

Pixel Outpost, Making It Big in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Steve Kozel president of Pixel Outpost in front of one of his prints Photo Sophie Braccini

When Steve and Suzanne Kozel took a trip to Italy in 2004, they took pictures they wanted to enlarge and display. They looked online and couldn't find an affordable way to get large prints of their memories. That's how Kozel, who was part of a visual art family business, decided to start a new venture; Pixel Outpost, an internet service that takes those beautiful Taj Mahal or Grand Canyon pictures and turns them into works of art that will gracefully adorn living rooms and entryways. Last June, the Lafayette resident moved his Walnut Creek business to Moraga, purchasing the old firehouse at 331 Rheem Boulevard.

For the end-user, the process is quite simple: go to www.pixeloutpost.com, upload your electronic file (you can upload directly up to 100MB files, otherwise, there are other ways to transfer your pixels) and then the creative part begins. After deciding on an optional border, you'll get to choose the kind of material you want your rendition on and how you want it mounted. The software will offer you different sizes appropriate for the definition of your picture. For example, a canvas made out of a picture would look great blown to a 32" by 24", but look too "pixelated" at 48" by 36". Pixel Outpost offers free help via email to optimize your results.

According to Kozel, "less than 5% of the projects get finalized without interaction with the customers. 70% of the discussions happen via email, the rest by phone. We do not charge for any of this and what sets us apart is that we are available almost 24/7."

Denise Davidson from Oakwood Athletic Club works with Pixel Outpost: "They print posters for us and their response time is amazing; they will deliver the finished product the same day or within 24 hours. They are very helpful if we have a problem with a picture and will always offer suggestions. They are easy to work with and very reasonably priced." The price range varies depending on size and material and goes from \$37 for a paper print 16"X20" to \$315 for a canvas 60"X72".

Oakwood is one local customer of the Outpost, but that's only a fraction of the business. Since it is web-based, orders come from all over the United States. Of the 16,000 images printed since the beginning in May of 2005, 80% came from outside of California and in California, only 20% originate in the Bay Area. The three largest markets are New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The majority of the images are landscapes from individual trips, but the Outpost gets orders from Historical Societies and Museums wanting to preserve and display older material. The company can work from already-printed material like ancient pictures.

All the orders received are printed on the premises. The office harbors HP and Epson printers stocked with water based ink, rolls of paper and canvas, frames, fixtures, as well as tubes and boxes for shipping. Five employees work in the building, including wife Suzanne who helps with marketing and Kozel's sister Kim Fogarty who handles the bookkeeping and part of the production.

The end results can be quite stunning. Beautiful family pictures on canvas

with a paint-like finish, long panoramic views of the Bay, Machu Pichu in the clouds, flowers, pets.... The range of images is endless. You can count on Kozel's mastery of Photoshop to improve your images: When a picture is blown up, what appeared to be a pure blue sky can show "digital noise," or markings can be revealed on portraits; Kozel takes care of these without being asked. For special projects Kozel is happy to get involved and make suggestions, like the composition based on a dog's picture with four different backgrounds or a beautiful panoramic view of Yosemite presented in the form of a triptych. Your imagination and creativity is the limit.

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