

Back to Basics



by Paul Cascio

Making the Most of Your Supplier Relationships

Whether you're a freshman framer just starting out, or an experienced framing veteran, you'll want to take advantage of one of the industry's most valuable resources for helpful advice and useful information. Sure, you find these things here in *PFM*, but there's another source for information and assistance that's often overlooked—your wholesale suppliers.

A good supplier is like a good partner—an asset to your business that can help you to increase profits, improve the quality of your work, and operate more efficiently. After all, no one (other than you) has more of a vested interest in your success than your suppliers. That's because when you're successful, your suppliers share in that success. As a result, most good suppliers do more than just deliver materials in a timely manner. They also offer advice. This is particularly helpful for new business owners.

I remember when I got started in the business many years ago, it was my suppliers and their sales reps that answered my many questions, offered suggestions, and helped me to get my business off the ground. There was nary a

week that went by when I wasn't at a supplier's warehouse inquiring about a technique or seeking a solution to a problem.

I was fortunate to be able to work with some of the most knowledgeable sales reps in the industry. Ben Waters of Framer's Market in Meriden, CT, for example, was, and continues to be, one of the most sincere and helpful people in the industry. Ben has been around for a long time (legend has it that he was around when the first frame was made),

has a wealth of wisdom, and has always been willing to share it with his customers.

There are many people in the industry like Ben Waters. Just pick up the phone, call your supplier, and chances are you'll find

someone willing to answer your questions and help you find solutions to problems. One of the best things about the framing industry is the seemingly endless number of nice people who are associated with it.

Once, when I had trouble with a mat cutter I had recently purchased, I even got a surprise visit to my home from John Peterson, then sales manager and now vice president of sales for Fletcher-Terry. Now that's customer service. And

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even though it happened almost 17 years ago, it's something I've never forgotten.

I believe one of the best ways to form a strong partnership with a supplier is by not having too many of them. Not only does this make you a more valuable customer, but it's also smart business. Ordering supplies from too many sources increases your shipping costs and prevents you from taking advantage of volume discounts. Following are some suggestions to help you form a strong partnership with your suppliers:

- Meet with your sales rep on a regular basis, and by appointment. Arrange the meeting at a time when you can minimize interrup-

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tions. Keep in mind that your rep's time is as valuable as yours is. Show respect by not taking personal phone calls during the meeting.

- Have a ready list of written questions or issues you wish to discuss.

- Schedule a tour of your supplier's facility. I find that it's useful to see how the other half lives so that you will be able to understand their operations and learn how they can help you maximize yours.

- Suppliers have their fingers on the pulse of the industry. Ask for their observation of industry trends and sales patterns.

- Have lunch with your sales reps at least once a year.

- And last, but certainly not least, inquire about the availability of cooperative advertising; point-of-purchase signage and literature; seminars; and other services that might be offered. I've been invited by suppliers on numerous occasions to conduct sales and marketing seminars. One thing I've noticed is that these events are not only valuable from an educational standpoint, but also serve as a social gathering where framers get to meet one another and form friendships. Remember, just because you're competitors doesn't mean you have to be enemies.

Forming a partnership with your suppliers and utilizing their wealth of knowledge and experience is a great way to further the success of your business, improve your skills, and add to the enjoyment being a part of our great industry. ■

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