

Getting Started In Picture Framing

The Essentials

By James Miller, MCPF, GCF



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The Fletcher-Terry Company



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Picture framing is a great business to be in. It's fun and interesting for creative people with a good mechanical aptitude, especially those who enjoy art or photography. It appeals to both men and women of all demographics; in communities large and small; whether urban, suburban, or rural.

Framing appeals to all adult age groups, too. Young, ambitious entrepreneurs with that creative tendency find framing very attractive. It's easy to gain entry level positions in the industry, either part time or full time, where they can learn about the trade and, more important, learn about how the business operates. Some become hooked on the unique nature of picture framing, and become life-long picture framers and small business owners.

Or, after a career in the fast-paced corporate environment, framing may provide a welcome change of life style. Picture framing offers a fresh career change, and it can be a wonderfully rewarding, and profitable, retirement business. Indeed, some very successful picture framing businesses have been started by "empty nesters" or mature, experienced business people who never enjoyed such business success in their previous careers – not to mention the fact that they truly love the work.

There are basically four ways to get started in picture framing:

- 1. EMPLOYEE** -- If you want to get started in picture framing, but are not ready to become a business owner, you may find a part-time or full-time job with an established framing company, where you can receive training and education. To get started as an employee, the essentials are similar to all retail jobs, with emphasis on these:
 - ✓ **Good Visual & Manual Skills** – Framing requires working with a wide variety of materials, equipment, and hand tools. Quality results are important.
 - ✓ **Autonomy/Dependability** – Most picture framing shops have only a few employees. The work is changeable and usually not highly organized. Employees who produce good work consistently, with only limited supervision, are valuable assets.
 - ✓ **Personality** – In retail picture framing, we work directly with customers. It's important to make a good appearance, relate to others, and create strong buyer-seller relationships.
- 2. HOBBY** -- If picture framing is to be your hobby, you can start with a modest investment in the primary tools, perhaps just a few thousand dollars, along with some books and trade show classes. As a hobby, framing can be done in the basement or garage, similar to some other manual-skill hobbies, such as furniture making, for example. A few hundred square feet of space may be all you need.

Where can you buy supplies? Unfinished wood mouldings, glass, and hardware are available from home-improvement stores. Art supply retailers have most everything else the hobby-framer needs. You may find that your best suppliers are larger, professional frame shops, especially if your location is remote. Some wholesale suppliers might sell to you, although minimum order requirements and other conditions could make that alternative impractical.

Here is a list of the bare essentials for the picture framing hobbyist. Note that many more items would be helpful; this is a list of minimum requirements. Additional tools and equipment would add extra capabilities. The better tools and equipment save time, and make it easier to achieve professional results consistently.

- ✓ **Suitable Work Space** – The more space the better, but you might get by with as little as an 8 ft. x 10 ft. room, if you will need it only for small, simple, occasional framing jobs. Regardless of size, your work space will need good lighting; bright and well distributed throughout. And the room should be climate-controlled at all times, by reliable heating & cooling systems; not only for your comfort, but to limit expansion & contraction of your framing materials. You may need to use some potentially toxic glues or chemicals, so be sure to provide adequate ventilation. Of course, the space should be kept clean and dry. Airborne dust and debris must be carefully cleaned out of every frame during fitting. Excessive moisture might cause problems with mildew & mold, attracts insects, and might cause cockling of mats & other board products commonly used for framing.
- ✓ **Straight-Line Mat Cutter** – Available in 48" or 60" size, a good mat cutter is among the most useful tools in picture framing. It not only cuts and sizes mats, but also backing boards and filler boards of all kinds. A hand-held mat cutter may be less expensive, but it is very difficult to achieve professional results without a

professional-type mat cutting machine, such as the Fletcher-Terry model 2200. Accessories add extra capabilities and save time.

- ✓ **Work Table** – You need a sturdy, smooth, flat place to put your mat cutter, and a generous work surface. Most picture framers build their own work tables according to their needs, but factory-built and custom-built tables are generally as good. 48" x 96" is a useful table size, although larger, or smaller, or multiple tables might serve your purposes as well, and might better fit your available space. In any case, the table(s) should be of comfortable working height; a couple of inches below your elbow is ideal. If your work surface is too low, you may suffer back problems related to constantly bending over to reach or closely see your work. There are fewer potential problems if the table is too high, but you might need to use a step-stool sometimes. Make the most of your space by building storage shelves and bins under your table. Be sure to provide plenty of support; wobbly or unstable work tables are not just inconvenient; they may also be dangerous.
- ✓ **Hand Tools** – You can never have too many tools. And no matter how many you have, there will always be a need for one more. With those thoughts in mind, here's a brief, general selection for getting started:
 - ✓ Hammer – small, to drive brads into frame corners.
 - ✓ Wire cutters – to cut picture framing wire.
 - ✓ Pliers – long-nose and regular, for innumerable grabbing tasks.
 - ✓ Screwdrivers – both common-type, and Phillips head, in several sizes.
 - ✓ Fitting tools – Fletcher-Terry fitting tools are available from framing suppliers.
 - ✓ Drill & assorted bits – small hand drill is OK, but battery-operated is better.
 - ✓ Knives – Utility knife, X-Acto knife, single-edge blades, and dustcover-trimmer.
 - ✓ Sharpening stone -- smoothes cut edges of glass to reduce breakage.
 - ✓ Wrenches -- all kinds, for machine maintenance & repairs.
 - ✓ Plexi Cutter – to score and cut clear acrylic glazing
 - ✓ Manual glass cutters – for cutting glass of any shape or size.
 - ✓ Files – assorted, for smoothing metal and wood edges
- ✓ **Miter Vice** – One, at least. A set of four allows you to glue and nail all 4 frame corners at once.

3. HOME-BASED -- Picture framing is a popular home-based business, especially for those who make their living in related fields, such as photography or painting. Framing might remain a long-term secondary, home-based occupation for some. Many home-based businesses start out as hobbies. However, business framing should not be confused with hobby framing. Here are a few of the important differences:

- (A) A business must be fiscally responsible and earn a profit. It isn't just for fun anymore.
- (B) You become responsible for your customers' property, given to you for framing.
- (C) Customer service enters the equation; they rightfully expect to be satisfied.
- (D) Businesses must meet certain legal requirements that do not apply to hobbies. Documents such as a vendor's license and tax identification are required. Zoning & environmental laws, and deed restrictions apply to home-based businesses, and must be respected.

The home-based picture framing business could probably function with nothing more than the essentials given above for the hobbyist. However, unlike the hobbyist, the home-based business owner needs to produce professional results, and earn a profit in the process. These added essentials facilitate generally accepted business practices, save time and money, improve results, and improve profitability:

- ✓ **Suppliers** – at least one, but two or more may be advisable. Visit and talk with potential suppliers, to determine which one(s) will serve your needs best. Wholesale suppliers generally prefer to do business with professional framers who regularly buy package quantities, and may decline to supply the small requirements of home-based framers. National suppliers are useful if you care to buy on-line or by telephone. Discounts may be available on the basis of your purchase quantities. So, it is generally better to consolidate your needs and buy more from a few suppliers, than to buy a little from several of them.
- ✓ **Industry Publications** – such as Décor Magazine and Picture Framing Magazine are dedicated to picture framing. These monthly publications provide a useful link to what's happening in the industry, and will be your gateway to the specialized books, educational opportunities, trade shows, new tools and equipment, and informative articles on all aspects of picture framing. They are your primary connection with the picture framing industry.
- ✓ **PPFA Membership** – Professional Picture Framers Association is the industry's only American trade association, dedicated to helping independent picture framing companies of all sizes. PPFA offers a comprehensive list of framing books & educational materials, useful to framers of all skill levels. PPFA

chapters sponsor gatherings of local framers for fellowship, education, and special events. The PPFA online forum, Framers' Corner, provides an important communication tool for members to share information and ideas on all aspects of the framing business. When you are ready to earn framing credentials, or if you just want to find out how much more there is to learn about framing, PPFA offers the best, most comprehensive certification programs in the industry.

- ✓ **Training/Education** – You can learn enough to begin hobby framing by reading several good books on the subject. But when you take your framing work beyond a personal-use hobby, and begin framing for others, then you should learn and practice the fine points of the craft. Especially, if you intend to earn income as a picture framer, it is essential for you to acquire the knowledge and skills to do the work professionally. Proper framing can protect valuables from common hazards, as well as provide beautiful displays. On the other hand, improper framing would damage items of value, and leave them vulnerable to environmental harm. Learn about your liabilities. Attend classes and learn about preservation framing methods and materials before framing anyone's valuables.
- ✓ **Insurance** – Homeowners insurance typically does not cover business matters. Separate business insurance is required. Consult insurance providers and determine your needs carefully. Make sure your coverage grows to keep up with your growing business.
- ✓ **Record Keeping** – Every business needs provisions for bookkeeping, accounting, and the files required to maintain the business. Keeping track of costs, sales, and profits is essential to any business. Minimum requirements are outlined by local, state, and federal laws. Consult an accounting specialist and make sure your practices are in compliance.
- ✓ **Incoming Work Storage** – The property of customers is often valuable, and sometimes can not be replaced at any price. It is very important to provide safe packaging and storage for incoming work, and work in process, until mounting and framing are completed. Appropriate storage assures that customers' property will be protected from mechanical damage, moisture, dirt & dust, insects, and other anticipated hazards. And you'll want to keep the storage orderly, so you can keep track of everything.
- ✓ **Finished Work Packaging & Storage** – After your frames are built, they must be packaged & temporarily stored until customers pick up. And the packaging should be suitable for transport home. If anything could be worse than damaging a customer's painting, it's damaging the painting and the new frame you built for it.
- ✓ **Wall-Mounted Glass & Board Cutter** – It is possible to cut glass properly with hand tools, but you will achieve better results faster, safer, and more consistently if you have a wall-mounted machine such as the Fletcher 3000 or 3100. Most framing boards can be cut on the straight-line matcutter, but the wall-mounted machine avoids having to change settings on the matcutter. Also, the wall-mounted cutter generally has a sturdier, heavier-duty mechanism than a matcutter. So, the precise settings of the matcutter suffer less stress when sizing larger, heavier framing boards.
- ✓ **Drymount Press** – We should be prepared to frame what our customers bring to us. Photographs, posters & open edition art prints are among the most popular items framed. Many of them should be permanently mounted, and a dry mount press is the most versatile machine for that purpose. Dry mount presses are relatively compact, operate on household electrical service, and take care of most permanent mounting needs.
- ✓ **Underpinner** – Frames may be professionally joined by suppliers, or you may join the corners in vices using glue and brads. However, an underpinner, such as the Fletcher CornerPro, is essential to professional framing. An underpinner inserts fasteners into the bottom of a frame, quickly and automatically, eliminating nail holes and providing the tightest, strongest miter joints possible.

4. RETAIL STOREFRONT -- Part-time, home-based framing businesses and hobbies often progress into successful, full-time, storefront framing businesses. If you intend to build a strong and lasting business, a home-based setup might eventually become inadequate for your purposes. You may not have enough space at home, or you may live in a community where home-based businesses aren't allowed. If framing is to provide your main income, investing in a storefront location would allow faster development of a successful & profitable business.

In any case, there are some real advantages to locating your picture framing business in a retail storefront:

- (A) Exposure – Customers find you more easily. Location, location, location. By carefully choosing a popular retail location, you can enjoy drive-by visibility and walk-in business far in excess of most home-based framing businesses.
- (B) Perceived professionalism – While many home-based businesses are operated in a most professional manner, the typical consumer's perception is that a retail storefront location implies a larger, more stable, and more professionally-operated business.

- (C) Growth – When a retail storefront location operates profitably, its format may be refined, standardized, and then transplanted to additional locations for continued growth.
- (D) Add-on sales – If picture framing is your main business, you might want to also sell other décor-related items; art, sculpture, gifts, or home accessories, for example.

To get started in picture framing with a retail storefront, here are essentials you will need in addition to all of those above:

- ✓ **Marketing Plan** – This goes along with the business plan (see below), but it's not the same thing. The marketing plan comes first; it helps you identify your target customers, outlines the methods by which you will attract them, and considers the costs of advertising & other promotional actions, which should be included in the Business Plan.
- ✓ **Business Plan** – A storefront location requires a larger up-front investment than the other ways of getting started. A long-term lease commitment is required, and there are higher overhead costs of all kinds. Although the actual work of framing may be about the same, a storefront should result in more customers, more frames to build, more revenue, more profit, and accordingly, more cost. Managing the higher numbers is a job in itself, so it is wise to plan ahead. More is at stake. Before you begin a storefront location, you should determine reasonable goals in sales, profit, and costs. The purpose of the Business Plan is to outline and demonstrate how you will achieve those goals.
- ✓ **Working Capital** – Aside from your initial investment, you will need to maintain a supply of ready cash to cover large purchases and other expenses until your customers pay for the goods and services you provide.
- ✓ **More Space** – Work space was described earlier, for hobby framing. All of those considerations apply equally for a storefront. However, a retail storefront also requires a display & sales area, storage for inventory, and perhaps a well-equipped office. The amount of space you need will be determined in the process of making your business plan, and it should be carefully decided. Too much space would eat up profits unnecessarily; too little space would restrict growth and make operations more difficult.
- ✓ **Computer** – Essential for good bookkeeping, accurate accounting, and useful management data in any modern business.
- ✓ **Framing Software** – The best way to maintain order histories for all of your customers, and data for all of the products & services you offer, is to use specially prepared framing software designed for the purpose. Several programs are commercially available, which allow framing businesses to quickly & conveniently update suppliers' item listings & their costs. New items are added; discontinued items are deleted or marked, as you decide. Also, the program will automatically maintain & update retail prices for all framing parts and procedures, which you may set up to serve your specific business. All of the popular programs allow custom pricing set ups.
- ✓ **Production Equipment** – A power-assisted v-nailer, single or double miter saw, power-assisted or computer-controlled mat cutting machines, and power-assisted hand tools add speed and convenience to the frame production. Automated equipment may also provide better accuracy & repeatability, and consistently better results than manual operations. More sophisticated tools represent a wise investment in your growing business.
- ✓ **More Education & Industry Awareness** – As the picture framing industry continues to evolve, successful storefront framing businesses keep abreast of the latest tools & equipment, materials and techniques. There's always something new to learn, which might make your business operate more profitably.

Welcome to the Wonderful World of Picture Framing.