



Lofty Ambitions

By Patrick Sarver

When Masterpiece Framing moved to a new location in Bloomingdale, IL, two years ago, it gave the store a great opportunity to reinvent itself

“If I had to pick one word that I’m striving for in the look of my store, it would be ‘inspiring,’” says Matt Puchalski, owner of Masterpiece Framing in Bloomingdale, IL. “When customers walk in, I want them to feel comfortable with a setting that is organized, up-to-date, and welcoming. At the same time, I don’t want it too upscale because that can be intimidating to some customers. My goal is to inspire everyone who visits with the art on the walls and the services we offer in a way that gets them thinking about their own projects.”

The look that Puchalski has created since moving to his new location two years ago might be described as “artist’s loft.” There’s an open space above the gallery floor where lighting and other elements are suspended from an exposed ceiling. This gives the design showroom an open feel. The walls are covered by cedar paneling, original to the building. Above both of his design tables are frames suspended from the ceiling with two pendant lights on each.



(Top) The visual style of the new Masterpiece Framing emphasizes the loft look, with high, open ceilings. (Above) A 3D logo, framed television, and glass comparison sample are prominently displayed in the middle of the corner wall.



A display promoting photo restoration services highlights before-and-after samples.



A space in the showroom is dedicated to promoting digital printing services, with an emphasis on educating customers.

The illumination is largely from track lighting that Puchalski brought from his previous location, which he retrofitted with LED lights that shine down on a number of special display walls around the store. “There are also 18 LED pod lights on the sample walls, one for every two rows of corner samples,” he says.

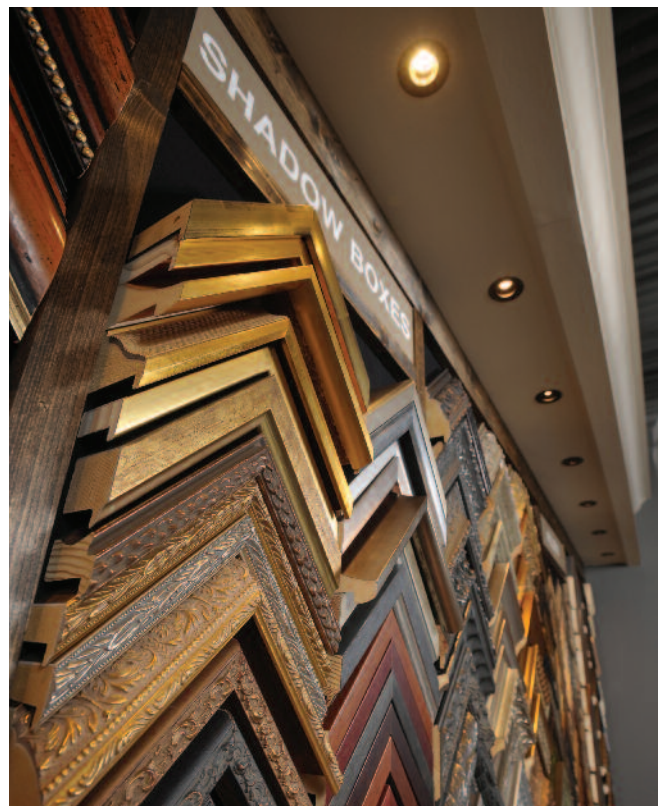
There are plenty of personal touches as well. “I’ve incorporated my own handwriting into the signage,” says Puchalski. “For example, on the front door it says ‘Welcome!’ in my handwriting. It also appears on some of our flyers and promotional materials—not on everything that’s printed, but enough so there’s a coordinating theme. It humanizes the customer’s experience.”

Evolution

Puchalski has a simple philosophy for creating a welcoming retail space. “Improvement is an ongoing process,” he says. “You have to constantly analyze the look of your space and your merchandising. This requires interacting with customers to find out how to best use your space, and constantly tweaking and asking yourself how you can improve the customer’s experience—the flow, the efficiency, and the order-taking process.”

He often finds inspiration from other retailers he visits. For example, he says, “On a recent visit to Dunkin Donuts, I saw a continuous loop video showing glamour shots of coffee being poured and doughnuts being made, so I hired a video company to do something similar for our store. We took action shots of frames being made, glamour shots panning the frame wall, before-and-after

photo restorations, shots of customers’ art, and pictures of past projects.” Looking at how other businesses operate is a great source of ideas for store design, he says. “It’s important to take notice of how retailers in other industries merchandize. If you see something that inspires you, think about how you can incorporate that idea into your own business.”



Corner samples are divided into categories and illuminated by LED lights.



Unique framed items are used to inspire customers when they're thinking about their own potential framing projects.

As time goes on, Puchalski adds, your shop should evolve as you learn from your customers and as you grow as a business owner. He compares this process to a patina that takes place over a long period of time. “The colors on my walls are more neutral now, for example. There are also more signs and specific displays to draw customer interest. The lighting has changed, too. And where the design counter used to cordon off the corner sample wall, there’s now a more open floor plan that makes it easier for customers to approach the frame wall.”

After being in four locations over 13 years, Puchalski says he has found that store layout and location are both key elements of success. “The most important thing we’ve done to enhance the customer experience is move to our new location two years ago. It’s a better location from a visibility standpoint, and it also gave us an opportunity to reevaluate the business and refresh our look.”

Counters

One important change at Masterpiece Framing has been to take a different approach to the design counters. Today, the emphasis is on trying to keep things off the design space. The latest thing Puchalski has done is remove the sample spinners. Now, hooks on the side of each design table store measuring tapes. The result is a fresh, clean design counter, which has made a better impression on customers.

The design counters have also been rebuilt. The new ones are custom-made from stained pine with iron bases—built by one of Puchalski’s customers. “The bottoms are open so you can see through them, which creates a more airy feel compared to our previous counters, which had cabinets below,” he says. “They are 3½’x7’, on casters, and sit in an angled position about 5’ from the sample wall. The rea-



Custom design counters contribute to the open-space concept and encourage clients to walk up and interact with the sample wall.

son we designed the tables with wheels was to allow us to roll them together to accommodate oversized art. We don’t use the wheels often, but they’re very handy, such as on nights when we host events. It’s nice to be able to roll the counters out of the way to create more space.”

Corners

Another change at the new location has been reorganizing the corner sample wall. “When we first moved in, all the corner samples were arranged by color—gold, black, and wood tones,” says Puchalski. “After a while, we decided to break it up visually by adding some cross members and reorganizing the samples into categories to make the selling process easier. For example, we now have individual sections for shadowbox mouldings, fillets, float frames, extra-large profiles, new releases, and in-stock frames.” The wall now organizes 700 to 800 corners with signs that indicate categories, so it’s not just row on solid row. The signs also provide some visual relief to the display.

Digital Imaging Displays

Puchalski strongly advocates promoting any special services your store offers. The item that attracts the most attention at Masterpiece Framing is the digital printing display; it is presented on an 8'x8' wall with a mural to emulate the look of a chalkboard. At the top, a sign says, "Turn your photos into art." In the middle is a 2' high picture of a smartphone with a photo of a little girl. Lines radiate from the phone to images of different frame treatments for digital photos that can be printed from the phone. Treatments include prints on photo paper, gallery wraps, canvas prints on float frames, and traditional frames with matting and glass. There's also information on a package program in which a customer can select from 20 frames.

The free-standing digital printing wall takes up two of the store's exterior windows. "On one side of the wall we hang artwork that can be seen from the road; the other side is the digital printing display," says Puchalski. "There's also a small table containing flyers showing what customers can do with digital printing."

A separate wall displays the store's photo restoration services with several before-and-after examples. A sign also illustrates the process of photo restoration—the scanning, the digital repair, the archival prints, and, ultimately, the frame.

Standard vs. Premium

There's also a display that presents two different framing treatments offered at Masterpiece Framing. The left half shows standard clear glass and regular foamboard backing, while the other half contains a premium-framing package with an upgrade to Museum Glass and preservation framing materials—a treatment that Puchalski has coined the "Archival Advantage." "This display features only two framing options so customers can make a decision quickly," says Puchalski. "We don't want them to be overwhelmed with dozens of different glazing and framing options. I'm a strong believer in simplicity."

Other Features

The store's framing area includes a design sample area displaying items such as a framed guitar, fishing lure, board game, buttons, and a number of other items. The purpose is to inspire customers to frame more than posters and prints, says Puchalski. "We have a testimonial bulletin board that proudly displays letters and website comments from customers about past work. The board is simple—4'x2'—but

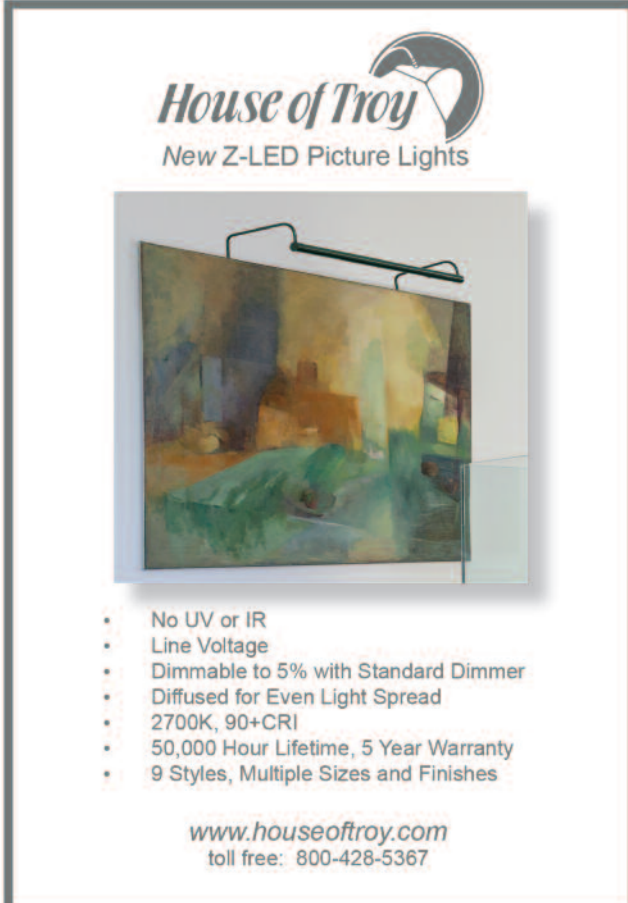
gets the message across and builds our credibility."

Among the other store features is an LCD TV display that shows customers examples of other work done at the shop. "Typically, customers watch this while waiting for us to write up their order," says Puchalski. "The screen is about 30" wide and—of course—is framed, which has led to framing flat-screen TVs for customers."

The exterior of the building is also important in inspiring customers. Some windows have a frosted glass look, and the signage says, "Photo Restoration, Canvas Photos, Framing, and Art" in big white block letters. The front door also has a hand-written "Welcome" and a block of frosted glass that looks like an etched frame with the store hours and website address.

"I've recently commissioned a local artist to create a painting for the side of our building with an 'old town' theme, as we are in that part of town," says Puchalski. "We are currently in the process of printing that image and plan to have it up soon."

Puchalski adds that he feels there's no single factor he attributes to the success of the business. "It's a combination of doing many things well," he says. "But there's no doubt the new location and fresh look have had a major impact on business." **PFM**



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