perspective

Doing Things Right

By Matthew Kent

Everyone knows the expression, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." Most people would probably agree with that statement. But what can we take from that old expression, and what does it have to do with today's fast-paced, highly competitive wall art and production framing industry? While the expression sounds straightforward enough, how can you apply it not only as a rule of thumb but also as a company philosophy? Two main areas come to mind: materials and perceived value.

Materials

I love using quality materials that are appropriate for a project in which the material is allowed to have its own beauty, not simply be a surface decoration. This can almost be a spiritual endeavor, giving material the respect and dignity it deserves by showcasing it. This is certainly worth doing.

All too often, in my opinion, there is a lot of manipulation of materials, usually in an attempt to make them look like something they're not. The result can look cheap because it wasn't done right.

This can result in a devalued price perception. If a customer is disappointed in a moulding's feel, weight, and depth of finish, it will have little value in that customer's eyes. Manufacturers and designers need to take great care in creating faux materials. If not done perfectly, they will be seen as cheap, making them hard to sell.

Inventive manufacturers and product designers would be wise, in my view, to develop framing products that celebrate the inherent qualities of materials. Based on my experience, when the industry uses real materials, profit margins are better and company prestige rises. If all your competition is running to the latest, cheapest material, that's a clue to run fast the other way.

Good design, I feel, should show off the material. For example, we recently created the Craftsman Collection, which celebrates the Arts and Craft movement with frames made from solid quarter-sawn oak. The wood costs more but is well worth it because it is done right. The collection is now sold through 17 distributors. In this case, the material sings its own song.

Another example is a small company that makes custom frames out of raw standard steel. These plain iron frames sell at over $50 a foot! Why? Because they let steel be steel.

Perceived Value

There's been a steady trend in the past decade to keep lowering prices and quality in the ready-made market. The value keeps going down to the point where there is no profit and little quality. OEMs are pushed into using cheaper products until they can no longer be done right and have no worth. They end up as trash in a few years. But shouldn't art worth doing have at least some timeless value? The industry needs to turn this trend around before it's too late.

Such a change can be done successfully. For example, working with the designer from one of our largest OEM accounts, I created a new line of quality wood moulding using rich stains, unique cuts, and wider profiles than what they had previously used. To its great credit, the company changed its thinking—and rapidly declining sales—by bucking the industry trend. They began using mouldings that were more than twice the cost of what they usually sold.

The result is a happy one. The representatives were excited about selling the higher quality line, large orders were secured, and large reorders have been flowing. Reports have all been positive, and one big box store said the new product was the best the company had made for them in over a decade. Why did the buyer say that? Because the OEM did something right.

The important factor is perceived value. If you make low-priced items, with little value, they will always be devalued in customers' minds. It you make a quality item, the perceived value is much higher—sometimes 100 to 200 percent higher even though it may only cost 20 percent more to make.

When I go to a photo frame rack at a box store and have to decide between two frames, I pay attention to this. If one frame costs $9.99 and the other $11.99, and the cheaper one is ¾" wide and made of a fake material while the $11.99 frame is made of a real material and is 2" wide, I perceive that the second one has a higher value. On the other hand, if a product is not what you want, you won't buy it at any price. The key is producing something that looks much more expensive but doesn't cost that much more to make.

The bottom line is that to be successful, you need to bring good designs to the market and use the correct materials for your designs if you want to create a high perceived value. This is the recipe for doing something right. ■

Matthew Kent is the marketing/sales and design director of Nickell Moulding Company. He has worked in the design, gift, and art industry for 17 years, teaches sculpture at a local college, and also does commission sculptures. He lives with his family in South Bend, IN.