

What Are Your Customers Thinking?

...Or how to set the stage for satisfying sales

by Stuart M. Altschuler, CPF, GCF

When framers think about how to set up or improve their shops, they most often think about new equipment and a fresh coat of paint. However several other ideas should be considered. In his book, "Why We Buy—The Science of Shopping" (Touchstone, 1999), Paco Underhill shares observations made from years of work in retail. Some of his thoughts, which I have adapted to picture framing, are presented here.

Why is the shopping experience important?

Perhaps one of the most important concerns for every potential framing customer is the credibility of the shop and its owner. Clients in today's world are notoriously skeptical. Questions that enter their minds can range from: "How long will this take?" to "Will this shop ruin my precious object?" and even to "Will they still be in business when I pick up my piece?" Everything that you do and say, the way your shop presents itself, and even how you present yourself is part of the answer to these questions for new customers. The quality of the shopping experience can, and will, determine your conversion rate (the percentage of people who come in related to the number of people that you sell).

In retail, the easiest way to

make more money is by selling more to your existing customers. This is something I think we all know. The framers who care to think about this concept market more to their existing clients with newsletters, frequent framer clubs or cards, and thank you notes. (You send thank you notes to your clients, right?)

As a slight variation on this theme a program that rewards existing clients for introducing you to new clients can be especially profitable. A preprinted coupon card similar to a gift certificate is completed by your customer and given to a friend. When it is redeemed, you send a "thank you" coupon to the originating client for their next framing purchase.

Don't expect your advertising to do more than it should. Marketing, advertising, and promotion yield traffic. They do not generate sales. That is the job of the in-store experience—the look and feel of the shop as well as the personal interaction. You can have the best advertising and promotions and they will bring large numbers of people to your shop. But if people don't find the shop appealing, are made to wait unacknowledged, or find the personal interaction upsetting, you will not convert your "lookers" into buyers.

How do we first deal with

new arrivals?

It is important to let people know what you do before they enter your store. Your windows are the perfect place to do this—they can begin to tell the story of your shop. While you don't want your displays to be stale, you do want them to have some continuity. Make changes frequently but let the windows have the same feel about them. That feel should reflect the personality of your store. Is the store sleek and modern, quick and efficient, or is it more homey and Victorian catering to the framing of textile art?

Let this be the style of the windows. Before you decorate the windows you must consider some crucial "people factors." People walk quickly from the parking lot so a larger scale display and signage must be used in outward facing window displays. Lighting must be such that displays are visible at all times. This is particularly important at dusk when many people have a difficult time seeing because the evening lighting hasn't yet been activated.

Your store design should encompass a transition area, which may begin *outside* the door. People need time to adjust to the fact that they are actually inside. They need to get their bearings: Did they go in the right door? Is this really where

they want to be? If you approach people before they have made the transition to being "in" your shop they will respond negatively to any question, starting the sales process off on the wrong foot. Give people a moment and some space to adjust.

On the same principle, people are largely unreceptive to merchandise placed in that transition area. Yet, you have to pay rent on all of your space. This suggests that it is best to have your transition to "in" begin before they have entered your door. One easy way to start the transition is by using an awning and a carpet. One shop I know of has a large welcome mat with a chair and ashtray just to the right of the front door (on the outside, of course). By providing a chair and a spot for smoking, they are being polite to the smokers while gently informing all that no smoking is allowed in the shop. They have also set up their transition zone in a place where they don't waste precious sales space. Their customers are ready to begin shopping as soon as they get in the door. They have already passed through the transition zone and are really "in."

Make your store work for you

Store layout, display (including moulding placement), merchandising, and staffing all contribute to your conversion rate. Therefore each aspect should be carefully considered. Every store is a collection of zones. IKEA, the home furnishings chain, takes this to the extreme. Actually, in that store layout, with several discreet zones of merchandising, you are walking in the pattern that they have imposed, not wandering on your own.

Take It On the Road

Oftentimes an idea drives right by you and you don't notice it. Sometimes, it has to be parked right next to you for it to register. So it was on a recent teaching trip to Denver, CO. Distributor open houses are a way of life in our industry. As an educator, I enjoy these open houses. Although I am always hopeful and the shows are filled with energy, I rarely see something new at one of these meetings. However, my trip to Denver was different from the moment that I arrived in the parking lot. While it is not uncommon to see cars, vans, and trucks with signs indicating the name of the frame business, I was overwhelmed by the van from Frame de art II. It was, without question, the most impressive vehicle that I had ever seen in our industry. Hip, successful, contemporary, striking, attention grabbing, and "wow" were just a few of the words that came to mind. As a matter of fact, seeking out its innovative owner was my first priority.

Brian Hart, owner of Frame de art II with 11 years experience in the industry, was both outgoing and extremely bright. Specializing in object box framing for memorabilia, Brian does work for both corporate and individual clients. He shared that while he has always had some type of advertising on his vehicle, he recently decided to update the look. Known for his updated and contemporary designs in framing, he sought the same look for his vehicular advertising. Thinking of the banners that completely wrap public busses in his area, he wondered about the

feasibility of using that type of product for his van. Investigation revealed that indeed it was possible, and not overly expensive. And Brian was able to barter for the work by providing framing for the sign shop's owner!

"The entire process took just a couple of weeks and the results are spectacular," said Brian. "People tell us that they have seen our van all over town." There are a few things Brian might do differently if he had it to do all over again. First, he would have the same type of graphics applied to the roof of the van as well. As he drives in downtown or even suburban Denver, people see the van as they look out of office windows and the roof presents additional marketing opportunities.

Business is up at Frame de art II in Denver. And, perhaps for me too because I parked next to a wonderful van when I went to teach for the fine folks at Colorado Moulding. ■



Brian Hart, owner of Frame de art II in Denver, CO, has increased the visibility of his business with this eye-catching van.

Though most of our shops aren't big enough to resemble the IKEA patterns, we too have separate areas for different things. We might have an area for ready-made frames, one for poster or print selection, another for our design and consultation area, and finally a pick-up and pay zone. Are all of the areas in your shop placed so that your clients see what you want them to see? Or, is there a lonesome corner with discarded and unappealing displays of infrequently sold products? Aggressive shops will bring in a new product and if it doesn't sell in a reasonable period of time, move it to another location.

Merchandising mix is important to encourage impulse buying. Are you getting as much as you should from each client? Or do they leave your shop to purchase an ancillary product elsewhere because you don't sell it? One of our most expensive costs is to get clients in the front door. The greatest misuse of our advertising dollar is to not have something to sell them when they come in.

Adjacencies are ancillary products placed to suggest to the buyer something useful that may have otherwise missed. By strategically displaying small decorative easels near photo frames, you can reap additional margin dollars. Since the number of products sold diminishes the cost of each sale, adding things to the customer's basket adds directly to your bottom line. Sometimes one plus one does equal three!

Signage is another selling tool and it should interrupt sight lines. A sign hanging from the ceiling directing people to the restroom (an important informative sign) will probably go unnoticed because of its

location. Make sure that your signs can, and will, be seen by customers. The sequence of signage should be considered. Signs are stories that should be told in order. Also, don't neglect to inform people of your accomplishments and awards. Find a visible spot for certificates, awards, and prize-winning frames.

A few more tips...

- People walk to the right (except in the U.K. and Australia) and look to the right. In order to make someone turn to the left, put an eye-catching object or display there to attract attention. For instance, mirrors are people-stoppers and attract attention to needed areas.
- The right looking concept extends significantly to your moulding display. The prime space on the moulding wall is eye level to the right. Place the most popular dead center at eye level and the one you want to sell just to its right.
- People walk forward making end caps more effective than side facing displays. Sight lines are important and your store design should allow people to see not only what is immediately in front of them but also a hint of what else is available. It should pique their curiosity and make them want to investigate. Have something interesting in out of the way places to draw customers there.

Make your store work for your clients...

- Make your store client-friendly. Women generally need more space in a store than men; they don't like to be bumped or crowded. See to it that your showroom areas are wide enough

to accommodate traffic.

- A chair tells your customers that you care about their comfort.
- Tactile sense is important in the buying process. Place products and samples so that people can touch the merchandise. This will give people a proprietary sense of these things.
- Don't sell a product; sell a lifestyle. Display products as they will be used. It is very difficult for our clients to visualize how their items will look when finished. Vignettes that simulate how framed objects will appear in the home will easily allow you to sell up. Show people how good design will look in their homes and they will buy. A mirror above a table can also help your clients with visualization. Also, using a vertical stand during the design process will help clients visualize how the design would look on a wall.

...And their children

People frequently enter a frame shop with children in tow. To ignore this is to miss a large market segment and alienate potential clients. Can your shop easily accommodate a stroller? Are the showroom areas wide enough?

When children are mobile they can, and will, go unexpected places. The shop must be baby proofed! Make a small play area for children. This area must be large enough and safe. Sight lines from children's area to design counter must be clear so a parent can look up and see their children. Some toys and a coloring book are great diversions. A television also provides an easy distraction for children.

Children are also consumers. How many shops have frames for

children near our play areas? In a grocery store, children throw things into the parent's carriage and while many of those items are removed, parents *will* often allow a child something as a reward. This applies to picture frames as well. Mommy gets three things framed and the child gets a frame they have chosen for their bedroom. Place frames that might appeal to youngsters at an appropriate height.

The importance of non-design at the design counter

The frame designer should think of himself as the customer's guide as the following example demonstrates. A few years ago I met with a client to help her select framing on a Monday evening. It was the first night of a basic framing class at my school, and some students observed the design consultation.

The following morning they were discussing the experience with the rest of the students. The most important thing they noticed was my telling the client that I wouldn't make the choices for her, but I also wouldn't allow her to make a design mistake. Some framers think that responsibility at the design counter is limited to ensuring a good selection. Once again the client experience is equal if not more important.

Shopping is the sensory aspect of decision-making and something that promises pleasure or fulfillment. Discussion and time spent with the client is what sells your products and services. While some refer to this as "romancing the sale," it is key to note that the more time you spend with your clients, the more money they will spend.

Control the buying process to sell what you want. Although this is

not limited to what you do and say at the design counter, it is crucial that you understand this process. All framers do this to a certain extent without realizing it. You decide how you are going to help your customers and follow a set format for the sales cycle. You might be excited or enthusiastic about some new mat or moulding and this energy comes across to your client. By your subtle suggestions, the customer is making choices that you have presented. You also control the buying process by what merchandise you offer and how you present it.

Adjust expectations to reality. This is, perhaps, the most vital element of the sales cycle. Customers must understand exactly what to expect of your work for them. Surprises, other than pleasant ones, must be avoided at pick up time. It is your job to explain to the customer precisely what you will and will not be able to do.

If someone brings you a heavily folded poster torn along the edges, they cannot reasonably expect it to be perfectly flat without creases or tears after framing. You must point this out, even if it appears obvious, so that there is no confusion later. Some shops now incorporate a free, no obligation condition report on every object they frame. While being perceived by the client as being a value-added service, it also gives the framer the opportunity to adjust expectations to reality.

It is rare that a client will surprise you with a question. You've heard them all before. Don't succumb to the temptation to allow your presentation to become routine. People hate to ask dumb questions, so you should answer

them before they have to ask. Not only does this put the customer at ease, it also marks you as an experienced and savvy framer.

Perhaps the most significant potential concern is anxiety over payment. Clients have already decided to go ahead yet they may be embarrassed by not knowing your terms. People often find it awkward to ask about money. This uneasiness is avoided by quickly and clearly explaining the process.

The more time someone is in your store, the more they will spend. From most to least, the amount of time spent shopping is by: a woman with another woman; a woman with children (have something to occupy the children); a woman alone; and a woman with a man.

Waiting time is problematic. Turn that into an advantage by educating customers while they wait. That education might be as simple as having a few posters displayed. "The Frame in America" (sold on www.pictureframing-magazine.com) and an informational preservation poster are examples. You might also have some brochures explaining different elements of framing available. Along these lines, I have put together a computerized presentation, "What everyone should know about picture framing," that runs on a personal computer in my shop.

Waiting is perceived differently after acknowledgment. Anxiety is relieved. Eliminate the uncertainty of the wait—"You'll be right after the lady in the red." As mentioned above, women shopping together spend the most time and money in a store. If you have customers waiting and can involve them in

the present design and sale process, you have both given the first customer a “friend” to shop with and begun to overcome any credibility skepticism with the second. In practice, this will happen in the shop with your active participation. One customer will ask others (those waiting) for opinions on the design selections.

Possession is an emotional process that begins early in the sales cycle. It must be fostered. While it seems simple minded, you must put the framed artwork in the client’s home in their mind before they buy. If they can’t see it hanging in their house they won’t spend anything to frame it. Simply put, you begin by asking them where the piece will hang and what that room looks like.

You first do that to help define

the selection that you will present. Don’t stop there. When you have selected a mat and frame ask, “How will that look in the (wherever) room?” Help them place the piece on their wall in their own mind. Getting the green light on the project will be easier. It is also important to refer to “your” frame or mat. Make the client feel possessive about what you are doing. It will be more difficult for them to say no to the project.

If a product “does something,” show that. Many years ago I brought a new product called a photo box into the shop. This was a frame that doubled as an album. You could put up to 40 prints in the frame from the back and then cycle through them without opening the frame. It seemed like a good product to me, but it didn’t

sell. Once the manufacturer provided point-of-sale demonstration props, they walked off the shelf. As we all know, clients can find it difficult to visualize. Just as with a frame design, show them how products work.

Design, merchandising, and operations are interconnected. All of the concepts that we have mentioned combine to help improve sales. Most shops can’t easily implement wholesale changes, something that leads to procrastination. The best way to start is with a self-exam. Start in your parking lot, just as a customer would, and walk into your store. Move as if you had never been there before. Look at the big things, and look at the small things. Your exam will tell you where to start. Good luck! ■