



RETAILER PROFILE: GILDED MOON FRAMING

By Kimberly Biesiada

It was the late 1990s, and Jill Choma, a computer software instructor who also studied at Parsons School of Design, went out and got a picture framed. A lover of building things by hand, Choma returned home and told her husband, Paul, two things that set her new career in motion: “That was a great experience—and I can do it.”

The Chomas had been looking to start their own business and move away from the New York suburb in which they lived. They founded Gilded Moon Framing with the intent of growing the home-based business into a brick-and-mortar location in the New England town of their dreams.

Jill was at the helm, completing her first framing job in 2000 in their home. She took a course at the New England Picture Framing Academy. She read voraciously: educational literature, books by industry experts, trade magazines. She grew the business. Soon, Paul—a programmer-analyst for a large construction company—joined Gilded Moon full-time, and they kept on growing.

After 18 years of hard work, the Chomas have settled in their dream locale—and Gilded Moon is doing better than ever.

In an interview with PFM, they discuss their big move, how a bold decision meant surviving the recession, and how they work with neighbors and vendors to continue thriving.

In 2004, you stopped being a home-based business when you opened your shop in the village of Millerton, NY. How did you choose your location?

PAUL: Around 2003, Jill started doing marketing research. We really wanted to find a small town; we didn’t like where we were living. I was also a ski instructor at the time, and while I was on a ski lift talking with another coach, he suggested Millerton.

JILL: I made a business plan and realized that, while Millerton is a small town—today, the population is about 993—it also serves as a hub for many surrounding towns. The town is about two hours north of New York City and a lot of people have weekend homes there. That looked like a good customer base, so in 2004, we opened our shop in Millerton. It was very small, only about 300 square feet; we were kind of testing the waters. Once we realized it was successful, we immediately moved in 2005 right to the center of Main Street in a 1,200-square-foot rental. After a couple of years, we took over the space next door and doubled to 2,400 square feet.

This growth happened in 2008, when many retailers buckled under economic pressure.

PAUL: That year we were out in Las Vegas at the West Coast Art & Frame Expo and The National Conference, taking classes by industry leaders. We



saw the writing on the wall with other framers—and we were at a point personally where we had huge education bills for our kids. We had to do something, and we had to do something bold, because we had to make money. The space adjacent to ours was vacant for quite a while. We decided to take over that space by partnering with a nearby furniture store.

How did you and the other business arrange the space?

JILL: We shared the space (with the furniture store) and we staged it with framed artwork. We also lit it up at night; there's a movie theater not too far away, so people would walk by and see it at night on their way to a movie. On occasion, they would come in the next day and say 'Hey, we saw this piece, and we want to purchase it.' Which was great. We also got more workspace, which was ideal for us at that time, too, because we were growing with our staff and equipment.

PAUL: We also went from about 20 feet of front window display to 40 feet, with beautifully staged furniture and framed artwork in an eye-catching, street-level view.

Taking the risk obviously paid off.

PAUL: Because we partnered with them, to the general public, it looked like we grew. The other thing we did was bring in Wizard (visualization software), which we learned about at the WCAF Expo. We grew about 28 percent that year, when so many other framers were losing sales and going out of business.

JILL: Since then, we've purchased our own building.

PAUL: In 2010, we found out the building we were oc-

cupying was going to be sold. Just when we found out we were losing our lease, a building across the street that had been a bank for about 100 years was also being sold. The timing couldn't have been better. We spoke to the bank manager—she knew of our reputation in town. The bank wanted to leave on good terms with the community, so they wanted whoever took over the business to be a good fit. They gave us a deal we couldn't refuse. We bought the building, did a six-month renovation, and that's where we are now. It's about 4,000 square feet.



● In the showroom, the Chomas display similar artworks framed in incremental price points, from around \$100 to \$1,700. They say seeing their options puts customers at ease.



● Jill Choma says her computer software background and her education at Parsons set her up to succeed as a frame shop owner.

You mentioned that your staff was growing. What does your staff look like today?

PAUL: We're a staff of four now. One of our staff members has been with us going on six years, and the other is going on three years. We have a strong team, but behind our team, we have some phenomenal vendors that make us better. From Rhonda Feinman, to A Street Frames, AMCI, Jonah Frameworks in Pennsylvania, and many more.

JILL: We feel like we're the front designers, but behind us we know we have a team of vendors and industry experts that we can use as our resources when a challenging project comes in, or if we need something in a rush. We know who to call, and we feel like we're bigger than just the four of us. Jay Goltz has been a mentor over the years; we know we can pick up the phone and call him if we're struggling with a decision. He's given us good insight on some of our bigger decisions. Rhonda (Feinman) has been with us for many years, and I would say about 40 percent of our business now is closed corner frames.

Who are your customers?

PAUL: We do a lot of framing of fine art, whether it be a Rauschenberg or a Lichtenstein or a Chagall. We work with different art galleries. In 2013, Jill and I walked into MoMA and saw about 20 of our frames in a very prominent artist's show.

JILL: We have art collectors, designers, and artists whom we do work for, as well as local residents and

visitors—whether it's people bringing something back from travels to be framed, or children's art. There's no one person that makes up all our sales. It's really spread between various types of customers.

Can you give some insight on how to make it as a custom framer in a small town?

PAUL: The secret to our success is that we constantly look at our space, and we ask ourselves, is this the



● The sitting area in Gilded Moon. The Chomas say they keep the customer experience in mind throughout the shop.



● *Gilded Moon's new inspiration gallery showcases creative framing projects that aim to spark similar ideas in customers.*

best it can be? Does it look like you'd want to bring a piece of artwork into this shop? The other thing is, we offer premium products. Years ago, Rhonda Feinman said, 'Of course you can sell closed corner frames. How many times do you see a Lexus or Mercedes drive by your shop?' To say you can't sell museum glass, or a closed corner frame, just because you as a picture framer may not be able to afford that, is a mistake. Our main showroom is closed corner.

Another thing we did that's been very helpful to us was frame the same piece of artwork 16 different ways, in incremental price points. These pieces go all the way around the showroom, starting from under \$100 all the way up to \$1,700. When a new customer comes in, we offer to give them a two-minute tour

and we show them (the framed series) and say, which one do you like? Chances are good that most people will point toward the higher-end market.

JILL: It also puts the customer at ease to know that there are options. We try to take intimidation and mystery out of the equation. Sometimes customers go high-end, sometimes they go low-end; and sometimes it's both in the same sale. It's about having good options and understanding what the customer is looking for. That's what we try to do at the design counter so the customer's happy with what we've done for them and come back—and in a perfect world, recommend us to their friends.

PAUL: We do installations, as well.

JILL: There's a demand for it, and more and more customers are wanting that service.

And you're forming that personal relationship.

JILL: Definitely. When we're in their homes, we're able to see the setting, and that helps at the design counter because now we know what their style is. It gives you some insight that's very helpful. It's fun, too. It gets you out of the shop and lets you see where your work is going.

PAUL: We also work closely with subcontractors.

How do you find good contractors you can rely on?

PAUL: We offer some services—like antique frame restoration—that we don't have the expertise to do



● *From ready-mades to high-end, custom framing, Gilded Moon offers customers of all tastes and budgets a one-of-a-kind experience.*

ourselves. If someone brings in a gilded frame that needs resizing or repair, for instance, I will reach out to a fine furniture maker nearby. His work is that of an artist; it's unbelievable. For an antique frame, I might ask him to resize it or regild it. We hand-deliver frames to various restorers and will go over the details in person about what needs to happen with the piece. We'll then pick up the frames and do delivery and installation, so we offer that full service.

One of the people who helps me with installation has an art degree and is also a home builder. Yesterday, for instance, I hung artwork in somebody's house that was 55" x 55" and had to go 20 feet up, above a fireplace. I'll rely on this person for help in a complicated installation like that.

JILL: That's about as complicated as it gets!

PAUL: There are very few things where we say, 'No, we can't do that here, you have to go somewhere else.'

JILL: Know who your resources are and use them when you can. It's good for your customers and good for your community. It keeps us all in business.

PAUL: Just make sure when you're doing installation that you're properly insured. That's another thing we learned by going to the WCAF Expo. We spoke to an insurance company early on and learned that we really didn't have the proper insurance. Now, whenever a piece of artwork is in our care, we are covered.

That's hugely important.

PAUL: And it's something a lot of frame shop owners have no idea about. They just don't really realize that they aren't insured properly.

How do you advertise to bring in new customers?

JILL: One of the main ways we advertise is with our website. I'm in the process of redoing (the site). I recently finished a 12-week marketing course with Meg Glasgow, and we're really starting to put the focus on social media after she taught me how to use it more effectively. One of the things I struggle with as the owner is customer privacy; I can't always take pictures of clients' artwork and post them on social media. So, we're taking part of our shop and turning it into a gallery of



● Jill and Paul Choma offer full-service custom framing in their Millerton, NY shop.

cool, inspirational framing projects. We'll be able to walk customers in and say, 'Hey, this might look nice on your project, what do you think?'

PAUL: And these pieces will then translate to social media and website content.

JILL: We're doing more with video and photography and just trying to make it a good experience for the customer, in every aspect. There is a learning curve with social media, but we're getting there!

What advice would you give a new frame shop owner?

JILL: Never be complacent; always look for ways to reinvent or improve. Think about customer experience and how you can offer the best services possible. **PFM**

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