Inside this issue

1 Striking it niche — Growing a home-based business into a multi-million dollar operation means working smarter, not harder.

4 Focus on education — Among the many benefits of attending the PPFA Annual Convention: Gaining technical/business knowledge and earning your professional certification.

6 Chapter News — Local activities range from framing competitions to educational seminars.

Departments

7 Hang-Ups — Two options for mounting delicate fabrics.

8 PPFA Calendar of Events — A listing of meetings and events of the local chapters and the national PPFA.

9 CPF Exam Schedule — Where in the world can you take the CPF exam?

10 Competition Corner — There are many ways to increase chapter involvement in the PPFA International Framing Competitions.

16 Focus on Framing — Using vintage photos to tell a small story about a person can make the framing project more interesting overall.

Striking it niche

Meeting a need in the marketplace led this entrepreneur to focus on diploma framing

Do one thing, and do it well. That’s a mantra by which many custom framers live. They find a niche market they know something about, and create a product or service to fill that niche.

That’s exactly what Lucie Voves did 14 years ago when her own need for a framable print of her alma mater, Dartmouth College, located in Hanover, N.H., led her to commission an artist to paint a school landmark. To finance the project, she sold copies of the offset lithograph to students, their parents, and alumni. Soon she was framing the prints, too.

The business — which she called Church Hill Classics — was staffed with neighborhood moms who custom crafted one frame at a time in the basement of Voves’ Newtown, Conn., home. Voves listened carefully to her customers, and quickly discovered students had another need that was going unmet: quality frames for their college diplomas. The budding entrepreneur gladly obliged, adding diploma frames to her product line in 1993.

Continued on page 2

Lucie Voves, founder and president of Church Hill Classics, shows a frame manufactured at the Danbury, Conn. production facility. Voves started the company 14 years ago in her home. Today, Church Hill Classics customizes diploma and certificate frames for more than 600 colleges and universities nationwide. The Purdue campus photo used in this frame (inset) is one the company now owns as a result of its purchase this June of Lasting Memories.
Continued from page 1

Today, Church Hill Classics — now based in Danbury, Conn. — is a $4.1 million business serving more than 600 colleges and universities in partnership with their bookstores. Each store provides the company with a mailing list of their graduates or, alternatively, Church Hill Classics sources the list itself.

The company targets this audience with direct mail promotions and through its website, www.diplomaframe.com. Frames retail from $99 to $225; the college stores, which set the retail prices, typically double the wholesale cost.

Growing pains

Taking a tiny niche and focusing on it hasn’t always been easy. A true bootstrap operation, Church Hill Classics was self-funded for the first seven years. By 1998, with eight employees and orders being shipped throughout the day, the business could no longer be contained in Voves’ home.

“I had to make the commitment to be a big player or get out because the market was growing so fast,” she says.

Voves took the plunge, leasing commercial space and securing bank financing for inventory and equipment. A few years later, she expanded once again, adding more square footage to accommodate her burgeoning business.

All along, Voves has been committed to working smarter, not harder. “We didn’t take more space until we were busting at the seams,” she says.

The most recent move meant adding more automated equipment to make her employees as efficient as possible. In this way, the company can continue to meet its obligations during the busy times, yet is not burdened with too much overhead in the form of payroll, for example, during the leaner months. Likewise, computer software developed specifically for Church Hill Classics
allows for more efficient tracking of employee production, materials ordering, and shipping.

Taking responsibility
At Church Hill Classics, more than 50 people share the seemingly overwhelming task of producing between 500 and 550 frames per day during the peak season. The volume of business makes job specialization a necessity. Each worker is trained to focus on a particular function — cutting, joining, embossing, and fitting — related to the process of making a frame.

The process starts with an in-house graphics department that designs the frames, as well as the custom literature, for each client. Voves believes in making the task of buying framing easier by narrowing the customer’s selections. Clients see an electronic sample of what their finished piece will look like rather than being confronted with a vast assortment of mouldings from which they must choose.

From the designer, the order goes to the production department. Glazing and moulding are cut by separate teams. The appropriate matting is produced by yet another set of employees. Then, the various elements meet in the fitting department for assembly. Once the frame is complete, it goes to a packing department where it is carefully boxed to reduce breakage.

Along the way, a team of supervisors and quality control staff make certain each step in the process is consistent with company quality standards. Orders are tracked several ways, including inspection stickers employees in the fitting department apply to the frames that come through their workstations. In addition, a barcoding system allows work orders to be scanned at each workstation.

Even with all these quality control systems in place, errors can happen. Voves says the most common problem involves the size of the frame. Not all diplomas are the same size, she explains, and mistakes during order taking can mean a mat or frame is too small or too large.

Church Hill Classics stands behind its work with a 30-day money back guarantee, according to Voves and the company website.

Of the 90,000 to 100,000 frames the company expects to turn out this year, Voves anticipates no more than 0.4 percent will be returned for replacement or refund. Transit damage will account for about one-fourth of that, she estimates, with the remainder coming as a result of human error during order taking or production.

In addition to the standard risks any business owner faces, this specialty area presents a unique set of challenges for any framer determined enough to pursue it. “Diploma framing is not for everyone,” Voves warns. “Framers contemplating entering the field must be aware of the stringent licensing requirements. You can’t just start printing school names on mats.”

Doing the right thing
Throughout the years, Church Hill Classics has expanded its focus to include high school diplomas, corporate and military certificate/award framing, flag cases, and large-scale commercial projects. Voves’ decision to add corporate clients with high-volume framing needs to her customer roster was motivated by the seasonal nature of her business.

While diploma framing is her bread and butter during winter and spring as colleges and universities gear up for graduation, business typically declines in the second half of the year.

“Corporations have seasonalities that are different from ours,” Voves says, “so the volume of work even out.”

The most recent addition to the company client list is The Danbury Mint, for which Church Hill Classics will frame collectibles ranging from Norman Rockwell prints to Civil War commemoratives.

A recent acquisition also is helping Church Hill Classics serve more colleges and universities in its niche market. The company purchased Lasting Memories, a Troy, Ohio-based provider of exclusive college campus and landmark photos, this summer. The acquisition will broaden the scope of Church Hill Classics, allowing the company to offer a greater variety of campus scenes to

Continued on page 14
complement its framed diplomas. “The addition of the Lasting Memories campus photo and diploma frame line will further expand our product offerings in a market where school-specific customization is critical to success,” says Voves.

Recently, Church Hill Classics was named an Inc. 500 fast-growth company and, in 2004, received the prestigious Torch Award for Marketplace Ethics, sponsored by the Connecticut Better Business Bureau. The latter honor is based on outstanding ethics in customer service and high standards of behavior toward customers, suppliers, employees and the community. The BBB also presented the company with its second award for Outstanding Website Marketing Message.

To Voves, the most important award is one recognizing Church Hill Classics for its commitment to its customers. “I built this business on the premise of delivering the best product to our customers,” she says. “We put ourselves in the customers’ shoes and deliver what they want. More than anything, doing the right thing for the customer has driven our significant business growth.”