

The Changing Print Market

By Patrick Sarver

Based on the sales activity at this year's West Coast Art & Frame Show in Las Vegas, there has been a significant pick up in buying by OEM and contract framers. Indeed, the response by OEMs made it seem a bit like old times for print publishers, who said that they hadn't seen so much interest in prints in a long time.

It's not as if the clock has been turned back to old buying habits, however. In addition to looking for the latest images that fit with the newest interior design trends, there is more overall interest these days in things like smaller images, lower cost giclées, and fast turnaround times. Competition for North American art suppliers from Asian sources also remains strong, especially in larger runs where time is not as much of a factor. And the emphasis on new images is more intense than ever.

"The WCAF was a tremendously productive show for the industry and our company," says John Chester, owner of Wild Apple Graphics. "Even though we are in constant contact by phone, e-mail, and website, a show like this allows us to have in-depth face-to-face discussions with all of our key customers."

More Images

Chester says that he found that these discussions showed that there were a number of important trends in play. "One is the continuous search for new, marketable imagery," he says. "Long gone are semi-annual or quarterly or even bi-monthly product introductions. We can present a robust portfolio one day, and less than a week later a customer will ask, 'Don't you have anything new to show us?'"

Turnaround times are continuing to get faster and faster throughout the industry, Chester says. "Our employees have finally accepted that what we used to call 'rush' is the new normal. While wall decor products generally have a shorter lifespan than in years past, the great news is that we are finding that customers are hungry—voracious, actually—for artwork."

The stronger interest in new releases was seen by a number of other publishers as well. "OEMs are responding very well to new releases," says Tony Barrett, vice president of sales and marketing at Bentley Publishing Group. "They are driven by what



OEM and contract art buyers at the WCAF Show, as shown at the Editions Limited booth, were especially on the lookout for new imagery for their clients.

is newest in the marketplace as part of their desire to be ahead of the design curve and promote art that their competition does not yet have. This has made print-on-demand (POD) giclées on mat paper increasingly acceptable to domestic OEMs as the price has become more affordable and because it helps set them apart from their competition."

Other publishers are also finding an increased interest in POD prints. "We have a new POD photo site that is getting lots of traction," says Debi Gango, owner and CEO of Gango Editions. "We are finding more emphasis now on POD prints, smaller art, quicker turnaround times, and smaller quantities. We now have a digital press on which we can print in sizes less than 13"x19" in any quantity. OEMs love it. They can select any image from our entire line and crop or resize the image to fit what they are looking for. Our OEMs want to see a larger variety but aren't buying as

OEMs at the WCAF Show exhibited an increased interest in new sizes and shapes, more and more images, smaller runs, and faster turnaround

many of each image. Everyone is really watching their inventories; therefore, turnaround has gotten very quick.”

More Print Sizes

There also seems to be less standardization in print buying and more emphasis on providing something different that clients will buy. While some OEMs’ clients are looking for larger framed works, others are looking for smaller pieces. The difference is often a matter of different marketing strategy on the part of clients.

“OEMs are using many sizes of prints today,” says Chester. “Our most popular size is 36”x24”, but recently we’ve had increased demand for oversize prints like 30”x40”, 35”x35”, and 24”x48”. At the other end of the spectrum, 6”x6” is also seeing a lot of action. In panels, 8”x20” has taken over from the previously popular 12”x36” format.”

Sometimes the print choices are strongly dictated by in-store marketing approaches. “We’re still selling art in all sizes, but we are seeing more OEMs using smaller pieces like 6”x6”, 4”x10”, and 8”x10”, says Gango. “Most of the retail clients for these images seem to be using those sizes for endcap promotional programs.”

Print Styles

Even with all the changes taking place in the OEM print market and the demand for new imagery, the subject matter and overall style of prints that are popular isn’t changing radically. In fact, Chester says that he sees content and style trends evolving only incrementally. “Florals are as strong as ever, with contemporary outselling traditional. Abstract themes are growing in the middle market. Landscape, kitchen, bath, wine, coffee, words, and inspiration also continue to be solid, with no major shake-ups.”

Barrett says that because many OEM clients placing orders at the WCAF Show sell to the Western U.S., the company was seeing a solid interest in Western art. “However, the most interesting thing for us was an overall lack of a clear-cut trend at the show,” he says. “Clients came to us for Western art, but



Buyers at the booth of Haddads Fine Arts responded well to the company’s contemporary interpretations of figurative subjects.



Debi Gango, CEO of Gango Editions, says that images with circular images and blue/brown or aqua/chocolate colors are particularly popular at this time.



Photographic images and contemporary florals were among the popular prints that gathered interest at Image Conscious.

they also wanted museum reproductions, contemporary abstracts, and traditional landscapes. No one thing dominated.”

New Colors

There seems to be a bit more change in the colors of artwork these days than in the subject matter—but not by much. For example, Barrett says, “The bright warm Tuscan palette, with its reds and oranges, has been popular for many years and it continues to dominate the market. The blue-green palette, which is popular mainly in very contemporary looks, so far has remained a separate market niche.”

The one thing that buyers seem to be looking for is color. “Big and bold florals and abstracts,” says Simone Becker, director of sales for Image Conscious. “Hot colors like tomato reds, red oranges, yellow, purple, and teals top the list. People want to liven up their earth-tone rooms with lively accessories. The restraint that people are feeling in other areas of their lives is being released on their walls.”

Gango says that her company is “seeing blue/brown or aqua/chocolate overtaking spice as the color of choice, and we are getting asked for it in all markets. We are also seeing colors becoming cleaner and brighter, with green gaining strength. And, just recently, we have been asked for purple from a number of OEMs.”

Sourcing Issues

Printing in Asia is still a hot topic among North American print publishers. Larger runs, especially of poster art, continue to be done offshore. Barrett points out that, “Printing in China—subject to minimums—has proved to be a big hit with OEMs. So far, we do not see any discernable shift back to printing in the U.S.”

If the trend to smaller print runs and more emphasis on PODs and faster turnaround times continues, however, there could be more of a shift to domestic printing. Gango, for one, says she does see “OEMs trying to increase their art sourcing from North American publishers. Most Americans would rather buy products made in the U.S.”

Another sourcing issue facing both publishers and OEMs is the trend for framing companies to ask publishers to subcontract or license the art reproduction to them. “This is a difficult issue for publishers, who invest much time and money in finding and developing quality artists and artwork,” says Chester. “The art is still what drives a



OEM print buyers also responded positively to attractive, creative print presentations, such as those at Pyramid America's booth.



Tony Barrett, vice president of the Bentley Publishing Group, says there is a wide interest in many print genres, such as contemporary abstracts like this one from Art Folio West as well as museum reproductions, Western art, and traditional landscapes.

customer to buy, no matter how nice the framing is. Publishers and artists need to be fairly compensated, and quality safeguards must be put in place for this business model to work well. This is likely to be a growing issue in the partnership between OEMs and publishers in the near future.”

In spite of the many changes and issues affecting the OEM print market, the outlook looks brighter than it has in some time. “Our business has been really strong the last few months,” says Gango. “We are hearing from customers that we haven't heard from in awhile. The OEMs can't get enough fashion, kitchen, and bath images. It feels like the economy is starting to come back.” ■