, UV-filtering glazing manufacturers publish useful data about the effects of light. You can make a comparative frame to demonstrate how fading affects a color image.

To explain the differences between acid-free and preservation-quality mats and mount boards, talk about the pH scale and how buffers and filters in the boards work to protect framed items. Explain and show spacers, inert structural supports, rabbet-sealing barriers, desiccants, and other features applicable to the project at hand.

Verify that the customer understands your recommendations, and the preservative value they provide. Invite further discussion and answer questions completely. When you believe the customer is ready to proceed, ask for the order. Do it with

enthusiasm and confidence. If the customer hesitates, then find out why and talk further.

Objections usually point to some deficiency in the selling process. They should be identified and rectified as soon as possible. A common one is, "It isn't worth preserving." If the framer starts by asking questions as suggested above, then this objection will come early in the design process, as soon as the customer realizes an overly elaborate design is being suggested.

For an item known to have collectible value, ask the customer to sign a waiver of responsibility before designing a standard frame. The waiver might not completely exempt you from responsibility for a frame design of inadequate preservation, but it serves two immediate purposes: 1) It alerts the customer to your respect of the item's value; and 2) it demonstrates that preservation is not a price hike tactic.

Usually, further discussion leads to agreement about preservation, but not always. Sometimes customers simply do not care. In any case, clear this issue before proceeding with a standard frame design for an item that you believe should be preserved.

"The price is too high" may be the most popular objection, and usually comes after considerable time has been invested in the design process. Customers who focus on price alone may not understand the value added by preservation features, or they may just be angling for a discount. Regardless, review the design in terms of value. Show how the item is worth the design, and how the

design is worth the price.

"I need to think about it" usually means the customer is uncertain about the proposed design, or wants to get another opinion. The customer will probably go to at least one competitor. In that case, review your proposed design, making sure that any comparison will be based on value (features and benefits) and not just price. ■

James Miller, CPFcm founded his retail business, ARTFRAME, Inc., in 1988, and has focused on



preservation framing of art and objects as both a student and educator. He will be teaching, "Selling Preservation Framing" at the upcoming National Conference in Las Vegas in January 2001.