

Marketing, Merchandising, and Selling Ready Made Frames

by Laura Caiaccia

Why would a custom picture framing retailer, someone who produces one-of-a-kind frame designs that are made to order and built with skill and craftsmanship, want to offer his customers ready made frames, which are manufactured in standard styles and standard sizes?

The answer is simple: because his customer might want him to. If today's consumers are shopping for ready made frames—and they are—why shouldn't they buy them from their custom framer?

Not all consumers can afford custom framing, after all. And even those who can afford it might not want to spend that much on a gift for someone else this holiday season. "Carrying photo frames and ready made frames is a way to broaden the range of the price points you offer," explains Deborah Salmon, former owner of Pegasus Art Gallery and current owner of DJS Art Search Inc. "It's often the case that a consumer doesn't want to go above a certain price point when shopping for a gift. If you have a selection of ready made, then you have something to offer the consumer at that price level."

But framer retailers shouldn't think of the difference between ready made frames and custom framing as a case of "either/or," says Doug Hills of Borders, the ready made frame division of Americas Moulding. "Ready made frames are incremental sales," he explains, "If a customer comes in with an 8x10 photo to have custom framed, they probably have some 5x7 or other small size photos that they'd also like to have framed." If you sell that customer a ready made frame, you've added to your business without having to sacrifice an order for custom framing. Hills, like Salmon, also emphasizes the gift-giving appeal of ready made and

photo frames. "The trend is to give a small photo as a gift—but to give it framed," he says, "and studies show that 32% of all framing purchases are as gifts."

Framers should also keep in mind that the sale of a ready made or photo frame often involves little or no labor. "That's important during the holiday season rush," says Salmon. The opportunity to make a sale that doesn't add work to the back room's production cycle can be valuable when time is short. Not only is it a relief to the back room, it's an important service to the last-minute shopper who needs a gift quickly and a opportunity for the retailer to make a sale that would otherwise be lost. "Both snapshots and enlargements are made in standard print sizes. Why not take advantage of that with a frame made to fit that standard size?" says Salmon.

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Still, framers shouldn't think that only customers in search of a gift will shop for ready made. A woman with a wedding portrait to be custom framed also has honeymoon photos that she could display in ready made. A parent may want a custom framed 8x10 school portrait of their child at home, but have smaller sizes that they'd like to take to work to put on their desk. "More than 70% of all photo frames sales are impulse purchases, so the framer shouldn't underestimate the power of suggestive selling at the design counter," says Hills. Just a small mention to plant the seed of the idea is often enough.

Retailer should also be sure to include ready made frames in their merchandising plans. While a strong statement with groups of ready made frames displayed together is a good idea, it is by no means the only one. Ready made shown with custom framing samples on the walls can also generate customer interest—just be sure to

Supplement your custom framing sales by giving your customers a choice.

put something in the frame. Remembering to include a photo frame in a small vignette or a window display not only increases sales of ready made frames, it also creates a more unified, more home-like look to the entire setting.

Today's trends make ready made frames, especially photo frames, increasingly popular with consumers. According to *Creating Keepsakes* magazine, 46 million photos are taken in the U.S. every day; the average U.S. household takes 337 pictures a year; and approximately 16 billion photos a year are taken in the U.S. With statistics like these, it's clear that there are plenty of photos just waiting to be framed. And according to Hills, once a customer purchases a ready made frame for a photograph, they are unlikely to use that frame again for a different photo. His studies show that when customers get "tired" of a photo or have new ones they'd like to show, "They place the old photo—frame and all—into a drawer and then go and buy a new frame for the new photo. The small table-top frame is now considered a disposable item by the consumer." Why? Maybe the newer photo is a different size, or the consumer has simply tired of the frame. Maybe he or she plans to display the photo again during special occasions, and so needs the frame. Whatever the reason, this situation provides the retailer with a constant stream of ready made frame sales. While customers of custom framing may plan to keep their framed pieces on the wall for ten years or so—and will eventually run out of wall space—ready made frames meet a consumer need that is ongoing.

And unlike a piece of artwork that has been custom framed, ready made frames can cater to decorating whims and adventures. Smaller frames allow consumers to try out new design trends in home furnishings with-

out a large-scale commitment. (A small photo frame in a bamboo-style moulding is the perfect introduction to the new chinoiserie trend, for example.) Even if the consumer isn't looking to experiment and wants only to complement his or her already-existing decor, ready made frames can fit the bill. For many consumers, ready made frames aren't purchased just to hold photos—they are meant as elegant additions to a table in an entryway, a bookcase in a living room, or a night table in a bedroom. "Consumers see ready made frames as furniture accessories and home accents," says Hills. Having a selection of ready made frames in interesting styles can spark some of this type of impulse purchase.

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Hills recommends that framing retailers start out by carrying roughly 10 frame styles, with three frames (in different sizes) in each style. While framers don't need to live by the "one to show, one to go" motto of the gift industry, neither do they need to show more than four frames in any one style. He suggests that since most customers in a frame shop are women, retailers may want to offer feminine styles to appeal to the largest percentage of their clientele. Yet retailers should consider that women also shop for their husbands or brothers, and that masculine-style frames appropriate for a desk at the office, are also a good idea.

More important than any particular style, however, is the idea that a retailer's selection of ready made frames should reflect the style of his frame shop in general. Also important to remember is that customers who return to a frame shop because of the quality craftsmanship and design offered there will expect to see quality and value in the ready made frames sold there as well.

What size photo frames a retailer should purchase

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also depends on several factors. Since 8x10 and 5x7 are the most popular sizes that are framed, a selection in those sizes is important. Yet retailers don't have to limit themselves to those sizes. Some framers have also found success by stocking unusual sizes that gift stores and discount chains don't offer. For example, many professional photographers provide their clients with proofs that are 5x5, yet frames that size are hard to find. A custom framing retailer who doesn't need to appeal to the lowest common denominator in his selection of inventory can build a successful niche by providing unique styles or unique sizes.

Retailers should also keep track of which sizes sell well and which sizes their customers ask for. Hills says, "There were once a lot of 3x5 frames because most photo finishers were making prints in that size. But as the photography market upgrades its equipment, more and more photo finishers are providing 4x6 prints, so now there's a need for frames in that size."

Keeping track of popular styles and sizes will also help retailers in deciding what frames to reorder—and when. After all, while chop service allows the framer to order moulding only if and when a sale is made, selling ready made requires that the retailer keep inventory on hand. Not having the right size on hand might mean losing a sale, and a selection that looks like it has been picked over won't inspire impulse purchases. A retailer who stays alert to the status of his selection should find reordering easy, however, since many suppliers have low or no minimum order policies, especially for established accounts.

The potential for profit greatly outweighs the small effort involved. "A retailer can make 50% gross profit on a ready made," says Hills. And they don't even have to put it together. ■