



Marketing to the 'Flat' World

By Harriet Rinehart

In the 2005 landmark book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*, Thomas L. Friedman outlines the new universe in which everyone is now living and doing business. What Friedman means by “flat” in this context is “connected.”

The Internet has changed everything, not just access to your boss's embarrassing photos or your ability to buy a cool shirt at a great price from a retailer you previously had never known existed.

The wall decor industry has been unalterably changed by the new developments in cheap communications over the past 10 to 15 years. Instant communication has virtually obliterated all barriers to international competition. This new world is exciting in its opportunities to reach new markets, but it will also chew up anyone who does not keep pace with the changes.

Increasingly, people will buy products, including wall decor, wherever they find what they like for the least expensive price. You must have products in front of the buyer's consciousness whenever they are in the mood to buy, whether that means weekends at the mall or surfing the web at 2 a.m.

Some forms of globalization are not new to the wall decor industry, but the meaning of the term “global supply chain” has changed over the past 20 years. In the 1980s, when virtually all printing of U.S. art reproductions was done domestically, a few companies began printing in Italy. If the finest quality coffee-table art books had traditionally been printed in Italy, then the appeal of art posters printed in Italy for the mass market was a value-added plus. This was, in one small step, globalization.

In the early 1990s with the advent of faxing and relatively inexpensive world-wide 24-hour delivery, it became cost effective to have color separations made in Japan. Color proof sheets for offset reproductions were shipped from the U.S. overnight and the suggested corrections were faxed back to the separator. This seemed very innovative at the time, but—as many learned—

language barriers sometimes resulted in unintended colors in the final printing.

As the twenty-first century opened, the world “flattened” still more. Frame shops, which had traditionally offered local customers a selection of 50 to 100 in-stock posters and a few catalogs to review for special orders, could not compete with the web offerings of 100,000 searchable images. Many frame shops gradually sold and stocked less and less art. On the other hand, shops that offered true customer service prospered as customers became overwhelmed by the confusing myriad of choices on-line.

For the production framing industry, another important change was taking place during this period. Big box stores and furniture retailers began to stock more and more wall decor. The customer, increasingly pressed for time, did not want to visit

a gallery just to select art (unless they were true collectors, buying unique art as a hobby). For decorative purposes, the end user clearly preferred buying a fully framed art print to put into a shopping cart, then into a car trunk, and finally onto the wall at home.

Initially, this new marketplace was very good for artists, publishers, and framing companies. Many more prints were sold through these outlets than ever before. For many in the production framing industry, the period from 1990-2000 represented the best of times.

To supply large quantities of framed art, big box stores started turning to Asian countries to supply framing much less expensively than it could be manufactured in the U.S. Poster publishers were faced with the challenge of getting their U.S. printed product delivered to Chinese framers.

In many ways, this was the real beginning of globalization in the wall decor industry. Publishers who had fought to keep their printing in the U.S. were forced to find overseas printers in the Pacific Rim. Not only were they competing on the price of the print, but they also had to figure in the cost of shipping a skid of paper from the U.S. printers to offshore framers. Shipping from Korean printers to Chinese framers looked like a

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much better value.

Where does this leave the wall decor industry in 2011? Are all indicators negative? Absolutely not. There has been an industry marketing art reproductions since the seventeenth century, when Dutch merchants bought black and white engravings for newly emerging middle class walls. The industry needs to adjust to the new universe and learn how to work in a "flat" world, where the rules are constantly changing and everyone is connected to everyone else.

Americans prefer many kinds of imports. But much of the world has always valued American cultural products like Hollywood, jazz, and modern art. American Indian art has always been very popular with the Japanese. Impressionism and Post-impressionism "feels good" to buyers seeking modern but not "too modern." Abstract art, which is more acceptable to some religious faiths than figurative art,

increasingly appeals to the younger generation.

The marketing of wall art is also changing. It will be more difficult in the future to establish a big name artist with purchasing power because of the almost limitless number of choices available through the Internet. That is one shift that cannot be turned back. There will be fewer and fewer "stars" in the art marketplace, and those that there are will have a shorter and shorter lifespan of popularity as the world keeping filtering through the hottest and the newest.

The global reach of American cultural icons will help the U.S. to push into new international markets as rising middle classes in other countries looks for status symbols to announce their arrival on the world stage. America will need to adopt the technological skills to reach them.

Who knows what art delivery

system lies down the road. As broadband grows, retail clients may directly download image files to custom wall-hung viewers. The art could be seen for a month, or forever, based on a subscription fee. The point is that those who deal in wall decor need to always be thinking about the latest and future methods of delivering the art experience for a growing world audience.

Showing off the creative force of artists will require a willingness to envision and then adopt the technology needed to reach the huge growing middle class worldwide. The middle class has been the backbone of the art print industry since the seventeenth century. It won't fail us now. ■

Harriet Rinehart was the founder of Rinehart Fine Arts, which she owned from 1983-1999 before the company joined Bentley Publishing Group. She now is involved in artist management for the Bentley Global Arts Group.

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