



# Mediocrity Is Not A Destination

I don't know about you, but I've never met anybody that set out to build a mediocre business. As a matter of fact, I don't know anybody that would admit that they *have* a mediocre business. Yet, the fact is that most businesses *are* mediocre. Mediocre service. Mediocre products. Mediocre stores. Nothing especially inspiring. Nothing beyond expectation. Not a particularly great bottom line. No big, happy family.

My argument is that mediocrity is a resting spot. Kind of like when you are exercising and you have a routine. Then one day, you decide not to exercise. And one day turns into two days, or three days or four. Or you are on a diet, and you decide to have a cookie. And two is just like one; and three won't hurt you.

A mediocre business (or parts of a business that are mediocre) is the end result of an action or, in many cases, a lack of action. Since business is slower in the summer and our big season is about to arrive, I'm going to give you a tune-up list of ten things to analyze about your business. Individually, some are more important than others and will have varying degrees of impact on your business. Collectively, they represent how far you have to be willing to go to have a great business.

**1.** *Selection.* If you haven't changed 20% of your samples within the last year, you probably haven't kept up with new styles and are displaying stale mouldings. It's easy to fall into a rut and not change anything. Change occurs with or without us and you might be missing out on the latest trends.

**2.** *Equipment.* Is your mat cutter still cutting beautiful mats or do you have to doctor them up? Is your saw cutting perfect corners or are you having to putty them? Machinery wears out and eventually needs to be replaced or repaired. There is not always a defining moment to indicate this. Make today that defining moment. Take the cost of the piece of equipment, divide it by how long you will be able to use it, and you will probably find that it will cost you less than a dollar a day. The cost can usually be recouped in saved time and materials.

**3.** *Vendors.* Love them or leave them. Some companies are good and stay good. Some companies were good and aren't any longer. Some companies never were good and still aren't. There are plenty of good vendors out there. Stop wasting time with those that waste yours.

**4.** *Advertising.* It's one of those things that you keep spending money on even when you don't know what's working and what's not. Unfortunately, it's very easy not to think about it. Is it time to come up with a new ad? Have you been trying to track where all your new customers are coming from? It can be a tremendous waste of money to advertise when you don't know if it's working.

**5.** *Wear and tear.* Not the wear and tear on you—that's a whole different subject! I'm talking about your store. Is it time to change the carpeting? Paint the walls? Replace the counter tops? Corner samples get banged up, torn, and

dirty. It's very easy to overlook these things when you are busy. Your customers don't. They look at them every time they visit your store.

**6.** *Hiring.* Most people don't like the hiring process. It's time consuming, nerve wracking, and frustrating. The fact that you are looking for somebody suggests that you are probably very busy. This is an easy time to settle for someone who is less than ideal. This would be your biggest seed of mediocrity. You might convince yourself that you don't have time to wait it out for a better person, but you do have time to fix all their mistakes and train their replacement. Good management is 75% hiring the right people in the first place. This is a good example of the old adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

**7.** *The "We could do worse" syndrome.* Even when you are careful hiring, people don't always work out. Once again, the easiest thing to do is nothing. Most people excel at doing nothing. You can't have a great businesses if you have mediocre employees. Or maybe someone is a great employee, but they just do not fit your company. They are honest, hardworking, punctual, careful, and friendly—but have no sense of design. I'm being kind. Usually that is not the case. Usually, there is a problem with one of those things, but we rationalize them because "we can do worse." If you do not want a mediocre company, the question is not, "Can we do worse?" The question should be, "Can we do better?"

**8.** *Quality control.* Unfortunately, quality control in this business is not black and white. We deal with many natural materials and tolerances. If a mat is  $\frac{1}{16}$ " off, is that acceptable? What about  $\frac{1}{32}$ "? What about  $\frac{1}{64}$ "? If you set your standards too low, some customers are going to notice and will not return. If you set your standards too high, you will spend an inordinate amount of time trying to make the piece "perfect" with no additional payback. Most customers would not notice or care if a mat was  $\frac{1}{32}$ " off. If you were trying to eliminate all knots in some wood, you would throw out about 85% of the moulding. Your prices would have to increase accordingly. And most customers would notice that. Try-

ing to set some kind of standard requires some energy and team effort. If your frame shop consists of more than one person you should try to create some sort of consensus so that your quality control standards are not decided at the whim of individual employees.

**9.** *Customer service.* First of all, you have to define what customer service is. How long does it take for a customer to be served in your shop? How long is your turnaround? How talented and well trained are your framing consultants? And what do you do if someone's frame package does not meet their expectations? Framing in six weeks is easier than doing it in five; five easier than four; four than three; and two can be downright difficult. One week is nearly impossible if you buy chops. How do you balance the customer's desire to get it quicker, while leaving yourself enough room for fluctuations in the workflow and unexpected problems? The longer the turnaround, the easier it is to run your business; but it costs you in the long run.

**10.** *Are you making enough money? Or for that matter, are you making any money?* While I obviously cannot make a general statement about how much a framing company should be making given the disparity in the demographics, competition, and resources, I can offer some general accounting guidelines. A good goal for a company is to shoot for a 10% profit after you have compensated yourself with a reasonable salary. As the company gets bigger, this will probably become more difficult due to lack of control. You will either need to add more layers of management or things will not run as well as in the beginning.

Number 10 is different than all the other items on this list. It is more the end result of the previous nine. No one decides to have a mediocre profit. You just decide to accept it. We're about to go into our busy season and you have an opportunity to rise to greatness. It starts with small decisions. Make this your "to do list" and start doing. Profits will follow. (Why do I feel like I am writing a fortune cookie?)