

Photo Magic

Digital photo restoration services can generate new business for your shop with a minimum of effort and investment.

by Patrick Sarver

Last week, a customer came in who wanted to frame his brother's 1950s major league baseball contract," says Mark Klostermeyer, owner of Design Frames in Falls Church, VA. "What would make this a really nice presentation, I told him, would be to have a photo of his brother in uniform with it. Later he came back with the only picture he had—a photocopy of an old newspaper clipping. It wasn't in very good shape, but we sent it off to Digital Custom to have it restored. When it came back, it still looked like it came from a newspaper, but you could really see the photo. And when it was combined with the contract, the end result was spectacular."

Klostermeyer's experience with using a digital photo restoration service echoes the experience of a growing number of framers throughout the country. They are discovering that using an outside service doesn't just create an additional revenue source, it also creates a significant source of framing projects they wouldn't otherwise have had.

"It's been a pleasant surprise as a revenue source," says Klostermeyer. "Before, we would send customers to a photo lab or refinisher. Often, the quality wasn't very good or I didn't know what it was printed on, which meant I couldn't give the customer an idea of how much the framing would cost. Now we control the entire process. It's really worked out well. We let customers know what can happen if they don't deal with an old photo in the right manner. It's given us an opportunity not only to enhance customers' pieces but also to provide them with a service a lot of photo shops don't promote."

Two of the main companies providing digital restoration services to framers are Pixit, LLC, whose restoration facilities are in Franklin, TN, and Digital Custom, whose service and printing are done in Cincinnati. Both report a very positive reception on the part of framers who use their services.

David Starko, managing partner of Pixit, says, "We are currently working with about 200 frame stores nationwide. We look at this business as a partnership that allows a customer to bring in any photograph in to a framing counter for restoration and for other photo effects. A lot of our retail partners are very enthusiastic because it generates a lot of framing



This deteriorating black and white photo (right) was restored, enlarged, and colorized (above) by Pixit at its facility in Franklin, TN. The photo was also altered to complete the subject's pose. Framers can increase their revenue from such restorations, and can also add business from the new framing projects that restoration can generate.

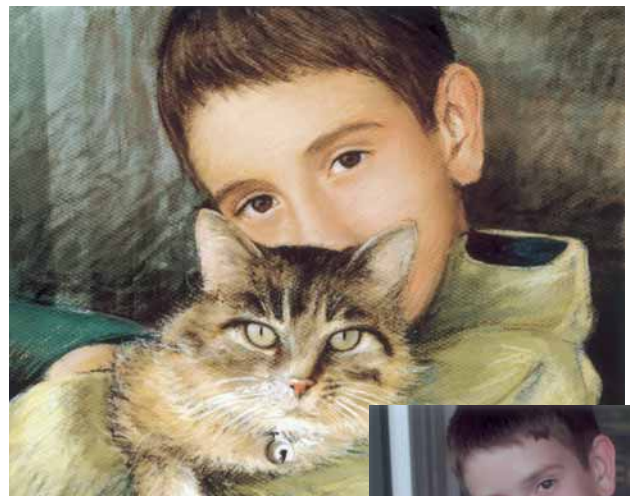
business for them. Generally, they do \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month in photo restoration revenue. And a dollar spent on restoration usually generates another two to three dollars in framing revenue."

"We see the opportunities for framers as enormous because of the number of people who walk into a frame store with old or damaged photos," says Jeffrey Makoff, president of Digital Custom. "These photos are usually pre-selected for importance, so the chance of customers saying yes when you ask if they would like to have them restored is quite high."

Adding a digital photo restoration service to a frame shop is relatively easy. "The process starts when the store examines a photo and determines if it's a candidate for restoration," says



A damaged family portrait (below) was restored, enlarged, and colorized (left) at Digital Custom's labs in Cincinnati. Displays of such dramatic before and after images can be an effective sales tool for the service.



Besides restoration, a number of special effects can be added to photos, such as this pastel painting look created by Digital Custom from the photo at right. These are often printed on larger canvases.



Makoff. "The photo is then scanned and the original given back to the customer. Stores with high-speed Internet access typically scan [the image] in the store and send the file to us. Or they can send the actual image to us, which we require to be done in a properly protected FedEx or UPS package. Digital Custom will provide new frame store customers with a free scanner if they agree to place at least 12 orders in the first year. Or they can buy it from us at cost, which is between \$100 and \$125. We work a lot with new stores on the phone and in writing to show them how to use the scanner. The first two or three scans can be challenging if you haven't done it before, but from then on they're all the same."

Typically frame stores charge \$75 to \$125 for a restored photo, says Makoff, which is well within a price range that most customers find reasonable. You can charge less, so that more people will use the service and that in turn can generate more framing. Or you charge more, which brings in more per order of the restoration, but you may get fewer orders and do less framing. "Our average wholesale price to frame stores is in the low to mid \$30s per image, based on how much work has to be done," says Makoff.

Once you scan and send in an image, you can immediately order any framing materials you need and start working on the frame before the restored print is shipped back to you. Standard turnaround time for both companies is currently about 10 working days.

The companies do vary on the types of prints they produce. Pixit uses high quality, wide format Epson giclée inkjet printers with archival inks, while Digital Custom makes two kinds of prints. "When we restore a photo, we output it as a photograph using a digital silver halide process," explains

Makoff at Digital Custom. "We feel that people who bring in a photo are not expecting back an inkjet print. They want a photo. When people want to turn a photo into art, on canvas and such, then we print on Epson wide format, inkjet printers."

The Pixit marketing kit, which the retailer can purchase, includes a quality digital scanner, a broad range of examples of the work the company does for display, including full-sized canvas prints and prints on photo papers. "This kit turns a frame store into a digital photo center without having to get anything else," says Starko. "Framers also get a catalog, window posters, and photo canvases to stretch and display. The kit ranges from \$150 to \$250, depending on whether or not you get a scanner. We also have a basic kit at no cost that includes a poster, a catalog, order forms, and a booklet that explains the service and gets you up and running. All retailers get unlimited toll-free support, so if a customer at the counter has a question or if a retailer has problems scanning, you can just pick up the phone and call us."

Along with the marketing kit, Pixit includes point-of-purchase displays as well as 500 color postcards suitable as mailers or handouts that can be stamped with store information. More cards are available for an additional cost. "We will also create a printed strip that advertises the service along with the frame shop's information that they can place on the back of a frame," says Starko. "It's like a little stuffer that goes with the order." In addition, Pixit's website lists all of its retail partners so consumers can find a location near them.

Digital Custom provides each store with a book of before and after prints for a tabletop display. "If they want to frame before and after prints, we will provide them with enlarge-

ments,” says Makoff. “We don’t charge for any point of sale material, such as brochures, which have a space where they can stamp their store names. We also provide package stuffers on request. And we have an 800 number for retailers, which comes in handy when a customer has an unusual request or if there are copyright issues.”

Tom Trimble, owner of The Trimble Collection in Williamsburg, VA, says, “This service has made a lot of money for me over the past two years. We’re having the best year in our history, and a lot of it has been because of the photo restoration. I probably do 100 to 125 pieces a year, which probably brings in 250 framing jobs a year because once I get customers in and they see my work, they want other things framed. It’s a great intro. I just have a black-and-white, before and after, [on display] and that sells it. The original was beat up, and the restored version looks like a 19th century photo when it was first taken. I have it set on a little easel at eye level at a kind of narrowing in my shop. People walk by and, bam, they see it and that does it. Once customers have one done, they always come back with more. We don’t try to sell them; we just educate them on it.

“I have an old-fashioned frame shop,” adds Trimble. “I do everything by hand. I just ship everything directly, from four to 10 pieces at a time. Usually I get them back in two to three weeks. I charge customers exactly what I’m charged, and I even pay the shipping both ways. It’s a loss leader for me, but that gets people to try it. Then, when they see the kind of framing I do with my hand-painted French mats and all, 95 percent have me do the framing.”

There are a variety of ordering options when using this type of service. The Pixit counter catalog, for example, offers customers three options. “The first is photo restoration, which is majority of what we do,” says Starko. “That’s very straightforward. The retailer can also note any special instructions for us, such as ‘make sure the eyes are blue’ or ‘the hair is blond.’ It only takes a couple of orders to get very comfortable with selling the product and knowing where the subjective areas lie and what questions to ask the customer. There’s also just one price for our restoration, no matter how much work is needed—even if a customer brings in a photo in pieces. That makes it easy for retailers to sell.”

The second option is “photo-to-canvas.” “Let’s say a customer has a great photo of a child or an event that they want blown up and printed on canvas,” says Starko. “Because canvas prints look so good nowadays, you can get stunning results at a very reasonable cost. They make great gifts. Framers love them because we ship them unstretched canvas prints. They do the stretching and, of course, every canvas needs a frame.”

The third option is what Starko calls the “fun stuff,” with all kind of digital effects. There’s an Andy Warhol look, plus four or five other different digital effects, such as collages. These are explained in the catalog, allowing customers to flip through and choose what they like.

Digital Custom’s Makoff says, “Our most popular upgrade is digital colorization. When you see samples of old black-and-white photos being colorized, it often has a strong emotional impact on the customer. It’s also an upsell for the frame store because it adds another \$15 to \$20 for colorization on top of the restoration fee. And the turnaround time is the same.”

Digital Custom also offers many special effects, such as turning a photo into art that replicates watercolors, or an oil or pastel painting, as well as posterization.

“The best thing photo restoration offers framers is that it’s a new service they can offer without having to do all the work themselves,” says Starko. “And just about everything we do requires mounting or stretching as well as framing. It’s a great way for framing retailers to offer customers something new and exciting. For framers who have tried a service like this in the past when the results were not good, all I can say is that there’s been a dramatic improvement in technical quality—and we guarantee our product.”

Adds Makoff: “The opportunities are enormous because of the number of people who walk into a frame store with old or damaged photos. These photos are usually pre-selected for importance, so the chance of a person saying yes when you ask if they would like to restore it is quite high. Customers often want to know how much a photo can be fixed, especially if there’s a lot of damage. They don’t mind paying \$75, but not for something that looks fake or isn’t really repaired. We provide each store with a set of before and after photos, and those answer a lot of customer questions. The typical reaction is for a customer’s jaw to drop. The art and craft of photo restoration really is inspiring today.”

And how do frame shop owners who use it feel about photo restoration? “I haven’t necessarily been quick to embrace new technologies at my store,” says Klostermeyer. “But I’ve been very pleased with the quality and the speed of photo restoration. And I’ve been able to use it for other applications, such as reproducing documents I might have sent to a paper conservator in the past. I can’t survive just by cutting mats anymore. I have to find ways I can serve customers and still make a living, and this is one of those opportunities.” ■

Patrick Sarver, editorial director of the PFM Group, previously served as editor-in-chief of *PFM*’s former sister publications *Art Trends* and *Digital Fine Art* for six years, writing about galleries and their businesses.

