

A Time for Innovation

By Debi Gango Teschke

Who in this industry didn't like the 1990s? And I bet a lot of you would love to flip back the calendar to 2004. There are many moments in the history of the industry when times like those were great and profits flowed with ease. But it is 2008 now, and the industry is challenged. Everyone must adapt to survive.

There are still profits to be made in 2008, but they won't come easily. They will come with hard work and creativity. Most of all, making a profit will require innovation in every aspect of business. It is very easy to become complacent in good times. When times grow tougher, however, the practices that made business profitable before are often continued when they are outmoded. Only then do you discover that those practices no longer work as well and that you need to adapt and innovate. You need to find new ways to increase efficiency, to create value, and to build profits.

Even a "perfect" business needs to change. Each com-



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pany needs to find the business model that works for it but must remember that whatever works effectively today may not work tomorrow. Only continuing innovation will keep you out in front. And those innovations might involve product, systems, and people.

The place where most companies need to be the most innovative is in delivering new products to the marketplace. Customers demand newer, better, and faster framed art products at a marketable price.

This year, for example, our company arrived at fall trade shows with two new product lines. One of these products, Coloursheen, had been in development for almost two years and was ready just in time to help us through this difficult time. This bright new process delivers a broad range of colors that excited buyers all over the country. It also came at a time when metallic processes were at the cutting edge of fashion as well as home accessories.

The second new product line, the Jacqueline Collection, was much different. It was a classic response to customer demand. This collection is designed for boutique retailers and framers at a time when the industry trend is to reduce costs by limiting the number of choices. A customer who requires an image with limited distribution and a fair price now has a home.

When times get tougher, you need to find new ways to be efficient and deliver new products to the market place

The wall art industry also needs to be innovative with its management and production systems. Over the last decade the number of images that Gango Editions published annually grew immensely. Our old systems grew to keep up with the workload. In reality, those old systems turned out to be poorly suited to do what was now being asked of them. We responded by commissioning a web-based production management software that has saved the company thousands of labor hours every year. This required scrapping the old system for one that works for the company's and the industry's growing needs.

Similarly, our website had to change along with the Internet. Our old way of posting data periodically in a static shell failed to work as the digital world became more dynamic year by year. The new system allows us to add new features and update content daily.

Innovation also involves people. These are many truisms about people: They are the software of the business, they are the heart of the business, or they are the biggest challenge of the business. They can also be a great source of innovation. Everyone is a creature of habit. (Just ask my staff what I had for lunch the past five days.) Changing people and how you work can be hard, but it can provide the greatest benefit of all.

For instance, in our marketing efforts we needed to break down and analyze what we were doing so we could strip away bad habits and old thinking. Bad marketing is very expensive. We need every dollar to work at its maximum potential. We arranged for better communication between our art direction/market research people and our production people so not a single dollar would be wasted in getting product from design to market.

Easy profits sound wonderful, but dollars are never going to walk themselves in the door. Last year was a challenge for the entire industry, but we are getting stronger every day by continuing to innovate at every turn.

The point is simple: To be successful you need to invent and design new products, respond to customer demands, create new management and production systems, and work with your employees to work better and smarter. It can be challenging, but when everything works right it can also be exciting. I find that coming up with new ways to innovate can sometimes keep me up at night. But like most everyone in this business, I choose to be in it and I love it. ■