



It was my first time at the West Coast Art & Frame Expo and The National Conference, and I, like the thousands of framers in attendance, had a packed to-do list. I joined the crowd of retailers, suppliers, and distributors in the Paris Las Vegas Hotel & Casino and felt the energy build in the halls. The Expo, now in its 19th year, has become a mainstay in the framing industry—and it's easy to see why.

From popular colors to frame finishes and new art releases, the show is where art and picture frame retailers go to see new products and learn what's trending in today's market. The massive scale of the event is immediately apparent as you walk from the registration desk to the show floor. Innovative newcomers and industry giants alike exhibit year after year, and each company delivers its message in unique, fun ways.

This isn't just someone sitting in a chair, telling you about their product or service; there are interactive walkthroughs, lively demonstrations,

and eye-catching displays around every turn. I was impressed by the creativity and even joy that exhibitors put into the creation of their booths. To me, it reflected the passion that the people in this industry have for custom framing, and it was great to witness.

Of course, it isn't only about having fun; exhibitors are there to connect with retailers about their featured products and services. In my conversations with them over the four days of the event, representatives echoed the same sentiment: people at the Expo were actively engaged in seeking out new suppliers.

One first-time exhibitor was Jodie Royak, CEO of Blink Hangers. "I've been swamped," he told me when I visited his booth. "The reception has been overwhelmingly good."

Royak's company, which sells picture hangers, launched in September. He stressed the value of the one-on-one interactions he had with attendees at the Expo. "The connections I've made here are priceless," he said.

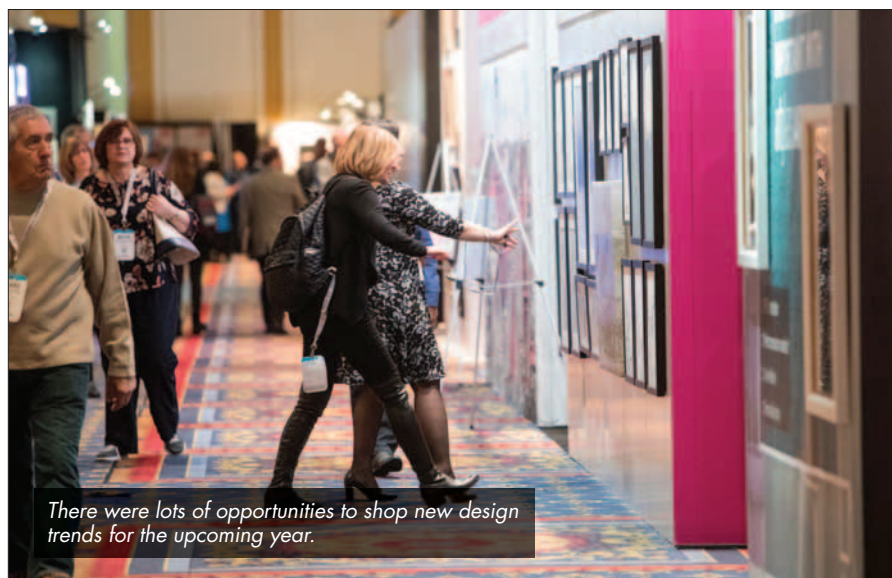


By Kimberly Biesiada

Another newcomer to the Expo this year was SMA, showcasing its Verascan flatbed scanners and visual three-dimensional (V3D) scanning technology. Managing director Aaron Burkel said he attends 10 to 15 trade shows per year with SMA, and was struck by the attention he received from the WCAF Expo management team: “I am absolutely blown away by this show. We don’t get this kind of support anywhere else.”

Managing director Peggy Zilian agreed, adding, “The audience here is so much nicer and more excited than at other industries’ shows.” Zilian’s statement backed up what I, a trade show newcomer, had suspected but couldn’t prove: the fun, friendly, energetic atmosphere I was experiencing was unusual for something that is, at the end of the day, a work event (or at least an event for your business). That atmosphere could be felt throughout the show from the first day to the last.

“We experienced a lot of framing retailers who were really excited to add new items to their lines and really build their businesses,” said Gryphon Moulding President Philip LaMarche. “We



There were lots of opportunities to shop new design trends for the upcoming year.

are excited to return next year, and are anticipating an even larger crowd since the WCAF Expo will coincide with the Winter World Market.”

Among the companies that showcased completely new booth displays was World Art Group. Eric Reeves, operations director, said the rebranding was a huge success for the company. “The traffic was great; we met a lot of new customers and got a ton of new leads from the show,” he added. “Since it’s the largest industry show in the United States, you need to be here.”

Dale Holmgren, marketing coordinator at International Moulding, echoed that sentiment. He said attending the WCAF Expo gives company representatives “a chance to present the broad band of the product line and services all at once—a difficult experience for a salesperson to replicate.

“It’s always good to have the face-to-face time with customers, and the fact they make the effort to come says something about themselves and their business,” Holmgren added.

Enhancing the trade show experience, several exhibitors hosted competitions that showcased the best and most creative custom framing from retailers around the world. Larson-Juhl added a new spin on its annual Design Star competition by introducing Chopped Edition. Similar to the Food Network cooking show, entrants were tasked with creating a spectacular frame design using the same “ingredients” from a mystery basket. Amy Young, of The Frame Shoppe in Cincinnati, OH, took home the title for her winning submission, “Lantern by the Sea.”



Jay Goltz leads a keynote seminar focused on successful brand development.



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It's no surprise that the WCAF Expo has earned a "must-attend" reputation among industry experts.

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Peterboro Matboard is known for creative interactive booth displays.



Elvis enters the building and was the highlight of the PPFA President's Dinner.



Erick Rios teaches his popular session "Social Media and Digital Storytelling."



Yozo Suzuki demonstrates gilding techniques in one of his hands-on workshops.



Roma's booth attracts a lot of interest as they showcase its new products and designs.



Newly renovated rooms enhanced the trade show experience.



The Expo offers a unique opportunity to meet with exhibitors and build relationships.



Attendees examine the gallery wall in Epson's booth and learn more about its different photo papers.



Instructor Meg Glasgow snaps a selfie with attendees in one of her sold-out sessions at The National Conference.



2018 brought about new networking opportunities for attendees to develop new industry contacts.



The WCAF Expo attracts the industry's leading suppliers and distributors from around the globe.



Arthur Van Dover leads a session on how to incorporate digital printing in your shop's services.

Finalists in this year's Tru Vue Framing Competition were required to frame a textile artwork by Chilean artist Andrea Barrios Aguilar and use Optium Museum Acrylic. Donna Erwin, owner of Columbia River Gallery in Troutdale, OR, won the Best in Show: Judge's Choice award for her piece, which used a triple-stacked frame to complement different elements of the art.

Attendees from big cities, tiny towns, and everywhere in between said it's enormously valuable for them to go to a place that has so many leading suppliers in one room. Maralee and David Johnson, owners of Johnson's Custom Photography in Flora, IL, told me that they've returned to the show for over a decade because of the business ideas presented at the conference and the new products on the show floor.

"We live in a small, rural area in southern Illinois; this is our one chance to see vendors face-to-face," David Johnson said.

The challenge for attendees was making enough time to see it all. Which brings me to my next observation: you can't see it all. Not if you're planning to only attend the Expo once. In addition to the packed exhibit space and events in the Paris and adjoining Bally's Las Vegas hotel, there's also the four-day National Conference. Unless you've perfected cloning technology, you won't be able to do everything. That's OK. The Expo will be back next year.

The conference itself is a huge undertaking, and one that is uniquely valuable for framers at all levels of experience. This year, the conference expanded its educational offerings. New sessions focused on

challenges like brand development and how to attract loyal customers through online marketing.

In a previous life, I worked in the communications department of a private university. One of my favorite things about that job was working in the middle of a campus; the energy and intellectual spirit of that setting was something I thought couldn't be replicated anywhere else. When I started sitting in on classes during the conference, though, it soon struck me that what I was experiencing was remarkably similar to what I experienced on that campus. Attendees could sign up for sessions taught by an impressive 58 experts. The class schedule truly covered every subject a frame retailer could want to learn about, from mounting and matting to finance and marketing.

The educational value was clear, but what I kept asking instructors was, do the classes always feel this open, this collaborative, this upbeat? In other words, like a great university, just for framing?

"I've noticed over the years that I can get a real feel for the enthusiasm level of the entire conference during the first 15 minutes of my first class," said Chris Paschke, owner of Designs Ink in Tehachapi, CA and longtime conference instructor. "Even before we started, my first classroom was full of anticipation, teasing, laughter, and warmth. It was fabulous. And the rest of the classes continued with similar enthusiasm, energy, optimism, questions, and interaction, with a lot of first-timers to WCAF and new framers in the room."

Kyle Abernethy, owner of Mainframe in Seattle, WA, was one of those first-timers. He purchased Mainframe one year ago from the previous owner,

and was drawn to the technique-based classes and workshops offered at the conference.

“Chris really covered a ton of ground and answered questions I didn’t know I had,” he said, adding that he plans to return next year. “The class environment, with this level of instructor, is just great.”

The conference featured 30 new sessions this year, many of which were sold out. The “new frame shop owner” trend carried over across multiple classrooms; about a quarter of people in Paul MacFarland’s “Framing Works of Art on Canvas” seminar placed themselves in that demographic.

While seeing so many new faces at the conference and trade show says something encouraging about custom framing as an industry, what’s equally as encouraging are all the retailers who are still in business, 20 or 30 or 40 years after opening their doors. A majority of attendees in Chris Perez’s keynote lecture, “Today’s Online Marketing Challenge: Navigating the Customer Scavenger Hunt,” said they had been in business for more than 10 years. Many kept their hands raised for “more than 20,” and “more than 30.”

The conference always strives to bring the most current and relevant information to all business owners. Jay Goltz, PFM’s popular business editor and moderator of the Successful Retailing Panel, brought a new seminar to the conference this year that focused on brand building. The seminar helped frame retailers of all levels of experience create an action plan for growing their business once they returned home.

“The people I talked to at the show were really looking for new opportunities to expand their business, including re-examining things they have been doing for years that either no longer work, or never did,” Goltz said.

Brian Flax, president and owner of Flax Art & Frame in Chicago, IL, was one of the many attendees who have been framing for more than three decades. He said he’d signed up for strictly business development classes this year, and found great value in what instructors were saying.

“We need to learn to adapt to the changing market—this is the show where you learn to do that,” Flax said. “I really think this is a must-attend show.”

Watching exhibitors pack up their booths and instructors say goodbye to one another late Wednesday afternoon, I reflected on what people had told me over the last four days. I had spoken with some of the most seasoned framing professionals, as well as people as new to the industry as I was. We all seemed to be in agreement: what you stand to gain when making the trip out here is unparalleled. I’m already thinking about what to do first when the Expo returns to the Paris, Jan. 27-30, 2019. I hope to see you there. **PFM**

