



Sue Colbert (front row, far left) is pictured with ASID interior designers and industry partners following the Colberts' presentation of a continuing education class.

# BRIDGING THE GAP

By Sue Colbert

## HOW WORKING WITH INTERIOR DESIGNERS HAS BENEFITED OUR CUSTOM FRAMING BUSINESS

For years, when my husband, Kevin, and I tried to find ways to establish connections with the interior design community, we followed the idea that custom framing and art printing should make a great, natural partnership with designers. When we encountered several barriers to that relationship, we set out to overcome them.

One of the obstacles we discovered was that framing—especially custom framing—is not covered in interior design school. “We learned about things like Louis XVI furniture, dentil moulding, and gothic architecture,” said our friend and interior designer, Nancy Anderson of Nancy Anderson Design. “But never did we learn anything as designers about matting and framing other than cutting our own white mats in art class.”

Because of that lack of exposure, Kevin and I found that interior designers often urged their clients to default to a white mat and black frame. Our daughter, Stephanie, who now runs the business, says she finds that design customers and other clients tend to ask for white mats and black frames simply because they believe that is a neutral choice. They haven’t been exposed to all the other options or been told how distracting black and white can be to the art. Many established designers also attended design school before the digital age exploded, ushering in nearly limitless possibilities for altering and stylizing customer’s own or public domain images through custom art print-

ing. They are simply wired to search for the “perfect piece” rather than having it created for them.

Another encumbrance we found to creating a business relationship between interior designers and framers is cost. Custom framing can be expensive, but I’ve always been puzzled why designers and their clients don’t seem to bat an eye when it comes to other expensive items such as furniture and fixtures yet consider custom framing too costly. We found this to be a twofold issue.

First, designers (and thus their clients) are unaware of the value of quality framing. If they don’t understand the importance of properly mounting art, the use of preservation materials, and using UV-filtering glass to protect and



Kevin and Sue Colbert talk to an interior designer at one of the many events they have attended to forge relationships in the design industry.







The Colberts hosted a continuing education class and store tour for interior designers in their Naperville facility.



a listing in the organization's directory and, hopefully, a designer needing custom framing services would call. Over time, however, we found that ASID is much more than a directory of designers and industry partners. In fact, as its website states, "ASID inspires and enriches its members by promoting the value of interior design, while providing indispensable knowledge and experiences that build relationships".

Soon after becoming a member, I started attending meetings and events, which range from peer group meetings to networking events, continuing education classes, social events, and tours of other industry partner facilities. These include everything from furniture and lighting stores to tile manufacturers, cabinetry companies, quartz manufacturers, a toilet showroom, paint stores, and other companies.

Before long, I found myself on the Industry Partner planning committee and realized I was not only developing relationships with designers but also with a host of people from other businesses related to the design industry. I gained a wealth of knowledge about their fields. We also gained visibility within the organization, which gave us an opportunity to host an event—an evening of wine

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and cheese and a tour of our facility. We have 5,000 square feet, which includes a warehouse, production center, design center, galleries, graphics studio, and offices. Since then, several interior designer peer groups have asked to hold one of their monthly meetings here. Designers are thus able to get a glimpse of the entire printing and framing process and begin to develop a better understanding of custom framing. Getting those potential clients in the door was an important step.

Another opportunity has been to raise awareness about our business—and digital art printing and framing in general—through continuing education. Licensed interior designers are required to fulfill a certain number of continuing education units every two years. We took advantage of this to develop our own accredited course, “Custom Framing 101: Beyond White Mats and Black Frames.” It took several months to write the course, produce the visual aids, and submit it for approval. Since then, we have presented the course a number of



*Sue and Stephanie Colbert explain matting and frames to designers during their "Beyond White Mats and Black Frames" class.*



*Stephanie Colbert is the third generation owner of Colbert Custom Framing & Art Printing.*

times. It's easier to do that at our own store, with sample mats and frames at hand as well as a wide range of examples in our galleries, but we've also taken the show on

the road. The response from designers has been very positive. In addition, designers are by nature very visual learners. When they see the transformation when proper mats and framing are placed on art, or when showing how to colorize and reformat images, a lot of “light-bulb” moments are created. The course also covers the importance of archival framing as well as art placement and hanging methods.

Once we began to develop relationships with designers and industry partners and learned the types of incentives other vendors offer, we developed our own designer incentive program. It took a while for designers to begin taking advantage of the program, but more designers are now referring their clients to us or coming in with them. Raising awareness just takes time, but once designers start using our services and receiving those commission checks, they get the idea.

Another way we've tried to get the word out about our business is by attending ASID events and donating framed giclée prints as door prizes. Often we have a chance

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to describe the piece, which offers a superb opportunity to explain what we do. We also post pictures of the winner with the framed piece on Facebook, further increasing visibility, as we are now being followed by a significant number of designers. In addition, our store has donated printing and framing of awards for various ASID Illinois events, giving us status as a yearly sponsor, which includes placement of our logo on the chapter's website home page as well as on display at ASID Illinois events.

The interior designer who originally encouraged us to join ASID recently provided us with a lead that resulted in several large corporate orders, and we have been contacted by ASID chapters in other states with an interest in the custom-designed ASID awards.

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And a corporate client referred by one of our designer connections spent \$45,000 in the past eight months for custom framing and installation. Another designer has brought in over \$12,000 in business over the past two years and introduced our services to residential clients.

My position on the ASID Illinois Industry Partner Planning Committee has also led to the formation of a new committee, ASID Illinois Gives Back, which was created for "facilitating charitable projects through the coordination of interior designers and industry partners, while demonstrating the goodwill and talents of ASID Illinois and its members." Last year, the committee completed a pro-bono facelift of the reception area and kitchen at the non-profit organization Little

Friends of Naperville, IL, which serves adults and children with developmental disabilities.

What started as a way to get our name on a list has turned into many opportunities to connect not only with designers but also with many wonderful people from all aspects of the design industry. I have learned so much from all these relationships; it has definitely been an important avenue for business and personal development. I'm grateful for all the doors our involvement in ASID has opened. **PFM**

**Sue Colbert** and her husband, Kevin, are owners of Colbert Custom Framing & Art Printing in Naperville, IL, an award-winning, third generation business. Sue holds a BA in French Business Translation from Northern Illinois University. The Colberts have three grown children and one grandchild.



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