



Dexter Merritt

Positive Black Images



Dexter R. Merritt, Sr. started his side hustle, Positive Black Images, as a mail-order catalog business in Dallas, TX in 1989. During the 1990s and 2000s, they recruited independent sales representatives (Positive Black Images dealers) to sell their art prints at home shows nationwide. Today, they are a nationally recognized e-commerce niche brand, selling Black art worldwide.

I am from Indianola, MS, near the Mississippi River. Indianola is widely known as the home of the legendary B.B. King.

After graduating from college in 1985, I left Mississippi and settled in Dallas, TX. I rented an apartment for the first couple of years and subsequently purchased my first home in my mid-20s. I had moved to Dallas to join IBM as a system engineer, having graduated from "Ole' Miss" with a degree in computer science.

I wanted to buy artwork for my new house. Consciously or subconsciously, I wanted to display art that reflected my nostalgia for the Mississippi Delta. I wanted a collection that spoke to the African American experience in ways that were positive and creative. So, I began to visit several art galleries in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, only to realize that most galleries did not carry African American art prints created by Black artists.

I finally came across a gallery at Red Bird Mall: the Ebony Fine Art Gallery. The framer that worked there was an African American and after we spoke, I found out that he was also an artist. He showed me some of his work. His originals were exquisite. I asked if he had any prints of the work so that it could be made more widely available for purchase. He told me that, by his calculation, he could invest the money to reproduce the prints, but he didn't have a distribution network to market the merchandise.

Even though I had a full-time job, we started to collaborate on a number of ideas. He introduced me to other artists in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Consequently, there were several African American artists interested in having their work published and sold to art galleries and individuals throughout the country.



Positive Black Images

Retail

Positive Black Images is a fine art publishing and distribution company located in Gaithersburg, MD. The Positive Black Images fine art collection is a vibrant celebration of African American artistic expressions, imagination, culture, and heritage. Their collection of fine art and gift accessories includes open & limited-edition prints, full color & black and white reproductions, a full line of Christmas, All Occasion and Humorous greeting cards, ceramic mugs and more. Their products are available for retail buyers, and they can be purchased wholesale by art galleries, art dealers, eCommerce sites, and other fine art businesses.

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That's how I got started. My hobby then evolved into a part-time business.

Growing Positive Black Images into a Nationally-Recognized Niche Brand

Over the next few years, I became a go-to person for many Black artists who wanted to have their work displayed and sold through retail and wholesale channels across the country.

Occasionally, I would have my own ideas about artistic themes that I felt would really strike a chord – art that spoke to education, family unity, spirituality, music and rhythm, Black culture and family life, and more – things that I felt would provoke thought, be marketable, and would communicate a positive message. Sometimes, I would have an idea and one of the artists would express that concept on canvas, and then we would reproduce it as a lithograph print. That is how I came up with the Positive Black Images motto, “You Have To See It, To Be It.” Always directing my thrust was the profound belief that art was not simply a financial investment, but a cultural investment. It could serve as a teaching tool for today’s youth and tomorrow’s leaders.

I started placing ads in *Ebony*, *Black Enterprise*, and *Upscale* magazines to recruit dealers to sell Positive Black Images prints throughout the country. At that time, Black art was still not widely available in galleries, especially in rural areas. People in rural communities needed to have a way to purchase art. During the 1990s and early 2000s, having Positive Black Images dealers in those areas turned out to be a very successful sales strategy.

To find independent dealers, I would run ads looking to connect with individuals interested in selling Black art. At first, we were a mail-order business. We had a hardcopy catalog and dealers guide with exhibition tips that included images of our fine art print collection. Positive Black Images dealers would order select prints at wholesale prices and they would exhibit, take orders, and sell lithograph prints at home shows.

In February of 1993, before my move to Montgomery County, we appeared in a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled Black Entrepreneurship (Pretty Picture - Closing the Money Gap). We were included because of the way we were selling Black art. Although my customer base included a number of art galleries, the majority of my network was made up of independent art dealers, individuals who were generating part-time income purchasing from Positive Black Images wholesale and selling retail at home shows.

Perhaps, we were one of the first to sell Black art this way.

From Hobby to Part-Time to Full-Time

For most of the 1990s and 2000s, the work I did with Positive Black Images was on a part-time basis. During the day, I always worked full-time at large information technology companies. Over my 35+ year career, I performed a variety of job assignments. I worked as a system engineer for 9 years. Then, I served as a Senior Integration Analyst Specialist, Software Engineering Manager, Multi-Functional Engineering & Science Manager, Senior Manager, IT Program Senior Manager, and more.

During the period from 1989 – 2004, I would work my day job from 8 to 5, then come home in the evening and work from 6 to 10 p.m. filling orders and responding to customer requests. At one point, five people were working with us on a part-time basis, helping with order fulfillment. During the period mentioned above, on average, I worked 12 or more hours a day. In 2002, I decided to go back to school and get my MBA. During the early 2000s, I also moved into management.

It was around this time that I noticed that I was no longer working a

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standard 40-hour week, but oftentimes, I would have to work additional hours because of the increased responsibility. It became extremely difficult to traverse both worlds, so I had to decide as to which way I was going to go.

I enjoyed both and I had a passion for both, but while the part-time business was doing very well, I decided I had to place a temporary pause on the art business. My degree was in Computer Science so with the increased responsibilities I had, I committed myself to a full-time career in systems engineering, software development, and program management until my retirement.

The Next Phase for Positive Black Images

When I finally retired from corporate work in 2020, I revitalized the fine art business. With the relaunch, we evolved Positive Black Images into an e-commerce business. We now have a Positive Black Images eCommerce shop at www.positiveblackimagesfineart.com with additional eCommerce storefronts on Etsy, Shopify, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Amazon, and Black Wall Street.

I set up a holding company called Merritt Investment Trust (MIT, LLC) that houses 3 businesses. It includes a program management consulting business, which is what I did during the last 7 years of my tenure. It also includes a real estate business that provides tenant and buyer services for properties I purchased in the 2000s. And it includes Positive Black Images, a vibrant celebration of African American artistic expressions, imagination, culture, and heritage.

Today, marketing fine art is different, and the way you sell the art is different because customers can purchase products and services online directly from publishers, manufacturers, and distributors, rather than having to go to a physical storefront. Still, our track record and passion keep us in the game, and always moving forward.

Education, Family Unity, and Spirituality

Concerning any advice I would give someone starting a business in Montgomery County, I would say the following:

I have always believed that success could be achieved through education, family unity, and spirituality. Everything that I have achieved individually and contributed to collectively starts there. In addition to these building blocks, I suggest that aspiring business owners follow their passion. Take the time to develop the right skills, learn your craft, pay attention to the details, and treat others like you want to be treated.

You don't have to achieve all of your goals overnight, and you can have multiple interests and passions. But in doing so, you may have to work long hours. Growing up, I recall my father saying, "The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary." I have found that to be true. For 35+ years, I was employed full-time with large information technology companies. For 15 of those years, I worked part-time in the evenings and on the weekends to grow my fine art business. I was able to thoroughly enjoy my work in engineering and program management, and I am utilizing those skills as I continue to follow my passion for Positive Black Images. I am blessed and thankful!