
A Postcard from Vegas – Profile Magazine April 2006

Everything in Las Vegas is “over the top”. This place and the people here are “larger than life”. They call this town the “*Adult Playground of America*”, and apparently, “*What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*” ... However this rule won't be applied to my recent adventure to the “capital city of neon lights”..

Once again, I was given the privileged opportunity to help out Gunnar at one of their international tradeshow to promote their computerised matcutters, and this time it was the West Coast Art & Framing Show, held in the Las Vegas Hilton in February, earlier this year.

Vegas!

Before I talk about the show itself, please allow me to talk a bit about Las Vegas. This place is amazing, and it is all driven on gambling. It was amusing to see that the “gambling pressure” here is so huge, that they even have slot machines in the airport, outside your flight gate as soon as you arrive! (How convenient!) Everywhere you go in Las Vegas, you are always only a few metres away from the closest slot machine. Even some fuel stations and other retail stores have slot machines.

The casinos themselves are all opulent, individually themed and are all designed to attract and engage the senses of the average consumer. I noticed that all casinos have creatively designed “mazes” of slot machines and gambling tables, designed to confuse the consumer of the actual time of day (fake sky and clouds painted on the ceilings, no clocks anywhere) and create a unique ambience that tries to make you feel comfortable parting with your cash. Inside each casino, there is always a pleasant fragrance in the air (they pump through \$1,000's of essential oils a day!), and there never seems to be enough signage to direct you to the exit? Every aspect of Las Vegas is marketing and retailing at its best. Even shopping in a retail mall here is considered as an “experience”.

Apart from the recognised attraction for gambling, Las Vegas has a lot more to offer. Being able to take in a world class show is a great way to make your visit memorable, and worthwhile. On any night of the week, you can choose from an amazing selection of famous performers, comedians, magicians and other unique shows such as Barry Manilow, Celine Dion, David Copperfield, Cirque Du Soleil, and of course the obligatory “Elvis” tribute shows, all of which are extravagant and enjoyable. Even seeing a “free” lounge act in any casino, is better than a paid \$25 performance from a “feature” band in your local Aussie pub. The quality and scale of these shows is unmatched anywhere else on the planet.

The West Coast Art & Frame Show

The West Coast Art & Frame Show was much larger than I expected, and has been a regular event now for the last 5 years. Every year, this show has been growing at an exponentially, and it has had to find bigger venues in Las Vegas each year to cater for its expansion. The reason for it's growth is quite apparent to most, Las Vegas is an extremely desirable destination to visit, and offers a lot more

entertainment and interest than other annual international shows held in New York, Atlanta and Bologna. No wonder it is the fastest growing framing show in the world. The only US show bigger than the West Coast Art & Frame show now is the Atlanta show, held in September every year.

The display areas and halls were busy everyday, and all major framing industry brands and suppliers are represented, showing off their latest products. Framers are flowing through the show all day, and the hours seemed to pass very quickly.

This international tradeshow is also famous for its extensive range of educational seminars, and there are over 80 seminars over 4 days, covering a huge range of framing related topics from fundamental basics, to advanced gilding techniques, to commercial production efficiency for mass frame manufacturers. Over 4000 seats were available for seminars, which were attended by over 1000 people. Many of the major seminars were free to attend, but they book out very quickly before the show even starts. This show is now the biggest in the world with regards to educational seminars.

Interesting facts learned at the Las Vegas Show

I made the time to sit through some of the key seminars at the show, while I wasn't working on the Gunnar stand, and from these seminars I learned some very interesting facts.

Firstly, I can confirm the suspicions that most of us have, yes, the custom framing market in the US is indeed very similar to the Australian market, but the US market does seem to be ahead of us in a few areas. By watching what is happening in their market, I believe we can prepare ourselves here better for what is happening now, and what is yet to come.

- Custom framing is suffering a major downturn worldwide, and the competition for "luxury consumer dollar" is becoming increasingly difficult.
- Compared to 10 years ago, consumers now have more choices to spend their money on, but not necessarily more dollars to spend?
- It is estimated that approximately 50% of all custom framing in the US is done by a "Big Box" retailer or a franchised chain store of framing shops.
- The framing industry is growing, but the dynamics are shifting to other retailers. There are more frames being manufactured than ever before, but this new business is not all channeled through traditional custom frame shops.
- A new, stronger market in empty ready-made frames has been driven by the digital printing revolution.
- Canvas stretched images are just as popular in the US, as they are here, and definitely impacting the market for custom framing.
- Major retailers are getting better at merchandising and marketing, and are now offering consumers more choices. For example –
 - **McDonalds** now offer DVD's for sale in vending machines.
 - **Borders Bookshops** now expanding into selling ready-made frames & gifts

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- **Starbucks Coffee** is now the biggest CD retailer of music in the US, and have such a strong influence on the music industry, they can demand exclusive release of certain albums from the record companies, weeks before other retailers can offer them.
 - **Amazon.com** is no longer all about books. They have expanded into a vast array of cosmetics and other gift lines. If it can be Fed-Ex'd, then it can be sold on Amazon.com!
 - All industries are heading to China, and this seems to be part of the changing landscape of our industry. The products coming out of China now are high quality, and highly affordable.
 - Containers of Chinese ready-made frames are landing weekly in the US – and ready-made frames have now become a primary source of profit for retail photo shops.
 - Custom suit tailors are now obsolete in the US. High quality custom-made suits are now made in China, where orders are e-mailed to the factory in China, and the suit is then Fed-Ex'ed back to the US retail shop in less than 3 weeks turnaround.

But it is not all bad news. Currently in Australia, there are no major "Big Box" retailers to compete with for custom framing, and there will always be consumers who want quality.... not everyone wants to buy a cheap ready-made from K-Mart!

The bottom line is that as retailers, we all need to recognise that we need to compete harder for attracting today's consumer and the luxury dollar. Each of us, in our own way, will already know what we can be doing better with regards to marketing, and now is the time to start doing it.

For those that are interested in learning more about the West Coast Art & Frame Show, you can visit their website - www.wcafshow.com .

Jared Davis



With over 15 years experience in the framing & graphics industry, Jared Davis has covered the wholesale, commercial and retail aspects of the business. His previous sales, marketing & training experience gives him an understanding of the changing opportunities for retail businesses, and he offers an up-to-date approach on new methods and techniques now required by today's business owners, to be able to successfully market, merchandise and sell their services to consumers. Jared is also a featured educator at major international industry tradeshows & conventions.