



Chicago native Jay Goltz in his 85,000-square-foot warehouse on the city's west side. Goltz, who started a custom picture framing business straight out of college, has now had over 40 years of success in the industry.

RETAILER PROFILE: JAY GOLTZ

By Kimberly Biesiada

Jay Goltz doesn't believe in excuses.

A proud native Chicagoan, Goltz works hard, moves fast, and talks straight. He is the owner of Artists Frame Service, the frame shop he first opened in a third-floor loft on Clybourn Avenue after graduating from Northern Illinois University in 1978. Earning his business degree made him a first-generation college graduate.

At the time, conventional wisdom told him to get a corporate job; he was usually met with incredulity when he told peers and classmates that he was going to instead open his own small business. People thought he was wasting his college education, but Goltz believed that he had a shot. He'd grown up in his father's dime store, honing his customer service skills since age seven. Later, he'd put himself through school by working in a picture frame shop and by selling frames to artists. He'd seen what was out there, and was certain he could offer better quality, design, and service than what had existed in the market.

He opened his shop in what was at the time an abandoned factory district on the edge of Lincoln Park, about two blocks from the dime store of his youth. He had no mentor in the industry; no guidebook, no management experience. He relied on what he'd learned about taking care of customers and his knowledge of framing, as

well as his wits and ambitious, competitive nature, to make his store a success. He listened, adapted, and learned from his mistakes. He didn't accept excuses; not from suppliers, not from employees, and especially not from himself. It worked.

The business grew quickly, crossing the million-dollar threshold by its fifth year of operation. That made Artists Frame Service the largest frame retailer in the United States, and it remains about 20 times the size of an average frame shop. And, after saving money for a little over a decade, Goltz purchased the building that houses Artists Frame Service in 1999.

In an interview with PFM, Goltz reflects on his career path, shares what he's learned along the way, and gives his take on what's in store for the future of picture framing.

You have worked in the framing industry as a retail owner for over 40 years. What do you love most about it?

Custom picture framing is a beautiful thing. You use design, creativity, color, texture, and shape to figure out how to take a cherished something and not only enhance it, but help preserve it. Every time you finish a job, it's a celebration; and as retailers, we get to share that with customers who appreciate the effort. It is both a "make-beautiful-things" and a "make-people-happy" business.

In 1997, you expanded into the furniture and home décor business by opening Jayson Home. How has branching out into that arena informed your choices within Artists Frame Service?

Expanding my business into the furniture and accessory world has broadened my exposure to styles, design, and architecture. I think I have a better appreciation of how custom picture framing plays an important role in furnishing a well-designed home.

What has changed in the framing industry since you joined it in 1978?

The framing world has changed dramatically since then. There is a more sophisticated selection of framing materials available, and the customers are more aware of their options. The art that is being framed has also changed. Fewer signed and numbered prints; more photographs. The advent of the under-joiner and computerized mat cutter have made it easier for a non-skilled craftsman to do the work.

What is the biggest challenge facing retailers in 2018?

To continue to evolve in this changing market. The baby boomers are almost done framing, and their children have different expectations, different tastes, and different pri-

orities. We need to run frame shops that work in today's market, not yesterday's. Change can be difficult.

Where do you think the most opportunity is today?

I think the biggest opportunity for framers is to showcase and do better framing. Yes, sometimes a simple, black frame is best; but many times, there are better choices for a piece. Much better. I started importing moulding from Italy and Spain about 20 years ago, because I found there were incredible shapes, finishes, and textures that I couldn't find domestically. To buy more profiles and meet minimum requirements, I started to sell to other frame shops. That is how my frame distribution business, Bella Moulding, was born. I believe that in today's competitive environment, the most successful frame shops are the ones that are doing better framing, using materials and techniques that make the framing spectacular. It takes a sense and passion for design, and it also takes being a good retailer. That means having a nice-looking store with people working there that know what they are doing. Easier said than done!

You talk to a lot of framers. Do you feel that some of them are not meeting their full business potential, and why?

I have found that meeting your potential, no matter what



Goltz says he is always thinking about his decisions and the state of his business to figure out what needs improving. Learning the ins and outs of management was a challenge in the beginning; he contends it is mostly about hiring the right people.



Artists Frame Service, located on Clybourn Avenue in Chicago, is a full-service custom frame shop that offers a wide range of products.

you do, requires self-awareness. Can you be a better manager, salesperson, buyer, or number-cruncher? Every day I question what I could be doing better, and I try to improve something. Many times, that requires spending money. I believe in the adage “you have to spend money to make money.” We are in a style business. We need to keep up.

What aspect of owning Artists Frame Service posed the biggest challenge for you when you started, and how did you overcome it?

I started at 22 years old, and my company grew very quickly. I have never had a full-time job or even a mentor. I had to learn the hard way how to hire, train, and keep people around.

What have I learned? Management is 75 percent hiring the right people in the first place. I’ve gotten much better at it; I’m much more careful now about who I hire. I take my time interviewing and check references. My average employee has been with me for over 10 years. I have people who are talented, who care, and who are on the mission with me.

We are in a great industry, full of people who love what they do and have the skill set and personality to do it well. It comes down to having the time and patience for interviewing a lot of people until you find the right one, and then it’s about treating people well. It isn’t brain surgery. Then again, maybe it is!

On the other side of the coin, what about firing? What’s your timeframe for deciding if a new hire has what it takes to be a successful employee?

We pretty much know after 30 working days. I think in most cases, after the sixth week, you should have a good feel for if they’re going to make it or not. Sometimes you know in six hours!

And for the ones who pass that benchmark, do you offer employee discounts on framing?

I give a 40 percent discount to my employees, and I don’t charge for labor. I specifically don’t charge for the labor because I don’t want them to spend their time in the back doing the framing themselves or asking someone else to put it together for them. I want them to enjoy beautiful custom framing.

Where do you think the industry is headed in 10 years?

I think there is still, and always will be, a segment of the population that wants better, more interesting, different, and more sophisticated framing. I think that the framers who raise their game to meet the needs and wants of these customers will do well and will always be relevant in the market. In the old days, there was just one market. Now, I believe there is a just-get-it-framed market, and another, more professional market that requires a better selection and level of expertise. I’m not sure that you can be everything to everybody, but I am sure you can play an important role in the lives of your customers and your team members.

You have taught profit and management classes and led a retailing panel at The National Conference for many years.

What’s the most rewarding part?

There was no business model that I could follow while growing my business. There was no one to get advice from. I was pioneering it myself, and it was brutal. It was an ongoing struggle every day—and that went on for 15 years.

As a result of that, I’m glad I can help other people with it. I’m able to take the lessons I learned from my painful struggle and help people that I believe are in an honorable profession in an industry that’s full of nice people. I want to help keep independent framers in business, so I feel like I’m doing what I can. **PFM**