

The Basics: Matting Artwork

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Professional and semi-professional artists and photographers must effectively market their images. This market is very competitive, and keeping costs down while using quality materials is of prime importance. Thoroughly professional ways of presenting your product in an effective manner is essential.

In some instances an image can be marketed by itself, but more often an art mat is used, and at times a frame is added. Some of the common places to market matted images are through retail stores, street markets, art and photography exhibitions, craft shows and fund raising projects. You will find a lot of competition with any of these alternatives, so you must be prepared to provide the best possible product at the lowest price. Assuming you have a photo or artwork that is readily saleable, there are ways to present that product to the end user in a highly attractive manner.

Using art mats:

Try putting your artwork behind several different mats. This can be done at most photo stores, or use the corner samples at a custom cutting counter. It becomes readily apparent that the perception of the image changes radically with different combinations of colors. Most will enhance the image, and some will stand out immediately as excellent choices. In most cases double mats will work best, but images without bright colors will often work best with a single mat. Adding a single or double mat will usually be cost efficient, since most end-users will appreciate the added value. Here are some fundamental ideas when considering using art mats.

Single mats:

If a single mat is used, it is often safest and most desirable to use a neutral color, such as off white, cream, light grays etc. These go very well with most images and fit into most home settings. If you wish a stronger color, try to match the mat color with a dominant color in the image. i.e. Lots of dark green trees in the picture, use a dark green mat. For black and white photographs, off-white mats with a black core are very effective.

Using a double mat:

Double mats add considerably to the richness of the presentation. The safest method is to use a neutral outer mat, and a color for the inner mat that matches a dominant color in the image. The amount of the inner mat that can be seen is called the "reveal", and varies with the size of the mat. A reveal of 3/16" is close to being an industry standard, but use your own judgment. When using a white mat over another white mat, a reveal of 1/2" or even much more can work very well. Double mats are usually twice the price of a single.

Adding decorative cuts:

Closed and open "V-grooves", decorative corners and graphics can be attractive, but often unnecessary. A closed v-groove is very common, and can be quite cost effective especially with larger artwork. The extra cost can be recovered by a higher retail price. Closed v-grooves can be very effective on single mats of conservation quality.

Types of mat cuts explained These are some of the cuts available, and the terminology used to describe them.

1. Open v-groove, 3/16" reveal
2. V-groove gap
3. Closed v-groove
4. Message box, 3/16" reveal
5. Double opening, 3/16" reveal
6. Single opening
7. "Fancy" corner
8. Floating the image
9. Graphic
10. #246 Walnut frame
11. Double mat, light blue outer, dark blue inner.

What type of mat to use:

The two common types are regular mats and conservation quality (rag) mats. It would always be nice to use conservation quality, but this market is very competitive, and price is important. Regular matboard is still of very high quality, and we suggest they be used for any image that does not have a high value in itself.

Example: Photos and printer copies. Conservation mats should be used for original artwork, high quality prints, Limited editions prints or any image that has a high value in itself. Price wise, a presentation using regular mats will cost less than half that of using conservation quality.

Technical information on mats can be seen on the pages of the two largest mat companies, Crescent and Bainbridge.

Size of mat:

Use standard sizes when possible, allowing your customer to buy a frame easily. Non-standard size mats mean an expensive custom frame is necessary, and most end-users recognize this when purchasing matted images.

Standard sizes are 5 x 7, 8 x 10, 11 x 14, 16 x 20 and 20 x 24. The borders around the image should be a minimum of 1 1/2 inches for small images, and up to 3 inches or more for large images.

A 5 x 7 image in an 8 x 10 mat will give borders of 1 1/2 inches all round.

If you plan to provide a frame with the mat, keeping to standard sizes is not important. Obtaining mats at wholesale prices: Most photo stores and many large retailers will carry a few sizes and very limited colors, but don't supply volume.

They are also expensive. Larger art supply stores may have very limited selections of mats in volumes of 25 or so at some discount. To get a true wholesale price, scour the Internet for companies that cater to the smaller vendor.

Expect to buy in some volume in order to get the best price possible. Fifty or more identical mats will get you into a price range that will keep your product competitive. A regular 11 x 14 double mat in a local store will cost \$4.50 to \$6.00. In volumes less than 200, you should pay \$2.50 or less. Be careful of highly discounted mats that are not by major manufacturers such as Crescent and Bainbridge. Some of these are not of equivalent quality, and may warp or discolor quickly or otherwise harm the image.

Final note on mats:

KEEP IT SIMPLE. Do not try to match every image with a different color combination. A color combination that fits several images quite well will meet your needs much more efficiently. One opening size is better than several. Your cost will be reduced, and those images that do not sell will not saddle you with high or useless inventories of mats.

Backing:

You will need a backing for the mat and image. The backing completes the package and protects the image. For regular mats, we recommend manila board or heavier non-corrugated cardboard (for mats 11 x 14 and smaller), and foam core for larger mats. If you use conservation quality mat, your backing MUST be acid-free. Use acid-free mat or acid-free foam core.

To frame or not to frame:

In general, do not get heavily into framing for the "drop by" market. The customer can pick a frame of their choice if the mat is a standard size. Consider having a few framed pieces so the customer can see a finished result, and can buy your framed piece if they like. Aluminum "backloader" frames are inexpensive, and very easy to load, as are clip frames. A thorough search of the internet will find some high quality wood frames at reasonable prices, and custom sizes are often not much more. Thin plexi glass (1 mm.) is becoming very popular as a replacement for glass. It is much lighter and being very durable is a big plus. It also provides some solar radiation protection for outdoor events or florescent lighting.

Packaging:

A covering of some sort is a necessity. A product made for this purpose is a re-sealable polybag. It protects the mat package from the elements and dirty fingers, and also gives a very professional appearance. Some ultraviolet protection is built in to all plastics. These bags can sometimes be found in Art supply stores but frequently the Internet is the only choice.

Shrink-wrapping also works, but requires time and equipment, and is finicky. Shrink-wrapped matted art often has a tendency to bow in hot weather.

Assembly:

Tape the image to the back of the mat on one long side only. This allows the picture to "breathe" under differing atmospheric conditions. Use magic (scotch) tape or something similar. For conservation matting, an acid free tape is mandatory. Photo corners are good, but time consuming. Attaching the back to the mat is not necessary.

Displays:

It should not be necessary to have wire racks or other expensive methods of display your product. A white cardboard box neatly cut can be sufficient if presented well. Many larger communities will have stores specializing in acrylic displays, and you may find ready made ones of the right size and shape. Large stationary stores often carry these or may have other cardboard displays to fit your needs.

Foam core (3/16") may be purchased at Art supply stores, and a good utility knife, a glue gun and some imagination can create impressive displays. How much to charge? A general rule is to add up the cost of your mat, image, bag and backing. Add some for labor.

If you are going into a show, add a proportional cost for this. Multiply the total by 2 to get a ballpark figure. If you sell through a retailer, the "norm" is for them to double whatever they pay you to get the minimum retail price.

Summary:

Selling images in this market is competitive. If your presentation is as good or better than your competitors, then the quality and uniqueness of your image will determine the outcome. There is a large appetite for well-done photos, artwork and crafts. Keep it simple, keep your costs to a minimum, don't expect to get rich, and most importantly, enjoy the experience.

About MatShop

MatShop has been supplying mat and framing supplies to photo retailers for 10 years, and through the WEB for 6 years. Its customers are artists, photographers, manufacturers and others who require volume purchases of these products. The purpose of the MatShop.com page is to supply

background information on all products, and to suggest how mats and frames can benefit the specific needs of its customers. MatShop is a Division of Island Art Publishers, (www.islandart.com). Island Art markets art cards and other products throughout the United States and Canada using the exact products we recommend to our MatShop customers.