

POSitive Benefits

by James Miller, MCPPE, GCF

*Looking for a way to save time and improve your bottom line?
Then it's time to consider point of sale software designed specifically for frame shops.*

Computer technology is all around these days, changing lives and businesses, mostly for the better. Of all the innovations computers have brought to the framing business, point of sale (POS) software ranks near the top. Why is this software important enough for a framer to buy and learn to use? There are many reasons:

Accuracy

Every framing project begins with the design process. It is the foundation of successful framing, so accuracy is important. Errors in writing orders cost time and money throughout the framing process, as materials and time are lost. Using POS software reduces the likelihood of errors because all the calculations are done automatically. Also, the consistent sequence of entering order data may remind a framer of certain frame parts that might be forgotten in manual write-up, such as a glass spacer when a fillet is used. When a framer keys in the part numbers and dimensions properly, the software does the rest—no more number crunching and rechecking every calculation. Factors like moulding waste are built in. While there's no foolproof system for writing framing orders, POS software has been proven to be the most accurate.

Time

A frame designer spends a lot of time communicating with a customer, discussing optional framing features and recording the details of the order. In one-at-a-time retail framing, the design process can sometimes take as much time as the actual framing. Speeding up the process with POS software saves time and money, better than any manual system, without shortcutting the design process. All the materials and their prices are stored in the software, so a frame designer doesn't have to spend minutes looking up anything. No more flipping through catalogs and price lists to find part numbers or prices. Customers appreciate the time savings, too.

Professionalism

POS software allows frame designers to pay less attention to the numbers and more to the customers. This enhances customer service and often results in better designs because you do not have the distraction of looking up prices.

Customers perceive the process as more credible than when you fumble through a pile of dog-eared, outdated price lists to identify and price each component. A framer with all the needed information literally at his or her finger-



Hand-written orders using numerous, often out-of-date, catalogs and price sheets can often slow the design process.

tips seems much more professional. In an era of laser-scanned checkouts, hand-written orders can create the impression that you and what you're selling are out of date. All other things being equal, this gives a frame shop using POS software a distinct advantage over one that does not.

Convenient Updates

Most POS programs include an annual subscription for updates, which can be downloaded from the vendor's website. These updates cover not only price changes but also new and discontinued items. When a supplier issues a new price list, the software company translates that information and posts it for download by subscribers. This allows you to

use the latest prices at the earliest possible time. Generally, it takes just a few minutes to complete an update, even a large one, if you have a high-speed internet connection. For subscribers without internet service, updates may be available on CDs.

This may be the most significant benefit of POS software, because up-to-date product listings and pricing can improve your profitability directly. Automatic updates save dozens of hours a year that you would otherwise spend manually recreating price lists. For many framers, this feature alone justifies the investment in POS software.

Profitability

Some benefits of POS software certainly help profitability even if they appear difficult to quantify. But consider this: Framers without POS software typically use suppliers' price lists in conjunction with their own pricing factors created in-house, such as glazing, matting, fitting/finishing, labor, and decorative features. Recalculating and rewriting your own price lists on a regular basis can be very tedious and



Using POS software allows a frame shop to eliminate design counter clutter and focus in on the design process, saving time and eliminating errors.

time-consuming. Consequently, you might get around to doing it only two or three times a year. What's the result? You do a lot of work, and some of your retail prices could still be as much as six months out of date. Or if you redo price lists manually often enough to keep current, it can cost you a significant amount of time and money.

Paperwork

POS software lets you produce any number of copies of a work order or invoice immediately and on demand according to the needs of your business. For example, a frame shop owner might want a copy of each work order for the production shop, a copy of the invoice for the customer,

and one of each for permanent files in the office. In addition to customer data and order information, these forms may include, for example, your shop's logo and address and some limited text about your return policy or warranty. Computer-generated printing can be done on plain paper, with every copy looking professional, with no more sloppy handwriting or transposed numbers. Some programs can also print an identification tag to keep with a customer's property throughout production and finished work storage.

Printing from computer on plain paper also eliminates the need to buy specially printed, multi-part invoices and work order forms. That savings alone might exceed the POS program's annual subscription fee for updates.

Adaptability

If you haven't used professional POS software, you might think that it would impose restrictions or rigid rules about its operation, pricing, or profitability. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every software program has its advantages, but all of them let users add and/or adjust price levels for all kinds of framing materials and techniques—and then some. For example, the more sophisticated programs let you automatically add a fixed-dollar amount (regardless of frame size) to the usual per-foot price to offset the setup cost of chopping and joining moulding. Also, a framer who hand-finishes a line of custom-milled mouldings can create a separate vendor file for such items that are unique to that business. You can use special terms or descriptions instead of the standard terms. For example, a “golf ball mount” could be added if you need to price that kind of special mount very often. Mounting charges could be coded simply as “Mounting A” or “Labor Factor G” if that's what works for you.

Another handy feature is that pricing can be temporarily changed at will for one item or another. For example, if you decide to offer Museum Glass (or perhaps a moulding or matboard) at a special price for a specific period of time, you can easily change the price for that product without disturbing any others, then change it back later.

Order History

When a repeat customer comes in with her third daughter's senior portrait and asks to have it framed just like her other two children's senior photos, which were framed in 1995 and 1999, what happens next? A framer without POS software goes to the back room to dig through order archives stored in file boxes. Depending on how meticulously those records were kept, that can take several minutes or a few

Software Package and Vendor Contact Information	Software Platform	Year Introduced	Time Clock	Vendor Updates	CMC Export	Cash Drawer	Receipt Printer	Bar Codes	Multi-Site	Misc. Sales	Inventory	Comments
Artisan Frame Plus www.ceriteksoftware.com Ceritek Software, Dunedin, FL 877.723.7835	PC	2000	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		Framing order pricing, estimates, and inventory. Consignment, commissions, misc. sales & layaways. Art & framing vendor catalog online or CD. Use detailed work flow management or simple order completion tracking. Deluxe edition includes time clock, LE prints, and more. Hardware available, including computers, printers, bar code scanners, cash drawers, integrated credit card processing.
Artteck www.artteck.com Artteck Software, Corona, CA 951.737.6100	PC, Vis. Basic	1998		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	Designing software comes ready with high digital moulding, mats & art data, or you can import your own. Select an image, mat fit and frame it on your computer to show variety & selection. Call up data by item number, vendor, texture, color, profile, etc. optional dual monitor. Built in marketing tools. Mobile Gallery. Accounting, work orders, invoices, materials pick list, and more.
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ezFramer www.ezframer.com nuTech Software, Spencerville, MD 800.404.0634	PC	1998	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		Available in 3 versions: ezFramer Express (free software), ezFramer Basic, ezFramer Full. All versions include a customer database, history database, work order entry (on one screen), and printouts. Additional features include job tracking, barcodes, networking, inventory reports, QuickBooks integration, and more depending on the version. Comparison chart on web site.
FerenSoft Trio! www.ferensoft.com FerenSoft Corp., Seattle, WA 206.282.1775	PC, Vis, FoxPro	1992		•	•	•		•	•	•		Available in U.S., Canadian, international, imperial, and metric versions. Art database, consignments, commissions, gallery sales. Power Tools option for busier shops. Numerous management reports, online vendor updates, software upgrades, and support are all optional. Prints receipts, work orders, invoices, estimates, reports, labels. Label printer available.
FrameReady www.frameready.com SoftTouch Solutions Petrolia, ON, Canada 888.281.3303	PC, Mac, FileMaker Pro	1995		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Toll-free support, free phone training for 1st yr; single-screen work order entry; customer email notification; materials/cut list; online vendor updates; support for inline ovals; barcode & label software included; art & retail database; consignments; numerous financial/sales/inventory reports; commissions; gift certs.; marketing tools; word processing. Hardware for barcodes available.
Framiac www.framiac.com.au Manly, Australia 61.500.899.005	PC	1995		•	•			•	•	•		1 license may be used for 2 PCs. Aged debtors system, full customer reporting and mailing lists, full workflow reporting including cutting sheets, stock and labor requirements. Contact vendor for rental pricing. Individual vendor import (noncentralized), supports metric only at this time.
Fullcalc www.fullcalc.com Eagle Computers, Zebulon, GA 866.946.2252	PC, Vis FoxPro	1990	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Multi-site version can handle over 1000 stores; inventory can be maintained locally or chain-wide. One-touch vendor updates; integrates with Lieberman's Gallery, QuickBooks, Larson-Hill matcrafting program; four credit/debit card processing programs; tracks customer preferences; email customer notification; physical inventory system; automatic reorders to vendors; layaways; gift certs.; over 100 reports.

LifeSaver www.lifesaversoft.com LifeSaver Software, Atlanta, GA 800.361.0600	PC, Vis FoxPro	1992	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Toll free support, simplified order entry from a single screen, customer email notification upon order completion, consignments, materials/pick list commission, integrates w/Lieberman's art explorer CD, EDI ordering capability; many reports; barcode scanning & printing option, thermal label writer option, full integration w/optional Picture It First visualization software.
Masterpiece Manager www.masterpiecemanager.com Masterpiece Solutions, Denver, CO 303.225.0330	PC, Mac, SQL, Vis FoxPro	1996	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Fully integrated Web link. Full gallery support. Consignments, commissions, quotes, digital images. Can support Macs via terminal services.
QuickPrice www.qprice.co.uk Quickprice Software, Belfast, UK 44.28.9081.2117	PC	1996	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Imperial or metric; quotations; invoices; job sheets; customer accounts and statements; stock control.
SpecialtySoft www.specialtysoft.com Specialty Software, Wilmington, NC 910.794.4013	PC, Vbasic, MS Access, SQL	1996	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Interfaces with QuickBooks, Microsoft MapPoint, Lieberman's, computerized matcutters, saws, and underpinners. Automatic vendor update notification. Over 100 management reports export to email, Microsoft Word and Excel. Choose from 5 software versions: Lite, FullFraming, P&S, Wholesale Volume, Multi-site centralized production floor management.
Spinsoft Gallery www.spinsoft.com Spinsoft Co., Lake Forest, CA 877.568.0707	PC	1994	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Designed for gallery/frameshop environment. Includes extensive marketing tools. Inventory is for art, not framing supplies.

SOFTWARE PLATFORM: Supported software platform (windows/mac/unix, etc), programming language and/or database engine used. • **TIME CLOCK :** The software has the ability to track employee attendance, with reporting.

VENDOR UPDATES: The software vendor directly offers/distributes pricing updates from popular vendors via the internet or by postal mail. • **CMC EXPORT:** The software can export cutting instruction files to a computerized mat cutter

CASH DRAWER: The software supports a cash drawer option (drawer not included) • **RECEIPT PRINTER :** The software supports a narrow paper (pos) receipt printer option (printer not included)

BARCODES: The software supports a barcode reader option (barcode scanner not included) • **MULTI-SITE:** The software can centrally manage multiple locations electronically to a central hub (optional feature that generally costs more)

MISC SALES: The software allows you to process art, gift, and miscellaneous non-framing sales, in addition to framing. • **INVENTORY:** The software includes a database to maintain inventory of framing materials, such as moulding, matboards, glass

This table shows some basic information about many POS software providers. Its data is only part of a more comprehensive table that was compiled and generously shared by Michael Labbe of Get The Picture Framing. He independently maintains even more information on his website, www.getthepictureframing.com.

hours. With POS software, you could search customer order archives stored in the program and immediately bring up a previous order. The value of this feature increases over time, which means that the sooner a POS system is in use, the more history can be accumulated for future reference.

Customer Database

Customer information, such as name, address, and phone number are obviously important, and every POS program keeps these details. Beyond that, the software can provide for additional data, such as fax number, spouse and children's names, e-mail addresses, birthdays, anniversaries, favorite artists, special pricing, and special notes. (I used to write this information on 3" x 5" index cards, and what a pain it was to keep that up to date!) POS software doesn't just keep all of that information handy; it also has the ability to sort customer data by any of those parameters for marketing purposes. Most programs can export the data to a program that prints mailing labels, and some can do it directly.

Management Data

POS software offers useful management data in an instant that would require countless hours of work manually.

With comprehensive databases on customers, products, and orders, POS programs can provide a wide range of reports for business management even automatic orders to vendors. These reports vary by software vendor, so when evaluating them, be sure to consider what management data is available compared to what you want for your business.

For example, some programs let you print a report showing details of usage for a specific product, such as a

matboard, glazing selection, or moulding, as well as how many orders were placed, and how much product was used. A few programs include a full-blown inventory control system that keeps track of usage and remaining stock, recommends reorder points, reminds you when it's time to order, and then prints the orders on demand.

Cost vs. Benefit

Can a frame shop owner be confident that POS software is a good investment? Each business is unique, but for most professional framers, especially those with the overhead of a storefront, the answer is usually a resounding yes. Generally, retail frame shops building 20 or more frames a week can easily justify the expense with payback in the form of cost savings, profit enhancements, and operational advantages within a few months—maybe even a matter of weeks. To determine how quickly POS software could pay for itself, consider the benefits. In a hypothetical example, you might conservatively estimate that using POS software would:

- u Save about \$25 per week in revenue lost to errors, and the cost to fix write-up mistakes (replacement of one wrong-size chop, for example); save \$108 per month.
- u Eliminate the need to recreate in-house price lists three times a year. If the person doing the work costs \$20 an hour (wages plus benefits and taxes) and spends 20 working hours (half a work week) on each manual update, that amounts to 60 hours x \$20 = \$1,200 per year; save \$100 per month.
- u Provide always-up-to-date prices that would increase your average order value by 5 percent. If your business presently builds 20 frames per week, averaging \$150 value, the benefit would be \$7.50 per frame or \$150 per week; increase \$650 per month.
- u Improve the quality of time spent with customers at the design table and impress them with newfound professionalism, enabling the frame designer to establish better sales rapport and increase average order value by 5 percent. Based on the parameters above, that amounts to another increase of \$650 per month.
- u Decrease by 10 percent the amount of design time devoted to looking up prices, calculating, and handwriting orders. If the 20 orders a week presently take an average of 30 minutes at the design table, the software would save 60 minutes a week. If the total cost of a frame designer is \$20 per hour (wages plus benefits and taxes), the savings would be \$86 per month.
- u Improve direct mail promotions to specific target cus-

tomers sorted from the customer database. This saves time in preparing the mailing list as well as printing and postage costs that would otherwise be wasted on ineffective mailings. This might best be measured in terms of return on your advertising investment. If using sorted POS customer data results in one additional \$150 order a week, while saving postage and printing expenses, it could amount to \$650 more income per month.

u Improve inventory analysis by providing accurate usage of materials by part number. If knowing the most popular and least popular mats, glass, and mouldings lets you buy them smarter and save 15 percent of their total acquired cost (part of which might be shipping expense), the COGS might improve by a few percentage points, perhaps saving \$50 a month or more.

These hypothetical POS software benefits, which would total \$2,300 a month or \$27,600 a year, may not apply to every business. But some of them surely would, and other benefits may apply in your particular business as well. If your framing business could gain just half of these benefits in real dollars, it is safe to say the extra \$13,750 would pay the expenses of starting up a POS system in only a few months. Such returns on a POS software investment are not uncommon.

Total Cost

Purchasing the software itself is only one of several costs involved, and the total cost varies dramatically because each frame shop's situation is different. Perhaps you already have a computer for the purpose; if so, then you can scratch that from the list. Do you want to start out with a barcode reader? Do you need a mailing label printer, or do you already have a suitable word processing program? How many POS work stations do you need to set up with the software?

In any case, price comparisons should be among the last steps you take in the decision-making process. After you have determined the most useful features and narrowed your decision to a few suitable programs, then you will have a good basis for comparing each alternative program's total costs versus their benefits. Buying POS software means you should heed the advice you often give your own customers: make an informed purchasing decision based on long-term value, not price.

u Software license. Nearly all of the available programs charge for a license to use the software. This may be occasionally discounted or bundled with some extras, such as software add-ons, optional hardware, or the first year's update subscription.

u Software add-ons. Some POS software providers offer add-ons for multiple work stations in a single store, for multiple store locations, or for such functions as printing mailing labels or barcodes or for exporting cut files to a CMC.

u Hardware add-ons. Providers of programs that support optional features may offer associated hardware, such as a cash drawer, barcode reader, or label printer as options.

u Annual update subscription. Most programs offer updates of the product information, which changes every time a supplier issues a new price list.

u Program upgrades. When a provider revises the software to incorporate improvements or new features, those revisions may be included with the annual update subscription or may be sold separately.

u Computer. Consult the POS provider of your choice first, then acquire a computer adequate for running the program you have selected. As always with computers, it is best to plan for increasing RAM and hard drive capacity. Be sure your computer has suitable backup capability, and use it regularly. If your important data is backed up daily, any computer-related loss would be reduced to hardware replacement and a few minutes to reload the software. On the other hand, failure to backup data could result in catastrophic loss of nec-

essary business records. Reconstructing it could take months. This applies not only to POS software but also to any accounting software you use. Backup daily; it takes only a few minutes. Using multiple storage devices is the best assurance that the data will be available. A good procedure is to use a separate storage device for each day of the week. Be sure to keep recent backups in a safe, remote location.

u Training. Unless you have a computer wizard on staff, you should receive some training on the software program or at least study the published instructions very carefully. Some providers offer special classes at trade shows, which are useful even before you make a final software selection.

u Set up and transition. Once the software is installed and activated, a considerable amount of time is needed to tailor the program to your business and to make sure it's running properly. First, the administrator of the program (probably the store owner or sales manager) needs to review pricing parameters for each family of products and the labor factors in the program. This is the time to add special price items, such as unique mounting methods or specially modified mouldings. Next, carefully plan a transition to the new program. Train all your frame designers on the operation of the computer and software, making sure they can use it confidently in the presence of customers. Most POS software

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providers recommend a period of parallel usage, when both the new and old systems are running together. That means duplicating everything for a short time and monitoring the results. Just to be sure the products and prices are correct. This is an important step, if only for a few days. For the first few months, COGS and profit data should be carefully monitored, too. If all is well with the software, those numbers should improve immediately.

Which POS Software Program Is Best?

Virtually every framer who uses POS software will probably tell you the program he or she uses is the best. The truth is that few framers have experience with more than one program, so their opinions may not be completely valid for your business. The best way to start an evaluation is to contact several providers. Get a demo disk for each program that is suitable, and try them out. Be sure to let everyone who would use the new software try out the sample program. After entering several orders, you can usually decide which programs are most useful for your purposes.

Enlist Your Staff's Help

It is very important to get the cooperation of your frame designers in the selection and startup of new POS software. As the main operators of the program, they need training and practice to become proficient. Some shop owners let their employees have a hand in the entire evaluation process, which provides a sense of ownership in the software and optional features, and can result in some valuable insights. This helps you get the best pro-

gram. Of all costs of POS software, the set up and transition can be the most difficult because each framing business is different and so are the capabilities of the users.

Taking the Plunge

For some, POS software might require a leap into the unknown. That's how it was for me in 1994, when I installed POS software in my framing business. The technology seemed to be from another world, and the idea of depending on computers was a bit frightening. For a long time I resisted, saying I would rather do it by hand. But once I made the commitment and began to enjoy the benefits, I wished I had done it sooner. POS software has revolutionized my framing business. More and more framers are finding, as I did, that the benefits of POS software far exceed the cost and the learning curve.

POS software providers have already heard most of the

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questions and, with professional technical support tailored to our industry, they stand ready to give us the help we need to start up a POS program and to keep it running smoothly.

In today's competitive retail framing market, an objective analysis of the costs and benefits of POS software is just good business. And for most frame shops, that will result in the acquisition and enthusiastic use of it. n

James Miller, MCPF, GCF, founded his framing business, ArtFrame, Inc., in suburban Columbus, OH, in 1988, where he specializes in the preservation framing of art, heirlooms, and three-dimensional objects. He is also an accomplished calligrapher. Miller, who holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, has served as chairman of the PPFA Certification Board, where he helped develop the MCPF exam, and has been chairman of the FACTS Education Committee. He also teaches at numerous industry venues and writes regularly for PFM.



Advertisement

Supply Chain Integration

POS software opens the door to supply chain integration, a new electronic capability that frame shops can use to transmit their orders online to distributors for faster service, saving money while keeping on top of their order status.

One of the biggest frustrations for the retail picture framer is getting timely, accurate information from suppliers, including what items are out of stock, backordered, or discontinued and expected shipping date. Supply chain integration offers a way to know for sure that what you sell to customers will be delivered in a timely manner. This assurance comes directly from distributors while a customer is still in your shop, saving a lot of phone calls and problems later on.

Working with retail POS software vendors LifeSaver, Full Calc, SpecialtySoft, and several large industry distributors, CMAC has developed a system that allows retailers to electronically transmit orders to distributors while customers are at the design counter. The response comes in less than a minute, confirming acceptance of the order for that customer's frame components. Currently, more than 45 framing distributors nationwide are part of the supply chain network, with many of them set up to receive orders electronically.

Supply chain integration also helps eliminate the need to call in each day's orders to multiple vendors as well as transcription errors in item numbers or sizes. Optimally, a retail frame store could communicate with all of its distributors with as little as one keystroke.

Distributors also benefit from this online ordering process. Processing orders can cost a distributor \$2.50 to \$9.50 per order depending on its location, labor costs, order volume, and overhead. Supply chain integration can cut these processing costs to virtually nothing and speed up turnaround time—providing better service to customers. It also allows distributors to alert frame shops to new products and special pricing quickly, update prices as they change, and notify you

immediately when mouldings and matboards are discontinued.

There are three steps in supply chain integration:

- A retailer places an order into their POS software.
- The distributor immediately receives the order electronically.
- The retailer receives a return confirmation of what they ordered by return e-mail, which is sent within 60 seconds of the order's placement. Items that are backordered or out of stock are noted on this acknowledgment.

The capability to transmit the order electronically is already available in most of the leading POS software packages in the framing industry. This streamlined data transfer helps retail stores compete with big box stores, which already use similar systems.

A Sales Rep link on this software is designed for distributor representatives to use when they call on retailers. It allows a rep to check up-to-the-minute status of every piece of information pertinent to a store, track the status of any orders, update corner sample walls by removing discontinued mouldings, suggest and order samples of top selling mouldings, update prices, print bar-coded labels with current pricing, and analyze a shop to uncover profit opportunities a retailer may currently be missing out on. Through instant messaging, the rep also has immediate access to all distributor customer service personnel to immediately resolve any questions while still at the store. The rep can also help a retailer learn how to enter orders and receive confirmation on new or prior orders. Depending on the distributor, retailers can also enter supply orders manually and receive the same immediate response capability as with POS software orders.

For more information go to www.cmacsoft.com and click on the Supply Chain Integration link. Other links take you to the web pages of the companies involved in the development of supply chain integration for the framing industry.

By Troy Heitmeyer, CMAC