

The World Wide Picture Framing Industry

Maximizing Your Presence on the Internet...

by Joshua Gabriel

Why is it beneficial and imperative for picture framers to have a presence on the Internet? Marketing opportunities, our extremely visual industry, and the ability to level the playing field are only a few examples of why it's time for all frame shops to have a web address.

Despite the continued popularity of Internet browsing, many in the picture framing industry have been reluctant to put their business online. Robert Markoff, an industry educator, believes this is partially due to the common misconception that websites should only be used as a means of selling. Markoff notes, "Originally people thought having a web presence was ineffective. There was a feeling that consumers were unlikely to purchase expensive artwork or custom framing without seeing it in person. While that may be true, websites are better suited as a marketing tool, allowing potential customers to gain information and visual insight into a store and its products."

The marketing possibilities with websites are virtually endless. Aside from the ability to provide browsers the opportunity to view online the variety of services and products offered, it allows framers to place their web address in store windows, local publications, on voice mail or answering machines... everywhere and anywhere possible. It's a way to showcase your business to someone who may have never visited your shop. It's also a way to stay in touch with existing customers, whether through e-mail or with the updates you place on your site.

When the owners of Bev's Fine Art in Raleigh, NC (bev'sfineart.com) decided to go online, they did so hoping their site would serve as a way for customers to make an initial "visual" visit after seeing advertisements that included their web address. Paul Krebs, production



This site, set up by Art & Frame Gallery to track advertising results by rewarding potential customers with coupon offers, is separate from the gallery's main website.



The Magni Frame website features a section to showcase its custom framing.

manager, says they have been satisfied with the results over the past year, noting, "We monitor the web statistics weekly and it seems that hits do increase after we run an advertisement or send a mailing. We make sure to update the site monthly to keep it fresh, which I think has helped with repeat visitors. Overall it's been very successful."

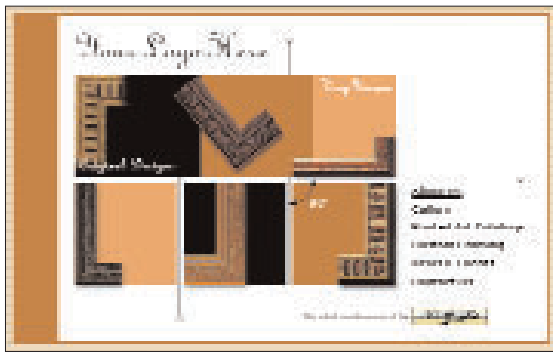
Magni Frame, a chain of frame shops in the Toronto area of Canada that went online with

magniframe.com two years ago has seen similar success. "We realize people are not likely to buy expensive art or framing online, but it's a more convenient place for consumers to start the process of shopping for wall décor," notes owner Sonja Dagon. "The web is an excellent resource for promoting a store and that's where we've seen the greatest benefit."

Lester Herbertson of Regency Fine Art in Norcross, GA (regencyfineart.com) has found that featuring a live web cam is an excellent sales resource. "Our live web cam allows us to tell a customer about a

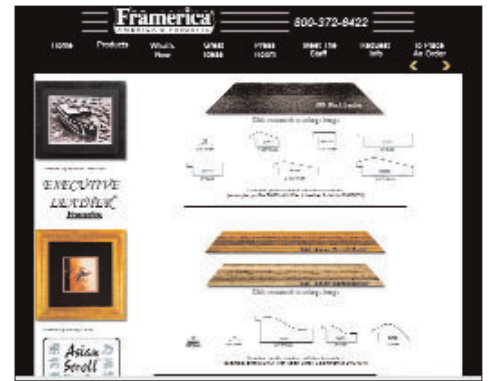
new piece of artwork, then instantly place it on an easel in front of the camera," says Herbertson. "We enjoy having the added interaction with our customers." Regency Fine Art also uses the web to provide information about its charitable fundraising services, which is accessed via a link.

And while the web is well-suited for marketing initiatives, it is also a powerful resource to quantify advertising campaigns. When Marc Bluestone, owner of Art & Frame Gallery, needed a way to judge the success of his radio and print advertising, he created iloveafg.com. Once a customer logs onto the site (which is promoted within the ads), they are asked how they learned about the St. Louis-based chain. After disclosing in which magazine, newspaper, radio, or television station the ad was seen or heard, the



This "Corner Store" template, available through ArtAffairs, is one of twelve designs from which to choose.

Framerica's website features an online catalog of its products for customers to browse.



customer gets their choice of three coupon offers. It enables the company to gauge where its advertising dollars are best spent.

"When a potential customer goes to our website they probably have some interest in our stores," notes Bluestone. "The challenge is learning exactly what generated that interest. We decided to make our advertising concise, creating an incentive for people to visit our website where they could learn more about Art & Frame Gallery. It's a win-win for both our customers and our company."

Informal polls have shown the most common reason a large percentage of picture framers are unwilling to put their shops on the web is finance-related. While the creation of a website may sometimes be cost-prohibitive, companies like Art Affairs in Ontario, Canada (Artaffairs.com) have addressed the problem by offering template options. These templates provide basic website setups, at a good market value, which are then customized to include the information and product offerings of the specific frame shop or gallery.

Of course, working from a template is not the only way to go. Art Affairs, and countless others, also build custom sites. A number of both retailers and suppliers in the industry have gone that route, some using flash media to enhance their site's appearance. For example, New-York based moulding manufacturer Framerica recently overhauled its site (framerica.com) to include its full line catalog. The company chose to use flash media in an effort to change the original appearance. (Flash media is a frame-by-frame animation that resembles a short film.)

Dave Rosner, senior vice president of marketing at Framerica, says the decision to overhaul the company's site was in response to customer inquiry as to when an updated catalog would be available online. "We're very excited about the new site," says Rosner. "It allows us to direct our customers to our site for up-to-date product viewing, company news, and great ideas. We chose flash media because it seemed like a natural progression from our last

site." (Editor's Note: For more industry supplier websites, go to the PFM website's Online Buyers' Guide.)

Bentley Publishing Group in Walnut Creek, CA (bentleypublishinggroup.com) designed its website as a resource for framers and designers. The keyword search feature on the site asks visitors to type in a print subject or descriptive word. Print examples matching the description then appear, including artist information and available sizes. "We wanted our site to be informative and easy to navigate," says Craig Anderson, Bentley's sales manager. "We continuously update its contents to provide customers with the absolute latest prints and posters."

Bentley has also debuted a website to provide framers and designers with a risk free sales tool. Designcollection.biz features many print options without any reference to Bentley. Print buyers can be directed to this "safe site" without fear they will be tempted to purchase the artwork elsewhere. "We view our customer's as partners," says Anderson. "We wanted them to have the ability to showcase print options without the normal concerns they might have."

When making a commitment to a website, be sure to consider the importance of "search engines." Search engines are the sites most web browsers use to find a product, service or store on the web (i.e. yahoo.com, google.com). While there are several thousand search engines, there are seven to 10 that receive the most hits. Most website designers offer a web submission service (approximately \$100) which includes testing to ensure search engine compliance. Sharon Wood of web designer Bi Tech is an expert in the field. "Many search engines send out what are known as 'web bots' to determine whether a site adheres to its requirements," says Wood. "These check several different areas, including keywords, formats, etc. I would urge new website owners to use a web submission service to increase their site's exposure."

FramerSelect, a member network of independently-owned frame shops, focuses on search engine placement. Its advertising within upscale home décor magazines has helped generate thousands of sales leads for members of the Chicago,

IL-based group. FramerSelect.com directs consumers to "FramerSelect Approved" members, who receive the referrals based on their proximity to the prospective customer. "The FramerSelect website allows us to pair one of our members with an inquiring sales lead," says Jeff Grabowski, vice president at FramerSelect. "It is a terrific resource for our members and for consumers interested in framing."

We have all heard, "The Internet is the way of the future." Well, the future of the picture framing industry is now. This industry is comprised of some of the most talented and creative people anywhere. It's time for those talents to be displayed on the World Wide Web.



Joshua Gabriel has spent many years in the picture framing industry, the last several focused on marketing. With a bachelor's degree in business marketing, he has done extensive writing and research in the field.