

Adding Value to Your Business During Quiet Times

What you can do now to improve your business—even during shutdowns

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis will test us all on multiple fronts. Ultimately, it is an issue of survival. For retailers, that means not only focusing on the health of ourselves, our families, and our employees, but on the health of our businesses.

When things suddenly go quiet and customers stop walking through your doors for reasons beyond your control, there is a significant degree of shock and paralysis that can set in. It can also be difficult to stay focused on what you can and should do when you have the polarizing distraction of news media.

But there are things you can be doing now to help your business survive these tough times and beyond. Here, I'll explore some ways in which you can meet the changing needs and habits of your customers and add value to your business even during mass shutdowns.

Adapting to Changing Behavior

For those that have an option to keep their business open, now is the time to embrace technology and implement some new strate-



gies to make it easier for your customers to do business with you.

It's important to keep in mind that many of your customers may not be impacted financially so much as they are emotionally. While they are spending less money on outdoor entertainment (restaurants, bars, concerts, etc.), they might have more to spend on decorating their homes. However, consumers need to feel safe and comfortable in order to spend money. Your job is to find ways to provide your customers that sense of assurance, paving the path to purchase. Some ideas to accomplish this include:

Many of us are being faced with slower sales due to COVID-19. There are many ways to invest in your business despite this.



Jared Davis has 25 years of industry experience and is the business development manager for Larson-Juhl Australia as well as a consultant for Gunnar International. In addition to writing for PFM, Jared also travels extensively as an educator and speaker, teaching at many industry shows and seminars around the world. Jared also serves on the PPFA Board of Directors and is the author of the book "Getting the Most Value From Your CMC." He leads popular sessions on sales strategies at The National Conference in Las Vegas every year.

- **Keeping things clean.** Advise your customers of all improved personal safety policies and cleanliness protocols in your shop. People want to know you are respecting social distancing and prioritizing the health and safety of your customers and employees.
- **Doing business by appointment only.** In lieu of walk-ins, work with your customers to set up one-on-one design consultations by appointment.
- **Offer an incentive.** Now could be a great time to offer your customers a promotional incentive, such as a free gift with every frame.
- **Pickup, virtual design, and delivery services.** Many people will be hesitant to leave their homes to do business with you. Why not go to them? Some framers I know have introduced a contactless pickup service to collect customers' artwork. With the help of technology, they then offer a virtual design consultation via email, Skype, or Facetime, which allows their customers to still engage with them in the design process. It also allows the framer to be able to complete a job for a client, which they can then deliver back to the customer's doorstep.

If you do implement any protocol changes like this, promote these services to your customers via email and social

media, or even by calling your top 10-20 percent of customers to let them know directly.

Depending on your location, you're likely experiencing some level of uncertainty and confusion amidst all the active and imminent shutdowns and wondering how long your business can endure this challenging period. However, there may be some silver linings to finding yourself with a sudden abundance of spare time. When things finally recover, you will want your business to be prepared. Now is a good time to focus on your "too-hard" basket: those important but not-so-high-priority tasks you've been putting off because of a lack of time.

Let's look at some ways you can improve your business during times like this. I've separated them into two categories: physical tasks, which are related to the hands-on aspects of your business; and digital tasks, which can be done while working from home.

Physical Ways to Add Value

Mini-renovation. While many people are forced to stay at home and cannot otherwise spend their money on travel and entertainment, paint manufacturers are reporting increased business through hardware store distributors. Home

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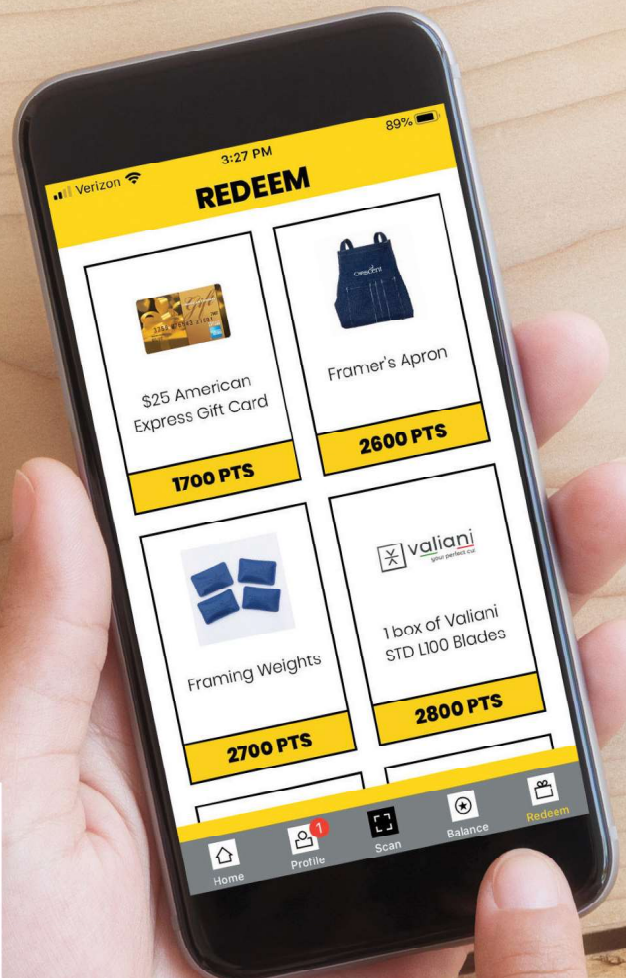
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renovation projects have clearly started to kick in for many stir-crazy families; good news for framing retailers, who specialize in custom interior decoration. Does your shop look fresh, new, and ready to greet your customers? Take a leaf out of your customers' book and pick up a few cans of paint. A fresh splash of clean white or vibrant color on your walls, door trims, and more can make a big impact at a small cost.

Lighting. Could your showroom or display lighting fixtures benefit from an update? High-quality track lighting with modern, cost-efficient LEDs is now more affordable than ever. Time to light things up!

Merchandizing. The way your products are presented in your store has a huge influence on your sales, and the key to making a successful first impression with your customers is your merchandizing. With your target customer in mind, consider introducing fresh and innovative products such as decorator homewares and gifts that could complement your custom framing.

In-store displays. Customers benefit from inspiration, and from their point of view, seeing is believing. Are there props, display concepts, and ideas you could fabricate to demonstrate some great ideas and inspiration? For example, what about a "good-better-best" frame display or some framed examples that feature high-value concepts like stacked frames, fabric mats, premium glazing, and fillets?

Window displays. Although it may be quiet right now, a great window display can capture attention and inspire customers to come into your store. Design and plan some potential window displays for the future, making them easy and ready to implement when the time comes. Seasonal themes are a perfect place to start. Good window displays might also require specific signage and props. Use this downtime to source and fabricate what you'll need now and have it ready to roll out when your shop is back up and running.

Stock materials. To reduce impact on your cash flow, now is a good time to take stock of your current inventory and focus on using and selling what you have available.

Moulding sample display. Review your most important selling tool; your moulding sample wall. Start by removing and replacing any damaged or worn samples. One of the golden rules of merchandizing is "eye level is buy level," so it's important to make sure your high-value mouldings are optimally positioned for easy access. The space between your samples is just as important as the sample itself. A wall of tightly bunched corner samples creates a continuous blend of color and texture, making it difficult for a con-

sumer to visually determine where one sample starts and the next one ends. I suggest giving a distance the width of your little finger between each sample. Also consider adding some framed examples into your sample wall display to help break up the visual monotony of endless samples. These examples could double as sales aids to demonstrate design concepts such as a float mount, a shadowbox, a fillet, and more.

Product and personal development. There are many specialty concepts that could complement and enhance your frame designs and maybe even help you develop a new niche market. Some examples include decorative matting, such as fabric wrapping, gilded bevels, and traditional French matting; unique frame finishing techniques, such as gilding; and digital printing services, such as wide format printing and photo restoration. It's an ideal time to develop some of these skills to improve your offerings and foster a deeper passion for your career.

Professional certification can also add value to your business. Set aside time to research the certified picture framer (CPF) designation awarded by the Professional Picture Framers' Association. The association's website, www.ppfa.com, has information on the CPF exam and resources like a study guide and recommended reading.

Digital Ways to Add Value

Corporate identity. Consider updating your business's overall image. Does your logo seem dated? What about your color palette? Good branding can add value to a business in multiple ways, such as increased consumer trust and perception.

Website. Virtually everyone uses Google as their primary search engine today. Approximately four out of five consumers use online research to make buying decisions, so a good online presence is critical to your business. Here are some tips to consider when updating or redesigning your website:

- Keep it simple. Consumers need to be able to clearly find what they're looking for.
- Images are more engaging and valuable to your website than written content. Use professional photography whenever possible, and personalize images with human content, such as shots of yourself, your team, and even happy customers.
- Make sure your website is dynamic and adapts well to different devices like computers, tablets, and smartphones. This requires using a modern platform like

Wordpress that allows for mobile-friendly formatting.

- Showcase an inspirational gallery of examples.

Business listing. If you haven't already done so, claim your Google Business listing. Most consumers who search for your business will read your listing before they even get to your website, so making sure your address, contact information, and store hours are up to date is critical. It's also important to include recent, inspiring photos of your business. If possible, set up a Google 360 tour inside your shop. About 80 percent of consumers read online reviews before buying anything, so soliciting five-star reviews from your happiest customers should become part of your sales routine. You could also contact some of your best regular customers now and ask them for help with this.

Videos. After Google, the second most popular search engine in the world is YouTube. Harness the power of this platform and create a free YouTube page for your business (don't forget to add links to your website and social media).

Why not upload a virtual tour of your business? For example, you could make a montage of your backroom operation to help sell the artisanal aspect of custom framing. Or you could create an informative video explaining the features and benefits of different products such as premium

glazing options. These types of videos don't have to be slick, professional productions; in fact, they can come across as more credible when you personalize them and feature yourself and/or your staff.

Social media. Learn more about managing your social media presence. You could invest some time to create and schedule future posts based around seasonal opportunities. Keep it social; promote and personalize stories about customers and their special framed pieces.

Electronic digital marketing. If you have a database of customer email addresses, you can use this for marketing email campaigns via popular web-based email clients such as MailChimp or Constant Contact. Many of these clients offer free versions and are very easy to learn and use. They also offer step-by-step tutorials to learn how they work. Now could be a great time to get your head around this part of your business and build a schedule of future email campaigns to directly market to your customers.

Even though there is so much uncertainty and fear right now, there is one thing we be sure of; there will be an end to this. Keep busy, stay safe, and do what you can now to prepare for better times ahead. **PFM**

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