



Goltz by Jay Goltz On Business

The Soul of a Framer

Who is a framer? Is it an artist who uses framing to express his creativity? Is it a laid-off carpenter who took his hobby and turned it into a business? Is it the spouse of an artist who became so proficient in framing pieces that he decided to open a frame shop? Is it an accounting graduate who worked at a frame shop through school and decided he liked it better than accounting? The answer is yes to all of the above and many, many more.

Since I have yet to meet anyone who graduated college with a Picture Framing Degree, I think it's safe to conclude that people who go into the framing business come from all sorts of backgrounds. The interesting part is even though we've started from different places, we're on a common journey that most people don't understand and will never experience.

The Ups and Downs

Only a framer can understand the excitement, adventure, and, sometimes, anxiety of a customer having a special picture framed. There's the joy of parents framing their baby's first photo for the grandparents, the satisfaction and relief of someone framing their college diploma, and the excitement of framing a newly purchased piece of art and integrating it into their home.

Custom framing is a personal business—sometimes too personal. And it's not always a happy scene. I can remember when I was working at a frame shop in high school. A woman

came in to frame a picture of her teenage daughter, but started crying every few minutes. She finally revealed that the girl had recently passed away. And what do you say to a woman who is framing a pair of newborn footprints for Father's Day when she tells you the baby was stillborn? I'll tell you what you say—nothing. Absolutely nothing. You just stand there in stunned silence.

There aren't many jobs that get you so intimately involved with customers. Through their photographs, you meet their friends and relatives. You see where they went on vacation and you get to frame their souvenirs. You hear about their home—their likes and dislikes. And you learn how they really feel about the art their mother-in-law gave them.

Only a framer can understand the horror of damaging a person's artwork and staying up at night worrying about how to tell the customer. Or the aggravation of promising a customer that their frame will be complete for their special family event, only to find that the supplier shipped the wrong moulding style or size. Or the disbelief at putting the piece together and discovering that you measured wrong. How about the panic you felt that Wednesday when not one customer came in? Do you think that happens to restaurants or gas stations? No, it doesn't. After all, people *need* gas and food.

All that is just the emotional side of being a framer—then there's the physical side. You know you're a framer when you cut yourself and the

first thing you worry about is not your finger, but whether you got blood on the artwork. *Then* you wrap up your finger with paper towels and masking tape. And then there's the more humiliating injury. When you're in excruciating pain from poking yourself with the braided picture frame wire and can't even get any sympathy for the blood you've drawn. It's kind of like a boxer who didn't get knocked down by the mighty blow of his opponent but tripped on his shoelaces.

But there's the big payoff that makes it all worthwhile. You've painstakingly gone through all of the choices with the customer. You have reached harmony for the plan of action. You ordered all of the materials (and they actually arrived on time). You put it all together and it comes out as wonderfully as you expected.

The customer might have had some anxiety—but not you. You have framer vision. You can take a 6" corner sample and envision it around the whole piece. The customer comes in to pick up their piece and you see the expression on their face. If a picture is worth a thousand words, than that expression is worth a thousand "thank yous." If only you could pay the landlord with those "thank yous," along with the moulding supplier, the gas company, your employees, the supermarket... But you can't. That's why making sure you earn a profit is what assures that your business will be around to continue to make customers happy.


New Year's Resolutions

In this business, being a good business person means doing good framing. I've observed that if you do wonderful framing, it doesn't necessarily lead to making a good profit. On the other hand, it would be very difficult to make a good profit with poor framing. Making really good money at framing does not have to diminish your passion for framing, your standards for framing, or the satisfaction you derive from a job well done.

What it does affect is how many customers you can service, the standard of living you and your employees can enjoy, and how many people you can bring in to

work in this wonderful industry. A good profit buys a lot of state-of-the-art equipment, the best products, and many education classes on everything from hinging to business practices.

Being driven to do wonderful, professional custom picture framing and making as good a profit as possible does not require a compromise. One does not take away from the other. It requires a two-track mind. The first track is being a good framer. Enjoy what you do. Make sure everything is done to professional standards. Make sure your customers go home with framing they can't wait to hang.



Creating wonderful framing and making a good profit does not require a compromise. It requires a two-track mind.

Track two starts with getting over any guilt from making a good profit. Good profit does not make a bad framer. It is absurd to assume that if someone is in it for the money, they do lesser quality framing or take advantage of customers in some way. The next step is to get over any intimidation you have about not being a good business person. Change that to "I'm improving my business skills." I'm not suggesting that if you try hard enough, you can stage a hostile takeover of Chrysler. I am suggesting that you can have a non-hostile makeover of your own business!

Let's start the new millennium (I'm going with the official new millennium of January 1, 2001) with an action plan. There is a sequence of events to pass through from here to prosperity. First of all, now that 2000 is over, I hope you have some good records to review. That includes sales for the year, cost of labor, cost of materials, etc. If you don't, that's your first step. (I'd be curious as to how you pay income tax if you don't know what your costs were. But I don't want to know. That's between you and your tax professional.)

Second, I've said it before and I'll say it again—you have to analyze your pricing. When I say a "good profit," I mean having a bottom line of at least 11% after you allocate a salary for yourself commensurate to the amount of hours you work. I'm guessing that would be between \$25,000 and \$35,000. Your salary allocation should pay you for doing the work in your store and your profit should compensate you for your investment,

risk, and overall responsibility.

It does not matter how much you pay yourself; this is for financial analysis only. For example, if your store does \$300,000 each year in sales, I believe a good profit would be \$33,000 in addition to a \$35,000 allocation of salary for yourself. That means your taxable earnings would total \$68,000. That's not too shabby.

In addition, you would have received benefits of your car expenses and any business-related travel expenses. If any of your family members work in the business with you, you should allocate what you would pay them if they weren't your family members before you calculate your profit.

There are many reasons why you may not be reaching your profit potential. If you are doing a good volume and you're doing good framing, the biggest culprit I have found is pricing. If you are not charging enough, all of your costs are going to be too high.

A good goal to shoot for (if you are mostly buying

chops) is a cost of materials of 28% and total store labor (including the allocation for your salary) of 25%. These numbers will vary depending on whether you only buy length or only buy chop. As one is higher, the other should be lower.

After you have gotten your pricing straightened out and it drives more profit, you'll also be able to hire (and keep) more qualified people, buy better equipment, and do more advertising. And there you have it. You can be in it for the money and the passion of framing. You *can* make a profit without selling your soul. ■