

Tapping the Designer Market

A growing number of framers are cultivating designers as a source of business. Here's why...

by Patrick Sarver

Standing still and waiting for work to come in during an economy like this one doesn't work very well," says Linda Strack, owner of Whites Gallery in Montrose, CA. "That's why, this year, I plan to pursue outside sales harder, and designers are an important part of that market."

While many framers may shy away from developing designers as clients because they're unsure how to work with them, or aren't comfortable with offering discounts, a growing number of framers see the designer market as a good fit. "Designers are a resource with a lot of potential," says Pat Baur, co-owner of Framing Concepts in Chesterton, IN. "Framing Concepts is less than two years old, and designers now account for 15 percent of our business. We'd like that to be 30 to 40 percent. We frame with preservation and quality in mind, and designers fit well with that."

"Most framers don't seem to want any part of designers; they all want the \$500 residential sale," says Dave Romeo, owner of Romeo's Fine Arts in Lansdale, PA, where a quarter of his business comes from designers. "I have six to 10 good designers I see all the time. I'm not seeking any more right now because we're busy. But if we had a downturn, I wouldn't hesitate to cultivate more."

"Designers offer a captive audience and higher-end jobs," says Strack. "I like working with them because



At Framing Concepts in Chesterton, IN, Pat Baur sees designers as a great untapped source of business. Here, Pat (right) discusses a project with designer Linda Bishop (left).

they don't shop around. We're reliable, do great design, and fulfill our promises. They like that. Their clients are also design-conscious, so you're freer to create something wonderful."

The bottom line, says Ira Freinle, owner of Creations n' Things in Emerson, NJ, is that "dealing with a good decorator is an ongoing business that could be of substantial volume. The only real challenge is price and taste."

There's no single formula for doing business with designers. Some framers don't bend much on discounts; others give discounts greater than the customary 20 percent. Some sell decorative accessories; some don't. Some sell art; for others, decorators almost always bring in the art to be framed. Greater discounts and more service options can certainly generate

more business. But it's a matter of making business choices that work for you.

What matters most, however, is to be able to create frame designs that designers want and to develop good working relationships with them. "Personality is definitely important in dealing with decorators," says Freinle. "Many consider themselves experts. If you can convert them to a relationship, it's a major advantage. But you must be prepared to offer design ideas that work, because that makes a real difference."

Frame shops with designer clients vary considerably on discounts. "We give designers 20 percent off retail," says Baur. "Our pricing is based on chop prices. Sometimes you can order in length and chop it yourself for less. We feel designers bring us clients we wouldn't have otherwise. In essence, we're paying designers a finder's fee. They also keep bringing us customers. Not giving a discount can be shortsighted."

"The first thing a decorator wants to know is the discount," says Freinle. "Not price, but discount. I find it hard to do a lot of business like that. But you can still have a pricing strategy. Some framers with more room in their price structures than I have can afford 20 percent. If not, maybe 10 percent. Any framer can afford some kind of discount. If you're doing a production job, there's an inherent price difference.

But with designers it's usually dollar volume, not production volume.

"One thing I won't do is pad prices to make it look like I'm giving a big discount. I give designers honest prices and discounts I can live with."

In California, Strack says she gives only a 10 percent discount to designers. "I won't work at what I do best at cost. Fortunately, most of my designers understand this position."

Romeo takes a different approach. "I have to make it worth a designer's while to shop here, and discounts do that," he says. "When designers sell clients a decorative print or two, they aren't making that much for their time at 15 percent. If I can put in an hour on a job and make \$150 profit, that's not a bad deal for me. That's why I give a good decorator 30 percent. I tell them, 'Try us first and see what you think; we normally give 20 percent off.' If they place an order for \$1000 to \$1500, I put them in at the 30 percent level.' If you let designers make money, then you'll make money. And I make money by buying moulding at discount on 10-foot sticks from larger suppliers instead of ordering 100-foot minimums. If I order two 10-foot sticks, I can also use the leftover to cut a little mirror from and sell it off my wall."

Of course, what's very important is the ability to create great designs that keep designers coming back. "Designers are in the design business, so that's what they're primarily looking at," says Strack. "Even with a client on a restricted budget, a good framer can help with the right design while keeping the price down. Unfortunately, few designers know anything about framing. They frequently think that because they have mahogany furniture, they also need mahogany frames. You need to educate both designers and clients about this. It's a stretch for some because they see a frame as part of the furniture, even though it may look terrible on the artwork. So I pull things off the wall that go with the artwork to show them what works. If it's too expensive, you downgrade without sacrificing the look. I may have two or three options, but I show what I think offers the best design balance for the artwork."

"The design is what matters the most," says Romeo. "Our strong point lies in choosing mats and frames that make art look its best. I have about 7000 corner samples, and designers quickly see they have more frames to choose from than they've ever seen. I help them pick out frames, matting, and artwork. A lot of times they come in with wallpaper or fabric samples and tell us they need something to go with that. They also may want a design that might not look best for the print but goes with their clients' homes. My wife will meet a designer at the job and offer design suggestions. Having someone there who knows art

and framing is a huge asset to the designer."

"Designers are great people, but sometimes they'll want a blue and pink mat around a Monet print to match the colors," says Baur. "They think in terms of a frame as a decorative accessory rather than how artwork and moulding flow together. Fortunately, the better designers are also able to take suggestions."

For cultivating designer business, framers have found an impressive showroom is a powerful sales tool. "People say they feel like they're in New York or Chicago [in our showroom]," says Baur. "Designers like that. It's a great environment with room for working with designers and clients. The lighting system was designed specifically for art and provides a nice, warm feel."

"I hired a store merchandiser to make my shop look like a decorator showroom," says Romeo. "We also try to be creative. People hire decorators to do unusual things, and your shop should present that side of your business."

"I walk designers around our gallery and show them how certain things are framed," says Strack. "A display showing museum versus regular glass is essential, so designers and clients can see the advantage of UV [filtering] glass. If you don't show them the difference, they won't get it."

Delivering on time and offering installation services can also go a long way in cementing a relationship with a designer.

"If they have to go somewhere else for installation, it's strike one," says Baur. "For jobs of \$1000 or more, we install for free. For smaller jobs, we charge \$20 per piece."

Beyond these things, what's the best way to find and cultivate designer accounts? "A lot of my best accounts come from overhearing them in the shop," says Romeo. "When we discover they are designers, we interview them and tell them whatever they need is theirs. If they need to borrow a catalog, a frame sample, or even take pictures off my wall for a house, they get it."

"We send letters showing the services we offer and how we differ from other frame shops," says Baur. "Then I make a follow-up call and ask for an appointment. We're also creating a designer newsletter."

"We're producing a brochure for designers that talks about installations, custom framing, and framing specialty items," says Strack. "Still, I've found the personal approach works best. I've been introduced to designers at various functions. I usually follow up with a handwritten note and invite them to the gallery. I've also joined the ASID [American Society of Interior Designers] as an industry partner, which puts me in their local source guide." The most important thing, says Strack, is to "cultivate conversation in a way that you find out who they are. If you don't cultivate

A DESIGNER'S VIEW

Mary Hausman, ASID, who owns Dwellings LLC in Riverdale, NJ, offers the following observations to framers—

- ◆ “Word of mouth is very important. Clients want it yesterday. So recommendation of other designers on quality and timeliness is important. So is a framer’s willingness to work with a designer.”
- ◆ “My clients look to me to provide art, and I rely on my framer as a source. I’ve worked with framers who don’t carry much art in the past, but an interesting art selection counts.”
- ◆ “I tell framers the ‘feel’ I’m going for. They know their product; I don’t. I like a selection to look at, but I rely on their judgment. I will say if I want an expensive or an inexpensive frame.”
- ◆ “I prefer that the framer handle installation. For something easy, like a child’s room, I have the homeowner or contractor do it.”
- ◆ “I look for framers to provide a selection of frames, mats and innovative ways of framing. I rely on a framer to tell me when more creative matting would be good.”
- ◆ “I need framers to be on top of the latest products and to present me with those.”

◆ “Examples of a framer’s finished work are important, such as family portraits, large-scale artwork, framed contemporary pieces, and innovative matting. It can be hard to get a clear idea without seeing a finished piece.”

◆ “Showroom lighting is important, especially for color. Halogen lights provide clear color. Natural light is also good in case I need to see things under those conditions.”

◆ “I like a call from my framer telling me when new artwork, or important new lines of framing materials of note, comes in.”

◆ “I would be interested in looking at any decorative accent pieces a framer may carry that fits with a design I’m doing.”

◆ “A simple brochure with a business card from framers is good so I can see what they offer. It’s easy to file if it looks appealing.”

◆ “It’s hard to judge a framer’s product from a mailing. If you show me your frames at a show, I’ll be more inclined to call. For example, our local ASID chapter holds a show every spring for designers from all over the state. Many vendors display their goods there; I think it would be perfect place for a framer to reach many designers at one time.

them on the basis of a personal relationship, why would they return?”

Does developing a designer clientele work? Romeo says, “My designers help me stay busy 12 months a year. I have a lot of friends in framing who don’t work with designers because they won’t discount. Sometimes they call to talk about how slow business is. I have to tell them I can’t talk because I’m busy. The designers make that difference.” ■



Patrick Sarver, was editor-in-chief of PFM’s sister publications [Art Trends](#) and [Digital Fine Art](#) for six years. Previously, he had been executive editor of [Rutgers Magazine](#), as well as executive editor of [New Jersey Monthly](#).