



DECOR Goes Behind the Scenes with Matt Puchalski to Find Out How He Cultivated a Successful Frameshop.

BY KRISTIN STEFEK BRASHARES

# ON TOP

(Photo by Jill Carlson of Martin Woods Image Consulting)

# OF HIS GAME

the best year in the business' history, despite a troubled economy.

## Getting His Start

Puchalski started framing at a nationally recognized framing franchise in the latter part of his high school years. At 20 years old, when the frameshop went out of business, the ambitious youth purchased the framing equipment and customer list, registered as a sole proprietorship and set up shop in his parents' basement.

"I called on our previous top customers and told them I had started Masterpiece Framing," he says. "I asked them to contact me for their future picture framing needs."

He juggled classes at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and home consultations with customers, showing them everything he had to offer from a suitcase filled with corner samples. In his downtime from school, he called on customers, set up appointments and ordered framing materials. Most of the clients were homeowners, but he managed to land two corporate jobs, earning enough revenue to help him move into his first storefront after graduating from college.

"I think my parents were happy when I decided to move out of the basement," he says. "My workshop and storage area had begun to take over."

In 2003, shortly after celebrating his 22<sup>nd</sup>

Like many new business owners, Matt Puchalski faced initial challenges after opening his first retail store, Masterpiece Framing, a custom frameshop in Bloomingdale, Ill. There were days he'd play Solitaire on his computer, waiting for customers to come. He sometimes struggled to pay rent, as there were hardly enough sales to get by.

"My first year in business was painful," he says. "It was not uncommon for me to have 'zero' days, where the only people calling or stopping by my store were solicitors. I remem-

ber thinking that if all the solicitors were actual customers, business would be booming."

The trying times, however, didn't last long. Determined to succeed, Puchalski worked hard on the fundamentals. He concentrated heavily on customer service—showing up to appointments on time, returning telephone calls and e-mails promptly and thanking clients for their business. Coupled with high-quality frame designs, his efforts began to pay off in the form of repeat business and referrals.

Since that time, he's continued to move full-speed ahead, and last year, his constant persistence to improve Masterpiece Framing led to

### Masterpiece Framing At A Glance

**Store Location:** Bloomingdale, Ill.

**Years In Business:** 7

**Employees/Duties:** Matt Puchalski: owner, framer and self-proclaimed chief toilet bowl cleaner; Deborah: designer/framer; Alex: independent art consultant specializing in original art

**More Information:** matt@mframing.com; www.mframing.com

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birthday, he invested his savings into re-registering Masterpiece Framing as an S-Corporation and researched potential locations. He decided on a 1,400-square-foot space in a strip mall in Bloomington, Ill., where the majority of his basement-business' clients resided.

Masterpiece Framing's gallery walls feature all kinds of unique framing displays.

"My first gallery was nothing special," he says. "It was tucked into a small corner of the strip mall and street visibility was poor. Rent was reasonable, though. After signing a three-year lease, I quickly got to work painting and constructing worktables, storage bins and store fixtures."

Puchalski's family and friends pitched in—his

dad aiding with the construction work and his mother and sister painting and helping with the interior design.

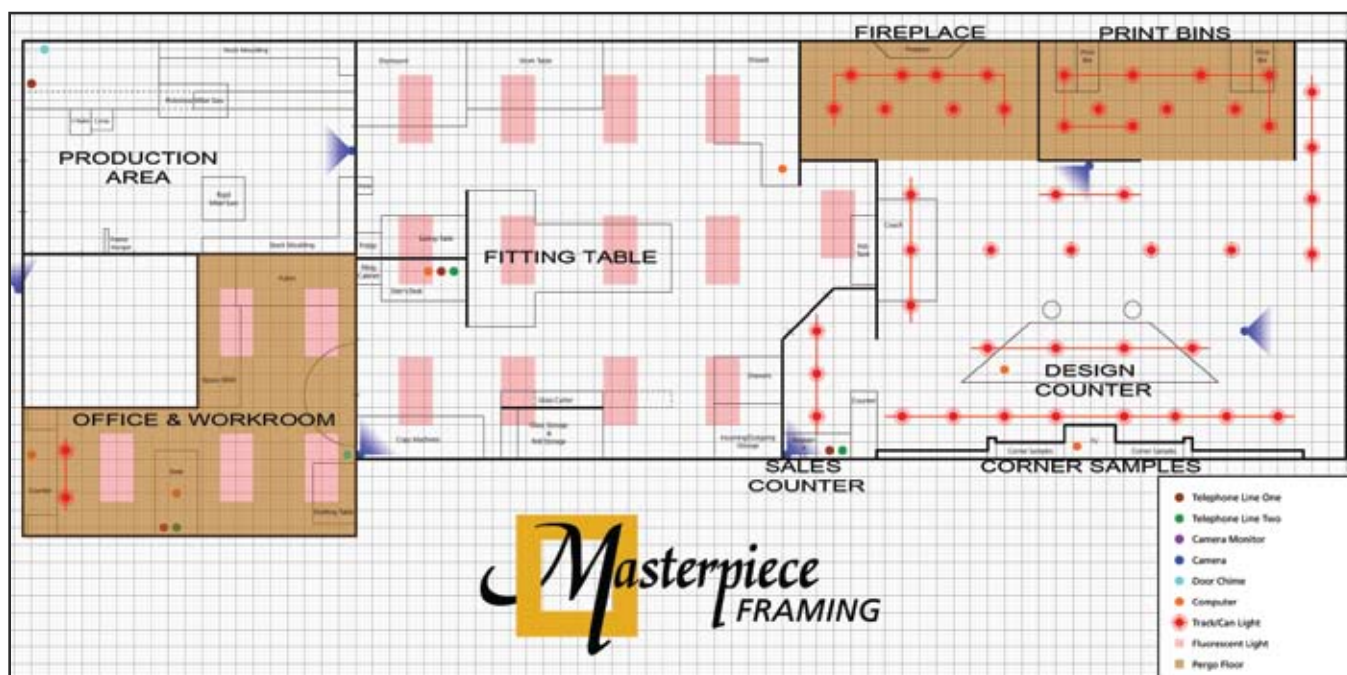
Two years later, when he had established a solid foundation, he expanded and partnered with a local photographer to open a second retail location—a 1,000-square-foot satellite gallery. Puchalski dedicated the space as a design showroom, leaving the frame production at the original location.

Masterpiece Framing operated in the front of the satellite gallery, and the back area served as a photography studio. In exchange for Puchalski covering rent on the entire space, the photographer worked for free as a frame designer.

"If a customer came into the gallery seeking custom framing, he would assist them," Puchalski says of the photographer. "When he was not with a framing customer, he was able to pursue his photography business and operate out of the same space. This partnership sounded great in theory and looked good on paper. I had a second location without the expense of payroll. The photographer had a photo studio without the expense of rent. We could bounce business between framing customers and photography customers."

## Bigger and Better Things

In 2006, Puchalski spearheaded a major expansion of the first location, moving the gallery to a more spacious 2,200-square-foot store to take advantage of a superior location in the same strip mall.



View this floorplan in more detail at [www.decoramagazine.com](http://www.decoramagazine.com).

It was the third time he had expanded the business, and it would prove to be his most challenging endeavor at the time, as he and his staff continued to operate the existing gallery during the transition.

"The renovation and move were not easy," Puchalski says. "Due to timing and budget limitations, we did all of the construction work ourselves."

After several months of exhaustive work and little sleep, the new state-of-the-art gallery was open for business.



A display promotes the store's photo restoration services.



This framed award greets customers.

## A Smart Move

Even with the success of the expansion, there were problems with the business. Puchalski's time was consumed with traveling between the sec-

ond and third locations. Unfortunately, the photographer he had partnered with lacked Puchalski's motivation and passion, and Puchalski started to wonder if he had made the right move.

## HOW MATT MARKETS HIS BUSINESS

Through lots of trial and error, Puchalski has weeded through a lot of not-so-successful advertising ideas and come up with solid ones. Here are four strategies he says have worked well in keeping the business in front of customers.

### 1. "Keep Us In Mind" Notes

We attach a removable card to the wire of every frame job that leaves our gallery. It reads: "Happy with your frame? The finest compliment we can receive is a referral from past clients and customers. Thank you for supporting a locally owned business. Visit [www.mframing.com](http://www.mframing.com) for more great framing ideas."

We also have attached flyers to the packaging of completed frames announcing seasonal promotions. This is a great idea because it is extremely cost-effective.

### 2. Direct Mailings

We run quarterly mailings to our existing customers. Using LifeSaver software, we print mailing labels and attach them to postcards that we design and print in-house. We signed up for a bulk-rate mailing permit at our local post office to help keep costs down. The postcards advertise a new product or service, a new piece of art on display or an upcoming event. The postcard prompts them to take action by either stopping by our gallery to make a purchase or visiting our Web site to learn more.

### 3. Online Presence

Masterpiece Framing has had a Web site since day one. It has landed us countless jobs, and I consider it to be our best form of advertising. It serves as an informative online portfolio that gives people confidence in our work before they ever step foot in our store. We update the site seasonally. I believe that having a Web site is a no-

brainer for any business.

The Internet and our Web sites have played a major role in the growth of Masterpiece Framing. In fact, I think it's been the most successful advertising medium for my business, not to mention it's our cheapest form of advertising.

### 4. E-Newsletters/E-Mail Blasts

I sent out our first e-newsletter in October. I've been collecting e-mails for the last couple years and finally decided to do an e-mail blast.

I signed up to use Constant Contact ([www.constantcontact.com](http://www.constantcontact.com)), a program that I believe delivers a significant return on investment. For \$15 dollars per month, you can send an e-mail to 500 contacts using customizable newsletter templates. The coolest part is that the e-mails are trackable, and you get statistics showing how your e-mail performed.

You can see who opens your e-mail, what links they've clicked on, if they've forwarded your e-mail and much more. Our first e-mail landed us three fairly large corporate jobs and a few smaller frame orders, and I was able to get the word out about my new art Web site [www.mattsart.com](http://www.mattsart.com) (see page 34 for more details). I definitely plan to take full advantage of this program for future advertising campaigns.

—By Matt Puchalski

## Takeaway Tip: Keep Your Eyes & Ears Open for Ideas.

Aside from brainstorming while framing, Matt Puchalski seeks inspiration from other successful businesses, sometimes outside the industry. "It's great when you can get inspiration from another business' brilliant idea and spin it into your own idea," he says. "Reading books and trade magazines is another excellent source of new creative ideas. I've recently started listening to business podcasts while at the gym."

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“Looking back on this experience, I now realize that I was too eager to grow too fast,” he says. “After three years of owning the second location, I came to the realization that I would not be able to duplicate the success of my original store.”

Last January, he made good on a New Year’s resolution to close the satellite location. “This was one of the hardest decisions I have ever had to make because I hate admitting defeat,” he says.

Looking back, he realized it was one of the best business decisions he’d ever made. “It has been a huge weight off my shoulders,” he says. “I now view owning the second location as a learning experience instead of a failure.”

He focused last year entirely on the new location, which helped him achieve

significant success thanks in large part to improved visibility and an upgraded interior featuring exciting frame displays, such as a framed flat-screen TV and a framed 75-gallon freshwater aquarium.

“Despite the current state of the economy, we have managed to have our best year ever,” he said in late October. “We have done more business this year-to-date with only one store than we did last year with two stores.”

Deborah Soboleski, a framer/designer at Masterpiece Framing who has been working with Puchalski for the past eight years, says part of what makes the business so strong is the dedication to the best possible customer service and efforts to keep the business in front of clients. “We’ve stayed on top of the

advertising—sending out postcards and e-mails,” Soboleski says. “We just keep plugging along.”

Now, Puchalski is entering 2009 more confident than ever. “For the first time, I feel like I have now taken control of the business and am headed in the right direction,” he says.



Matt Puchalski works in the production area.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BRANDING

Matt Puchalski believes a business’ brand includes everything from the displays in a store to the way sales associates treat customers. So, he works hard to perfect every aspect of the store’s image.

### SIGNAGE

Our signs are silent salespeople that educate our customers about picture framing as they walk through our store.

### LOGOS

We put our logo on everything from our direct-mail postcards to the pens at our design counter that customers use to sign their checks. Make sure your logo is easily readable and professional looking because once you choose it, you have to stick with it. Many independent shops change their logo every three months and consistently have an inconsistent look. To make an impact, you need to bombard the public with your same logo over and over again.

### COLORS

Color might not seem all that important, but using consistent colors throughout your gallery, print material and anything else associated with your business will help make a lasting impression on your customers. Our store colors are Burgundy, Gold and Black. Repetition is the key here. Whether

customers receive a postcard in the mail from Masterpiece Framing, visit our Web site or stop by our gallery, they will know that they are dealing with the same business. Our colors are uniform across the board.

### REPETITION

Every quarter, Masterpiece Framing sends direct mailers to existing customers. If the recipients decide to visit our store, they are greeted by an oversized banner prominently displayed in the front window. The banner contains the same image that appears on the postcard. Repetition is important. If the customer decides to visit our Web site, they are greeted by the postcard image repeated on the welcome page.

### CUSTOMER SERVICE

I believe the quality of your product, services you offer and your turnaround time all play a part in your brand. Customers take away memories from their experiences with you—good memories and bad ones. If you offer to carry their large piece of framed art out to their car, they will remember. If you show up 10 minutes late to work, and they’re waiting outside your door, they will remember. Always bring your “A” game, and that’s what people will remember about you.

—By Matt Puchalski

## In His Own Words

Matt Puchalski Reflects on How He Got to Where He is Today

“Looking back on the past seven years of owning Masterpiece Framing, I have learned a ton. I received an education that I believe is far superior to any master’s degree in business. I once heard a picture framer describe this journey as becoming ‘street smart,’ and I couldn’t agree more. More importantly, owning a business and watching it grow has given me a satisfaction in life unlike anything else. I still wake up every morning with that same excited feeling in my stomach ready to go into work and frame.

As wacky as that sounds, it is completely true. There is nothing more satisfying to me than seeing a smile on a customer’s face (or sometimes tears of joy) after presenting them with their exquisitely framed piece. I now consider many of my customers to be close friends, and I even call one customer my girlfriend. Making customers happy is what will keep me motivated and in this business for the rest of my life—unless someone decides to offer me \$1 million for the business. Any takers?”

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## From Framer to Artist: Matt Puchalski Unleashes His Artistic Side



Matt Puchalski has always had a passion for drawing and painting. Instead of pursuing a career as an artist, though, he decided to focus first on establishing a solid business.

“My time over the past few years has been spent growing and promoting Masterpiece Framing, a custom picture-framing business that I started out of my parents’ basement at the age of 20,” he says. “I always tell people that I would rather be out

“Kingdom of Color”



“Winter Water Tower”

selling frames and eating, instead of painting pictures and starving. For that reason, all of my energy has been focused on being a business owner and framing pictures, which I thoroughly enjoy.”

This year, as he reached the seven-year mark of owning Masterpiece Framing, Puchalski decided to shift some of his attention back to art, and the result has been an impressive new series of artwork featuring Chicago’s skyline and prominent landmarks. Through the use of vibrant, intense colors, he creates impressionistic paintings of recognizable locations in the Windy City, including the Sears Tower, Chicago Water Tower Place and The Art Institute. He strives to capture the energy of the city through highly saturated color and whimsical brushstrokes.

“There has been nothing more satisfying than watching Masterpiece Framing grow to the point where I am now ready to start making art a part of my life again,” he says. “Art is what makes me feel alive.”

Viewers of his paintings are sure to glean some of that energy.

For more information or to view, purchase or sell Puchalski’s artwork, call 630-893-4390, e-mail [matt@mattsart.com](mailto:matt@mattsart.com), or visit [www.mattsart.com](http://www.mattsart.com).

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“Surging Skyline”