

The Guerrilla Framer

Because It's A Jungle Out There

by
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When Good Framers Make Bad Frames

Few professions demand a higher degree of accuracy and consistency than does custom picture framing. I challenge you: name another profession where a speck of lint can ruin your day. Who but an accused felon laments the discovery of a fingerprint more than does a framer?

Designing custom frames may be an art, but producing them is an engineering science requiring mathematical and geometric precision. At my framing schooling, I point out to my students that almost any neophyte can join the first three sides of any frame and achieve visually perfect results. The fourth side is another matter entirely.

It's the fourth and final side of every frame that reveals the true the quality of your skills, materials, and equipment.

Pleasing the Geometry Gods

I refer to framers who produce consistently inferior work as "Three-Sided Framers." Do you have more than just a few "mistake frames" hanging in the back room of your shop? Do you spend more money on frame putty than groceries? If so, you may have a serious problem. In fact, you might want to consider a career change.

Four-Sided Framing requires strict adherence to the laws of geometry. These demand that rectangular frame must contain exactly four precise and equal 90° angles. There are no exceptions to these laws, which are strictly enforced by the geometry gods. If you so much as dare to violate these laws, the unforgiving and unmerciful geometry gods will send you to frame hell every time.

Naturally, as a framer you don't want this to happen. You desire to make your own life easy by producing perfect, four-sided frames. To achieve this, there are four secrets:

1. Constantly strive to increase your professional knowledge and skills.
2. Maintain high personal standards of excellence.
3. Use only the highest quality, properly stored materials.
4. Insist upon having top quality, well-maintained equipment and tools.

I will focus on the last two items, because when a good framer is suddenly producing substandard work, poor materials and bad equipment are often responsible. These two factors must be eliminated to properly and objectively evaluate the skills and standards of a framer.

Bad Equipment Makes For Bad Frames

Neither defective materials nor malfunctioning equipment should be tolerated by a professional framer for even a single day. The best framer in the world is instantly reduced to Three-Sider status when forced to use inferior materials. Living with equipment problems is always far more expensive in the long run than correcting them.

Outfitting your shop with modern, properly functioning equipment increases productivity and profitability. It also improves morale and reduces employee turnover. And in today's tight labor market, happy employees and high productivity should be rated amongst the highest priorities for any business owner.

Without the right tools, no profes-

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sional framer can be expected to perform to his/her maximum potential. Quality control problems blamed on human error or professional incompetence are frequently the result of using worn, defective, or poorly maintained equipment.

A worn mat cutter, antiquated frame joiner or dysfunctional mounting press costs time and money. It will lower both the perceived and actual value of your product and takes the fun out of what should be a very enjoyable occupation.

The good news is that compared to most industries, framing equipment is both simple and inexpensive. A brand new, good quality, basic pneumatic underpinner costs less than \$2,000. For just a few hundred dollar more, you can choose one that will join almost any frame with a speed and accuracy that can nearly double your productivity, virtually eliminate bad corners, and render your miter vice nearly obsolete. Similarly, although its initial cost is much higher, heat presses reduce both the time and cost of mounting by about 40%, as opposed to cold presses.

Quality pre-owned or reconditioned machines can be an even better investment for many framers, because they've already depreciated in value. Used or reconditioned equipment may not be as pretty as new, but in many cases it performs as well.

Upgrading from a smaller mounting press to a larger one is also a wise investment, enabling you to accept larger artwork that requires larger and more expensive framing. A larger capacity press also reduces labor costs by speeding production.

Any one-time purchase that reduces labor costs or materials costs, which occur repetitively, is almost always a good investment. Double miter saws, choppers and underpinners offer some of the highest returns. A miter sander, such as the ITW-AMP Mitre True can help you produce perfect corners and reduce the time you spend applying putty to frames.

Computerized mat cutters can be a good investment too, especially if your mats frequently require a lot of intricate cuts. Conventional mat cutters are still good for basic matting. Manual production cutters, such as the

Esterly Speedmat are fastest and most cost effective for production matting.

Here, again, I want to emphasize that in an industry where quality is an absolute necessity, there is simply no justification for not having the best tools and equipment possible.

If you're having problems with quality control, you also need to make sure defective or damaged materials aren't to blame. Fresh materials are rarely the cause of bad frames. However, matboard and moulding are perishable items when not stored properly.

Matboard absorbs moisture, therefore, it should not be stored in damp areas.

Although we all occasionally receive flawed mouldings from a supplier, the problem is easily rectified: ask for a replacement. Many wholesalers make every effort to correct problems, even offering expedited delivery or offering to provide a chop at length price.

Be aware that frame moulding is perishable and needs to be stored in upright bins and protected from scratches and moisture.

When good framers produce bad frames, the problem is usually attributable to inadequate equipment or materials. Even the best framers can't compensate for bad equipment. Continuing to use substandard equipment or defective materials is both costly and ill advised.

I like to say that good equipment is bought and paid for once. Then you own it. Bad equipment can only be rented. You pay for it each month in the form of lost time and duplicated work, you'll never own it, and eventually you must replace it.

It's a major mistake to think your customers won't notice "minor" flaws. Some of them may not realize that you sold them a frame that was less than perfect, others may not care. However, most customers do care; some very much. The average customer can indeed see the imperfections that you thought were visible only to the "trained eye."

Producing a perfect product is a requirement in this industry. Without it, success and profit are rarely attainable. Make perfection priority if it isn't already. Don't be a Three-Sided Framer. ■