

# Glass Factors

A look at current issues affecting glass quality and cost in the production framing industry.

*An interview with Tim Schmieder of Knight Industries*

**Q:** *Why do some production framers assume that it's better to import glass, and are those assumptions true?*

**A:** If purchasing decisions are solely made on the basis of lowest price, then the assumption is true.

The single advantage that imported glass has over domestic suppliers is price. A "Price Is King" procurement strategy for materials such as glass should come with some warnings and deep consideration.

A well-planned purchasing decision is typically made with three simple questions for the supplier:

- Do you have it? (availability)
- How much is it? (competitive pricing)
- When can I get it? (lead-time)

A well-inventoried, responsive, and competitively priced domestic supplier brings far stronger advantages to a production framer, such as:

- Responsive lead times
- Accurate and complete shipment
- Consistent source
- Guaranteed quality
- Lower on-hand inventory costs
- Reliable logistics
- Custom sizes and quantities
- Factory representation
- Ability to alter orders on short notice

**Q:** *How is current fuel and delivery cost affecting the cost of clear glass?*

**A:** Recently we have all experienced significant upward cost pressures. Nothing has affected the glass industry more than energy and transportation cost.

"Surcharge" has become a very familiar term within the glass industry. Natural gas is a critical component of the float glass manufacturing process. As a result of enormous increases in North American natural gas cost manufacturers have been forced to pass this cost to customers, including production picture framers.

The national average for diesel fuel has now surpassed regular unleaded at the pump. Coupled with increased demand and driver shortage, this has driven all transportation and freight costs to an all-time high.

Oceangoing imported containers often have some of the same surcharges based on fuel and energy. Freight from port to door has obviously been affected by the same increased trucking cost imposed on domestic suppliers.

Close proximity to major U.S. ports helps mitigate some of the increased cost that longer over-the-road hauls may have. However, with the changes since September 11, U.S. ports have experienced longer delays in Customs clearing stations.

**Q:** *Are there quality issues affecting imported vs. domestic glass or are those mostly a thing of the past?*

**A:** Imported glass quality is consistently inconsistent because many import agents have multiple manufacturing sources with different quality standards and limited knowledge of the U.S. market. As with all products, quality issues will arise at the most inopportune time. Make certain that your supplier is one that understands your expectations and has the ability to respond rapidly to any potential issues.

**Q:** *Are there specific color and quality standards for glass used in picture framing and what should a production framer watch for in this area?*

**A:** Color and quality standards differ from one manufacturer to another. It is very important to partner with a glass supplier that has a consistent source as well as an understanding of your particular specifications and quality expectations.

Incorrect or out-of-tolerance dimensions, inconsistent packaging, and poor understanding of quality expectations all lead to missed deadlines and production interruption.

**Q: Are there differences in the manufacturing processes?**

**A:** Although glassmaking is an historical process, advancements and technological differences between manufacturers can range from minor to major. Many offshore manufacturers still use the old obsolete "sheet glass" process versus modern float glass technology. More importantly for a production framer are the processes used for fabrication. Everything from thickness and dimensional tolerances to overall glass quality can differ. This includes stains, defects, scratches, cleanliness, and packaging,

**Q: Are there any differences in packaging of domestic vs. imported glass and what practical impact might this have?**

**A:** Due to the fragile nature of glass, packaging is a critical step in making sure a product does not arrive at a customer's facility damaged.

Customers with imported glass experience have said, "You never really know what you are going to get until you get it." Differences in packaging from one shipment to the next can result in lost production time and safety concerns during the unpacking process. Automated lines require consistent case dimensions and packaging methods to eliminate additional labor cost.

A glass separator is a crucial element in the packaging process. Incorrect separator methods can result in damaged glass. Paper-interleaved glass packed with post-consumable paper may become imprinted or stained in shipment. Powder-packed glass with the wrong level or amount of powder can become scratched in transit or production.

**Q: What are the advantages/disadvantages of cutting glass yourself versus ordering it pre-cut to size?**

**A:** Limited or short quantity production runs that can be cut

onsite from a standard sized lite of glass is advantageous from a per-square-foot price standpoint. Most manufacturers will have an increased price for quantities that are under the standard 2,000 or 4,000 pound cases.

Prior to making the decision to cut glass onsite rather than ordering glass cut to size, it is important to evaluate yield loss (drops), breakage, labor cost, and in-house equipment efficiencies and expertise.

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**Q: What issues does a production framer have regarding the storage of glass?**

**A:** Glass stored for long periods in areas with seasonal humidity changes can result in "staining," which is a milky film on the glass that ranges from difficult to impossible to clean.

In most production facilities space is at a premium. Suitably constructed wooden cases or metal racks may be stacked to provide additional production floor space.

**Q: What does a container of glass weigh, and how common is it for a framer to order a container?**

**A:** A full truckload of glass weighs approximately 44,000 pounds. Typically a framer will order a mixture of 2,000 and 4,000 pound cases to fill a truckload. Otherwise orders are purchased through local glass distributors.

**Q: Is glass typically sold by weight or by its size and number of sheets?**

**A:** Glass is typically priced by the square foot or per piece depending on the customer's procurement systems. The glass thickness determines the total square footage per case.

Most all glass sold in the production framing industry has been traditionally 2mm or 5/64" thick.

As a result of continuous cost pressure, the industry has been trending to thinner glass, especially for smaller dimensions. Once again it is critically important to develop some of your own product specifications and express those to your glass supplier to be certain of what you are buying.

Window thickness glass is typically used in larger sized projects with dimensions larger than 36" x 48". ■

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Tim Schmieder is the national sales manager for Knight Industries Corp. in Toledo, OH. He has more than 14 years of experience in the independent retail, wholesale distribution, and manufacturing channels of the building products industry in such roles as sales management, marketing, and program development.

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