



By John Chester

The Elephant in the Room

Just because most of us in the picture industry are small businesses doesn't mean we're insulated from global trends. Quite the opposite. Because we're small, we often feel the effects of changes sooner than large corporations might.

There's a big thorny, complicated issue facing the art publishing industry. Wall decor manufacturers increasingly demand permission to print artwork using publishers' digital files. Various models and terminology are used, including licensing, sublicensing, co-publishing, subcontracting, print on demand, and permission to print.

Seeking the ability to print imagery is one way framers are responding to constantly escalating pressure from retailers for innovative and inexpensive product. Improvements in printing technology make this approach increasingly feasible, as short-run digital printing becomes cheaper, the quality gets better, and printing can incorporate new materials. In some cases wall decor manufacturers want to apply images to non-conventional substrates, and in others they are looking to use the images on traditional canvas or paper. Framers can experiment with different sizes and compositions without having to invest in inventory or commit to minimum quantity orders. Companies willing to produce "onesie" orders can customize the artwork exactly to the end user's preferences.

For publishers, used to being the folks producing the paper or canvas and selling it to the framer, this business model is terrifying. It means our valuable assets, the intellectual property in the form of high-resolution digital files, are getting into the hands of outsiders. We fear misappropriation of copyrights by an outside company or a rogue employee. We fear under-reporting of the number of units produced. We fear the loss of control over print quality and consistency. We also fear having to adjust our business model and the daunting task of updating our contracts with artists to make it possible.

At Wild Apple, we have spent a decade resisting requests to do business this way. But we have gradually become convinced that customer-produced artwork is an oncoming locomotive. Rather than be flattened on the tracks, we are carefully climbing onboard the moving train. Our legitimate fears can be addressed through contracts, audits, relationships, and mutual trust. Dealing with long-term trustworthy partners makes this strategic adjustment a little easier than it could be.

This is not an either-or, mutually exclusive decision on

our part. Publishing art posters is most definitely our preferred business model, and we continue to introduce an average of 50 new posters per month. While short run printing is more affordable now than ever, offset lithographs produced in reasonable volume still offer a lot of benefits price-wise for our customers. We'll continue publishing our own posters while also cautiously making imagery available on a subcontract basis. Our primary concern is offering the right artistic content for the market, not who prints it.

This brings up a very, very important point: Art development is not free, and artists need to get paid! Most of the time, the emphasis is on the cost of printing and the costs of producing the frame or stretching the canvas. What keeps getting undervalued is the cost of finding and developing the artwork, and the fact that artists need to make a living. Yet it is art that drives the sale. Price, printing quality, and framing treatment are all-important factors in a consumer's decision to buy, but the overriding motivation is a consumer's emotional connection to the art. Twenty years in business has consistently taught us that the wall decor manufacturers who understand that they are selling an emotional uplift, not commodity ink and substrate, are the ones who experience the most success.

No matter who does the printing, it takes the same skills, effort, and investment in finding and developing artwork. With shorter product lifecycles and constantly changing art offerings on the shelves, the cost of bringing an image to market may actually be rising. This creative side of the business seems like the "fun" part—which it is. But it's also extremely hard work and easy to screw up. Balancing the innovative with the marketable, the fresh with the sellable is tougher than it looks from the outside. It requires kissing many frogs to find one prince. Editing, culling, tweaking imagery from a massive universe to come up with the "right" look for today's market is what we do. Everybody has access to millions of images (see Corbis or Getty Images), but what works in the mainstream market?

The art publishing industry may be in a transition from physical product providers to "intellectual property" content providers. As such, they need to politely insist on being paid fairly to fuel future artistic innovation and to keep artists happy. It is still all about the art. ■

John Chester is owner and janitor of Wild Apple, a fine art publisher and art licensing company based in Woodstock, VT.