

# AUTOMATION AND THE FUTURE OF

## Framing



*This is the first in a series of articles by David Quattlebaum on automation in the frame shop.*



by David Quattlebaum, CPF

**T**echnology is changing the face of our industry more quickly than we could have ever imagined. The arrival of the home computing age has begun to familiarize all generations with the basics of computing. With the universal acceptance of this breed of technology comes solutions to tasks which were dreams of science fiction 20 years ago. Who would have imagined that computerized mat cutters or automated underpinners would be commonplace in even the small-

est shops across America?

### **POS Software**

The most important piece of technology one can add to their frame shop or gallery today is a computer. For years we have heard about the efficiency provided through databases, primarily as it pertains to the maintenance of customers and inventory.

Most of us accept that we should use computers, but often-times find ourselves justifying the “quality” of our paper system. It may be true that the paper flow of the shop is efficient in its own right, but not without the sacrifice of hours of filing and maintenance of documents.

The difficulty comes in discovering the correct tools to do the job. Begin by looking at your system of paperwork and production. What is the natural flow of information within your system? Once this information is determined, look to the tools available. Will an off-the-shelf accounting package fit your methods? Do you need an industry specific point of sale system, or will you need a custom designed system for your shop?

In most instances, an industry

specific software is the answer. The price of these systems is small compared to prices in other industries, and with some research, one can find software perfect for their needs.

If you decide to go with a custom designed software, there are a few considerations before diving in. First, how will you update your system? Most industry software automatically updates pricing from the moulding and mat suppliers, some as frequently as weekly on their websites.

Also, what happens if your developer decides to no longer support the product? The question then becomes, do you receive more benefits from a pre-designed package that may require a little change from than designing one to fit your exact way of doing business without the advantages of automated updates and support?

Most of us can change our system a little and see the increased efficiency of doing so. How long does your shop currently spend on changing prices on the back of moulding samples? Furthermore, how long do you put off the price update for the vendor because you either can't face pulling those samples down, or are simply too busy?

Take a few moments to factor in the costs of doing business that can be improved by automated point of sale, and you will find that acquiring software just makes good sense—long before you look at the benefits of direct advertising enabled through a valuable database of customer information.

### **Mat Cutters**

As we look beyond the first stage of automation, we should consider the

computerized mat cutter. Several years ago I swore that I would never cut a mat, if not by hand. Quality and value were far too important to the standards of our shop. However, over time I have come to realize how ridiculous it was for me to see cutting mats with an in-line mat cutter as “by hand.”

I recalled a conversation with Paul Frederick a number of years ago, when he told me of cutting every mat with a ruler and mat knife... now that was cutting mats by hand. The truth is we all have our connections with the old way of doing business, even those of us who are of the newest generation in custom picture framing.

The reality is that anyone can “tune” an automated piece of equipment to provide quality on the level of our standards. It used to take our shop a day to cut eighty triple mats. now we do so in an hour and a half, spending the balance of the day embellishing the mats with specialty designs.

When making the decision to move toward automation, consider the equipment as an employee. In most cases the computerized mat cutter or the point of sale software will be a near equivalent and will allow for business growth that you would not consider without it.

### **The Future**

Finally, let us consider the near future of automation. Looking to other industries we find automation taking a leap toward the Internet. Hosted applications, business to business marketplaces, vertical integration—this is the lingo of the next step in automation. Very soon, we will be able to place orders automati-

cally online, receive our invoices online, pay them without writing a check, find out instantly what items are back ordered, receive suggestions on replacement products, alternative shipping locations... more interactive enhanced feature buying than ever before.

These things are already happening with other industries, and are already in place to happen in ours. We live in an exciting and quickly evolving way of doing business; those who do not keep up will not survive.

Begin by taking small steps in the right direction. Visit other frame shops in your area that are already automated. Ask the owners what the transition was like and what steps they took first. If you don't have a home computer and an Internet connection, get one. Home computers can be purchased in most places for under \$500! (That's less expensive than an in-line mat cutter.) Look at each shop's integration of systems. Many shops now have their point of sale software connected directly to their computerized mat cutter: no more data entry at the mat cutter!

All of these advances are able to help you make more money; take advantage of them. Take time to go to the trade shows or your local chapter meetings for the PFFA. Learn how automation can change your shop and more importantly how it can help keep you from living at the frame shop! ■

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