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Using Aspen for Artist Stretcher Frames: Adding Value Through Quality Service, Direct Marketing, and Careful Material Selection

Chris Polson¹

Abstract.—Aspen wood, when carefully selected and kiln dried, makes excellent stock for artist stretcher frames. Direct marketing techniques including the Internet and word of mouth give access to national markets, providing a more diverse and stable customer base for operations from a rural area. High-quality service, as shown by product performance and rapid order fulfillment, yields high returns.

There is a clear need in the art supply market for high-quality, heavy-duty canvas stretchers suitable for large canvas paintings. We created **Twin Brooks Stretchers™** to fill this need. Our stretchers are made from aspen wood sawn and dried at our facility in Lincolnville, Maine, and assembled at our own custom shop. Aspen wood, when properly dried and selected, is stable, strong, and makes excellent stock for stretcher bars. We use a mechanical corner fastening system called a Tite Joint Fastener, which we believe to be a rugged, cost-effective improvement over traditional wedges.

ASPEN WOOD

Technical Advantages

Aspen sapwood is firm and white with uniform consistency and density through the cross section. The color of heartwood varies from white to cream to light grayish brown. Aspen is free from sap and associated staining problems. Properly dried to 6 percent moisture content and selected for straightness and structural integrity, aspen is a strong, lightweight, stable wood.

Benefits for Stretcher Use

Aspen wood is well suited to the job of taking and holding staples or tacks to fasten canvas. Aspen's strength and stability stand up to the task of holding a taut canvas as it dries after gesso application or other canvas preparation. Aspen wood does not tend to splinter.

Silviculture of Aspen

Bigtooth aspen (*Populus grandidentata*) and trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) grow predominately in northern regions of the world. Aspen is a pioneer tree species with several adaptations that enable it to colonize newly disturbed sites such as burned or harvested areas. When the main tree stem is removed, hormonal control over latent buds on the root system stops and heavy root sprouting occurs, often in the same growing season. The intact root system provides abundant nutrition and water to the rapidly growing shoots, which soon dominate growing space. Aspen tends to grow in expanding groups from this habit of root sprouting. Aspen produces large quantities of lightweight seed early in the spring, which can get a headstart on bare soil over heavy seeded or later seed-bearing species. These seedlings grow rapidly compared to other tree species.

The abundant young aspen shoots that arise from both of these forms of regeneration ensure a rapid recolonization of harvested sites. This,

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in turn, helps harvested land remain productive. Vigorously growing young shoots produce a great deal of oxygen and consume a lot of carbon dioxide, both desirable traits with a global warming trend upon us. These young shoots also provide ideal food and cover for wildlife such as ruffed grouse, woodcock, white-tailed deer, and snowshoe hare.

Source of Raw Materials

We buy aspen logs that grow in the state of Maine. These logs come from a variety of harvesting sites including selective harvests, patch cuttings, and clearcuts. Loggers in Maine are required to operate under strict Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards and perform in accordance with the Maine environmental laws as well as the progressive Maine Forest Practices Act of 1989.

When possible, we use logs cut from our own lands and lands here in Lincolnville. Other sources may include cuttings where the smaller parts of the aspen stem are utilized for pulp and paper production.

Value-Added Benefits

We saw our own logs on a small efficient bandsaw and dry the lumber in a state-of-the-art kiln that produces consistent high-quality drying. By manufacturing stretchers at our facility, we are able to get more value from the same raw material. This, in turn, allows us to offer high prices for logs, which benefits landowners, loggers, and their suppliers.

MARKETING

Marketing from rural areas presents challenges and opportunities. Drop-in traffic tends to be low, and shipping expenses tend to be high. Quality of life issues such as short work commutes, low traffic congestion, and proximity to natural environments are definite benefits of operating a business from a rural area.

Direct marketing techniques have helped us establish a diverse, stable customer base. Using low-cost Internet Web page advertising and communications as well as personal phone service with a toll-free telephone number, we are able to maintain a national market presence. Personal phone service for developing relationships for customized products is a must. Word of mouth business continues to be vital to our success. Products that get "used up" and need to be reordered have been the mainstay of the business.

SERVICE

Having a dependable high-quality product and backing it up with services such as prompt order fulfillment and a satisfaction guarantee contribute significantly to the success of this business. Providing options for customizing our product such as fractional sizing of stretcher frames and various levels of custom canvas preparation gives customers a wide range of choices to fit their particular needs.

SUMMARY

Non-timber forest product marketing from rural areas can be a viable business opportunity. Product choices that favor success include items that get used up and need to be reordered as well as items that can be customized to meet a variety of customer needs. Direct marketing techniques are critical to developing a diverse and stable customer base. The Internet is a fantastic tool for direct marketing and customer communications.

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