

The Guerrilla Framer

Because It's A Jungle Out There

by
Paul Cascio



Length vs. Chop: It All Depends

If there is a Great Debate amongst framers, then this is it. Should you purchase uncut lengths and chop it yourself? Or, should you buy pre-cut moulding, known as chops?

The answer is not simple, nor is it the same for every framing business. Each method has its pros and cons. However, for most framing businesses, if you want to maximize profit, cutting your own frames is a must. Let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Advantages

There are numerous benefits to buying chops, but the primary advantage is convenience. You place your order, specifying the exact size frame you need, and a few days later the frame arrives ready to join. You save the time needed to cut the frame, and if a mistake is made, the supplier takes the loss instead of you.

In addition, pre-cut frames eliminate the need to store moulding, which (believe it or not), is actually a perishable commodity. Unused moulding can warp due to changes in temperature and humidity. It can also get scratched.

If work or storage space is scarce in your shop, buying chops can reduce the amount you need to run your business. Mail-based businesses and others paying high rent should definitely consider chops, or use an off-site facility to cut frames.

Quality is also a consideration. In talking to framers who buy chops, I've found that almost every distributor offers consistently high quality—they have to or you'll buy from someone else. Only with an investment in quality equipment and

staff training will you be able to attain the same level of consistent quality by cutting your own frames.

Frame shops that use chops are able to offer a wider selection of frames without worrying about whether anyone will ever purchase the unused length of unusual moulding. Chop users spend less time tracking their frame inventory; they have none.

Using chops can save time. This is especially useful during peak sales periods, when you are understaffed, or when labor costs are very high. Bulk chops, which are often discounted, let you handle volume orders more efficiently with less disruption of your normal production.

Disadvantages

The major disadvantage of using chops is cost. The per-foot price for chopped moulding is generally 25% to as much as 50% more than its uncut counterpart. Many chop suppliers also add an additional charge onto each frame to cover waste.

Time is another factor. Only by cutting your own frames from in-stock moulding can you offer a speed advantage over your competitors. Finally, consider the shipping costs. At year's end, chops devotees will generally have paid out for more in shipping charges than stick-buyers.

Calculating and comparing the actual costs of length versus chop is not so easy. At a glance, it may seem that buying chops makes about as much sense as doing all of your grocery shopping at 7-Eleven. Not necessarily. When all costs are compared, the actual savings for using length moulding, while substantial, are considerably less than it first appears.

Paul Cascio, "The Guerrilla Framer," owns and operates A-Frame New & Used Equipment (www.framingequipment.com) and also a retail custom framing business. Paul also conducts sales, management and marketing seminars for the framing industry.

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Why Consider Length?

Is your chop supplier driving a nicer car than you are? If so, than perhaps it's time to consider a switch to length moulding. But before you head down to your local Lexus dealer, let me offer a warning: Simply making a decision to buy length moulding is not going to make you richer. I believe there is a science to maximizing the advantages of using length moulding. Do it right and you can substantially increase your profit. Do it haphazardly and the cost saving may not be worth the effort.

Suppose that for every frame you sell, your savings would grow by \$10 to \$15. If you sell just 10 frames per week, at the end of a year you'd have accumulated more than \$5,000 in additional profit. Add in your own numbers: This is how much additional profit you can earn by using length moulding instead of buying chops—but only if you are willing to do it correctly and efficiently.

Buying frame moulding by the stick and cutting it yourself offers other advantages besides cost saving. Cutting your own frames lets you offer faster service to your customers. Simply keeping a few selections of popular moulding on hand at all times lets you handle the needs of last minute shoppers who would otherwise have to patronize your competitor. Rush orders provide another opportunity to use any excess inventory you may have on hand.

Ironically, the disadvantages of using length moulding include the additional time (approximately 10 minutes) it takes to cut the frame and manage your inventory. Length moulding requires a place to store the leftovers. My highly respected Larson-Juhl rep Dave Modeen pointed out, if length moulding is being shipped via UPS it will have to be cut to meet the 96" length limitation. This increases the amount of waste you are likely to have.

Maximizing the Length Advantage

To obtain the full benefits and to maximize the profit potential of length moulding, you need to have the right equipment, a fully trained staff, and you need to "manage your moulding."

When you buy chops the supplier manages the moulding for you. The cost of labor, warehousing and other expenses that go into the job of producing chops for you is included in the price you pay. When you buy length, you assume responsibility for those costs.

Do a good job controlling and tracking your inventory and the financial rewards can be substantial. Do it poorly and the only benefit you'll get from buying length moulding will be the smell of fresh cut wood that will filter through your shop.

Here are the keys to profiting from length moulding.

1. You must have the right equipment. A double-miter saw or manual frame chopper provides the greatest accuracy and speed. Choose a saw if you want to cut aluminum or wood frames. Although the initial cost could be as much as several thousand dollars, you'll get your investment back fairly quickly.

2. Purchase only the minimum quantity of moulding necessary to meet your immediate needs. Buy from a supplier who will allow you to order a single stick of an individual item. Don't be forced to purchase "bundles."

3. It's not necessary to inventory moulding if you don't want to. Your inventory can consist only of remains of any popular frames you choose to keep on hand.

4. Store moulding in a consistent and logical manner, either by color or item number.

5. Wood moulding can warp if not stored properly. As long as the moulding is supported, either upright or horizontal, storage can be used depending on available space. Vertical storage minimizes the risk of scratching.

6. Dispose of scraps that are too small to be re-used. Aluminum frame scraps can be recycled.

7. When using a wide moulding, be sure to leave a remainder that's not too short to be re-used. Generally, the wider the frame, the longer the remainder needs to be in order to be reused. It is often to leave a 2 to 3 foot long remainder that can be reused in the future, rather than a 15' long remainder that will never become part of a finished frame.

8. Check stock before ordering moulding each week.

9. Conduct a backroom clearance sale once a year.

10. Track your expenditures over a six-month to one-year period.

Length moulding can increase your profit tremendously, but only if you are willing to manage its use and organize your inventory. Simply buying length instead of chop will not significantly alter your bottom line and may actually hurt it. Also, there may be times when even dedicated length users will find it advantageous to buy chops. ■