

THE **BIG** PICTURE

THE BUSINESS OF WIDE FORMAT

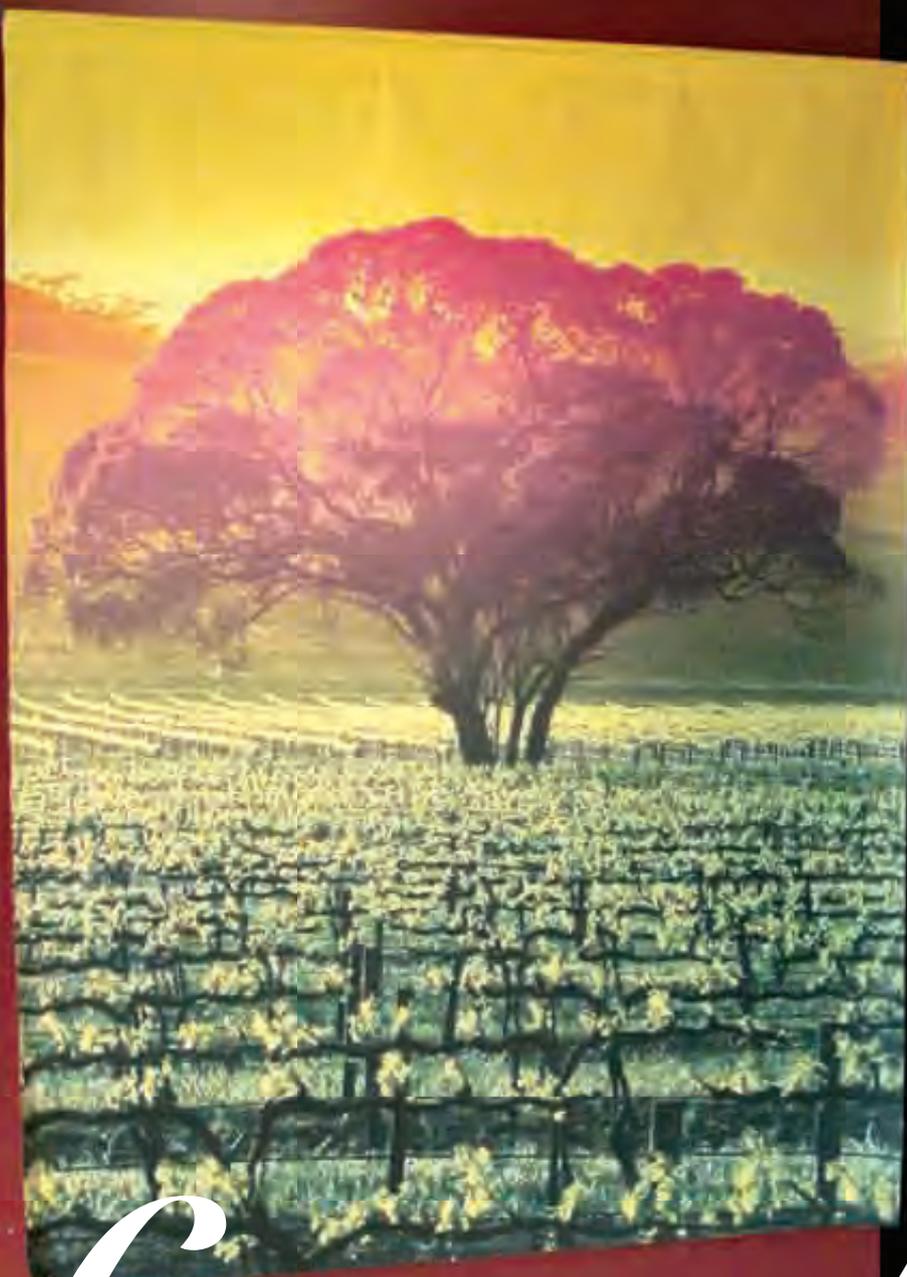


FABRICS

OPENING THE WINDOW TO PROFITABILITY

PLUS:

- Acquiring a Rival
- Fine Art from Every Angle
- Color Management on the Cheap



By Clare Baker

fine art FROM ALL ANGLES

Five fine-art print providers share techniques, tips, and tricks of the trade.

It's safe to say that fine-art printing is not for everyone, regardless of whether you've been in the business of wide-format printing for just months or you've spent dozens of years in the output arena. Besides the printer, media, and inks required for fine-art printmaking, the print provider must devise an accurate proofing process, be sensitive to the needs of fine-artists, and, of course, cultivate a viable client base, all of which can be a pricey and time-consuming undertaking. Fine-art printing, one might say, is an art within itself.

In spite of these potential barriers to entry or success in the field, however, many print providers have found that fine-art reproduction can be a profitable niche of digital printing. To do so:

- Pinpoint your client base;
- Don't skimp on capture technology;
- Invest in proofing and output capabilities;
- Analyze additional services to complement the shop's printing work; and
- Don't hesitate to push the envelope when it comes to finding new customers.

Know your customers

Before you can even begin to consider investing in fine-art digital printing equipment or deciding how to improve upon your shop's existing technology, you must first recognize your existing or desired client base. How you position your services in your marketing materials and how much money and time you invest in the technology will vary greatly depending what types of clients you wish to cultivate.

Printing reproductions or original digital art or photography for professional artists will require much more knowledge, money, and time on behalf of the print provider than reproducing work for amateur or recreational artists might. Serving the commercial market in need of fine-art reproductions may also influence how a shop handles its fine-art printing services. The geography of your clients is also an important consideration: Will you market strictly to those in your region or try to expand your business to serve a greater area?

Davidson, North Carolina-based Fine Art Impressions (fineartgiclee.com) is a prime example of a very high-end shop serving a global market. This go-to print provider for professional artists serious about print reproduction was opened by Gary Kerr after he became frustrated with the varying level of quality found in prints that people were tagging with the term *giclée*. With a background in prepress consulting and a passion for photography, Kerr opened Fine Art Impressions in 2001 with the intention of reproducing fine-art to museum standards. He has centered his shop on serving professional artists, the high-end décor market, and museums, for a client base that spans the globe.

However, a shop may also find success in fine-art printing catering to a more local, commercial market. For instance, Red Wing Framing Gallery (redwingframing.com), based in Red Wing, Minnesota, offers both custom framing services and fine-art digital printing. John Becker, owner of the seven-year-old shop, says that half of his digital printing clients are commercial in nature while the other half comprises individual artists. Of the latter segment, he says, about 20 percent are professional artists.

Mighty Imaging (mightyimaging.com), in Phoenix, also serves a more commercial demographic. Owner Peter Fradin says that his shop, which opened in 2005, serves those



At left: A 78 x 48-inch fabric print of a photo by Red Wing Framing Gallery owner John Becker was produced for Norton's Downtown Restaurant & Lucky Cat World Wine Market in Red Wing, Minnesota; printing was done with a 60-inch HP Z6100ps printer and HP Vivera inks onto Lexjet Water-Resistant Satin Cloth media.

Above: For a private collector in Europe, Fine Art Impressions used its BetterLight scanning back to capture *Kurfusten at Night*, by W.P. Vamled, then turned to its Canon iPF9000 printer and Canon Lucia inks for output onto Hahnemühle canvas.

“who need the very best imaging on a large scale.” He elaborates, “I felt that the large-format channel was being filled by sign shops and repro houses rather than true masters of color and printing, to the detriment of fine art, high-end retail display, and interior design.” His clients range from graphic designers “whose passion and vision get lost without high-quality output”; national Web-based companies with products that require printing and shipping; corporate wall-art programs that produce artwork and murals for lobbies, offices, conference rooms, and board rooms; architects and interior designers; and rounding out his client base, photographers and fine-artists. “I try to be solutions-based when making a sale,” says Fradin. “We are constantly bringing fresh ideas to market At the end of the day [our shop is prepared] to produce all types of graphics and prints.”

In addition to your marketing strategies and the technology you invest in, knowing your client base may also influence whom you keep on staff. If you're a wide-format shop new to fine art, it might be wise to hire a fine-artist who also, of course, has the necessary experience of working in digital printing.

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Kate Dardine, marketing director of Fine Print Imaging (fineprintimaging.com), a 34-year-old Fort Collins, Colorado-based print shop with 10 years of digital printing experience, expounds on that idea: “We pride ourselves on our ability to talk the same language as artists and photographers. Most of our staff members are either photographers or artists themselves, so we really understand how important it is that the reproduction retains the spirit and intention of the original piece. One of the greatest challenges, especially with artists, is to help them understand that most reproductions are not an exact match—very, very close, but not exact.”

Capture: the key to quality

While printers, media, and inks are of course major components in the fine-art printing process, the tools used to capture the original artwork cannot be overlooked. High-quality prints, Kerr explains, depend on high-quality capture. Even with top-of-the-line printers, without knowledge of how to correctly capture an image, you have no chance of producing high-quality artwork, he says. “I may have Tiger Woods’ golf clubs, but that doesn’t mean I’m in the PGA.”



Fine Print Imaging produced this 53 x 80-inch print of *Wildfires*, by photographer Connie Bransilver, using its Epson 11880 printer, output onto canvas.

Correctly photographing art, he says, is very difficult since there are so many pitfalls to avoid that result in a number of image alterations including blur, color aberration, moiré, and trapezoidal distortion. Kerr explains that common techniques to capture artwork can result in these distortions, including copy lighting, in which the artwork is evenly lit by two lights at 45-degree angles. Kerr’s shop practices asymmetrical lighting, which is biased from one direction. “This lighting produces intentional shadows, making the artwork look three dimensional,” he says. “People assume our reproductions are oil paintings for this reason—they don’t believe it’s ink and not paint.”

To capture his images, Kerr uses a 108-megapixel BetterLight scanning back with a 4 x 5 Sinar ground glass view camera. The shop uses a mirror and laser system to align the paintings for capture. If a customer brings in a wide-format transparency, the shop utilizes its Heidelberg Tango drum scanner.

Likewise, Fine Print also places much emphasis on the capture process and has invested in the necessary tools and equipment to ensure high-quality output. The shop uses a North Light HID Copy Light system to light the artwork that is being reproduced. The artwork is then captured with the shop’s BetterLight Super 6K scanning back that is coupled with a Calumet 4 x 5 view camera. For film scanning, the shop predominately uses its ICG 360 drum scanner; Nikon Coolscan 5000 and 9000 scanners are also occasionally utilized.

At Red Wing Framing Gallery, the shop uses several capture methods, determined by what the end goal is for the artwork they are reproducing. For lower-end reproductions, the shop uses its Epson GT 15000 11 x 17-inch flatbed scanner or its Minolta Dimage Scan Multi-Pro film scanner. For high-end reproductions, Becker says he’ll turn to the shop’s Scitex Eversmart Pro.

Whether you’re reproducing a high-end, museum-quality piece or something slightly more low-end, an important statistic to keep in mind, says Kerr, is that 90 percent of the quality of a reproduction is a result of the capture process. This said, it’s crucial that you are aware of how your capturing methods will affect the final output and that you put in place the correct capture methods and practices to ensure that the work your shop produces meets your clients’ standards.

Proofing and output

After the artwork is captured but before final output, successful fine-art print providers will offer their clients a thorough proofing process. At Fine Art Impressions, Kerr offers a fixed proofing fee, but an unlimited number of proofs. The shop usually produces a strip proof test, printing cross sections of the artwork in 3-inch strips so that the artist can then compare those strips directly to the corresponding section of the original artwork. “Since we only meet 20 percent of our clients in person, those strip tests are usually shipped to the customer with the original print.” Kerr says they can usually get it right the first time around. “Ninety percent of the clients don’t need to go past the first proof.”

Like Fine Art Impressions, 80 percent of the work that Fine Print does is also for remote customers. “For that reason,” says Dardine, “we had to come up with a system for long-distance proofing. Basically, we create a proof on the media desired by the client and then send them a copy of the print and keep a copy here. Any adjustments can be made based on our conversation with the artist when we’re

A catalyst for opportunities

If you have the resources, offering additional services beyond just printing may also have a positive impact on your shop. For example, both Red Wing Framing and American Frame Fine Art Printing have their roots in, you guessed it, fine-art framing. Both shops added on digital printing services to their business and now offer their framing capabilities as a finishing option for clients reproducing artwork. Becker says that it's very typical for their clients to ask for their print to be mounted and framed after printing. At American Frame, clients can have their prints mounted and framed for no additional charge.

Fine Print has also recently expanded its services to include canvas stretching as an add-on service to clients, which Dardine says has been very successful. And the shop has found that maintaining a gallery website for its customers has been a profitable source of promotion for clients. American Frame maintains a similar website, which has been a plus for customers, says Jajko: "We have free gallery space on our website available to artists and photographers who wish to re-sell their work on the site. We have had some fine artists and a few photographers 'discovered' by volume resellers of artwork through the site. It's exciting for us to be a catalyst for such opportunities."

both looking at the same image. When proofing a file that has been uploaded to our FTP site, we don't have a guide to match, so we use our best judgment." She continues, "In a small percentage of cases, a second proof is needed, but most of the time, we can make adjustments to the file and print the order."

At Mighty Imaging, Fradin explains that the shop proofs on the client-requested substrate, either at 8 x 10 or a test strip at 100 percent. "Client approval is almost always first run, but if we are struggling, then we grant the artist 'over the shoulder' privileges, meaning that we have them work with the technician and make whatever tweaks are necessary to meet the artist's expectations."

Maumee, Ohio-based American Frame Fine Art Printing (americanframe.com) introduced digital fine-art printing to its line of services in 2002 and since then has devised a proofing process that serves it well with its national clientele, since it rarely has the opportunity to adjust the final print from an original piece of art, says Laura Jajko, vice president of the shop. "When a customer uploads an image from proofing," she explains, "we create a strip of five 4 x 6-inch images with various hues and saturation and resolution levels from which the artist can choose. Once the proof is selected, the image is saved in our system with those credentials attached. This method takes the guesswork out of color adjustments. When a proof is ordered, the color is always guaranteed."

After the clients sign off on the proof, final output can commence. Just a few OEMs make up the major players in the fine-art digital printing arena, and Kerr says that there

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Mighty Imaging executed this print work for Stuart Anthony Black/Pangea Gallery using its Océ LightJet photo printer onto Kodak Metallic professional photo paper. The print is second-surface mounted to 1/8-inch Plexiglas with a museum back for hanging.

are just nuanced differences in these companies' latest and greatest fine-art printers. "They all should be able to get the job done if you have good input files to work with," he says. Kerr himself uses an Epson 9800 and 9880 and a Canon iPF5000 and iPF9100 to output the work that comes through his shop.

Mighty Imaging and American Frame Fine Art Printing also use Epson printers, both relying on the Epson 9800 with Epson Ultrachrome pigmented inks. Fradin includes that Mighty Imaging relies on a GretagMacbeth SpectroScan spectrophotometer to build profiles and sends files to its Epson with an Onyx RIP. Fine Print uses Epson Stylus Pro machines with Epson UltraChrome K3 inks as well, including the 9600, 9800, and the 11880. The shop also owns a Roland Hi-Fi Jet FJ-500 that uses Roland pigmented ink. With all printers, Dardine says the shop uses ErgoSoft's StudioPrint RIP and custom profiles built by a third party.

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American Frame used its Epson 9800 with Ultrachrome inks to produce this 17 x 17-inch print of *Daisy* by Polly Norman, onto Epson's Premium Luster paper.

Red Wing Framing Gallery relies on a series of Hewlett-Packard printers to output the jobs it receives. For smaller, black-and-white jobs, the shop uses its 24-inch HP Designjet 130nr; for high-end, wide-format work, Becker says the shop turns to its 42-inch Designjet 5500 and its 60-inch Designjet Z6100, which he says is really the workhorse of the shop. The printers are used with a Gretag color-calibration system (X-Rite acquired Gretag in 2006); the shop builds its own color profiles.

Looking ahead

If you're still only in the deciding or planning stages of adding fine-art printing capabilities to your shop, it would not be surprising if you're hesitant to do so given the current economic climate. Even the most successful print providers are probably feeling their business soften as the economy continues to slow. While only you can judge what is best for your shop, the shops we spoke with are finding unique ways to keep as well as find business during these times.

Mighty Imaging's Fradin, for instance, has settled on an arguably bullish way to deal with the slowing markets: "We have decided not to participate in the recession," he jokes. Despite what he acknowledges as trying times, he's doubling the shop's marketing efforts in hopes of identifying those artists and businesses that are looking for a higher level of quality from their current large-format fine-art print provider. "We're in the process of acquiring the best technology and latest equipment to make those folks' vision a reality," he says. "I know I'm incurring great risk right now in trying to grow my business in the current economic

environment—but as I see it, if our efforts here don't make our customers money, then we really haven't done our job."

Red Wing Framing is currently seeing how it can increase its profitability during this time by repositioning itself in the fine-art market. "We've really had success with the commercial side of fine-art printing," says Becker, "so we're looking to see how to expand those services and push our business toward that side of things." Becker says that some of those changes will require that the 2000-square-foot shop, already in need of additional space, move into a larger facility or acquire an additional 1500-square-foot location.

Utilizing the Internet and online means of promotion can also be a cost-effective way to publicize your business as well as establish new and innovative ways of creating new business. Fine Print offers clients the opportunity to order canvas reproductions or photographic enlargements online, printing through its Fine Print Express services, which Dardine says the shop sees as an area for a lot of potential business and growth. The Internet has also played a major role in the company's marketing plan, and Dardine says this will continue to be where the shop dedicates the majority of its marketing efforts.

Both Red Wing Framing and Fine Print also have found that publicizing special projects or promoting distinguishing aspects of a company can help to drum up business. In early 2008, for instance, Red Wing Framing was tapped to produce the artwork to decorate a townhouse that was being redone on PBS's do-it-yourself home improvement program, *Home Time*. Becker says that the shop produced 30 images for the renovated home and received a big bump in business after the show aired.

Fine Print, meanwhile, has gained a few high-profile projects due to its commitment to the environment. Shop owners Mark Lukes and Linda Helm have been very involved in conservation efforts in their personal lives, and their passion for the environment has influenced how they operate Fine Print, including the shop's Art for Conservation program, which has been supporting photographers' conservation efforts for the past 20 years.

Taking it all in

With any business, it's always smart to take inventory of the shop's operations—what works, what doesn't, what parts of the business receive the most attention, what parts are overlooked. The most successful shops have a command of all areas of their business and are constantly thinking of new ways to grow. Considering all aspects of fine-art printing services, from customers and capture to equipment and extra services, can go a long way in helping your shop enjoy success, whether you've been around the block or you're just getting started. ■

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