

## A Few Basic Truths

By Tony Barrett

### **I have kicked around in this wonderful industry for almost 20 years,**

living on both sides of the Atlantic. This past decade I have worked with Bentley Publishing Group in California. I have come in contact with many Americans and made new friends along the way. The main thing I have learned is that while there are hundreds of opinions and methods of working in our industry over the past few years, most people seem to agree on a few basic truths:

1. The industry is changing rapidly.
2. New technology is both a major challenge and an opportunity.
3. What the heck do we do about China?

### **The Changing Industry**

Managing change is always a challenge for any business or industry. In those 10 years that I worked in the U.S.,



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I have seen more frame shops and galleries closing than opening. I have seen big box retailers dominate the wall decor industry as they have in

many industries before us pushing average prices into a downward spiral that for many OEMs means that manufacturing offshore is the only viable option. Alternative wall decor has risen sharply alongside the move to produce in China. This is a trend that concerns art publishers as much as it does matboard and glass manufacturers. Canvas products have dominated the European market first and then lately have begun to establish a large market share in the U.S. These canvases are often sold gallery wrapped with no frame—cutting out the need for decorative molding.

So how does the industry face up to those challenges and look for an opportunity that surely exists in every situation? All publishers have been under intense pressure to offer lower prices to meet the demands of big

### **The industry today revolves around the main issues—a changing market, the challenge of technology, and how to deal with China**

box retailers and allow the domestic OEMs to compete with goods made in China.

At Bentley, about two years ago we began segment publishing. This involved identifying the images to be published mainly for the OEM market and then printing those in Asia (not China) in standard sizes and deeper runs to lower costs. This is our Volume line, and it lowered the published retail prices quite significantly. It is intended to offer prints as a commodity, which is what wall decor has become to big box retailers. It has also created a buffer between higher quality art and the market where a print is judged only on its size and price. We catalog this line every six months and reserve the catalog space in our larger, more expensive catalog for our Gallery publishing line.

### **Technology**

At the same time we have poured significant resources in to our website development. When you begin to publish in a segmented fashion the way we have, it becomes vital that customers can access what you are publishing quickly and efficiently. We have developed a searchable website that allows our partners to search and find any size and subject matter in either our Volume or Gallery line then upload that search result into a PDF online catalog that can be printed in their offices with their own printer or e-mailed for someone else to view. Our site is updated weekly with new images (we publish around 100 new ones a month).

One day an OEM framer called me on my cell phone while I was traveling. He was presenting at his New York showroom to a major retailer. The buyer had seen everything he had framed but wanted more Tuscan images. I called my office and had them collect our newest Tuscan images into a PDF and e-mail it in. The OEM framer printed it out and slipped it into the pres-

entation in less than 10 minutes after he had called me. We got a large order from that. I wouldn't be telling the story otherwise. But the real point is that technology was our ally. Without cell phones, PDF, and e-mail, we would have both lost the opportunity.

## The Challenge of China

The largest challenge facing the wall decor industry right now is China. We read a lot of stories about how we should be involved in the great Chinese social and commercial revolution. What we do not hear enough about is how that interaction should take place. Our industry rightly views China as a threat. As publishers we suffer from routine stealing of our images. The Art Copyright Coalition has been doing a great job trying to galvanize the whole industry and not just publishers into fighting the counterfeit

art producers.

Prior to 9/11, the Decor show in New York was the major International trade show for our industry. Now there is not even a show there. Other shows like the West Coast Art & Frame Show and DecorExpo Atlanta are excellent for domestic business, and SACA in Italy is a good International show but doesn't deal with the main issues involving China. It is my belief that we also need a show somewhat like the WCAF in China. Macau (which is furiously building a Las Vegas-style strip) or Hong Kong would be great venues. American and European suppliers could interact with Chinese and Asian industry.

One option for American OEMs is to outsource some portion of their production to China. But how does an OEM go about this without ending up working with the "bad" guys? How do we educate everyone in the industry about the

perils? Maybe a series of seminars like those offered at the WCAF but aimed at working with Asia might help.

China will not stop producing low-cost wall decor anytime soon. The challenge for the industry in Europe and the U.S. is how to stay relevant in that market. If we do not, then big box retailers will end up working directly with Chinese OEMs, who will publish their own prints and make their own matboard and moulding, and we will simply cease to exist. The challenge for domestic show organizers is to create an American-style show that the entire industry can support that will also attract the major players in China and Asia. Not everyone in our industry agrees with this idea, but I believe that if we build it, they will come. What I do know is that if a show like that gets off the ground, then Bentley Publishing Group will be first to sign up for a booth. ■



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