

Visualization Software

A New Tool for OEMs

By Jeff King

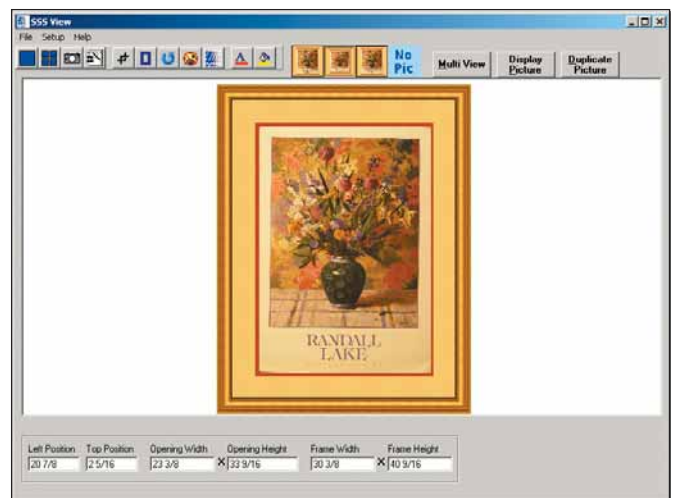
Framing visualization software has come a long way in a short time. In the past it was more suited for use by retail frame shops, but the latest versions of this software have been adapted to the needs of production framers. Part of this is in response to changes in the way that many production-framing clients are doing business. Many of them are expecting to get more information electronically these days, and that includes design samples. In an economy where speed in communicating ideas is important to everyone, commercial framers and their clients are using visualization software to provide a competitive advantage. The tradition of building design models is unlikely to disappear, but providing clients with virtual designs to make preliminary choices before physical samples are made speeds up the design process and provides clients with many more design selections.

The newest production visualization software has been developed to enhance the entire process of submitting high quality virtual samples to clients. It supports higher quality digital SLR images and provides a lot more flexibility in creating designs. It can also be integrated with a production and order entry system so images and specs can be stored showing the history of a design.

In the past, commercial framers would have to source images, get the images in, and make up models to send to a buyer. That's a very expensive and time-consuming process. With visualization software, you can start off with a base design and make other variations of it very easily with only a limited amount of editing. Making changes to images using visualization software is also much easier, with more flexibility in moving mats around and changing mouldings easily. This saves a lot of time when you're making up 10 images with 5 variations of each. You can switch out mouldings and mats very quickly to create different looks. In essence, the new visualization software has become a mat design or virtual



The components of a frame design are brought into visualization software either by photographing them or by importing images supplied by manufacturers and publishers (above). The software is then used to assemble these components into a virtual image of a frame design (below) that can then be e-mailed to a client. These images can be modified individually or can be used to generate variations on a design. (Just the image is sent, not the entire computer screen image.)



If your clients are interested in seeing more design options and faster turnaround, this software can be just what you need

frame design system. And the software creates a price quote for each design individually.

More Design Options

This software helps production-framing designers produce more designs for clients than in the past. Where you might have made 5, 10, or 20 designs for a customer before, you can now easily make 40 or 50 and show them much quicker. This gets that ball rolling faster because both you and your clients can be more responsive. It's also easier to e-mail new ideas to a buyer and ask if there's any interest rather than investing in producing models first.

Even if they use this software, framers will still need to make the real models. But you can create five different designs on a computer, and if a client doesn't like four of them, you only have to build the one model. Many production framers long looked for ways to reduce the number of models they have to make because of their cost. After all, when you make 40 models for evaluation, that's all up-front cost. With visualization software, you can provide 100 virtual models at very little cost. Plus, when your facility is geared to produce quantities of 500 or 5,000, putting a single item through the system can cause problems. The primary goal, however, is to provide an easy way to get proposed wall art designs to clients faster so they can tell you which ones they like.

Better Quality

One of the stumbling blocks of working this way in the past has been the quality of visualization software images. In large part, this was due to limitations with the cameras taking images of the art and framing components. With the new generation of visualization software, you can work with much better quality cameras, resulting in wall art images at the quality that makes electronic design presentation acceptable to clients. With this expanded capability, the type of camera you



Visualization software can add a number of design enhancements, such as the V-grooves shown in this virtual frame design. It can also be used for batch processing, in which a variety of different images and image sizes can be framed with the same framing style without having to place each image separately.

use becomes more important. To get the better quality images you need, you have to start with higher quality cameras to take the pictures of the art. Most custom frame shops don't typically use higher resolution digital SLR cameras because they're more expensive. For wholesale framing, where quality is a bigger issue, you've got to use higher quality cameras—at least a 10-megapixel camera, which is a digital SLR camera. The images used with the new generation of visualization software require this greater resolution and quality.

With this software, OEMs can also frame things virtually for their websites and never have to physically frame them at all. The key is that the quality has to be there. You have to have good quality images to make virtual presentation effective. If you will be using an image for the web or for e-mail promos, lower resolution is fine. If it's going to be used in a catalog or tear sheet, higher quality is important.

This higher level of quality does mean you need more computing power. If you're going to produce images mainly for a website or e-mail, you can get by with a cheaper system. If you're going to be producing the higher quality that many clients want, you'll need a workstation class machine with a lot of memory and larger hard drive along with having a color correct monitor.

Publisher Supplied Images

When you get images offline from a publisher, your camera doesn't matter as much. The issue then is what camera a publisher used for image capture. Sometimes images from publishers don't have very high quality. Publishers are usually very cautious about providing high-quality images because of the potential of image piracy. Instead, they provide lower resolution images that are like proofs. If an image is going to be used in

an e-mail or for a website, 72 dpi is fine, but if it's going to be printed, you're going to want at least 150 and preferably 250 or 300 dpi for an image to look good at the appropriate size.

Those who do professional digital image capture are taking 33 megapixel and greater images. They use these ultra high quality images to create giclée prints from original art. They won't give a production framer that level. So a wholesale framer using visualization software has to determine how far down the scale to go. If you're not buying a lot of prints, you don't have as much leverage with a publisher. A very large wholesale OEM, however, will have more ability to get the higher quality images. Not necessarily 300 dpi, but better quality.

For an OEM framer to really control design image quality, you're going to have to get actual prints in house. These can still be samples, even those with "sample" stamped on it. Clients will still get the idea. If you want to control quality, you're probably going to need to shoot the art yourself.

Better Customer Relations

One benefit of using the new visualization software is that it can allow you to be more reactive to your customers. When a client says, "I'd like to see some new things," how long does it take if you're creating manual models—a week or two? If you reduce that to a day or two, that would make your customer happier.

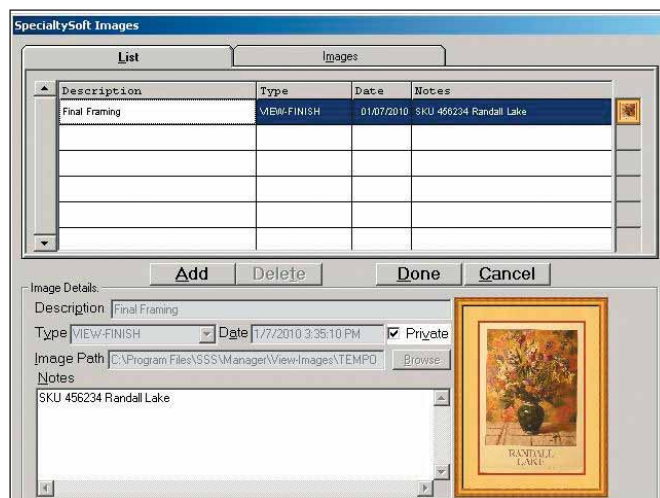
From a client perspective, they would be able to have more variety and have it quicker. That way a client can say, "I don't like the way that mat looked on this, but I like the way this other mat looked on that other design. Can you make that up and send it to me?" A production framer can then go to the order system, find the quote, make the changes, and send back the revised designs the same day. At the same time visualization software tells you how design changes will affect the price. This helps clients choose the images they want and know the cost upfront—all without you having to make a single model.

Setting Goals

Before adopting visualization software and the equipment that goes with it, you need to know what you need to accomplish. Do you need very high quality so you can do some in-house publishing, such as ad slicks, in addition to being able to virtually frame? Or do you want to be able to get design ideas to your customers faster by e-mailing jpgs of how framed pieces are going to look? If you don't need the high-end equipment of the first scenario, then you can save money. But if you want to do high level work, you're going to have to have the right equipment and software.

Talking to Clients

An OEM framer should ask clients if they would like to



Visualization software can also be used in conjunction with order management programs to store the history of a frame design along with its image, SKU, name, and specs.

work with virtual framing to speed up the interaction of ideas. Rather than jumping into using the software without a plan, it's important to see if visualization software will actually give you value. If you have traditional clients who only want to see physical models, if you have frame designs that have been in place for a long time and people just order, or if you don't turn your inventory very often, you may not be able to justify buying the software. The same holds true if the images don't matter that much to clients. But if your clients are interested in more customized looks and like the idea of more options, higher visual quality, and faster turnaround, then you should talk with them about using this software.

You could start by telling them that you're considering going to this type of system and ask if it's something they could work with. Ask if they would like to see e-mails so they could look at designs. Ask if it would be a benefit if they could receive virtual models before receiving regular ones. Ask if they would like to see more variety. If clients don't respond all that positively, then there's probably not enough benefit to warrant the expenditure.

On the other hand, maybe your competition has already asked them. If you've lost out on recent jobs, ask why that happened. You might be surprised to find out that your competition is already using a system like this. Even if you can't find that out, keep in mind that this is a new type of customer service you can offer. Whether it's big box, a hotel, or a hospital, is your client expecting this type of thing? Perhaps some clients have already been asking about it. Providing this service shows you're really trying to cater to your customers.

Integration

Another benefit of the newest visualization software is that it can also be integrated into a production order

entry or quoting system, speeding up manufacturing and providing an added level of control. With it, you turn a design into a SKU and tie the image to the specs of that SKU automatically. As a result, when you create design models, they're not sitting in a separate system as they might have been in the past.

For example, say you produce 100 designs that are narrowed down to the six that a customer wants. You can then turn those six into SKU items that you'll be able to produce over and over again. Or you can use those item numbers to create a one-time order. By having the design images integrated into a master order/production system, you can look at the history of a design any time you want. If you need to recall a design image and modify it later, you can also do that with ease.

Another feature of the new visualization software is batch processing, which lets you frame many images of different sizes and shapes in the same design style. You start by creating a frame template using a certain frame and mat design. Moulding and mats are specified, but the images remain open. With visualization software, you can choose any number of images and the software will place them in the design using the template so you don't have to place each image one by one.

When a visualization software design is placed in a production system, you can also use that design to tell a CMC how to cut the mats. That's important because

whatever the design is, you don't have any re-keying of information. This helps streamline production and results in fewer errors. This information is saved inside the system, and the cuts are not done using the CMC's software but by the virtual design software. This is the kind of integration production framers have been asking for, and it marks another major advance in this kind of software.

The Bottom Line

Considering all these features, the newest visualization software for production framing offers a lot of benefits specifically designed for wall art manufacturers. What has been a convenient tool for frame shops has now grown into a significant design and production aid for wholesale framers. As more production framers discover the sales, cost, and efficiency advantages of this software, it will become an everyday tool for the industry. ■

Jeff King is vice president of research and development for SpecialtySoft. His background in accounting and computer science preceded a career path including retail hardware sales, POS software specialist, and small business owner, giving him an extensive knowledge on computer hardware and retail systems. He has also managed a custom frame shop that continues to be used as an alpha test site for SpecialtySoft.

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