

WORKING WITH OUT-OF-TOWN CUSTOMERS

by Thomas M. Houston, MCPF

“Wow, your shop is awesome! I wish you were in my town!”

This is a phrase my employees and I have heard many times over the last few decades in business. We’ve learned that the best response to that is: “We can be your framer, wherever you live!”

We have run a custom frame shop and gallery in a busy tourist town for over 20 years. Originally, we had a central downtown location; now, we are situated a few blocks beyond that center. In both locations, we have a lot of foot traffic, some of which comes from people looking to check out our gallery and decide to get something framed. Whatever their reasons for coming, I’ve talked to many out-of-town customers on the checkout line who have told me they wished we were their neighborhood framer. I knew we had to find a way to fill that role for people, regardless of their zip code.

What does it take to start cultivating an out-of-town customer base? The first thing is desire. That may sound obvious, but many framers assume that no one would be interested in having framing done outside of their hometown, and don’t give non-local shoppers much of their attention. About 15 percent of our customers are from out of the local area (at least 40 miles away). Most of our out-of-town customers are from over 100 miles away; frequently from different states. Many of them come and visit us whenever they’re in town, bringing artwork that they’ve saved for us to design. Others ship us their artwork, and we work with them remotely using visualization software and email. These clients are golden, and we take their loyalty as a great compliment.

You may be asking yourself why someone from a distant locale would want to do framing with someone outside their area. The answer is simple: because they believe that we offer something their local framers do not. They appreciate our selection, product knowledge, and design expertise, and want our framing in their homes. You can be a destination for people. Focus on what you do best, or what sets you apart, and showcase those things



● *Safe, efficient shipping plays a large part in doing business with an out-of-town customer base.*

to everyone who comes through your door. If someone has a fantastic experience in your shop and takes home a piece they love, they will want to return to you rather than taking a chance on an unknown retailer.

BECOMING A DESTINATION

This leads to the most important factor: engagement. Taking the time to have a conversation with someone and educating them about what you do is the starting point of everything. One of the key elements in that conversation is having numerous, beautiful displays that showcase what you do. To attract clients that are willing to literally go the extra mile to do business with you, you must have something to set yourself apart. Basic black framing or other ordinary designs will not give customers the “wow” factor to make you noteworthy. Customers want to feel that you are offering them something special and unique. We take time to talk about the details of what makes a good design—things like hand-wrapped mats and closed

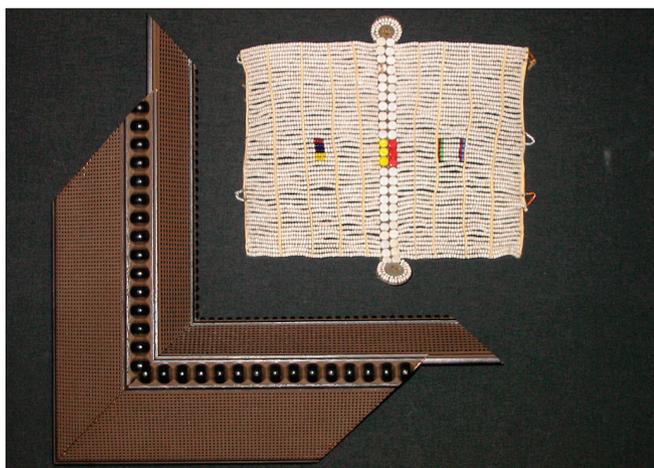
corner frames. We also frequently explain the importance of using preservation-quality materials and techniques.

We make sure to display framed examples of outstanding, high-end products and unusual and creative design solutions, both in our storefront window and inside our shop. We also talk to people about the benefits of having a certified picture framer (CPF or MCPF) frame their artwork. My MCPF certificate is displayed prominently. It is framed in a water-gilded gold frame with silk-wrapped mats and a gilded 8-ply fillet. It's crucial to show what you can do with every shop display you have—and you ought to have many of them.

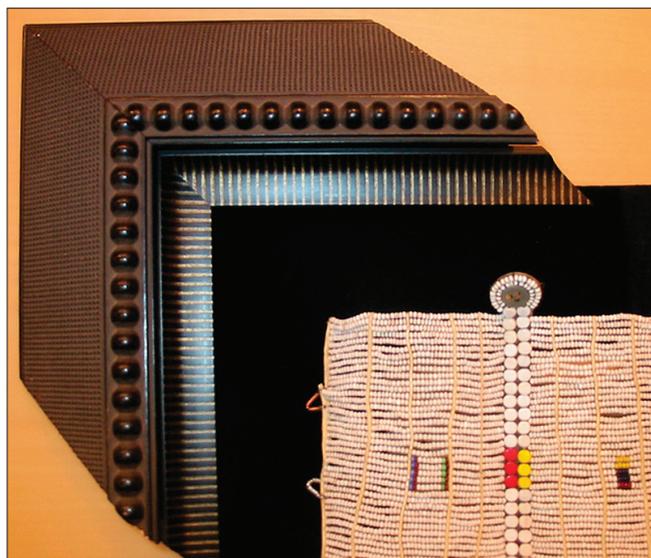
In our shop, we have prominent custom displays for the moulding we carry. It's important to offer a unique selection of moulding, including products that most customers haven't seen before. We also have a very large glazing display that we custom made in-store. We have three types of glass in three different panels above the same framed artwork; the center panel is museum glass. It's easy for a customer to see the difference that high-end glazing makes on a framing job when they look at this display, and we are sure to follow up with a verbal explanation. (A note about glazing: I always recommend our best glazing, i.e. museum glass or museum plexi, first. We made the choice many years ago to only use UV-filtering glass and to carry only preservation-grade matboard. This raises the quality bar right out of the gate.)

Finally, we express sincere interest and care about what people are getting framed, whether it's artwork, a photograph, a collectible or memorabilia, or a family heirloom.

SELLING DESIGNS REMOTELY



● The design for this framing project took place entirely through email with our client. We photographed and sent three initial ideas.



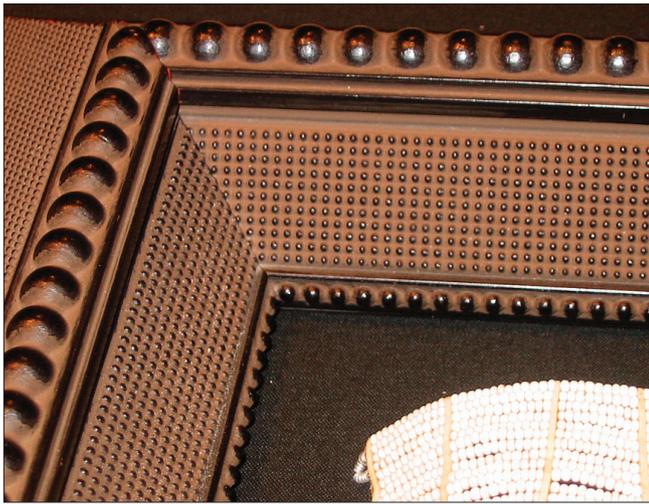
● Initial designs included a frame with large pyramidal shapes and this large beaded frame, combined with a striped, rustic inner frame.

Once you build that desire in non-local customers to bring return business to you, you have to be equipped to handle their orders conveniently; in other words, remotely. Our remote design service is key for many of our customers. With remote designing, the customer either sends us a .jpeg image via email or the actual artwork in the mail, and we work up a few design options using visualization software. We will also take photos of the frames, mats, and details to give them a better feel for what they're seeing. Having a working knowledge of Adobe Photoshop is helpful here. Since you will be creating/optimizing/saving and sending a lot of images via email, being organized is also key.

Remote design has its challenges, with color rendering being the biggest concern. We have on occasion sent customers swatches of matboard or actual corner samples—especially when working with a fabric-wrapped mat—so the colors and textures become real and tactile for them.

Benefits of Having Non-Local Customers

- They want to work with you—not because you are their local shop, but because of what they like about your shop.
- They are usually inclined to purchase high-end frame designs. After all, if they wanted ordinary, they would shop online or at their local retailer.
- They will return to you with their artwork, photographs, and memorabilia over time, which boosts your cache of return business.



● The customer liked both the pyramidal frame and the beaded one (pictured). We combined both ideas using our visualization software.

SHIPPING FINISHED PRODUCTS

Once we've got the design established and the work is complete, we will either wait for them to return to town (in our town, it's not uncommon for visitors to come twice per year), or we will ship them their artwork. Shipping requires some specific know-how. Proper packing and crating are crucial. We've used Airfloat boxes, created custom crates, and shipped in heavy corrugated boxes with outside reinforcements. Having corner protectors,

using Glas-Skin or other protective measures for glass, and proper padding are all factors in packing and shipping your framing jobs.

Which carrier you use can also make a difference. We usually use FedEx Ground, but UPS has been better about size restrictions (like the time we had to ship 10 boxes to the Cayman Islands!). When packing to ship, be sure to know the carrier's requirements for padding (usually 2" in all directions), and have the package insured. Some business insurance policies cover shipping, so check your policy or contact your agent.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Of course, all of this takes more time than working with a local client who can immediately see what you're designing. But for us, the gratification of successfully working with our non-local customers makes it worthwhile. It's also important to keep in mind that most of these out-of-town clients are buying high-end designs, as they are looking for that special "something." Giving them that extra time and attention helps assure them that their framed artwork will be personal and unique.

If you have the desire and the will to cultivate a

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367	3/4"x60yd	\$4.46 48+ \$3.96

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331	1/2"x60 yd	\$3.79	72+ \$3.19
332	3/4"x60 yd	\$4.95	48+ \$4.65

3M 924 ATG TAPE

Item #	Desc.	12 rolls @	
552	1/4"x36 yd	\$2.95	72+ \$2.69
553	1/2"x36 yd	\$3.39	72+ \$3.09
554	3/4"x36 yd	\$4.99	48+ \$4.69
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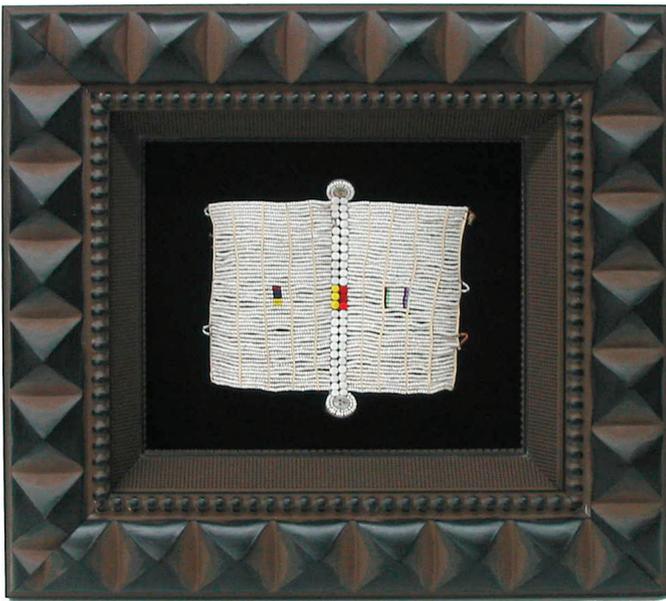
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● The final look, which our customer ultimately chose, used the pyramidal frame as the outer frame and the beaded one on the inside.

already. Successful custom frame retailers offer an interesting and diverse selection, beautiful designs and displays, and the knowledge to educate customers about the importance of preservation framing. Those are the reasons your customers have for wanting to return to you. Ultimately, the only difference between framers who grow an out-of-area clientele and those who only rely on local clients is the confidence to put themselves out there to those faraway customers. Give them your attention and your best designs, and you will be rewarded with a loyal following from all over the map. **PFM**



Thomas M. Houston, MCPF

Thomas has been framing for over 30 years. Since 1995, he has been the owner of Houston's Custom Framing and Fine Art in Ashland, OR. He graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1984.

strong base of non-local customers, I have some words of encouragement: you've got much of the work in place