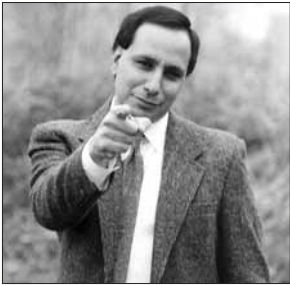


The Guerrilla Framer



by
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A Guide to Buying Equipment for Your New Business

Deciding what equipment to buy for your new framing business is a series of crucial decisions with far-reaching implications for the success of your enterprise.

Producing professional quality framing requires professional grade equipment. Producing a profit requires speed as well as quality. The challenge for the startup business owner is to acquire the equipment needed to achieve speed and quality, while operating within the confines of what is almost sure to be a limited budget.

Startup framing business owners often fall prey to one of two common mistakes. They buy more equipment than they need in the startup stage, or they try to get by with either too little or poor quality equipment.

A double miter saw and computerized mat cutters may be useful for mature businesses whose production demands exceed their capacity, but for the average startup, such high-cost acquisitions may produce insurmountable debt.

The second mistake occurs when an underequipped business lacks the necessary tools to compete effectively. Starting a business without adequate equipment is an almost surefire recipe for failure.

Several factors must be considered when deciding what equipment to purchase or to put on hold.

- 1) How important is the item to basic operations and profitability?
- 2) How much does it cost? What benefits does it offer?

- 3) How quickly will it pay for itself?
- 4) Is there a less expensive alternative that will suffice?
- 5) Should I buy this item new or pre-owned?

Mat Cutters

Some framing equipment, such as a conventional mat cutter, is an absolute necessity. A good mat cutter is a framer's constant companion and its frequent use demands that it meet high standards for quality and durability.

Although there are many good professional quality mat cutters to choose from, prices vary widely from brand to brand. Some of the less expensive cutters offer basic features, and sometimes even more, than the more expensive brands. I urge you to shop and compare. Don't just pay for the name; find out whether production stops and a squaring arm are included with the cutter, or if you'll have to pay extra for them. (Editor's note: Paul Cascio has created a comparison chart of the major brands of mat cutters and other equipment at www.framingequipment.com.)

Unlike most other framing equipment, mat cutters have a wear factor that is often difficult to gauge. You may occasionally run across a good used mat cutter, but I suggest that even if you're working with a limited budget, it may be worth it to invest in a brand new one.

Joining Equipment

I also believe that an underpinner, used

for joining frames, is a “must have” tool. There are three reasons for this: the speed, quality, and consistency it can provide.

Although it's true that you can assemble frames with a hammer and vice, you can't do it as profitably without the combination of quality, speed, and efficiency that only an underpinner provides.

An underpinner, even a manual (foot-powered) one, provides more time savings than any other single piece of framing equipment. If you use that extra time wisely to enhance your sales and marketing efforts, your underpinner pays for itself very quickly.

Underpinners produce strong frames that won't fall apart. This is especially important when making larger frames. When you use an underpinner, you'll also eliminate unsightly, and amateurish nail holes. Your frames will have a professional appearance.

Despite their seeming complexity, Underpinners are actually very a simple and reliable piece of equipment. Prices and basic features are competitive. If you can, purchase one that is equipped to serve your needs as your business grows.

If you do not want to buy an underpinner just yet, a compromise choice for joining frames would be a router-based system that uses plastic wedges to help hold the frame together. Although I'm not a big fan of this type of joining system, there are some framers who swear by them.

Cutting Equipment

There are basically two choices for cutting your own frame, a saw system or a chopper.

For speed, I think nothing beats a double miter saw. These saws also provide high-quality cuts and, fitted with an appropriate combo blade, handle both aluminum and wood mouldings with ease.

However, if speed is not an issue for your start-up business, I'd recommend a frame chopper. These guillotine-style frame cutters cost less than half the price of a double miter saw and offer some features and benefits than even their more expensive counterparts.

Most choppers are leg-powered. Choppers are quiet, and produce no sawdust.

Your investment in a chopper or saw will pay for itself more quickly than perhaps any other item of framing equipment. Using a chopper or saw lets you save

approximately \$10 to \$15 per frame.

A single miter saw system offers some of the same financial benefits as a chopper, but because they are noisy, produce sawdust, and can be intimidating and prone to sending metal scraps flying around the room, I prefer either the chopper or double miter saw.

When joining high-end frames from wide moulding, there is another choice—the rolling table top saw. Saws of this design, which cost about the same as a chopper, let you cut mouldings up to 5" wide.

Multi-Material Cutters

It's really optional (most of its functions are easily duplicated with other equipment) but because of the convenience it offers, you'll find a wall mounted glass/cardboard cutter, which can cost as much as \$2,000, in about 80% of all frame shops. The primary benefit of this piece is that simplifies glass cutting. However, you can also size foamboard and matboard.

If you are looking to cut costs, this is one purchase that you can put off. Here's why: Although it looks difficult and seems intimidating, almost anyone can quickly learn to cut glass with an inexpensive hand-held glass cutter. You can buy one at your local hardware store for less than \$10.

Learning to cut glass is not very difficult, but you will need to practice a few times before you become proficient. So add another \$10 to your budget for some extra glass.

The multi-material cutter's other functions are mostly redundant, as all professional grade mat cutters include a straight-cutting head for sizing foamboard and matboard. The multi-material cutter's advantage is a moderate gain in speed and its convenience.

Because of their simplicity, multi-material cutter last for years, making them a good candidate to purchase used.

Mounting Presses

Would you wear a wrinkled shirt or blouse with a \$300 suit? No, you probably would not. Unfortunately, many new framers believe they can put posters and other decorative paper items in frames without dry mounting them. Everything looks great for a few weeks, and then changes in temperature and humidity cause the paper to ripple. Soon you have an unhappy customer. Approximately 70% if the items you frame will need to be dry mounted.

Dry mount presses come in different sizes and two basic types—mechanical (pressure) heat presses and vacuum heat presses. Which one is right for you depends on a number of factors, including how much space you have in your work area. Your equipment supplier can help you make the right choice.

Other Equipment

In setting up your production space, you may want to go beyond the basics and add an oval/circle mat cutter, computerized mat cutters (CMC), fillet cutter, touch-up sander, and other specialty equipment to your business as your budget and production demands allow.

It takes professional quality equipment to produce professional results and to operate profitably. Purchase wisely, buy the best equipment you can afford, and work with a dealer you can trust. Happy framing and good luck with your new business. ■