



by Jay Goltz

Goltz On Business

Get Your Slice of the Pie

The custom framing industry continues to evolve, or dissolve, depending on your position in the marketplace. Picture framers are seeing competition from places that didn't exist 10 years ago. Chain stores have continued to expand into framing. At the same time, picture framing has become more mechanized due to the advent of the computerized mat cutter, automated joiners, and point-of-sale software. In the "old days," you had to be able to cut moulding, join it, figure out pricing, and cut the mat. Today, much of this has been made easier with technology, and the required skill level for an "entry framer" has been reduced. In a shop equipped with this technology, much of what used to take weeks or months to train someone to do can now be done at the push of a button.

Certainly, the design end of the business still requires an innate eye, or training, or both. The reality is that putting a frame on a poster or a photograph does not require an interior decorator. On the other hand, more complicated framing does require the experience and skill of a professional framer, not only for aesthetics but also the technical nuances required for proper framing. Determining if an item requires restoration, knowing how to handle a heavy object, or being versed in hinge mounting are all examples of this type of complicated framing. The question is, can your business thrive if you are relegated to only framing these "sophisticated" jobs?

There is some good news. While "pieces of your pie" have perhaps been nibbled away by new competition, the whole pie has gotten bigger. More and more people are familiar with custom framing. The new generation of custom framing customers

is larger than ever due to more educated, affluent individuals who are into home decorating. Most of our parents did not spend money on framing.

The pie has definitely gotten bigger. Unfortunately, even more people are going after the pie. Except the pie has changed. If you don't think of the pie as just custom framing, and you think of it as all the pictures being displayed on walls, you have to include the framed pictures that many now buy at department stores. It is a much bigger category than it used to be. The manufacturers of those framed pictures have taken advantage of computerized mat cutting and inexpensive moulding from countries that didn't know what picture frame moulding was 10 years ago. Framed pictures from the "big box stores" are far more sophisticated than before.

What's a framer to do? The first thing I would do is figure out your position in the marketplace. Are the products you offer what your customers are looking for? How do you really know what they are looking for? Our industry is going through a similar evolution that other businesses have gone through over the years. The local florist, pharmacy, and jewelry store have gone through similar transitions. Some have survived better than others. Some have not survived at all.

The good news is that custom framing is more service-oriented because of the design element and custom manufacturing process. It is difficult for a large company to match the expertise of a locally-owned store. And their buying power is less of a factor since much of the cost of custom framing is labor. As an industry, we need to adjust our thinking and deal with these changes.

It would be useful to have information, like how

many custom picture framers there are in the U.S. and what the trend is. Recently one of the “big cheeses” at the PFFA told me it can be difficult to get an accurate number of how many storefront picture framers there are because of the touchy subject of people working out of their homes. I’ve heard everything from 14,000 to 18,000 framers but the actual number is not as significant as the trend.

There are clearly many successful picture framers with some common denominators in their businesses. First of all, they are businesses. Their skills go beyond custom picture framing to management, marketing, and finance. They don’t just work in their business, they work *on* their business. They go to trade shows, train their staff, and are constantly looking for ways to improve. They have learned that a good gross margin is as important as a good net margin, and that how you sell is just as important as what you sell.

There is plenty of business out there in the world—that is if you are in the right part of the world. If your store is in the wrong part of town, or in the wrong town for that matter, you better move it. If you have the same selection you had five years ago, you better change it. If you’re not paying more attention to preservation issues, you better start.

As in other businesses, it will be the survival of the fittest. And that doesn’t mean you can put pictures together faster. It means they look better and the customer is happy. It means you have a reason to be. ■

Jay Goltz, Business Editor, started Artists’ Frame Service in 1978 fresh out of college. AFS employs over 80 people at its main location in Chicago, IL. Goltz is also the founder of FramerSelect. He has received numerous business honors and is best known for his straight talk on how to succeed in business. He has taught at the National Conference.