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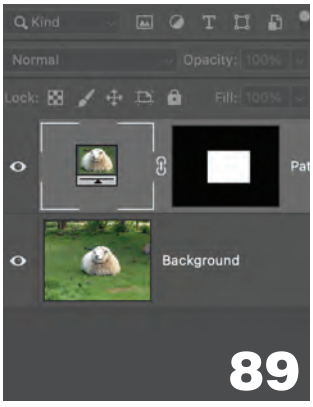





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ON THE COVER: Preparation and a full understanding of the process is the key for anyone's print and cut workflow, Page 8. Image courtesy of Chris Rodkey. Bottom right: This month's GP+ section is all about helping shops take a leap toward a new profit stream, Page 33.

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Shipping is the necessary evil of almost every business. Businesses have limited options to choose from, and once your product leaves your facility, shipping personnel become de facto company representatives with none of the shared consequences to your company's reputation should something go wrong.

The lack of control can be frustrating, but there are steps you can take to optimize the process.

Compare shipping rates: Always compare the shipping rates of different carriers and choose the one that offers the most cost-effective solution. You can use shipping comparison tools to get an idea of which carrier is the best for your shipping needs. But remember, just like you tell your clients, cheapest isn't always the best. Reliability is important.

Use shipping software: Shipping software can help you automate the shipping process and hopefully save you time while you compare rates from multiple carriers. It can also help you generate shipping labels and track your packages, which is more time and money saved.

Optimize packaging: The size and weight of your package can significantly affect shipping costs. You should aim to reduce the size and weight of your packages without compromising the safety of your products. Using standard packaging materials can also help you save money on shipping costs. Also, consolidate as much as you can.

Negotiate with carriers: Negotiating shipping rates with carriers is another way to lower your shipping costs. You can negotiate based on your shipping volume, frequency, and loyalty to a particular carrier.

Use regional carriers: Regional carriers may offer lower shipping rates in certain areas. By using regional carriers, you can reduce shipping costs while still providing timely delivery.

Offer free shipping over a minimum order value: If you have an online store, you can offer free shipping to customers who reach a minimum order value. This can help you increase sales while still providing a cost-effective shipping solution.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

*Feel free to give me a call directly at **720-566-7286** or email me at **mdixon@nbm.com**.*

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James Dean Hamilton has been writing for NBM since 1995. After a decade sabbatical from writing, he is back in the saddle. With over 30 years of experience, he has a vast knowledge of everything signage, marketing, and workflow management.

BY JD HAMILTON

Building an interior sign system from the outside in



Mood board illustrating architectural and decorative elements used in creating initial sign types for an apartment complex in Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of Studio 618)



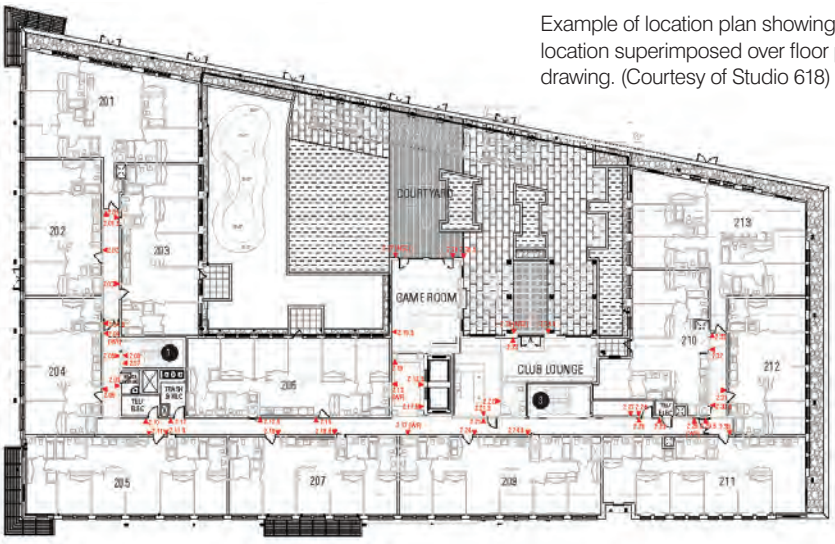


Sign types created from approved sign design generated with initial mood board. (Photos courtesy of Studio 618)

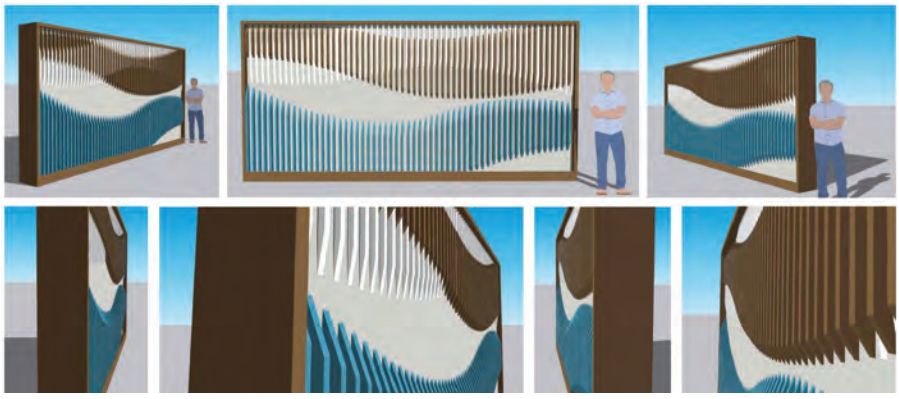
n a not-so-distant past, before the internet and before vinyl plotters, interior corporate signs were mostly an afterthought. There were nice high-end gold-leaf door signs for lawyers and doctors and the occasional upscaled lobby sign behind the welcoming receptionist at a corporation. Wayfinding consisted mostly of a men's and women's room with instructions to get the key at the front desk.

Like the way of the office fax machine (and, unfortunately the office receptionist), times have changed when it comes to a corporate interior environment. Today, creating an interior architectural signage system is an important way to create cohesive branding for a business. Architectural styled interior branding is a great way to make an impression on a client, establish your business as an authority in its industry and make an overall welcome and motivating place for employees to come to work.

Whether your business is a large national sign company, a small town (do it all) shop, or a printer looking to expand into a new market with your large-format equipment, let's discuss design, production, and installation of these impactful graphic systems. Often, taking the elements and cues of a successful exterior architectural signage program and building upon it for the interior.



Example of location plan showing sign location superimposed over floor plan drawing. (Courtesy of Studio 618)



Concept drawing of focal wall at 1700 Pennsylvania Ave. Concept was from the curving walkways of the roof top. (Drawing courtesy of Studio 618)



Photos of a completed focal wall. (Photos courtesy of Studio 618)



Designing a successful system

In recent years, there have been several trends in interior architectural signage.

Minimalism: There is a growing trend toward minimalistic signage designs that are clean, simple, and unobtrusive. This includes the use of simple typography, neutral colors, and understated materials like metal, wood, and glass.

Digital Signage: This is definitely a sign of our times because this technology was unheard of 20 years ago. With the rise of digital monitors, more businesses are incorporating digital signage into their interior architecture. Digital signage offers a dynamic and flexible way to display information that can be updated easily.

Wayfinding: This type of signage is becoming increasingly important as businesses seek to provide clear and easy-to-follow directions for visitors. This includes directional signage, maps, and floor plans, often using symbols and icons to convey information quickly and intuitively.

Sustainability: There is a growing awareness of environmental impact of signage and a trend toward using sustainable materials like bamboo, recycled plastics, and biodegradable materials. The Modulex Group has taken this a step further with its newest innovation, ReBond, a

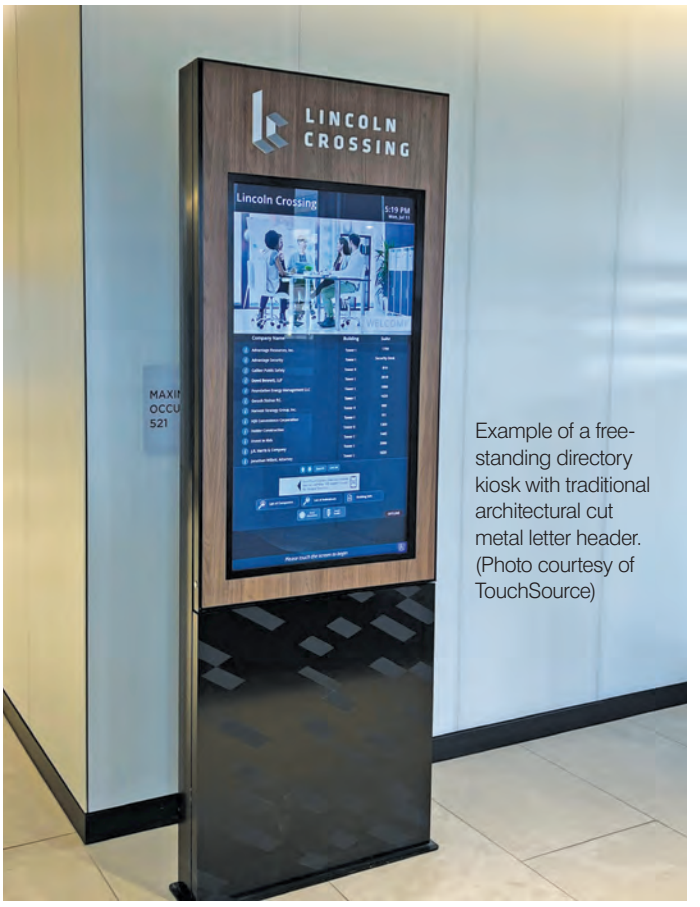
sign substrate made of recycled carpet waste from cruise ships.

Customization: Many businesses are opting for customized signage to create a unique brand identity and enhance the overall aesthetic of their space. This includes the use of custom typography, graphics, and materials to create a distinctive look and feel.

To help explain these trends in real-world terms, I reached out to Lauren Stern, owner of Studio 618 in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is an accomplished environmental graphic designer and member of SEGD, and just recently published her new children's book *Signs Have Much to Say.*

"I go through the whole project scope and make sure the client and I are on the same page with everything. I do a lot with multifamily projects. In these type of projects I like to get information like the naming (typography) and branding (logos and colors). I also spend a good deal of time reviewing the interior design, which often conceal images of building or decorative materials both organic and structural. I compile all this information and create a set of assets to use as inspiration."

Stern says, "All these elements come into play to create a more cohesive signage design that projects an intentional look



Example of a free-standing directory kiosk with traditional architectural cut metal letter header. (Photo courtesy of TouchSource)









Wall coverings at 1700 Pennsylvania Ave. project. (Photos courtesy of Studio 618)

and feel to the project and not like it was just slapped on as an afterthought. When it comes to inspiration, it could be something as seemingly insignificant as a herringbone tile pattern used in the building that becomes the sign background."

Overall, the trend in branded and themed graphics for corporate environments is toward creating a visually engaging and cohesive corporate identity that extends beyond the company's digital presence. By using a combination of large-scale graphics, environmental graphics, customized graphics, digital displays, and themed environments, companies can create a space that reflects their brand identity and reinforces their messaging in a powerful and memorable way.

For those already doing work in this area or for those testing the waters, understand that the interior signage arena can be competitive. Focusing on quality and innovation will help differentiate your company and work from others by offering high-quality, innovative products and services.

Keep in mind that this work is often viewed upon as a *program* or *system* involving a wide array of products and installation services. These include wayfinding signs, directional signs, ADA signs, wall coverings, and more.

Understanding the technology of digital products is also becoming increasingly necessary. With all this at stake it is important to know your clients: identify your target audience and understand their needs and requirements. Projects of this type may involve working with multiple team members, such as architects, contractors, designers and facility managers. It's important to communicate clearly the expectations of all involved.

With multiple sign types and various locations, these programs can become complicated quickly. New software programs like Sign Agent help to spell out all the different sign copy for each sign type, their location on a site layout and puts design, fabrication and installation on the same page following the same instructions.

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(Above) Digital resources can help add an interactive element to an already themed environment. (Photo courtesy of TouchSource)

(Left) An example of a combination wall covering graphic with real-time relevant information or directions using digital displays. (Photo courtesy of TouchSource)

On large projects with multiple floors and wings like a hospital or campus this type of program is a must and can easily be shared with the client and other team members for verification, ideally all before production and installation begins.

In Studio 618's case, Lauren describes her design studio as a "one-stop shop in a smaller studio. I give one to three concept drawings of initial sign types and once a final design is agreed upon I begin creating message schedules and location plans for the project. Depending on the type of project, I have a variety of vetted vendors I rely upon to fabricate and install. I always insist upon pre-production samples to verify myself and for client signoff."

What's your vector, Victor?

New advances in technology and manufacturing don't stop here. There is a new kid on the block that is becoming a necessity in medium to large interior signage systems: the digital presence of directories, wayfinding components and general aesthetics.

To get up to date on this important element, I spoke with Christina Powell, Senior Marketing Manager, TouchSource, in Lafayette, Colorado. TouchSource has been in this developing market since the beginning. This non-static element in interior architecture signage is a game changer.



Adding digital displays, entertainment, and up-to-date information can complement the existing architecture. (Photo courtesy of TouchSource)

"Simply put, digital signage solutions deliver visitor entertainment and support ongoing activities and changes not found in traditional signs. This is all done while ensuring brand integrity and synching in seamlessly with the rest of the signage program. Design elements like colors and logos can be included in the software design to achieve brand consistency for the customer. Our success is based on relentless focus on our software development that provides simplicity, consistency, clarity, quality, and innovation. Most clients are not capable of or have the resources to create and maintain what we can provide for them."

As with most new technologies, digital has often been an afterthought. The future is getting architects and designers on board with this from the get-go. The design and fabrication of the kiosk or display unit of a standalone or wall mounted unit can be enhanced with architectural elements in the rest of the sign system. Our business sells an all-in-one software and hardware solution for commercial building directories and other digital signage applications.

"We are already seeing even greater potential for this technology moving forward. For example, for large hospitals or campus, we can provide an application for the visitor's phone to provide on-the-go current location and direction information."

Where do we go from here?

Larger companies in our industry can handle the complete design, manufacturing, and installation of these projects. For smaller companies that may specialize in printed wall coverings or ADA signage there is the ability to work successfully with a plethora of wholesale product companies and partner with specialty installers. Often a wall covering installer is not comfortable installing ADA signs and vice versa. You can bet a specialty digital technician will likely not touch either.

Small to medium sized print and signage companies wanting to test the waters with this type of work may want to reach out and market their fabricating and installation services to architects, designers, and larger sign companies. If successful, transitioning an in-house person for design and another for project management to coordinate the complexity of these programs can then be justified.

This is a very fluid discipline filled with age-old questions of figuring out where to go, combined with every evolving technology. Throw in some amazing design challenges with architectural and decorative components and you have the interior architectural sign Holy Grail. Going to work will never be boring! GP



PERFECTING THE FINAL CUT

Flatbed printer workflow best practices using a CNC router and a laser

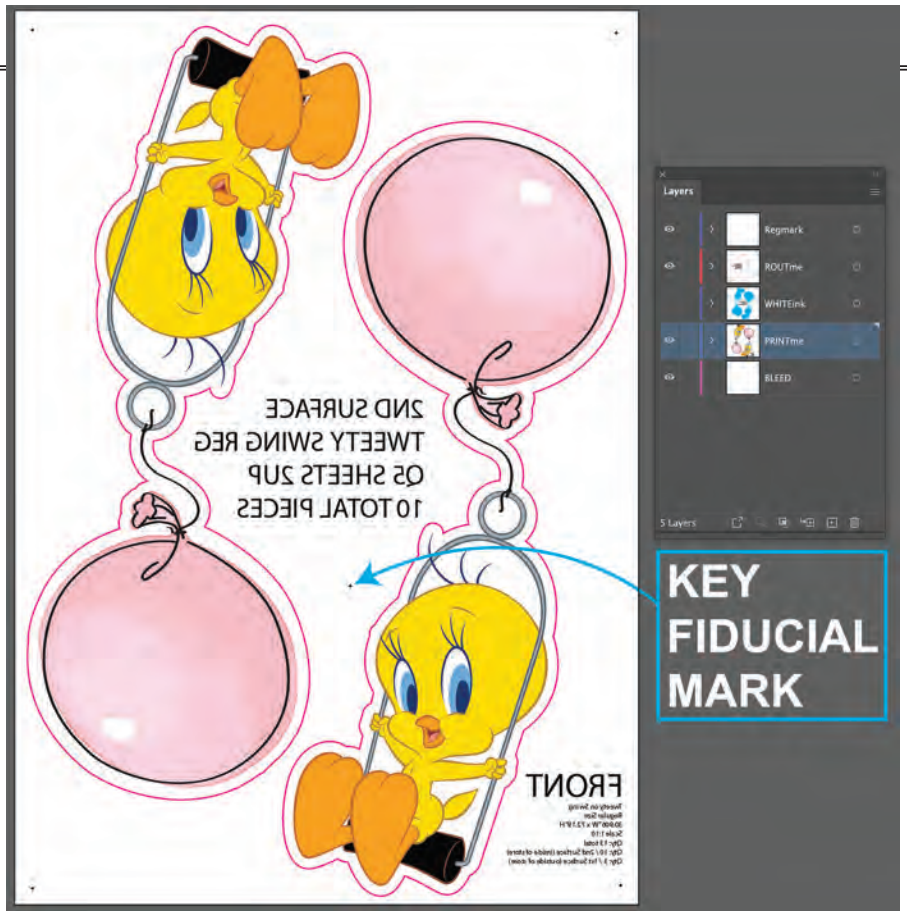
BY CHRIS RODKEY



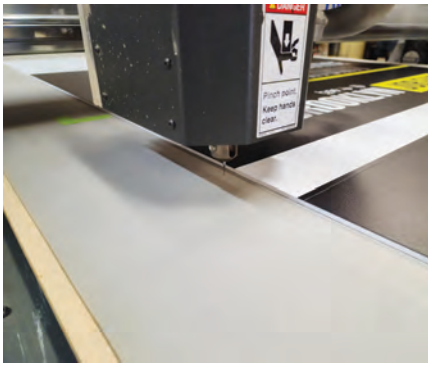
Chris Rodkey is the president of Vinylbomb in Hamilton, New Jersey. He has over 20 years of experience and in-depth knowledge of printing, fabrication, and color profiling. Vinylbomb is known for tackling the strange and unusual, offering in-house grand-format printing, fabrication, painting, and installation for high-end retail displays and exhibitions.

Preparation and a full understanding of the process is the key for anyone's print-and-cut workflow. After 20 years in the print industry, I will explain my workflow and what has worked well for us. In general, these are the rules I have my team follow for a proper print-and-cut workflow. Also included are some of the tricks we have developed over the years.





(Left) Screengrab of our Illustrator layering for print and cut workflows. Also shows the key fiducial mark. The graphic has already been flipped by our prepress operators for a second-surface application.



An example of the rout file set up at 50" w x 36" h. The oscillating knife is cutting outside the edge of the board by 1", so we keep a true 48" w x 36" h finished piece.



Prepping the file in Illustrator

Regmark, rout, print, and bleed layers (sometimes white ink)

Being organized is rule No. 1. For starters, everything should be built at 100% size. Next, four layers should be created in Illustrator. Below is a description of how each layer is utilized for our print and cut workflow.

• Top layer (Regmark) is typically autogenerated with the fiducial mark plugin. These circles will be 6mm or 1/4" depending on the demand of your cutter's camera. These are typically printed with a rich black for good contrast. This will allow the camera to easily recognize the dots. The plugin I use for the fiducials automatically applies an overprint fill. Keep this in mind if you are producing a second-surface print, which is described below.

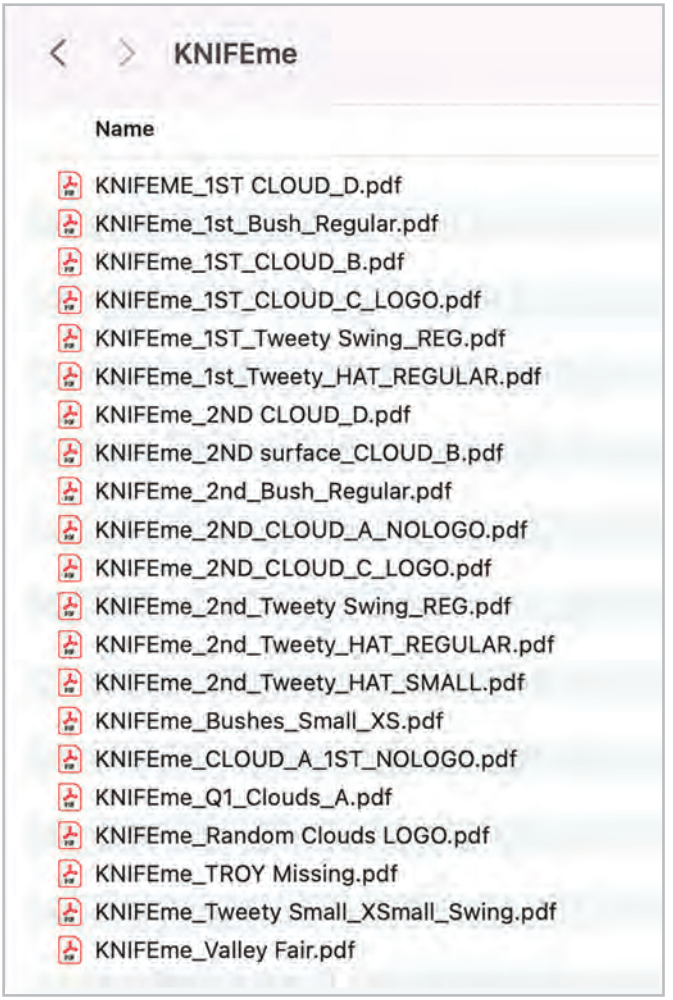
• Second layer would be your (Routme) die-cut layer. Make sure vector paths are closed and there are not duplicate paths on top of one another. If there are duplicate paths on top of one another, the CNC will cut that line twice.

If there are open paths, there will be a lot of lifting and plunging on the Z axis unnecessarily. This will waste cutting time and potentially damage your piece. You can check if paths are open or closed by going to Window > Document info. A new panel will open.

From the hamburger menu (submenu of the panel) you can select objects. Now when you click on the path, it will tell you if it is open or closed. This tool also comes in handy to figure out how many linear inches of cutting are involved for quoting.

• White Ink Layer (optional depending on workflow). This is where we apply our white ink if your printer has this capability. Keep in mind white ink will be needed under the fiducials on some materials so they can easily be read by the camera. Be careful if the fiducials are automatically set to overprint fill. This will not allow the fiducial to knock out through the white. In some cases the print will need to be flipped for CNC or lasercutting.

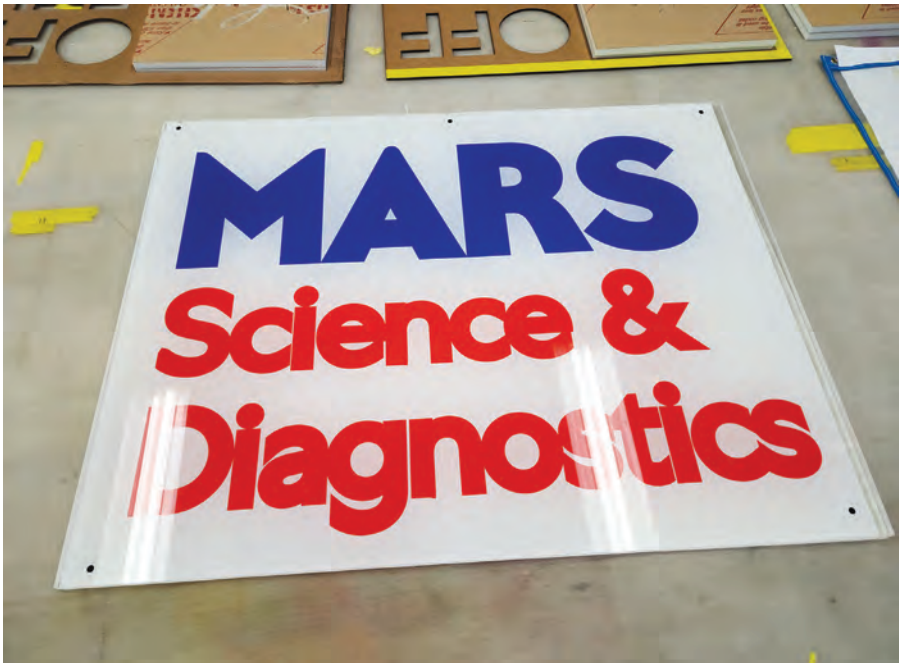
• Third layer down would be the creative (Printme). Your Routme layer can be created by duplicating this layer and creating a compound path by selecting all the objects and using Window-> Pathfinder panel-> Unite tool. This creates one solid



CNC files are named by tool and a brief description of the graphic being cut. This name is also printed with the graphic so the CNC operator knows which file to open.



Final lasercut 1/2" acrylic letters from a print and cut workflow.



1/2" acrylic with a second surface print. Premask is applied to the bottom of the print so the graphic is not damaged from flareup.

object, and we give you a perfect die-cut line. If you have a photo you need a die line from which you will have to create the path in Illustrator from scratch. You could also make a work path in Photoshop, so it is imported with the .tif.

• Bottom layer (Bleed) would be any additional bleed if necessary. For vector files, you can simply add a stroke or offset the path. If you have a photo, you might want to add additional color that is similar to the creative for the tolerances of your CNC or laser cutter. The other option for photos is offsetting your path (Object-> Path-> Offset Path) by negative 1/16" (-.0625) to choke the die line into the photo. This is to make sure no white is left around the perimeter of your graphic.

Save that Illustrator file with all the layers that were created. This will be the master file from which your production files will be generated. Your print file will have the regmark, print and bleed layer on with





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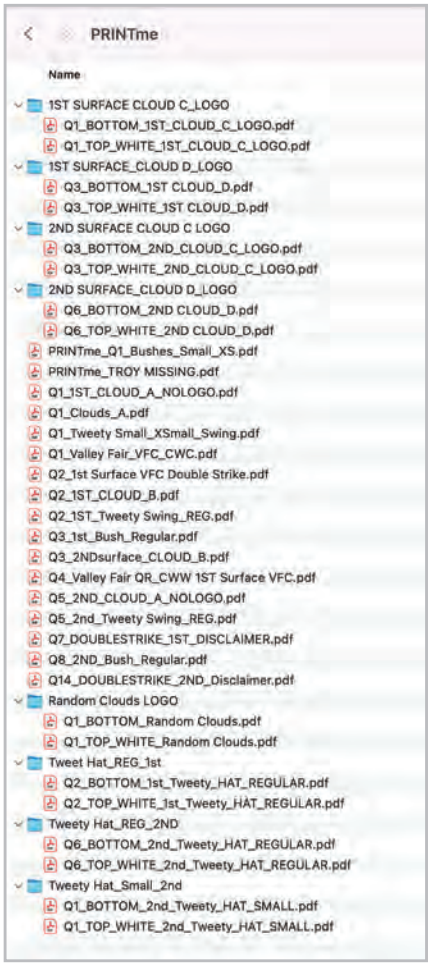
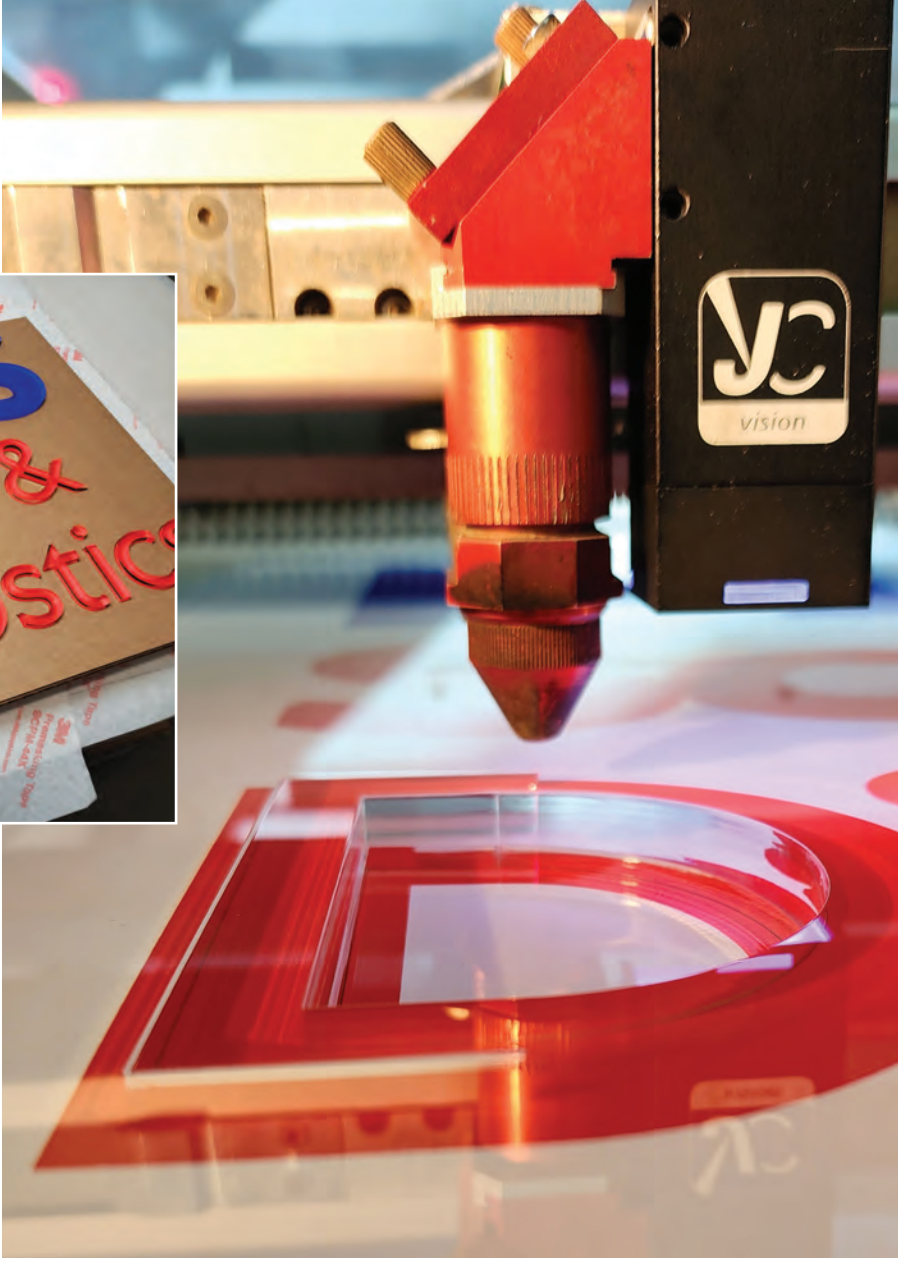
Finished product in a cardboard template for install. Template was lasercut with an .020 offset so the letters can easily fit in the guide.



Files with quantities and callout for first or second surface application for our printer operator.



Lasercutting with Trotec Vision camera.

the die-cut layer off. We do not want to print the die-cut layer. If you do, there is a good chance it will be seen after routing and ruin your piece.

For the CNC or laser file only the Regmark and Routme layer should be on. Our workflow requires a high-quality PDF for our VUTEk printer, Multicam CNC, and Trotec laser cutter. If there are large photos in the art, you can simply delete them before saving the cut file to save RIP time or import errors.

Key a 5th dot for your operator

It is very important to key the fiducial marks. This can be done by using an odd amount of dots. A minimum of three are required to find the proper placement of the graphic. You can use as many as you like, but I typically use five. This gives me the option to skip a dot if the camera is having a hard time recognizing a fiducial. We place one for each corner and a fifth dot placed randomly.

The random dot gives us confidence the correct rout file is matched up with the correct print. The workflow put in place should allow the CNC operator to know, without a doubt, the proper orientation of the print.

Say you have a 4' × 8' sheet of Gator Foam. Preflight sets up a graphic that is 3' × 6', but it is not placed in the exact middle of the sheet. If your prepress operator decided to put fiducial marks only in the four corners the sheet could be routed upside down. At that point the positioning of the graphic being routed out will

be off. The piece would have to be thrown out and redone.

Print names on each board for a larger rollout

Keying the rout file is effective if there are a few sheets that need to be print and cut. What happens if there are 40 unique prints that are different sizes and shapes? Keying the fiducials should still be done. In addition, a clean naming system should be incorporated so the CNC operator can look at the print, look at the file and know exactly which file to open.

We typically type the name of the file so it prints on the board. Something like San Francisco Window A. The .PDF should be named the same exact way the type reads on the board with the printed piece. This will save a lot of guesswork with your CNC operator when they are opening rout files.

Rout file same size as the board

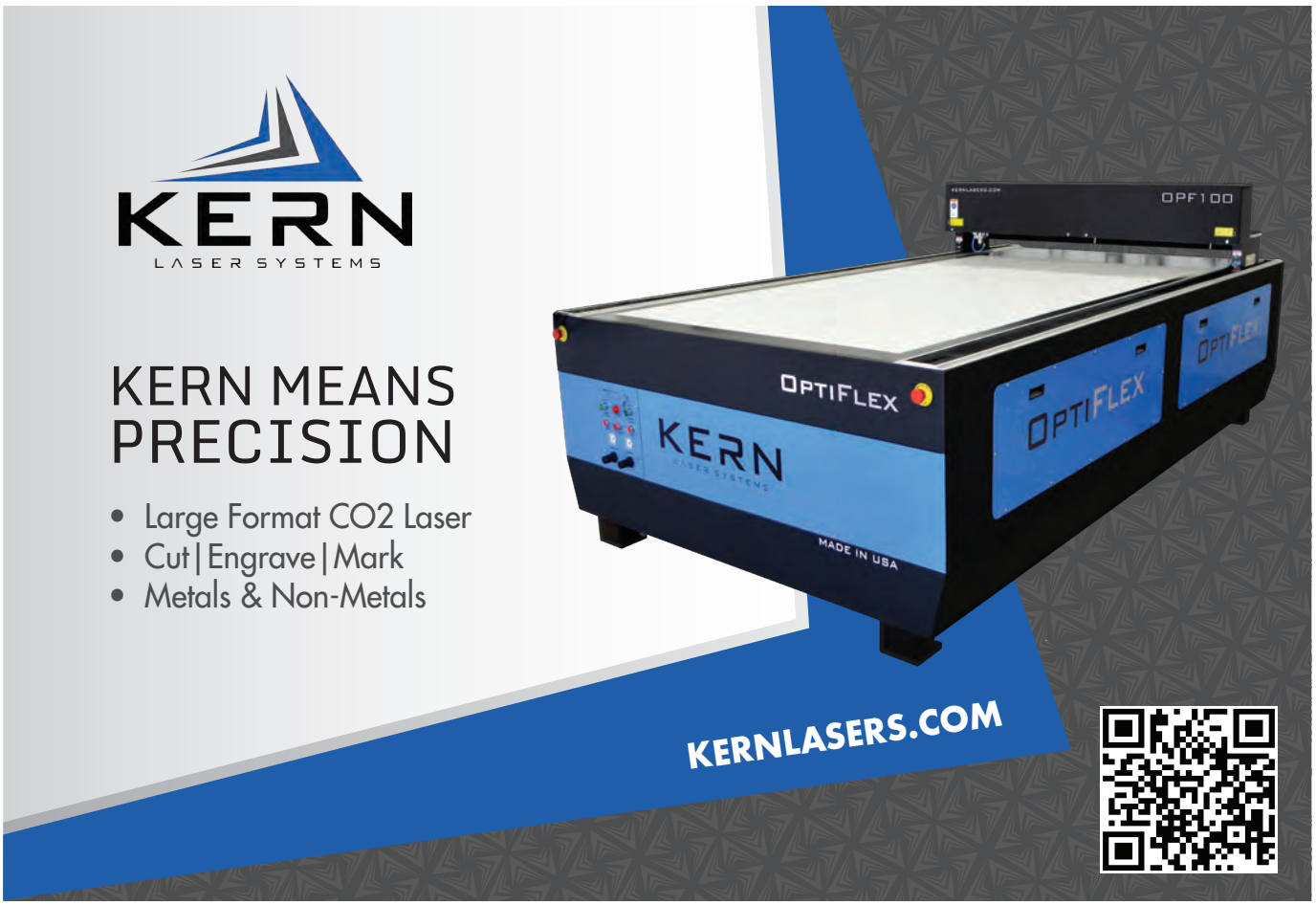
What should be done if you have to print and cut pieces the same width or height of the board? A good example would be quantity of two 48" × 36" prints on a sheet of 4' × 8' × 1/2" Gator Foam. We need to bleed to the edge and still rout-cut the file to size. There are three possible scenarios to execute this …

• **Option 1:** Print the 4' length of the graphic along the 8' board with fiducial marks, then CNC the print. This would work, but only yield one piece per sheet. It would result in a loss of profit or overcharging your customer. Producing the job this way could also make your company lose the bid in the first place due to cost.

• **Option 2:** Rout the foam board first and then print direct to the routed piece. You would have to add some bleed to ensure full coverage. If your customer is picky they might not be happy with overspray from the bleed on the sides of the board. This process would also have additional handling and print time to achieve the same results. The yield from the board would be two pieces as opposed to option 1.

• **Option 3:** Print the quantity of two 48" × 36" pieces utilizing the 48" width of the board. Add bleed so the graphic prints off the edge of the board on the 48" width. Apply fiducial marks on the board appropriately. The trick to do this is create the rout file at 50" width x 36" height. The idea being the 36" height will be routed and the 48" width will simply be the edges of the board uncut by the CNC.

The CNC will rout along the 48" width and continue 1" off each side. It will simply rout on the table along the 36" height and plunge back into the board. This way you will be left with a perfect 48" × 36" print.



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To premask or not to premask?

When CNC or laser cutting we have to decide whether premask should be applied or not. For starters, premask should be applied to vinyl graphics before they are mounted to the substrate. Premask will prevent stretching and distortion of the vinyl.

If the vinyl is stretched while being mounted, it will affect the final size of the cut piece, which could be rejected by your customer. Another reason to use premask is for clean cuts of the ink, vinyl, and substrate in certain scenarios.

There are other advanced ways to achieve this without using premask. Upcut, downcut and compression end mills, oscillating blades and drag knifes could be used. This article is not to overwhelm a beginner in print and cut workflows, so we will focus on using premask to aid in the cutting process. Here are a few general rules when premask should be applied to your graphics.

CNC routing

Cleaner cuts with ink printed on top. When premask is applied to the top of the print, we will kiss cut and remove premask from the areas the fiducials have to be recognized. When printing directly to harder substrates like Dibond, the UV ink can shear or tear instead of cutting cleanly. A premask on top would allow the ink to cut clean and have the premask tear. It will also aid in the protection of the graphic while shipping.

Onion skin cutting. The vacuum of the CNC can only do so much. At a certain point the force of the endmill is stronger than the vacuum holding down the surface area of the finished piece. Small graphics lose vacuum and tend to kick out of place. Once they hit the end mill unintentionally, a chip of material will be taken out, causing the piece to be ruined.

Performing an *onion skin* cut will avoid this. This is typically done with smaller pieces like museum placards or 8.5" × 11" prints on Sintra. Premask is applied to both the top and bottom of the substrate. The premask on top allows the ink or vinyl to cut clean. The bottom (onion skin) premask is used to hold the piece in place after it is routed.

To perform this, a few tests are needed to find the proper depth of cut. The idea is to fully cut through the material, but not cut through the premask on the bottom. When routing is complete, the prints can be removed from the premask with clean edges and corners.

Optically clear SAV. You cannot put premask on optically clear SAV. It will distort the clarity of the unprinted areas and cause the vinyl to look cloudy when installed on glass. If you have jobs that are being printed on optically clear vinyl use a loose perimeter die cut to avoid premask. This is more cost-effective than cutting all the letters and graphics individually where premask would be necessary. An example of the loose perimeter die-cut would be the Tweety job we produced.

Laser cutting

The first thing that has to be noted is if the graphic was printed first or second surface. There should always be premask on the bottom to protect from flareups that could damage the print if unprotected. This would be with or without a print on the bottom.

We remove the premask from the top; it is not required and could potentially stain the edges of the acrylic when cut. The only exception is if you have a first-surface print. Premask should be applied to protect the ink or vinyl.

There should be a low-powered cut to get through the premask and ink or vinyl first. Then a second full power cut to get through the substrate. If you skip this step and try to cut in one pass, the laser can stain the edges of the acrylic with the ink, vinyl, or premask being used (especially if there is watermark printing on the premask like 3M SCPM44-x) GP





Some larger-scale signs that Reum made for a wedding near the end of 2022. (All photos courtesy of Emma Reum)

SIGNATURE WORK WITH UV Flatbed Printing

BY NATHAN STROMBERG

Etchings by Emma takes the wedding market by storm with UV flatbed printing



Nathan Stromberg is an editorial/content intern for GRAPHICS PRO. Nathan is a recent graduate of the University of Northern Colorado with a double major in communication studies and journalism, emphasizing public relations.

tchings by Emma, located in Chandler, Arizona, and owned by Emma Reum, has been growing since its inception in 2017. She started out in the wedding industry, creating everything she made by hand, but as that industry began to revive after the pandemic, she knew she couldn't keep up with the increasing pace of the industry if she only did hand lettering.

In 2022, she experimented to see if UV printing would help her speed things up and keep her work at the standard she wanted, and she found success. For her UV print production, she purchased a Roland DG LEC2-330S F-200 flatbed UV printer.

"We chose this printer because of its size and price point," Reum says. "It can print up to 29" × 59", and my largest seating chart is 30" × 48". I didn't want to invest in a smaller machine and then wish I chose a bigger one that would work for my largest signs."

The addition of the printer has allowed her to do precise, quick work for an ever-growing customer base. She still gets to design by hand with her iPad Pro and Apple Pencil, which she then moves over to her laptop to finish the designs in Adobe Illustrator. Her workflow is done in the following steps:

- Receive all info from clients to create files
- Design and make files in Adobe Illustrator on the MacBook Pro
- Once multiple revisions are done and approved by the client, export them as an EPS file to a folder in iCloud



Two of Etchings by Emma's signs, printed on acrylic plexiglass.

- Go to the Windows computer connected to the printer and drag the files from the iCloud folder to the Versaworks printing software
- Pull the materials needed for a specific project
- Prep the file in Versaworks by changing the font color and direction, if needed
- Press print, and within 5 minutes, one sign is finished
- Once printed, clean and wrap the sign immediately to avoid further fingerprints, as most of Reum's material is acrylic plexiglass

The work isn't necessarily limited to these steps, though. The material types can vary based on what's needed for the project, and the shop has been trying some new materials recently.

"We print directly on to acrylic/plexiglass. Lately, we've been experimenting with printing on wood and linen! We haven't had experience with vinyl, but it's something I'm open to trying; however, my machine doesn't cut," Reum explains. "Acrylic in the wedding industry has become super popular over the last couple years, so we've been following this trend."



Reum's work isn't limited to just weddings. She made a sign for a wedding airbrush and makeup business to win a contest involving them, which included working a QR code onto the sign.



Some of the work is meticulous, such as these individual name signs printed onto small cacti-shaped materials in a large quantity.







Some of the smaller-scale work that gets produced in larger quantities includes table signs, some of which can be seen here.

Beyond the individual table signs, Reum also makes larger guest list/table directories so guests can know where to sit.

Not only does Reum need to be sure she can print on any material she needs, but she needs her colors to print correctly as well.

"What's funny is that about 65% of my jobs are all white ink, which sometimes feels like we aren't tapping into the printer's amazing capabilities. But when we do have full-color print opportunities, I typically print based on the final color in Illustrator, and it's been turning out amazing. However, I know the correct way to do this would be to use Roland Color Swatches so the printer and my design software are on the same page; we just haven't leaned into this resource yet," Reum says.

She's marketing herself and her business by using Instagram Reels and posts, mixing her brand with personal content, and sharing the behind-the-scenes work with the public.

"With these tools and a couple of Reels going viral, I have 14,400 followers and counting," Reum says.

There's a lot Reum does to run her business, so she has to be sure to keep all of her ducks in a row to get the job done efficiently. "I would be very lost without my CRM Honeybook, list making, and my wonderful assistant! I delegate us things each week to tackle what is needed. And I have deadlines with my clients to keep things on a schedule. Creating primarily for the wedding industry, we work week by week as opposed to fulfilling orders. So, on a given Monday-Friday, we're working on items for the upcoming weekend and next weekend. And then on Thursdays of each week, items are picked up by the client," Reum says.



Though the work may be difficult, Reum has passion and talent for what she does thanks to her degree in print and digital design, and with the capabilities of her UV flatbed printer, she's showing no signs of slowing down. GP

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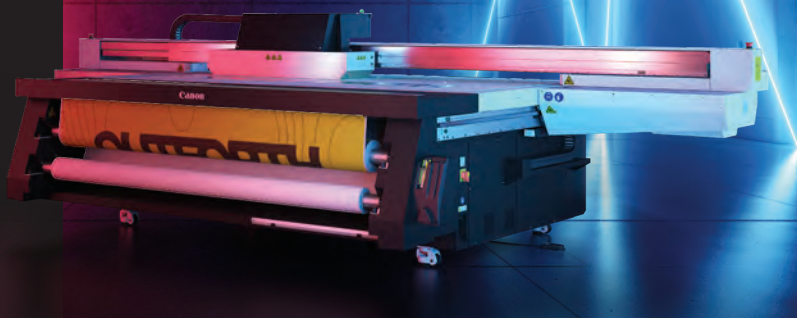

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Anatomy of an Installation

Breaking down the installation of a commercial vehicle wrap



Charity Jackson is the owner of Visual Horizons Custom Signs based in Modesto, California. She has been in business since 1995 and has worked in the sign industry for nearly 30 years. You can visit her website at VHSigns.com.

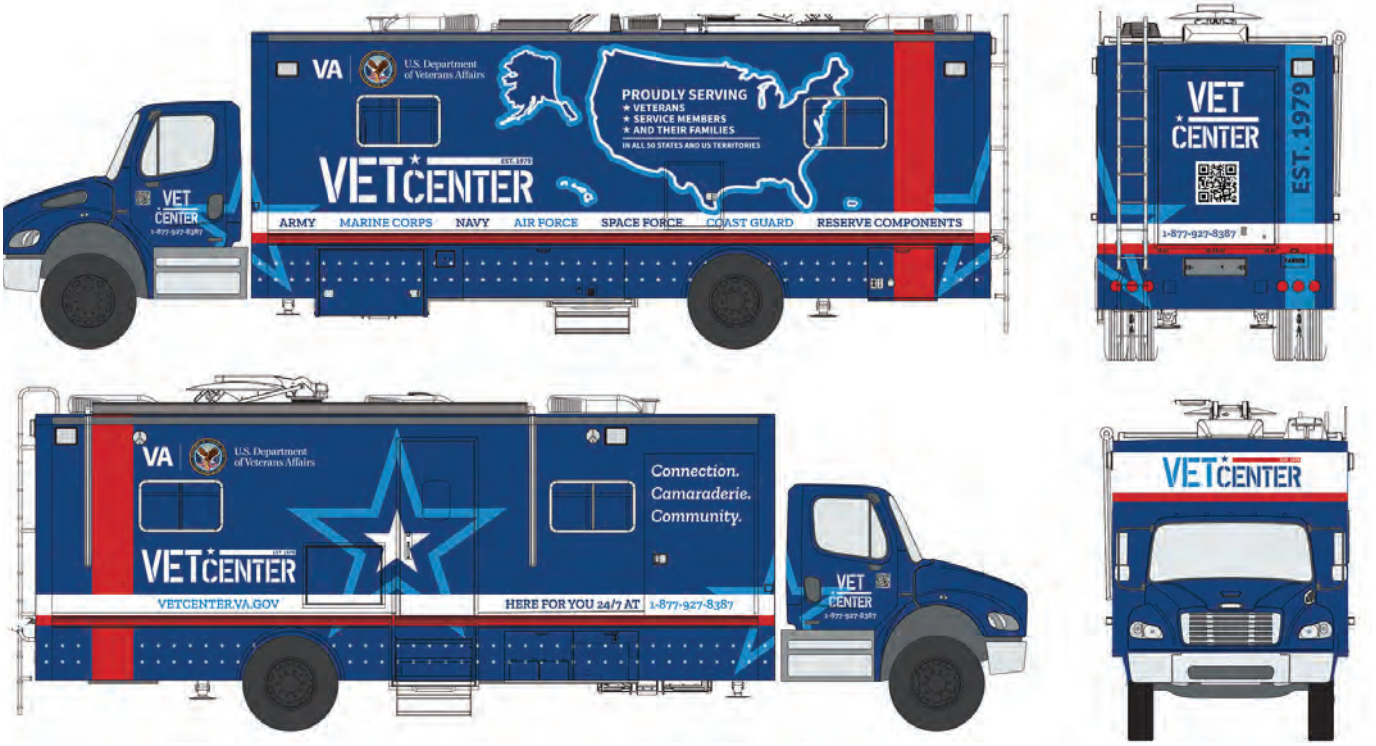
We've noticed a steady increase in installation requests from large national design agencies. Installing for national accounts has become a consistent addition to the number of spot graphics and wraps we do monthly.

A recent installation we completed made me think about some things that need to be considered when quoting projects for outside companies. Many of these considerations are for when you're handling the project from start to finish, but there are a few extra things to consider when the graphics are shipped to you instead.

I will use this recent job to break down the project from an installation standpoint. The company that hired us created an excellent design that looks fantastic on the oversized vehicle we wrapped. I quoted this installation based on photos and proofs sent to us, but there were a few things that I missed that made a big difference in the overall time it took us to complete the installation.

Design

When designing a wrap, I spend time photographing the vehicle, taking measurements, looking at the condition of the paint, checking out obstacles, and planning the artwork around those obstacles. When we're sent the graphics for a job,



When quoting the job, we relied on a template proof, which made it difficult to determine size and obstacles. (Images courtesy of Charity Jackson)



Removing old graphics, cleaning off old caulk and chalky paint, removing parts, and detail cleaning around obstacles are all necessary prior to installation, but the time spent must be accounted for.



this entire part of the process is skipped.

We're relying on the company's emailed and printed proofs showing how the graphics should fit the vehicle. Usually, these proofs are designed on a vehicle template, so we're not seeing the vehicle itself. In a few cases, the actual vehicle is brought by for inspection before installation, but we usually get a year, make, model, and the type of material being shipped to us.

Since you're relying on the agency hiring you to have done due diligence on the vehicle's condition, you have to focus on the design itself and how they expect it to fit the vehicle. Consider straight lines or lines of text, especially if they go over obstacles. Look closely at complex installs with busy patterns that have to align; designs that have to align from side to back or front or designs with text that has to fit in tight spaces.

The Veterans Center truck wrap discussed here had straight stripes that ran down the sides, connecting to the back of the vehicle. The stripes also had to run along a body line on the truck. It made for a striking design but a trickier install because we had to make sure both sides were installed at just the right height to connect to the back. Vertical lines also had to stay perfectly straight.

Size

We wrap a lot of large vehicles, so size isn't necessarily a factor in how difficult an installation is, but it does affect how long it takes to wrap. A bigger size means more coverage and more vinyl to install. A larger vehicle may also require ladders, scaffolding, or scissor lifts, which adds to the time involved in setting up and climbing up and down. Consider the time to set up for an installation and factor it into your estimate.

Looking at the proofs of the Veterans Center truck wrap, I realized it was a large truck. However, because I didn't design the wrap or see the vehicle in person ahead of time, I didn't have a clear picture of how large it was.

Another huge factor in how long it took us to wrap this truck was the height of it. We can fit a 12' 6" or shorter vehicle through our roll-up door. And since we can fit an entire city bus in our back shop, we usually get most vehicles into the shop easily.

I couldn't tell from the photos, and didn't think to ask, what obstacles were on top of the truck. Without the A/C unit and satellite dish on top of the vehicle, it would have fit into our shop with no problems, but with them it was about 8" too tall to bring inside.

This meant that the entire multi-day installation was completed outside. Fortunately, it wasn't summer yet, but the weather greatly affected the installation. The wind picked up in the afternoon for two days, lifting and blowing around panels as we tried to tape them up and install them. We also had problems with the sun heating one side as we were applying, which slowed the installation.

We could fit the vehicle's front end in the shop, so when it was time to wrap the front we did move it. But because the vehicle had to be left outside in general, each day we had to park it where our outside cameras could monitor it, and then in the morning it would have to be moved again to be convenient for installation. It wasn't a big deal, but each day the truck had to be moved around at least twice—another small thing that added time to the installation.

Prep

For every installation, you have to consider the prep that goes into the project to ensure you're covering all your time. This is an easy step to skip when planning your install, but it can significantly affect your profits.

For this Veterans Center truck, we had to first remove old spot graphics before we could clean and prep the truck. During the removal, we noticed the truck had a







Stripes, obstacles, and the need to align from one side of the vehicle to the other made this installation a bit trickier than anticipated. Weather, obstacles, and the overall size of the vehicle all contributed to the actual time spent installing.

chalky finish to the paint, which often happens on older vehicles. We've found the best way to remove this is to fill a bucket with warm water and orange cleaner. Using a window squeegee, we brush on the soapy solution and squeegee it off, then we wipe the vehicle down with a dry towel. The chalky finish washes off quickly this way. An alcohol wipe-down follows this whole process.

Another thing to consider when preparing for an installation is the time it takes to roll and label graphics that are sent to you. Usually, the graphics arrive in one or more boxes with all the graphics rolled onto one tube. These big rolls have to be laid out and re-rolled into the individual panels.

Each rolled panel must be clearly marked using the provided proofs and, hopefully, labeling on the vinyl. We also note on the proof where the panels fall and how we labeled them to keep the process as clear as possible.

Some companies provide the spot graphics already cut down to individual pieces, but often we receive them all nested together on a big sheet. We have to cut them out, label them, and sort them by the side of the vehicle to keep it all clear.

Obstacles

We remove as many obstacles as possible on commercial wraps to speed up installation. Depending on the number of parts removed, we get a box for each side or for the whole truck to keep all the parts and hardware together.

For this Veterans Center truck, we were able to remove many parts on the cab of the truck easily, which not only made installation faster but also improved the finish of the final install. On the back of the truck was a ladder that we knew we couldn't remove, but there were support bars in the middle of the ladder that should have come off so we could wrap behind the ladder in one large panel. Unfortunately, there were stripped screws in some of these bars, and we couldn't remove them. This increased the number of panels we had to do behind the ladder and made the installation take longer. The removal — or lack of removal — of obstacles can be challenging to figure out ahead of time, but time should still be budgeted for this step in the vehicle prep process.

Obstacles will also increase the time spent trimming. Properly trimming around doors, handles, hinges, awnings, lights, and other parts adds a lot of time to the installation process. This is also a part of the process that can set a poor installation apart from an excellent one. It also directly affects the durability of the installation. GP



For more on the suppliers featured in this section, please see website and phone information following each product.

UV PRINTERS



Roland DGA announces the launch of its new VersaOBJECT CO Series inkjets, which are flatbed and belt-driven UV printers. Customers can choose from 30" and 64" printer widths as well as F200, F300, or F400 bed lengths. The products also feature a media height of up to 7.87". Along with the CO Series printers, the company has introduced the Rotary Rack XL and Rotary Rack XXL.

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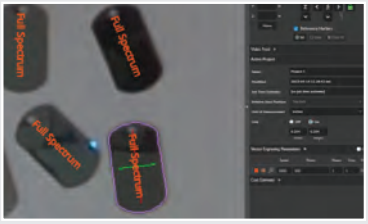
AI-POWERED CAMERA

Full Spectrum Laser announces an AI-powered camera for its laser engraving machine. This camera comes equipped with a host of features that enable it to detect objects and convert them to vector paths, orientate text onto detected objects, and mark serial numbers onto objects.



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Colex Finishing Solutions and **Fotaba International** introduce the Fotaba XLA170 Automatic X/Y Cutter featuring automatic vertical blade positioning that allows cutting of multiple sizes without operator intervention. The XLA170 handles flexible media up to 67" wide and 40 mils thick. Colex is the exclusive dealer for Fotaba in North America.



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CAROUSEL HEAT PRESS

East West Machines introduces the EW-HP4A, a four-station automatic heat press that features four plates, a 16" x 20" heat element, and is capable of pressing over 360 heat transfers per hour, the company says. Operators can use the EW-HP4A in automatic or semi-automatic with foot pedal control. It comes with a set of 6" x 6" pallets and a set of 16" x 20" pallets.



eastwestmachines.com

BASIC YOUTH TEE

JDS Industries Inc. offers the Vapor Youth Basic Tee, made of 100% spun polyester. It features two-needle double stitch seams and four thread over-lock. It is available in sizes 24M to 4T and youth sizes extra small to large. The youth sizes are also available in white and ash heather.



800-843-8853
jdsindustries.com

HEAT TRANSFER VINYL

Siser North America offers the EasyWeed heat transfer vinyl, which the company says is CPSIA certified and can be used for parents to decorate clothes safely. The company also says it applies at lower temperatures and that the backing can be peeled while hot or cold.



866-301-9409
siserna.com

ROLL-TO-ROLL PRINTER

Canon U.S.A Inc. announces the new Colorado M-Series roll-to-roll printer, which features modular design and white ink options. The available models are the M3 BASE and the M5W PRO. The company says the M3 BAES can be expanded over time up to the M5W PRO configuration, which includes speed enhancements, double-sided printing, dual-roll, white ink capabilities, and FLXfinish+.



800-453-9538
usa.canon.com

WALL WASHERS

Keystone announces its new Mistik DMX Linear Wall Washers, which the company says combine the range of RGBW light with its SmartLoop wireless lighting system. The company also says the product is fully DMX512 and RDM compliant, as well as IP66 rated to handle the elements.



800-464-2680
keystonetech.com

GP

GP+

START HERE

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SUCCEEDING WITH A Heat Press

Building your business on the back of a heat press has never been easier than it is right now

BY ADAM MCCAULEY



DTF print used for a youth soccer team participating in a special Halloween soccer event. (Images courtesy of Adam McCauley)



Adam McCauley is the co-owner of Sandlot Sports, a custom screen printing, embroidery, and promotional company that specializes in spiritwear, team uniforms, corporate workwear, and event T-shirts.



FlexStyle emblem heat applied to a trendy jacket for a local middle school staff.

For years there had been a stigma about shops that operated solely using a heat press as their primary decoration technique. You wouldn't find too many of those types of small businesses driving the industry, but companies today find it easier and easier to build a business on the back of the heat press than ever before.

With so many heat-applied products available, it's easier than ever to create unique and eye-catching designs. Decoration techniques and options have finally unlocked the creative potential of the heat press and businesses are literally pressing money.

We'll explore a handful of heat-applied products to find the best quality, ease of use, and creative techniques to bring your customers' garments to life. Open up your toolbox and grab the heat press… we're going to make some money.

Heat-applied vinyl

For starters, simple heat-applied vinyl has been a popular choice for apparel decoration for years. It's simple, has many color options, and is extremely durable. We still use it for individual names and numbers on tees, hoods, jerseys, etc. You can also create simple one- or two-color designs for the small runs. It's a staple product for a lot of shops.

Glitter, rainbow, cheetah prints, reflective, safety, hologram, glowing vinyl … all these options can be used to wow your clients when used creatively.

Sublistop, for instance, is a printable vinyl that inhibits dye migration on poly garments. This is perfect for your local youth sports teams that want a creatively colorful logo on a run of 12 team shirts. Think about your local soccer club that has a five-color crest on its left front chest. Design it, print it, press it.



These are leather-etched heat-applied patches purchased through Stahls and applied to a sublimated cap.





Smaller bottom heat platen. This particular unit is being used for cooler bags. Notice the bottom heat is reading 319 degrees (320 is programmed) the top heat is 280 degrees.



DTF print applied using the small bottom heat platen. The customer didn't have embroidery in the budget, so the DTF allowed for full-color decoration while not breaking the bank.



Siser Color Print Soft material printed and cut using the Roland Versa Camm. One of the benefits of having a dad own a T-shirt company.



The cons are that weeding vinyl is very time-consuming and particularly difficult on fine detail and designs. It's also a heavier product and sometimes doesn't have the greatest feel on the back of performance apparel.

Obviously, some materials are better than others, but the right pieces for the right garments help tendentiously. Also, for you to be able to use some of the materials, you may need to invest in some newer print/cut technology.

Heat-applied patches and emblems

These are amazing products and come in a wide variety of styles. Whether it's PVC, woven, embroidered, leather, or even 3D emblems, these products really give your customer a sense of creative retail-ready gear.

We often thought we had to have sewing machines or embroidery equipment to get patches sewn onto garments and hats. With the proper backing, most of these products are permanently heat applied in under a minute.

That saves a lot of time in the embroidery department when you can remove a 3D stitched logo off a machine production and instead turn it into a 3D embroidered patch to be heat pressed.

The cons of heat-applied patches are that the heat, pressures, and materials need to be closely monitored and have processes created. Leather patches have a different heat and pressure application than PVC patches.

If you don't get those application recipes correct and documented, you'll hurt your reputation when clients come back because their logo fell off. You may also need to invest in a heat press that allows for constant bottom heat. That way, you can bring the heat to the backside of the product while pressing from the top at a lower temperature to ensure that you don't scorch garments during the application.

Heat-applied DTF

One of the best and brightest products being used with the heat press are the DTF (Direct-to-Film) prints. Direct-to-Film printing is a relatively new technology

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SETTING NEW STANDARDS



DTF print for a performance hooded sweatshirt. Looks amazing on poly, and with a bottom heat platen, you can't see your press marks on the front of the garment.



This is a sheet of thermal film cut names. It is still a staple for individualized team and fan apparel for sports teams.



Custom Team 3D embroidered heat-applied patches.



Custom Team 3D embroidered patch being applied on the left chest of a performance quarter zip.



3D patch applied to team hats.



Get the whole team look with heat-applied patches. Not only can you use the same patches on different garments. One can free up your embroidery machines for larger orders.

in the world of apparel decoration, but it has been a creative force for heat press decorators.

DTF allows for full-color designs and can produce high-quality, detailed images. When screen printers must price jobs by considering a handful of different variables, the DTF doesn't care about any of it. Does your client need an 11-color left front chest on nine shirts? Design it, print it, press it. Can you imagine the cost if this was screened?

One of the benefits of DTF printing is that it can be used on a variety of fabrics, including cotton, polyester, and blends. Plus, the resulting design is soft to the touch and has a matte finish. DTF prints are extremely lightweight and leave little to no feel on the apparel.

One of the best parts about the DTF technology is that you can allow for stand-alone text on your graphics. Previously, a heat press product design would have to be contained, connected, or be surrounded by a larger outline because the fine designs and text were too small to weed.

The cons of the DTF prints are that larger prints feel funny, for lack of a better term. Matte finish and soft feel, true, but a larger 11" × 7" full front logo on a cotton tee isn't going to have the same feel as your screen-printed garment. It just doesn't.

Also, just like anything else, operator error can wreak havoc on DTF prints. If prints are not heat applied correctly or to manufacturer suggestions, they can go bad quickly. Peeling, cracking, or just falling off completely. I would recommend a lot of trial-and-error testing before DTF becomes a part of your arsenal.

Moreover, don't forget about ventilation and the use of gloves and a mask when working with the powder, if you're printing DTF in-house. Better safe than sorry with any airborne chemicals, right?

Heat-applied rhinestones

Don't think you won't get into rhinestones and glitter. If you want to get on any pom, dance, or cheer mom's good side, you better offer up rhinestones and glitter.

*Build a **playbook for different materials** and how to adhere them to particular garments.*

"Everything looks better with rhinestones," some may say, but seriously, the added rhinestone feature on a garment really creates a decoration that can wow a client. They pop, they sparkle, and they turn the simplest image into a statement piece. Take your one-color team's name and outline it in rhinestones and turn your simple $8 tee into a $18-$25 tee with a 30-second press.

The cons of using rhinestones is that you may have a rhinestone or two fall off the carrier sheet. It's a bummer, but it happens. Have a handful of rhinestones available to replace any that get lost. Also, if you don't have a rhinestone machine, you'll have to rely on a manufacturer to create them. They will take time and often have minimums.

Pro tips

Not all heat presses are equal. Find a press you can trust. Does it hold temperature accurately? Does it hold pressure accurately? Do I get support from the manufacturer or sales rep? These are all things that are important when choosing the proper heat press for you.

Also, investigate what types of accessories are available. Particularly with patches, bottom heat is important. If you can add a heated platen to your press, I would highly recommend it. For performance garments, you can lower the top heat and add the bottom heat to adhere DTF prints while eliminating the *scorched* heat press square.

Extra tip: If you haven't purchased the bottom heat platen yet, pre-press the platen before loading for about 20 seconds. That will heat up the bottom. Not ideal, but it will work until you're ready for an upgrade.

If you want to heat press hats, whether vinyl, patches, DTFs or anything else, get a good hat press. Bottom heat is essential. Don't be afraid to use the heat tape to keep hat patches or emblems in the right spot. It's there for a reason, so use it.

Lastly, use the correct application pads. Using the wrong pad could ruin an emblem of design on a garment. You'd hate to design a beautiful PVC patch only to melt it while trying to adhere the logo to a hat front.

Not all materials are equal. Do the research. Test, research, test, and then test again. Everyone says they have the *best* product on the market. Do your own due diligence. There are a lot of vendors selling what they call the *best* DTF prints, the *best* vinyl, and the *best* screen-printed transfers.

Find out what works for you. Consider the costs of product, shipping, customer service and reliability. Build a playbook for different materials and how to adhere them to particular garments.

Finally, don't be afraid of minimums. When working with heat-press materials, you'll typically find that the orders are smaller than your traditional screen-printing runs.

Don't be afraid to make clients get to the minimums. If a client wants to create a 3D emblem for 15 trucker caps, but your emblem manufacturer has a minimum of 24 pieces, for instance, you can do it one of two ways.

Tell the client they must get to the minimum to place the order with you. It's something I don't really like to do. I hate showing clients an amazing product and then pulling the rug out from under them and telling them they *have* to buy 24 or no deal.

Instead, I may not even mention a minimum and factor the net cost of the vendor minimum number for emblems and divide it into the cost of 15 pieces instead of 24. The price for the customer will ultimately be higher, but that's what happens with lower quantities.

The heat press is riding high right now with some of the coolest decoration options on the market. What can't you do with a heat press? I'll tell you … you can't *not* make money. GP



THE DIFFERENT STYLES OF Presses

COURTESY OF GEO KNIGHT



Specialty press



Swing away T-shirt press



Swing away T-shirt press

Clamshell T-shirt press

t's a good idea to be well-versed in the different styles of heat presses and what their purpose is.

The most common heat presses are T-shirt presses, with 14" × 16" or 16" × 20" heat platens.

There are two styles of T-shirt presses: swing-away (most popular) and clamshell.

After that, automatic presses are used heavily as a production solution for constant use.

Specialty presses like mug, cap and label presses are used for specific sizes and specialty shapes that cannot be done on the larger machines.

Lastly, large-format presses are used when the materials are oversized and the image area is significantly larger than a normal 16" × 20" press is, and continuous inks/imaging, requiring one single pressing for the entire design. GP



Specialty press

Large-format press

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Heat Transfer

BY EVE LOWRY

VINYL BASICS

Explore an easy income opportunity using heat transfer vinyl



Once you've weeded out the words, be sure to lay your heat transfer vinyl (HTV) shiny side up and press according to manufacturer directions. In this case, we used Siser Easy Weed heat transfer vinyl. (Images courtesy of Eve Lowry)



Eve Lowry started The Baby's Booty YouTube channel to help others learn exactly how to do machine embroidery, maintain their machines, and what materials they need to accomplish that. The Baby's Booty is in its sixth year of YouTube instruction with over 54,000 subscribers, and seven years in the embroidery business, and has since expanded its services to include rhinestone decoration, direct-to-film shirt printing, sublimation printing, and coaching services.

The art of creating unique heat transfer vinyl (HTV) designs is an incredibly rewarding way to make money. With a few simple tools and supplies anyone can create beautiful custom designs that will have your customers coming back for more. Whatever your specialty in the graphics market, HTV is worth a serious look as at least a nice profitable add-on you can offer your customers.

When it comes to HTV designs, the possibilities are truly endless. From intricate details to bold graphics and everything in between, you can craft eye-catching designs that will appeal to your target audience. Here are some tips on how to get started:

1 **Research your target audience:** Think about what types of designs they might be interested in and why. Take into account their age group, interests, and style preferences when brainstorming ideas for your HTV designs. For instance, you could reach out to local small businesses and see if they would like to have t-shirts made with their company info on the back.

2 **Gear up:** Heat transfer vinyl is perfect for printing on fabric, so look into getting a good quality heat press machine or cutter if you don't have one already. Additionally, you'll need to select the right type of vinyl material as well as a compatible cutting blade and software such as Adobe Illustrator or CorelDRAW Graphics Suite X5/X6/X7/X8. You'll also need other materials, such as a weed tool or tweezers, depending on the complexity

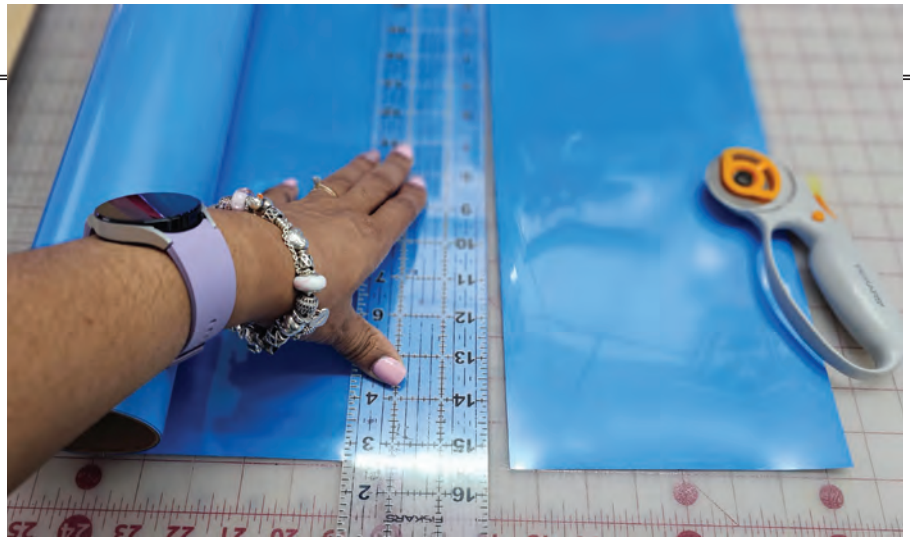
of your projects. Weeding can prove tedious. You may want to consider a light table to lay the cut vinyl on which will help you see the weeding lines better.

3 **Get creative:** Now it's time to start designing! Start by sketching out some ideas first before transferring them onto the computer screen for further refinement with digital tools like the ones mentioned above. Keep experimenting until you find something that resonates with your target audience — try different colors, shapes, patterns, and textures until you're confident with the final outcome. Don't forget to save each iteration so that you can go back and refine if needed later on, too!

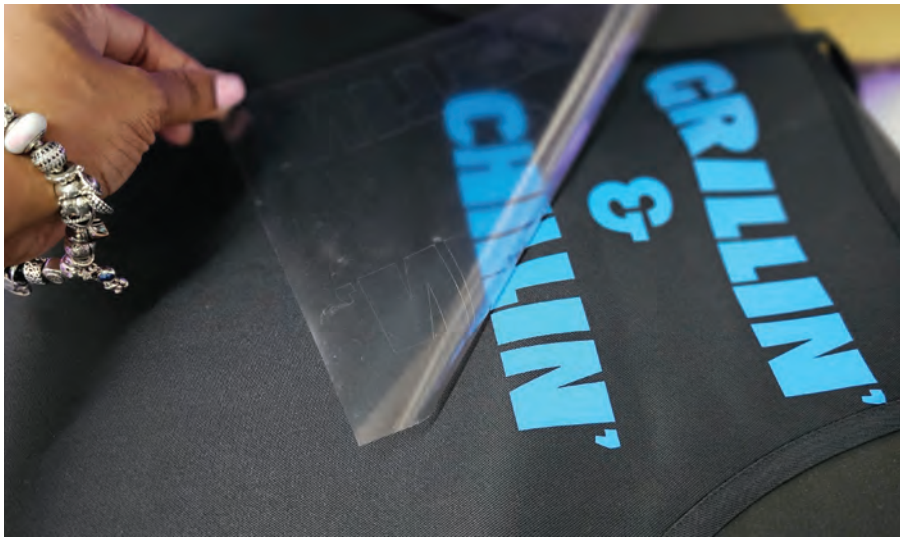
4 **Test your design:** You should always print out a small sample version first before committing to an entire sheet of HTV. This allows you to make sure everything looks good

from both sides and check for any potential problems like unsatisfactory cuts.

With a little hard work, determination, and patience, anyone can create stunning HTV products that are sure stand out from competitors in their marketplace!



You can easily cut the HTV down to the size you need for the design. This saves on waste.



Once the HTV has been pressed, peel the clear carrier sheet away, leaving your custom design behind!

Examples: shopping, grilling, and snacking

Let's take a look at three HTV projects that are simple to make, don't require a large heat press, and offer a quick turnaround for maximizing profits.

HTV tote bags are a one-size-fits-all job that can be as challenging as the design you put on it. To keep things simple, let's find a funny yet simple design that will sell to most of your customers. Our design says: "*Let me SHOP and no one gets hurt.*"

We used a bold font that will weed well and look great on a tote bag. It is easier and more profitable if you keep your design one color. We chose a basic color, though you could upgrade the design and thereby charge more if you used glitter or another specialty type of HTV.

We set the size, mirror the design, then send it to the cutter. Be sure to place the vinyl shiny side down on the mat. Once the vinyl design is cut out, remove the vinyl from the mat, then weed away the excess.

A pro tip here is to pre-press the bag prior to adhering the vinyl to the bag. It removes excess undetected moisture that will lessen the life of the vinyl design on the bag. Apply the design right-side up to the pre-pressed tote bag. You may have to apply heat tape to the HTV to hold it in place.

Now you're ready to press the vinyl design at the recommended time and temperature as recommended by the heat transfer vinyl supplier. Peel away the carrier sheet, and you now have a completed bag ready to sell!

You can easily create multiple one-color designs and allow the customer to choose the design they would prefer. After a quick press, you've made a customer happy!

Another simple project that can be easily customized for a quick profit is an apron. Aprons are also a one-size-fits-all job. There are thousands of designs you could find that would make an easy sale. Summertime is the time for grilling, so let's look at another simple one-color design that would work for most of your customers.

This design says *Grillin' and Chillin'*, and we'll use the same chunky font that cuts and weeds easily. Follow the exact same procedures as the tote bag, and be sure to pre-press the apron as well. In a similar fashion, you can create multiple one-color designs that your customers can choose from to create their ideal custom apron.



Be sure to lay the glitter HTV in the desired area and tape it down if you need to with heat tape to hold it in place prior to pressing with the heat press.



Once your design is pressed, let the glitter HTV cool down, then peel the clear carrier sheet away slowly.



Our three HTV projects are complete! They were easy to make and will bring a quick profit to your shop.

Our third HTV project is one that is pretty popular, but I add this because the profit margin is great, and it doesn't take a lot of time or vinyl … kids' T-shirts. The beauty of making kids' T-shirts is that it can generate repeat customers. Kids outgrow their shirts quickly, and parents know they can come to you for custom shirts. Their shirts are small, so it doesn't take a huge heat press to get their shirts done.

All kids love snacks, so we came up with *Snack Snatcher.* Chunky fonts work wonderfully for kids' shirts. You would follow all of the exact same processes as the apron and the tote bag, and don't forget to pre-press the shirt! There is no end of designs that would work for a kid's shirt that would be funny for the parents as well!

Using heat transfer vinyl is a straightforward process. You want to refer to the manufacturer's directions to ensure the proper application for temperature, time, and pressure. Heat transfer vinyl can be used on a wide variety of materials. Delicate fabrics that cannot withstand high heat should be avoided.

Once you are comfortable with simple one-color designs, you can branch out to multiple color designs. You can source ready-made HTV designs on platforms such as Etsy or Bundle Design sites like Creative Fabrica. SVG files will be the file type that is simple to use and works great.

If the design you are considering contains more than five colors, you should consider using an alternative printing method. Screen printing, sublimation, or even direct-to-film would be more profitable with multi-layer designs.

If you want to get really creative with your HTV designs, there are tons of online resources available for inspiration as well as advice on how best to use the medium itself. Sites like Pinterest and Etsy offer plenty of ideas from crafters, artists, and producers who have already made their mark in the industry.

Take advantage of this wealth of knowledge in order to up your game even further! With the right tools and resources at hand, you can easily create unique HTV designs that will captivate and excite any customer base! GP

Top 5 LASER HACKS TO IMPROVE Efficiency

COURTESY OF TROTEC



Advanced Reverse Inlay

Reverse engrave to create highly detailed inlays onto veneer woods.
https://youtu.be/p9gpVQHPO18



Cleaning Material with a Magic Eraser

Clean staining, scorching, and residue leftover or not completely removed in the engraving and cutting process.
https://youtu.be/XwI7-OFcFmg



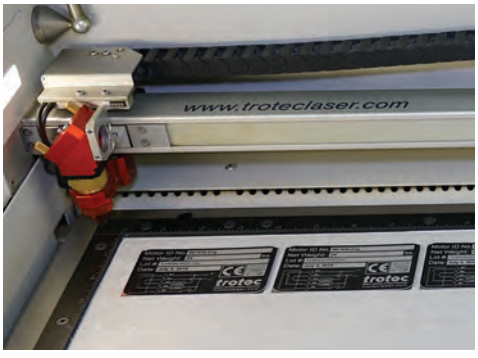
Paint Fill on Polished Surfaces

Color fill laser engraved polished surfaces using wax or oil-based paint to create more vibrant engravings. This is a much faster process than traditional masking processes.
https://youtu.be/vmWBh1kKIxI



Cutting Acrylic on Wet Paper Towels

Use wet paper towels to reduce the chance of flare ups when cutting thick acrylics with your laser.
https://youtu.be/fAquhnblg9o



Using Transfer Tape as a Laser Template

Fashion a quick and easy laser job template created using transfer tape.
https://youtu.be/fAquhnblg9o

For a full list of laser hacks from Trotec, visit https://gpro.link/laserhacks. GP

LEVERAGING Social Media

Take advantage of the explosive growth of small businesses on social media

BY ANGELICA BROADNAX



I use YouTube for long-form videos and TikTok for shorter videos, and use each to complement the other and drive more interest and traffic to both. Potential customers like to get a behind-the-scenes view of your work; it makes you more approachable and establishes credibility.





Angelica began her entrepreneurship journey in 2019 with the launch of Angel B. Designs, which now has over 65,000 subscribers on YouTube, 25,000 followers on TikTok, 2,000 Etsy sales, and over 5 million views across six platforms in just four years of business. She is a featured speaker at START HERE Academy at GRAPHICS PRO EXPO on June 14 in Indianapolis, where she will present Build Your Brand: How to Make Sales and Influence People.

Social media and the world of influencer marketing has been explosive over the last 10 years. But it has been even more pronounced during and even after the global pandemic. Large companies have taken their marketing budgets and pivoted to focus on influencer marketing and social media.

So why is this important information for small businesses and those just starting out in business? Social media integration in small businesses helps build brand awareness, connect with customers, and drive sales.

Building a network

When I started my handmade business in 2019, I mainly focused on networking opportunities to make sales, like popups. That was where the bulk of my income was generated. While I experienced a marginal level of success at in-person events, I knew there was a better and more efficient use of my time.

I was drawn to social media initially to display my crafting business to not just the few people that attended the local popups but to millions of people spending upwards of three hours a day scrolling social media. My timing for this transition could not have come at a more opportune time, as a global pandemic was approaching that would force the entire world to go online.

In 2020, my sales increased by 200% because of the social media presence and the community I began to build through it. These are the times in which people aren't looking to just blindly purchase; they want to feel like they're part of something. A lot of influencers name their platforms something catchy, which creates that community people are looking for.

Looking at social media as just a way to keep in touch with friends and family should be a thing of the past if you own or operate a business. Networking events aren't completely out of the window but look at it like this: events house a few thousand people, sometimes more, sometimes less. Social media opens doors to millions of people around the world; setting up a page or channel is free, and the ROI is infinite.

Having that online presence allows you to capture sales during times you can't be in front of people, like at 2 a.m. In 2020, I created a YouTube video showing how to make order books by hand. After the second day of that video being posted, it went viral during the middle of the night. I woke up the next morning to 50 orders, orders that I would never have been able to obtain elsewhere because it was during a time frame I physically couldn't.

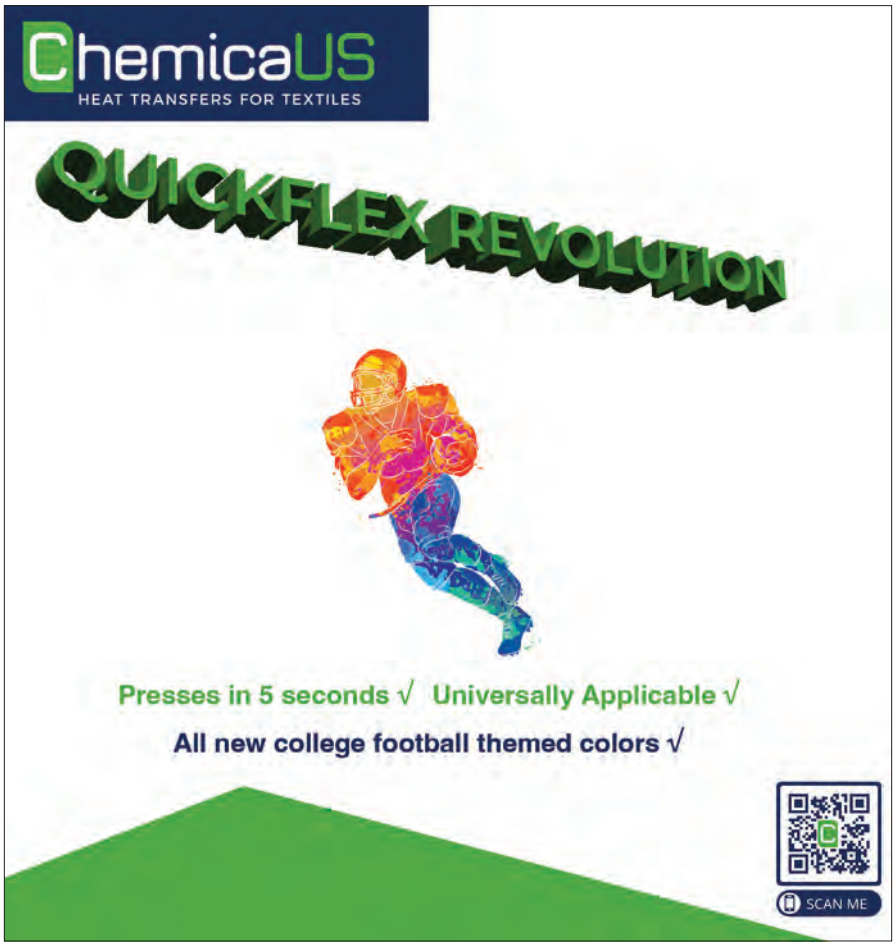
Turns out that consumers love to scroll at all times of the night, and there is a group of people that impulse buy in the wee hours. No matter what you sell, you want to position yourself to meet the demand of those buyers.

Start from scratch

So how do you go about establishing a social media presence? How do you get



I use a lot of videos on Instagram and Facebook as well. You can cast a wider net and cross-promote by using multiple platforms and save time posting by repurposing your content for each platform.





This 23-second TikTok video made as a shorter version of a full YouTube video demonstrating how to use DTF on a coffee mug funneled over 10,000 viewers to my YouTube channel, which is monetized and generated more than 100 direct messages to place an order. It also led to additional Amazon affiliate revenue.

people to want to be part of your community? You start by providing something for free. That is the quickest and most effective way.

It doesn't have to be a physical product or something that would cost money. It can be a piece of knowledge, an entertaining moment that provides a laugh or a smile, or a checklist that takes you five minutes to make, like the Top Five Custom Gifts for Mother's Day.

Being able to provide value or answer your audience's pain points are the most important aspects of starting your marketing journey on social media; just keep in mind that everyone defines value differently. So … switch things up, not in a way that takes you out of your niche but in a way that doesn't make your page or channel mundane and one-note.

Once you've established your freebie, create a consistent schedule. This doesn't have to be an everyday schedule if that would burn you out. It could be twice a week. Create a schedule that would allow you to be able to show up for your community on a consistent basis, so that they have something to look forward to. They say you only need 1,000 true fans who support everything you do to make a good living.

So, you have your freebie and your schedule all mapped out; now you need to optimize your content and cross-promote. Let's say you have a YouTube channel, which is considered a long-form platform. You need to establish a presence on another platform to reach a wider audience and be able to funnel new people to your main platform.

A good secondary platform to YouTube would be TikTok. They both contain searchable content. YouTube is the long form, and TikTok is the shorter one-minute version of whatever you post to YouTube. This allows you to reach more people, and the quickness of the one-minute TikToks entices people to go to your YouTube channel to view the full content.

Now that you have your freebie and your two major platforms, how do you build traction? How do you get people to find you, subscribe to you, and ultimately purchase from you? You must utilize the SEO (Search Engine Optimization) features built into these platforms.

When people go onto YouTube, for instance, most of the time, they are looking for something specific, like how to do something. So, if you want to make a video about making signs, the title, description box, thumbnail, and hashtags must use the word *signs* (or variations of that, like ADA signs, depending on the product you're highlighting). This way, when people search for something pertaining to signs, your content will be shown.

Cross-promoting is really what helped my channel gain the most traction in the beginning, like Facebook craft groups. I used YouTube and TikTok to promote video content, and I used Facebook craft groups to promote pictures of finished products.

The trick to this is to only post these pictures after your other content is live. That way when they ask for information, you have it available to either link or message them. When choosing your platform, your focus should be on whatever your goal is. If your goal is views and monetizing your content, you should focus on YouTube and Facebook. If your goal is sales and website traffic, you should focus on TikTok and Facebook/Instagram.

Consistency is the key to being successful on social media, especially across the platforms you choose. Ideally, if you can create a presence on all the major platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest) you'd be in the best position. They all have ways to funnel viewers somewhere else and capture the proper analytics to let you know what content is working and what isn't.

Mastering the art of social media is a tedious process. It takes a lot and requires a lot, but I have experienced explosive growth in my small business utilizing it. The greater the impact you're able to make on people's lives, the greater the income. People who feel like you've done something for them or included them in your life spend money and time with you. GP

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Print ON VIRTUALLY Any Media

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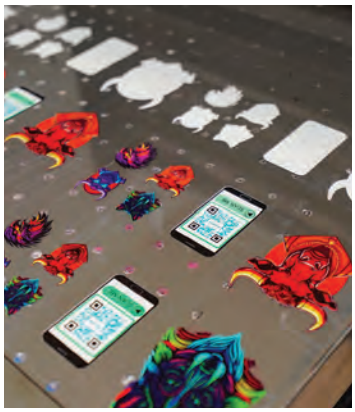
UV transfer media is the perfect solution to print UV ink on surfaces of all shapes and sizes. You can now personalize thousands of items without even putting them on your flatbed. With this easy-to-use product, we will show you how to print directly onto the glued surface, which then transfers the ink onto virtually any surface you desire. It's that simple!

Start by removing the top clear film that protects the adhesion and set your transfer media at the 0'0' mark. Once the media is set, run your job. For best results, we recommend using one to two layers of white underneath the image/images you want to print. After your UV printer has finished, apply the transfer stock to the end of your sheet and run it through the laminator. Once laminated, cut out a square around the image you want to transfer. The great thing is that only the ink will transfer to your media!











Now, it's time to apply your printed layer onto your object. Separate the two layers of media and apply the image white side down. A good tip is to bend the image from the middle and work from the inside out using your thumbs. After that, use a squeegee or your thumb to press the image into your media. If you encounter air pockets, don't worry. Simply use a sharp point like the edge of a razor blade to poke a little hole and work the air out.

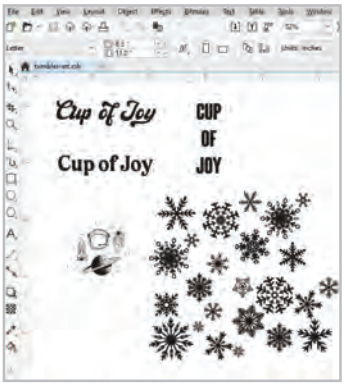
Lastly, peel off the laminate starting at a corner and working diagonally across. Peel at a sharp 90-degree angle going at a nice slow pace. If any sharp corners don't stick, roll it back and apply more pressure with your thumb. For objects that are giving you extra trouble when peeling, let the image sit for a few hours allowing the glue to adhere longer, then try again. Once the laminate is removed, your item is now dishwasher safe, and the ink is permanent.

To see transfer media in action, check out our video at www.xante.com/uv-unlimited. This is an amazing opportunity to take your printing game to the next level and increase your business revenue. Don't miss out on the limitless possibilities that UV transfer media provides. Try it out now! GP

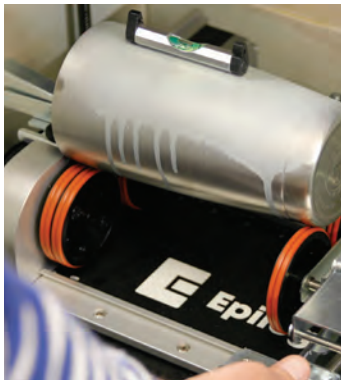
Laser Engraving

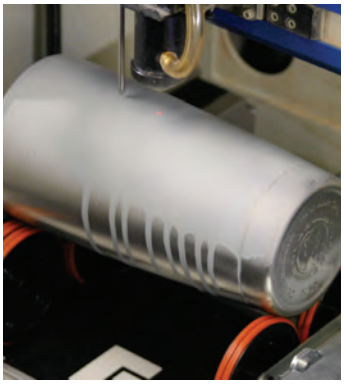
STAINLESS STEEL TUMBLERS

COURTESY OF EPILOG











Tumblers — whether they are painted, powder-coated, or stainless steel — are exceptionally popular engraving products. They are functional and versatile to audiences large and small. Here we'll walk you through the steps of customizing a stainless steel tumbler using the Rotary Attachment along with a metal marking compound. Read on to see step-by-step instructions on creating these popular and profitable personalized gifts.

What you need:

1. Stainless steel tumbler — we purchased ours through JDS Industries.
2. Metal marking compound — such as Enduramark or Cermark. Note: If you have a fiber laser system there is no need for a metal marking agent. You are able to directly mark upon the metal.
3. Epilog Laser System — We used a Fusion Maker 30-watt Raster: Speed 15% // Power 100% // 500DPI

Step 1: Prepare Artwork

Download the graphics above or import your own drawings, text, photos, or graphics. Modify as necessary.

Step 2: Setup

Spray the stainless steel tumblers: Spray the desired engraving area of the tumblers with an even coat of metal marking compound. If you have a fiber laser, you can skip the pre-treating step, as these systems were designed for bare-metal marking. Just be sure to check your user manual for recommended settings for your particular metal.

Install the rotary attachment: Lower your engraving table to allow room for the rotary attachment in your machine. Power off the machine, then plug in your rotary attachment and restart the laser. The laser head will relocate to a new home position for the rotary.

Insert the tumbler: Place your steel tumbler on the rotary attachment. Use a level to make sure the piece is level throughout, and manually focus your machine. If you are using the Center-Center engraving feature, set a new home position in the center of your piece using the red dot pointer as a guide (pictured below.)

Step 3: Determine your Parameters

In the Epilog Laser Dashboard select the recommended settings for engraving stainless steel. Or, you can consult your owner's manual for recommended engraving/cutting settings for your machine and wattage. Enter your settings within the dashboard, and send the job to the laser.

Step 4: Rinse off the Tumblers

Once your graphic is finished engraving, rinse off the marking compound with water and you are ready to use or gift your new custom steel tumblers! GP

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12 THINGS I DO TO MAKE MY SHOP A Happier Place

Take the time to bring comfort, convenience, and control into your environment

BY LORI CHAMPAGNE



Lori Champagne has owned two shops in her 28 years in the engraving industry. Her California shop was a retail space with employees and a neon sign in the window proudly proclaiming OPEN for far too many hours of the day and night. She now has a home-based studio in Michigan where she lives on seven acres of woods and wetlands with her husband. No neon, but if she is home, she is open. Lori's presentation at START HERE Academy @ GPX, June 14, is Keeping Peace and Profitability in Your Home-Based Business.

I admit it. I spend more waking hours in my shop than in any other single place. I walk miles in this small space, traversing from machine to machine. I sit. I stand. I sit again — sometimes for five seconds, sometimes for five hours. I talk, text, and Zoom with people endlessly.

I am a bee in my little world, bouncing from flower to flower in organized chaos. So why shouldn't my hive be as comfortable and convenient as possible? Here are my top recommendations to keep your workspace cozy, convenient, and even sometimes calm:

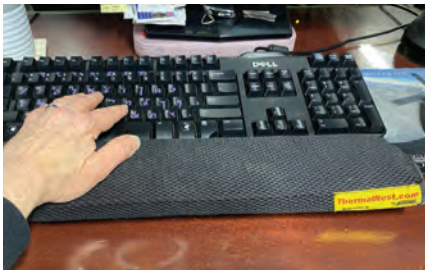
1 Foam floor tiles — I'm in Michigan. My floor is cement. It gets cold here erratically. As I write this, the temperature this morning was 29, and tomorrow it will be near 80. My feet used to freeze in the winter. Then I tried thin foam tiles (1/4"), and they helped to make the floor a little softer and warmer to stand on. After that, I tried the thick foam tiles (7/8"). What a difference! The floor is no longer radiating frigidity. The 24" interlocking foam squares traverse my busiest areas but stop within 1/2" of machines and cabinets. That way, the dust and dirt falls into these gutters and is easily vacuumed up. Individual tiles are easily removed if machines need to be relocated. As a bonus, things that drop don't break. It cost about $500 to tile a third of my shop, but it was money well spent.



Interlocking 7/8" foam flooring prevents dropped items from breaking, helps make standing more comfortable, and keeps the cold from radiating into the room.



2 Fans and heaters — I keep the air circulating in my workshop with a few fans; that way, the area near the heater doesn't roast while the area by the window freezes. I also have a heated wrist rest in front of my keyboard, a mini heater



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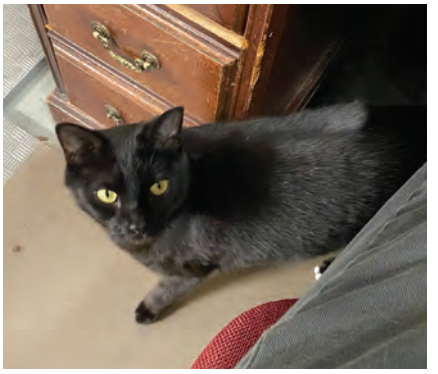
under my desk, and footwear similar to Ugg boots for really, really cold days. Catch me in a few months, and I'll tell you about the air conditioner in my attic and the fans in the window that blow in fresh air. The workspace should always be the perfect temperature. Sometimes that is 76, sometimes it is 64. Be warm. Be cool. Be comfortable.

3 **Chair** — Now that you are warm (or cool), it's time to look at your workspace. Your tush had better feel like it is in the best place on Earth. If not, get a new chair. You sit too much to be uncomfortable. Adjust for your back and neck, too! Concerned about the cost? You are likely going to be in that chair at least four hours a day. That's pennies per day assuming you will have it for at least five years. Splurge. Your hindquarters are worth it!

4 **Snacks** — Basic comforts are now in place, and after all that hard work, it is time for a snack. I know you want to reach for Twinkies, but resist the urge to stock them. Trail mix and fresh fruit are some of my favorites. Try to eat healthy, but keep chocolate in your desk just in case the day takes a turn for the worse.

5 **Declutter** — Clear your desk of anything that you don't touch at least once a month. If you can be ruthless, remove anything you don't touch at least weekly. This decluttering includes the mug-pencil-holder. Remove dry pens, stumpy pencils, and whatever else is in the cup that prevents implements from sliding in and out easily. Consolidate those post-it notes around your computer screen and admit to yourself that you are never going to get to that project that has been staring at you from the corner for years. Away it goes. Simplify.

6 **Cat** — Now that you have made space, the cat can more easily sit on your lap, on the desk, or wherever he chooses. Similarly, the dog can lay at your feet. Have a shop cat or dog. I have two cats. They are calming and keep me warm in the winter. Customers enjoy petting them. If you have a dog, you can take a break and get some fresh air by taking the pup for a walk.



7 **Take breaks** — Get out of your comfy chair and get some fresh air. Walk around the block. Walk to the store and get more chocolate. Take a stroll around the parking lot and notice how many cars are messier than yours. Yes, I want to work every minute possible, but I know I work more efficiently when I take occasional five-minute breaks. Stretch a bit. You will return refreshed and work more efficiently.

8 **Take vacations** — Guess what? You are never going to get caught up. Ever. Really. For the same reason that you go for a walk outside at least once a day, you should get away at least once a year for a week. An additional long weekend would be a good idea, too. It's amazing how customers can seem like minions of the underworld before vacation, but one week later, they are just regular human beings.

9 **Auto message** — Your real-world comforts are aligned, and now it is time to make your electronic devices work for you. If there are texts that you regularly send to people, you can save them and call them up with just a few keystrokes (On an Apple phone, those are: Settings>General>Keyboard>Text Replacement. Touch + to add new). For example, I have very specific directions that I send to anyone coming to the shop. I can bring the entire long paragraph up just by typing "dir." Typing "PPP" yields the message "You're engraving is complete and ready for pickup. Please let me know a specific date and time you would like to pick it up. I accept Venmo, PayPal, cash, or check." I would go crazy if I had to type that every time I finished a job.

10 **Bluetooth headset or EarPods** — Free up your hands and have adjustable volume. You will be able to hear texts and phone calls over the din of your machines. The people at the other end of your phone calls will be able to hear you. You can also pipe through your favorite music or podcast. You can hear the phone ring over your machines. Your phone can stay in one place, charging, and not get lost. If you get noise-canceling headphones, the ambient cacophony will be greatly reduced. Your ears will stay warm and happy.

11 **Tidy up** — Clean up before you leave for the day. That way, in the morning, you come into a clean shop and can hit the ground running. Nothing puts a crimp in my day like having to clean up before I even start working.

12 **"No"** — Finally, it's OK to say no. It's OK to refer people. It's OK to work with other shops. It's OK to say that you cannot fit in another job this week. Life's too short to *always* work. It's also OK to let a customer go. If their aggravation is not worth the money they bring in, then you have no obligation to make your own life more difficult. Yes, you can fire customers.



You spend a lot of time in your place of business. Distractions are inevitable, and unexpected emergencies pop up like critters in a whack-a-mole game. To balance with these inconveniences, shouldn't your workplace offer solace? Take the time to bring comfort, convenience, and control into your environment. It will help keep you and your worker bees buzzing. GP

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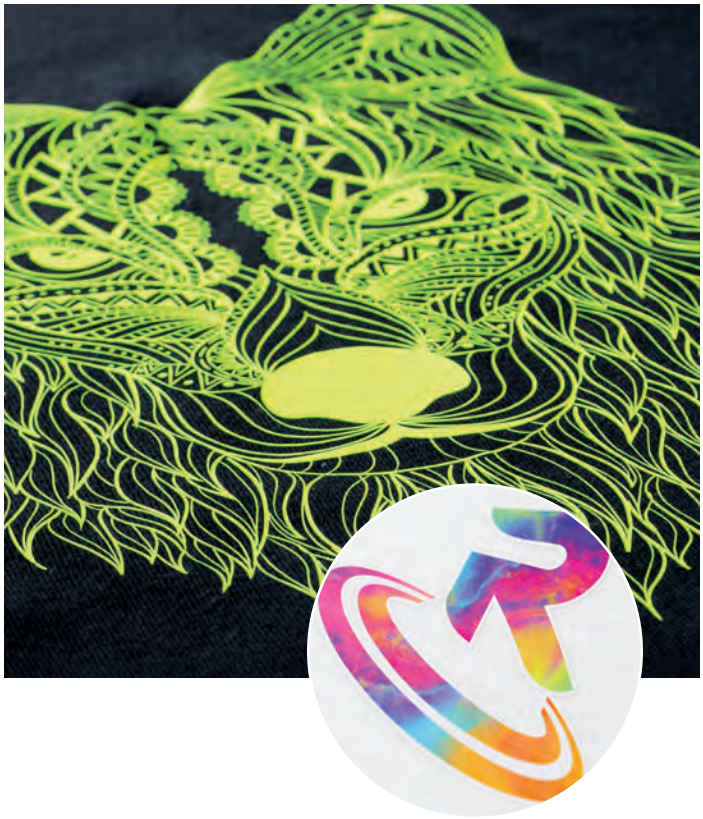
HOW TO SAVE TIME Pressing HTV AND HAVE GREAT RESULTS

COURTESY OF CHEMICA





When working on a heat transfer vinyl (HTV) job, using time effectively is extremely important. We at Chemica understand that you want to get the job done as fast as possible, but you also want to have the best results possible.

There are several things you can check when selecting your HTV for the job as well as things you can do while doing the job to help you save time and have awesome results. Here are a few of them:

1 Check the time needed to press the HTV. Some types of HTV are quicker to press than others. Most HTV takes 10-20 seconds to press. At Chemica, any HTV that has "Revolution" in the name takes as little as 5 seconds to press.

2 Pay attention to how you are supposed to peel the HTV. Oftentimes you are supposed to peel the HTV when it's warm or cold. However, some HTV allows you to peel warm. Pay attention to the product specifications to see if this is the case.

3 Use a room temperature surface to cool your design faster. Rub your recently pressed design on a room temperature surface, such as a tabletop, to help cool it before you peel it. Doing this will actually cause the HTV to cool quicker, thus saving you time. GP





Planting the Seeds of Success

Take action out of inspiration, not desperation



Aaron Montgomery is certified by New York Times best-selling author Jack Canfield as a Success Principles Trainer and is the co-founder of OurSuccessGroup.com. Aaron has over 25 years of experience with personalized products and small business development and is the co-creator of the "5 Keys of Business Success." You can also find Aaron co-hosting the decorator's industry podcast 2 Regular Guys Podcast (2RegularGuys.com). Also, check him out on his podcast channel called Small Business Saturdays (SmallBusinessSaturdaysPodcast.com). Aaron will emcee this year's START HERE Academy @ GPX in Indianapolis, June 14, and will present Planting the Seeds of Success: Achieving Your Goals with Clarity and Confidence.

What does growing or launching your business mean to you? Does it look like chasing shiny objects, working your fingers to the bone, and hoping to get it right? What if there was an alternative? I'm here to tell you that there is, as long as you don't get stuck in the trap of chasing quick fixes and magic bullet solutions.



It's time to focus on the FUNdamentals and lay a strong foundation for lasting success. That foundation includes key elements such as clarifying your purpose and developing a solid business plan. As part of the START HERE Academy happening in Indianapolis on June 14, I know laying a strong foundation for your business as early as possible is like planting a seed to grow your very own money tree.

Starting a business can be an exciting and daunting experience. For many people, the initial enthusiasm can quickly fade away as the realities of running a business set in. It's easy to get bogged down in the day-to-day tasks of keeping the business afloat and lose sight of the bigger picture. The key to avoiding this trap is to create a business that you love, rather than just another job that steals all your time and is overwhelming.

More than a mission statement

The first step in creating a business you love is clarifying your reason. Some people might call this finding your *why,* or your mission statement. This is the foundation upon which everything else will be built. It's essential to have a clear understanding of why you want to start a business, and if your reason is "to make money," you are going to have to dig a little deeper.

The truth is, your reason is not to make money, or to do some small thing. Your reason should be a driving force that goes well beyond just money. It is understanding why you want to make money doing this each day and why you do the small things you do.

It is ultimately the reason or purpose you have that is unique to you and brings you joy and passion. For example, one of the small business owners I get to work with did the work to get clarity on her why. The



mission statement she ended up with was: "Supporting communities by developing creative solutions and personalized service that are appreciated for years to come."

Before having this clarity, she was struggling with what to do and how to make decisions and was feeling overwhelmed. After this clarity, she had an easy gauge to quickly make decisions and immediately started doing the right things for her. She got her business back on track and is now operating from a place of joy as she focuses on the reason she is doing this each day.

Having a well-defined reason you can share with others creates a connection point, or even a magnet, to find your ideal customers. To clarify your reason, you need to get to a deep understanding of why you are in business, what drives your passions, and what things also drive you a little crazy. Your reason will be at the intersection of those things. Without this clarity, it's easy to get lost in the details, and when push comes to shove, you need your reasons to be bigger than your excuses.

Once you have a clear sense of your reason, the next step in creating a business you love is to create a plan that includes goal-setting, marketing groundwork, and other details about your business. Dr. Stephen Covey, in his book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about the plan, noting, "All things are created twice. There's a mental or first creation and a physical or second creation."

He goes on to add an analogy about the process of building a home: "You create it in every detail before you ever hammer the first nail into place. Then you reduce it to a blueprint and develop construction plans. You have to make sure that the blueprint, the first creation, is really what you want, and that you've thought



"ACTION is the foundational KEY to all SUCCESS"
— Pablo Picasso

everything through. Then you put it into bricks and mortar. You begin with the end in mind."

To begin with the end in mind when it comes to starting a business (or even growing one), you have to determine what the ideal business is and what your goals are.

Start with goal-setting, or as I like to call it, goal-*getting*. It is important to be both ambitious and realistic. You want to set goals that challenge you but are also achievable. It's also crucial to break down your goals into smaller, more manageable steps. This approach will help you stay motivated and make progress even when the end goal seems far away.

The differences between a goal-setter and a goal-getter are slight but mighty. You must be very specific, and you must also set up milestones along the way that allow you to believe you will achieve the next steps to keep you moving forward.

A goal-getter sets up strategies or processes to track and measure how they are doing on the journey to their goals. These measurements are a tool to tell you what to do more of and what to try differently. They are not a way to point out failures, but instead should be utilized as inspiration.

Marketing groundwork is another critical element of your plan. Many times, when I discuss marketing with others, they go immediately to the strategies. For example, the email blast they want to send out, the social media ad they want to run, or other similar tactics.

But before doing any of that, you need to spend some time on the most valuable part of marketing, and that is the groundwork. You need to have a clear understanding of your ideal customers and how to reach them. This includes developing a brand personality that resonates with your target audience and creating a product mix that speaks to their needs and desires.

When it comes to your product mix, it's important to strike a balance between offering a variety of products and services and staying focused on what you do best. Too many options can overwhelm your customers and dilute your brand. You want to offer a range of products that complement your core offering and provide value to your customers. Being all things to everyone will make you nothing to no one.

You should also have an understanding of your overhead, pricing strategy, and priority management plan. This is what I call the numbers game — costs, profits, and time. If you focus on these three numbers, you will be creating a business you love.

Yes, there are lots of other numbers, metrics, and data that you could track, but these three numbers will net you 80% of the value of all the numbers in your business. Focus on these things and then leave the rest of the numbers to people who love them — accountants, bookkeepers, and financial planners, for example.

By planting these seeds, you are going to be well on your way to a business you love. These foundations will make it so much easier, more exciting, and more joyful to be a small business owner, especially when combined with great education, support, and mentorship.

START HERE Academy in Indianapolis on June 14 is a perfect opportunity to take your business to a new level with the support of the wonderful sponsors like STAHLS', Press Hall, GS2 Awards, CorelTrainer.com, Rayzist, Mimaki, and more.

The event will be filled with valuable insights from experts like Lori Champagne of Champagne Engraving, who will share Keeping Peace and Profitability in Your Home-Based Business, and Angel Broadnax of Angel B. Designs, who will guide us by sharing Build Your Brand: How to Make Sales and Influence People.

Committing to continuous daily improvement is a great way to stay inspired and motivated. As Pablo Picasso said, "Action in the foundational key to all success." I suggest you take the information you learn at the START HERE Academy and from this magazine and start taking action right away.

You want to take action out of inspiration, not desperation. I can't wait to talk to you about all the ways we can improve together at START HERE Academy. If you see me there, be sure to stop and say hello, and let me know that you read this article. I'll have a token for you that will help you take action. GP





DENIM FABRIC-FACED Dimensional Sign

COURTESY OF TROTEC



Create an unconventional sign by adhering denim fabric to dimensional lettering to create a unique and distinct look.



Supplies:

1) Blue painters tape
2) ¼" (6mm) MDF wood
3) Denim fabric
4) Spray contact adhesive
5) ¼" (6 mm) Walnut wood
6) Double sided adhesive
7) Sign base, Frame, and Lettering files

Sign Base

1) Place the walnut wood sheet into the laser system and focus it. Close the laser lid.
2) Import the back plate design file with the red cut lines and the blue mark lines into the Ruby® software.
3) Place the file into the prepare screen and position over the material using the red dot pointer or Vision Design & Position camera.
4) Select the walnut wood material from the materials database. Push the file to the laser. Press start to begin processing.
5) Once finished, open the laser and remove the cut wood base. Wipe any residue from the surface and set it aside.

Frame

1) Add an adhesive to another piece of walnut wood. Place it onto one side of the wood and squeegee it down. Trim off any excess.
2) Place the sheet of wood into the laser with the adhesive side facing downward. Close the laser lid.
3) Repeat step 3.
4) Repeat step 4.
5) Repeat step 5.

Lettering

1) Spray adhesive onto one side of a piece MDF wood and to the back of a piece of denim fabric. Let these dry for 1-2 minutes.
2) Adhere the wood to the back side of the denim.
3) Add blue painters tape to the adhered denim surface and squeegee the tape to the surface. This will protect the denim from the heat of the laser during the cutting process.
4) Flip over and trim any excess tape and fabric from the sheet.
5) Flip over again and fasten double-sided adhesive sheeting to the back side of the MDF wood. Squeegee it to the surface to secure it.







6) Place the sheet into the laser with the blue painters tape facing upwards. Focus the laser and close the laser lid.
7) Open the signage lettering design file into the Ruby software.
8) Repeat step 3 from Sign Base instructions.
9) Repeat step 4 from Sign Base instructions.

Assembly

1) Peel the double-sided adhesive from the base and sign. Adhere the frame to the base of the sign.
2) Remove the blue painters tape from the front of the dimensional lettering.
3) Peel the double-sided adhesive from the back of the dimensional lettering.
4) Adhere the lettering to the walnut base using the laser marked lines as a guide.

This same process can be applied to a wide range of materials including flexible fabrics and leathers. This process is a simple yet effective way to create a unique and personalized sign using various materials. GP

Laser Engraving

WINE TUMBLERS

COURTESY OF EPILOG

Keep your vino at just the right temperature with these powder-coated wine tumblers! Available in a variety of colors, your customers will love these wine tumblers for their next festive event or even just a night in with friends. They also make a great holiday or housewarming gift! Fast and easy to customize, these sturdy tumblers are sure to become a customer favorite in no time.

Materials Needed:

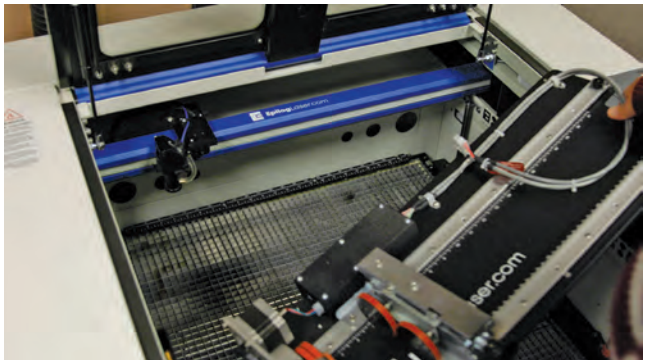
- Wine Tumblers
- Cleaning Solution
- Magic Eraser
- Rotary Accessory
- Laser System

We used a Fusion Pro 24 80 watt:

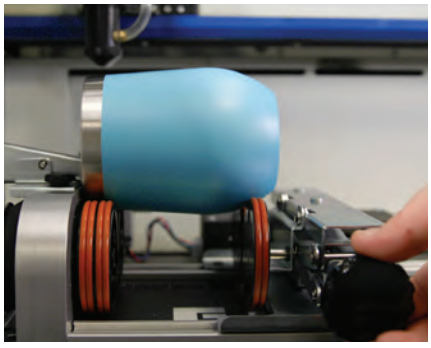
Raster engraving — Speed: 50% // Power: 80% // DPI: 500 // Center-Center Engraving



Step 1: Prepare the Artwork
Start by measuring the tumblers and customizing your artwork as necessary. Because there is a curve to the tumblers, it's best to size your artwork so that it remains on the upper portion of the cup. This will ensure the laser doesn't go out of focus on the curve of the piece when engraving.



Step 2: Install your Rotary
Before installing the rotary, be sure to lower the table enough to make room for it, then power off your machine. Place the rotary in the upper left corner of the table and plug it in. Now you may power the laser back on.



Step 3: Determine your Parameters
Test different speed/power/frequency settings for your tumblers. We used 50% speed, 80% power, and 500 DPI on an 80-watt Fusion Pro 24.



Step 4: Prepare your Material
Place your tumblers on the rotary and level them. Focus the table, close the lid and run the job.



Step 5: Clean
After the job is done, wipe any leftover residue from the surface of the tumbler using a cleaning solution, and then rinse them off with water. For this project we used Blu from Enduramark.



GP

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For more on the suppliers featured in this section, please see website and phone information following each product.



WINDOW GRAPHICS

Mactac Graphics and **Signage Solutions** announces six new products for its window graphics product line. The new products are the WV528 Windowview Translucent, the WV399R Windowview Easy, the WV399P Windowview Clear, the WV129 Windowview Opaque, the WV599 Windowview Clear, and the WV 569P Windowview Easy Etch. The company says all products are designed for inkjet printing and that durability ranges from one year to five years.

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WHITE INK

International Coatings Company introduces its newly reformulated Blaze Cotton White (7038) ink. The company says it delivers fast-flash, low tack, and high-performance hand on cotton fabrics. It is also a part of the company's FlexCure line, which means it can be cured at temperatures ranging from 290 F to 320 F, according to the company.

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Trotec Laser Inc. offers its Speedy series of laser engravers and Ruby, its laser engraving software. The product is available in a range of sizes, power options, and accessories, and the company says that Ruby will ensure a smooth workflow.

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DTG PRINTER

DTG Connection introduces the X2 DTG Printer. The product has a range of platen sizes and a button to switch to DTF printing. The company also says this product offers retail-ready prints and a user-friendly interface.

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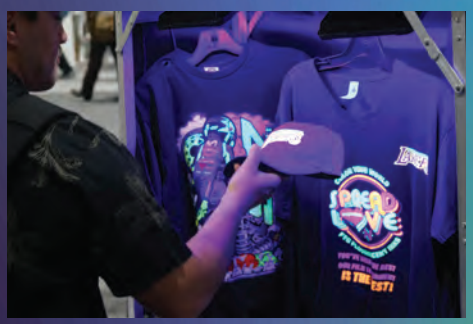

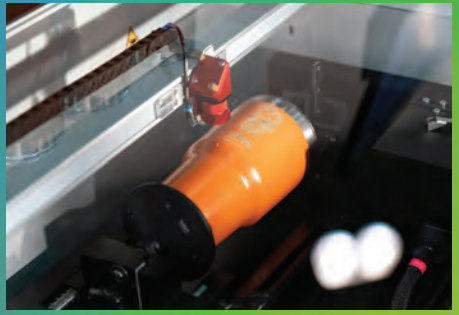



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- ☐ **General Formulations Inc** - Which Glue is Right for You START HERE
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1:30-3 p.m.

- ☐ **Trotec Laser Inc** - How to Start and Grow a Laser Business START HERE
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THURSDAY, JUNE 15, 2023 cont.

4-5:30 p.m.

- ☐ **Advertising Specialty Institute, ASI** - Start Selling More to Your Customers START HERE
- ☐ **CorelTRAINER** – CorelDRAW for Vectorizing & Digital Printing START HERE

FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 2023

8-9:30 a.m.

- ☐ **Transfer Express** – Perfect Print Placement PRO
- ☐ **IKONICS Imaging** - Profitable Sandcarving – Small Investment, Large Potential START HERE

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

- ☐ **SAGE** – Adding Promo to Your Business
- ☐ **GSG** - Apparel Decorator Panel: Expert Perspectives, Tips and Advice

1:30-3 p.m.

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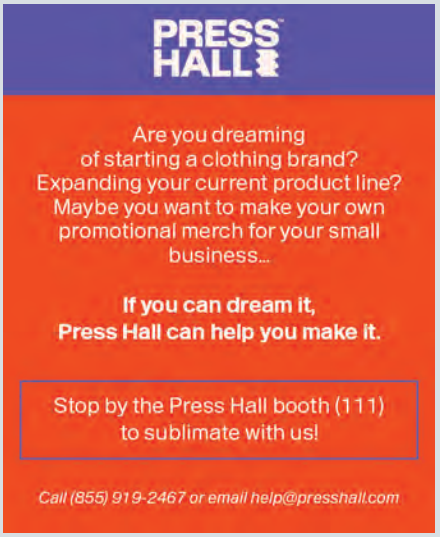






BLASTING AND ENGRAVING MASK SELECTION

BY RUTH DOBBINS

How to choose the right mask for the right job



Different colors of photoresists available on the market. All offer high detail imaging and only a couple are exclusively used for half-tones. (Courtesy of IKONICS Imaging)



With over 40 years in the glass business, Ruth Dobbins offers experience in all glass-etching techniques as well as in fused and cast glass. Ruth holds a master's degree in Art and has been a partner in an art glass wholesale supply and studio company in Europe, which also placed great emphasis on a training program. You can reach Ruth by email at ruth@etchmaster.com, or by phone at 505-473-9203. © Ruth L Dobbins 2023.

No matter if you just started your career as an engraving/blasting specialist, there is always room for improvement on every level. There is no such thing as a "one material fits all applications."

And yes, even for those of you who have been doing this for some time, we know how easy it is to get in a rut and stick with materials and procedures exactly the way we learned to do and use in the beginning. There is nothing wrong with that, except that you might be missing out on being able to work smarter and more efficiently, which ultimately means you could be earning more money for the time you spend on any given job. In this article I want to focus on an important work component, which is the mask or stencil material you are using.

From the beginning

For a lot of people, the decision on which mask they are going to use is actually done backward. What do I mean by that? Well, for the greater number of those getting started, they usually end up with a masking material they received with the purchase of their blasting or engraving system.

The determining factor is usually made by asking a few questions about which products you intend to make. Fair enough, but what is usually ignored is the fact that hardly anyone sticks to the initial products they mentioned.

In fact, most of us quickly realize that there is a whole world of products out there that can be blasted/engraved, and



A diagram showing the before-mentioned resists and a list of customary applications. (Courtesy of Professor Glass).



Various photoresist already exposed (imaged). The green resist is a non-washout resist and requires negative artwork instead of positive, as all others do. (Courtesy of Professor Glass)

guess what, the material you probably ended up buying initially may not be the best choice for some of the products you want to make.

The decision of the masking material to be used really should be made on the basis of the question: "What are you going to be blasting/engraving on, and what is your method of blasting/engraving?" Let's take a look at some of the possibilities.

Masks for blasting

First of all, you want to determine what you are going to be blasting on and second, which technique is going to be used. The simplest of these choices is working on glass and most likely glass wear and/or award blanks or metal. For this scenario the mask of choice would be any type of photoresist.

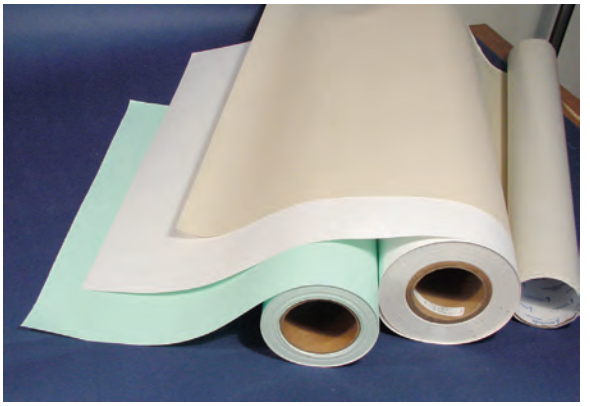
Most of you are familiar with the brands available and have probably have a product of your choice. It would be useful to investigate the different materials on the market. Why? Because you may not use the best choice for what you are going to do.

If a single blast stage is all you do, then you can ignore my next ruminations. Should you want to blast deeply and/or in a couple of stages, then you should be





There is no such thing as a "one material fits all applications" for masking. (Image courtesy Rayzist Photomask)



An example of hand-cut or plotter-cut vinyls and rubber resists, available in various widths. (Courtesy of Professor Glass)



Some common projects prepared with the orange tape, ready for blasting. (Courtesy of IKONICS Imaging)



Multi-stage carve stencil.



Showing two different laser tapes on the market, one for stenciling only, the orange one also for blasting purposes. (Courtesy of IKONICS Imaging)

aware that there are different thicknesses of photoresist available, which allow you to do just that.

Some photoresists are more flexible than others, which may play a role if you are working on curved surfaces and or, heaven forbid, having to deal with compound curves. In these cases, you definitely want a more pliable resist that will conform.

Should you be interested in blasting halftones, then a completely different mask is called for, one that can hold very fine detail since you are working with a very fine dot pattern. These masks are usually much thinner than the regular photoresists (2 mil).

Should you be interested in blasting on stone, then the requirement for the right mask lies more with the thicker versions as one usually ends up blasting more deeply into stone and adding color-filling to the product. This could mean switching to a 5 or 6 mil version of photoresist. In special cases you could even go with a thicker film in 9 mil or so, if great depth is to be achieved, like on some monuments.

If you are employing a laser for your work method, then you may want to consider using a special mask created just for this purpose. By using this type of masking, you can use your laser to create the image in the resist material while also imaging the object at the same time; you simply adhere the mask to the product and use your laser to do the work.

These masks are specially formulated for laser and do not contain any PVC, which otherwise would cause your mirrors to fog up. Please pay attention to the manufacturer guidelines, which inform you which setting to use for the wattage of your laser.

These laser tapes are available in three different colors: green, blue, or orange. Why, you ask? Well, the darker colors were first on the market and then the manufacturers heard that the dark colors were not very visible on dark wine bottles or stone. The orange makes it easier to see.

Should you fall into the unusual category of an art-based blasting business, meaning that you often employ the multi-stage techniques of carving and shading on glass, then there is another whole slew

of resist materials to consider.

For simple surface blasting on a larger scale we commonly use vinyl specifically created for this purpose. What do I mean by that? Well, these mask materials are formulated to have an adhesive which is just aggressive enough to stay on the surface to be blasted but not so strong that it would be hard to remove after blasting and potentially leave adhesive on the surface of the product, which then would have to be cleaned off, creating an extra step in your procedure.

Vinyls come in two types: hard and soft. The harder versions are good on any flat surface like glass and polished stone. On rough surfaces you want to switch to a soft vinyl, which conforms to those surfaces better and grips on an uneven surface much better.

The hard vinyls come in 6 and 8 mil thicknesses and the soft ones in 10, 25 and 30 mils. If you see a vinyl with 3 or 4 mil do not use because those are sign vinyls with super aggressive adhesives, which will cause you a lot of grief in the removal stage.

For super deep blasting on natural stones with rough surfaces and in doing deep multiple stage carving we sometimes resort to using a very pliable rubber resist that is 20 mils thick. It conforms to just about anything and will stand a lot of abuse which happens during prolonged blasting.

All of these latter materials are not suitable for lasers as they contain PVC or worse. Also, should you use a plotter for design cutting in your mask material, then you will find that the hard and soft vinyls can be cut on a plotter with a special knife angle, but the rubber resist cannot. The rubber resist is so soft that any knife blade, no matter how slow your plotter cuts, gets caught in the soft material and gets tangled up. Also, the cutlines are not visible in the rubber resist, even with an application of colorant. Any material sticks to the resist and can't be cleaned off.

I hope this gives you an overview of a few materials that are available for our line of work. Make good choices and your process will be easy! GP

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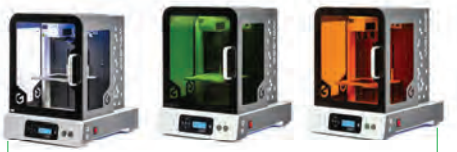

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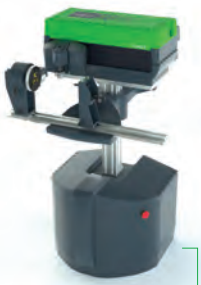

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WORKING WITH AWARDS

Don't be afraid to get creative

BY JOHN MORMAN





John Morman is the owner of Celtic Tides in Lexington, Virginia. He and his wife, Mary Jo, have been running the shop since 2005.

Although the word *awards* often appear in the same phrase as *personalization*, which is fair enough, I look at the two as separate categories. To me, awards offer different opportunities for large orders, with a myriad of materials to work from. These include off-the-shelf materials from some excellent suppliers, but with a little imagination, we can use some materials, formats, or layouts which are not often thought of for awards.

We may create our own designs or use customer-supplied ones, but either way, we are in a position to create a long-term customer by producing awards that are unique to them. We can also use different materials in combination to further individualize an order.

I have used off-the-shelf blanks in the past, but now, I concentrate on my own material selections and combinations. Material choice can include any material which can be engraved and/or cut; I have used different woods, different plastics, foils, leather, marble, granite, and acrylic, just as examples.

I have also taken what was an individual award and converted it into a *perpetual* award, subsequently dedicated to that individual. Using our own designs also lets us work with amounts we can control, meaning we aren't stuck with case lots we might never find a use for.

As with any time you deal with specialized retail offerings, make sure you have a customer base at hand or let local organizations know you have the capability to produce event-specific and customer-specific designs. You might be surprised how often event organizers want to have unique awards.



Award recipients very often compete in different events, and if they like what you've done, you may very well receive calls from other event organizers wanting to use your services.

Some things to look out for:

1 As much as I love my awards customers, they are, without exception, absolutely horrible at giving me sufficient time. Perhaps this is unique to me, but I seem to be constantly reminding award customers that I may need to order inventory, and that finished pieces don't miraculously appear at the shipping desk. From my experience, you will need to keep reminding your customers that you don't want to disappoint them, so they really need to give you as much time as possible.

2 If you are lucky enough to receive a large order (several hundred pieces) as I have been, you may find that, when you order materials, your supplier doesn't have that many in stock. Especially these days, the infamous supply chain can be a problem. Be ready to look for a different material, and possibly even a different supplier. Of course, always run your ideas or suggested changes by your customer first.

3 In some cases, I have taken a customer piece that they want to use as an award, or I've repurposed existing awards. Be sure to remind your customer that one-offs may not be workable, and respectfully suggest a new piece that retains the sentiment of the award if not the physical piece they've given you.









Always try to get editable artwork from your customers and remind them that what they can draw may not be reproduceable on a laser.







4 In the case of perpetual awards, you may be surprised at how difficult it can be to extend an existing award. Respectfully suggesting that you create a new, higher-capacity piece can do two things: It allows you to produce a finished piece everyone is happy with, and it will probably tie your customer to your business for the length of time now available on the larger plaque. As an added benefit, using a brand-new piece can result in some extra profit, too.

Suppliers

There are many suppliers available for you to choose from. Only experience will teach you which suppliers really work well for you, particularly if you venture into custom designs and unusual materials. As I mentioned previously, even the best suppliers can run out of inventory on occasion.

Some suppliers maintain different locations, so if your normal location is out, ask if the material is available at other locations. In some cases, your supplier will check this automatically. For large orders, always ensure you have enough material on hand to replace incorrect pieces. Producing a large volume of similar pieces with subtle changes can lead to mistakes.

In the case of awards dedicated to a number of individuals, I would recommend having somebody else check for spelling mistakes, missed or mistaken numbers, etc. I've always found that, in reading something you wrote, it is easy to read what you thought you wrote and not what appears on the page.

Margins

Event organizers will have a relatively slim budget for their awards. This can work for or against you. In only a very few cases have I found that I had to reluctantly use off-the-shelf blanks simply to meet a budget (or, of course, the customer's wishes). Going back to the beginning, you can almost always arrive at a compromise on price simply by using your imagination and coming up with different materials, designs, or a combination of the two.

Something I have long threatened but never actually done to my customers is to add a premium for short lead times. The threat is often enough, although there will always be some who are so busy with all the different aspects of an event that they get off schedule.

Unfortunately, it can happen that a customer gives a lead time that is simply not workable, even with working long hours to try and get over the line. In the past, I have worked several 12-, 14-, and even 16-hour days to finish an order for a special customer. That is obviously not sustainable, and even your best customers should be gently warned that you won't do it again (although we probably would for that most special or long-time customer).





Artwork

As with any time you use a laser, good artwork is essential. This is especially true for awards. Always try to get editable artwork from your customers and remind them that what they can draw may not be reproduceable on a laser. Too much variation in shading, especially, can present you with real challenges. Always leave a redraw on the table — I have found tracing to be the best approach, even for software that allows me to work with too much shading.

This is another issue that can lead to difficulties with lead time, so always try and get the artwork before you promise a lead time that you won't be able to meet if much rework is needed on their artwork.

In closing, producing awards can be very lucrative in both the short and long term. Always have your thinking cap on. GP

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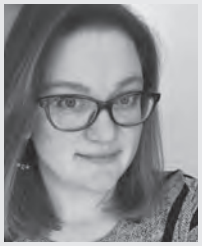

Jennifer Cox is one of the founders and serves as president of the National Network of Embroidery Professionals (NNEP), an organization that supports embroidery and apparel decoration professionals with programs and services designed to increase profitability and production. You can contact her at jennifer@nnep.com.





(Image courtesy Barbara Hayward, Absolutely Specialties)

In today's world of information overload, it is challenging to make yourself stand out. Let's face it, embroidered and decorated apparel is no less of a commodity than promotional products. In fact, promotional products distributors are out there talking to the same people that you are, hoping to land that next order, whether it is for magnets, pens, coffee mugs, or logoed apparel.

You will struggle to succeed against them or any other competitors if your only edge is the fact that you are willing to give up a few more pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, or dollars than the next guy. When the way to win a job is a race to the lowest price, the only person who comes out ahead is the customer. Even more concerning to me is that we are teaching these probably new customers that we will cut prices to win business. They are learning that our custom logoed products are only worth what they are willing to pay for them.

When our only tactic is to engage in price wars, we have no cause to lament about the state of the industry, how hard it is to win business, how tough the market is, how low the profit margins are, and how rough we have it banging on doors as we struggle to find the next customer and close the next sale.

There is good news — there is a way to change the environment in which you are competing. There is a way to set yourself apart, to make doing business with you different from doing business with the other apparel decoration professionals and promotional products distributors in your area. What if you had an advantage?

The tilt advantage

I'm calling this advantage your *tilt.* This is not my term; it comes from the marketing realm. I contend that by tweaking your approach to sales, you can create a compelling tilt; something that makes you and your apparel solutions unique and better.

When you offer something unique or better, it propels you far beyond the reach of your competition. Every embroidery shop can drop a logo on a shirt — that is an everyday, run of the mill order.

An embroiderer that is tilting their business may offer multimedia applications, such as sublimating images on top of the embroidery threads, to create an entirely new look for the customer's staff at their upcoming tradeshow. They may recommend new color combinations that look fresh and in line with today's fashion palette. They may have a suggestion about how incorporating an appliqué into a logo could reduce the stitch count and cost while creating a new, modern look for the client.

By our very nature, embroidery professionals tend to be creative people. We purchase the equipment to make stuff as the base of our business model. This differentiates you from promotional products distributors. They jumped in the sales side of the business because they are comfortable with the people and sales side of the equation.

And yet… You sell a basic logo on a basic shirt, and your customer needs it yesterday, for a dollar less than they paid last time. See the problem here? This is a slippery slope to closing down your business due to lack of profits. When our only advantage is engaging in price



(Image courtesy Desiree DelMonte, Desi's Threads)

cutting, we look and sound the same as our competition.

For your customers to see your solutions as unique, better, different, and worth the prices you quote, it has to start with you and the conversations you are willing to have with your customers. Take the time to talk with them and find out what they are trying to accomplish with the products they are considering ordering. Are they building brand awareness? Are they making it easy for customers to identify sales staff? Are they distinguishing different roles within the company — sales, manufacturing, or maintenance, for example — with different kinds of apparel? There are an endless variety of reasons why a company decides to purchase logoed apparel.

When you understand a customer's *why,* recommending a mix of products that help them meet their objectives becomes much easier. Once you have a more robust idea of what they hope to accomplish, you can position yourself as their hero when it comes to their decorated apparel needs simply by offering the most on-point solutions.

If you suggest an appliqué, or a trendy color combination, or a new style of shirt with a fresh design placement, you will not be lost in the pile of possibilities presented by the competition.

When you offer suggestions that are specifically designed to accomplish their why, you become different than competitors that are simply selling shirts. The customer is more likely to remember you and the entire conversation, even if the customer opts to go with a more traditional design, placement, or garment color.

The fact that you had unique, interesting suggestions based on your understanding of your customer's why is enough to make you more valuable as their decorated apparel supplier. You've shifted your role from that of being a shirt source to that of a being branding partner.

I invite you to take the time to talk with your customers. Let them know that you are interested in developing a better understanding of their various needs for decorated apparel. Get yourself up to speed with your most important customers, and then apply this same strategy with the next tier of customers, and the next tier after that. That becomes a tilt for you; a way to offer more and become different and more valuable to your customers.

When your customers know they can come to you for the best product recommendations to accomplish their objectives with fresh looks in quality decorated apparel, the competition fades away. This is when your customer realizes that just about anything is possible, and they will become your customer for life. GP



FOR THE KIDS

BY KRISTINE SHREVE

Know the trends and laws for childrenswear





Kristine Shreve is the founder and CEO of Kristine Shreve Consulting, which offers writing, marketing, and business development services. The company can be found at KristeneShreve.com. Kristine is also the creator and host of the Business + Women podcast and the director of marketing and outreach for Applique Getaway. Kristine was the director of marketing for Ensign Emblem and EnMart from 2006 to April 2020.

When most people think about children's clothing, especially clothing for small children, the first word that comes to mind is probably *adorable*. When the kids start moving around and getting into things, *adorable* might be supplanted by *durable*, but it's still going to be in the top five descriptors.

Cute seems to be the default setting when it comes to clothing for children, and there's nothing wrong with that. It can, however, be one of the pitfalls of creating designs and clothing for children. Not every parent, or every child — once they're old enough to have an opinion — is going to default to adorable. Options can be everything in this market. Decorating children's clothing and creating designs for that decoration can be about more than simply making something adorable, though adorable will always be a perennial favorite and shouldn't be discounted.

While adorability tops the list of qualities for children's clothing and designs, one thing that may be at the bottom of the list is the laws regarding designs and what's used to decorate clothing for kids. Copyright is a big issue when it comes to designs. The Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA) can have a big impact on what's used to decorate kids' clothing and even the manufacture and make of the clothing itself. Violating CPSIA regulations can come with hefty consequences, as can violating the rights of a copyright holder, so it's best to know the law and stay on the right side of it.





(Images courtesy of Love That Cotton)

Fashions and trends

Let's start with being adorable or not adorable and how trends and the tastes of parents and children and even the fashion world can dictate what's in and what's out for pint-sized fashionistas. While children's fashion may echo adult fashion, the trends aren't always exactly the same, so it's best to be plugged into some sites or blogs that specifically discuss children's fashions. In 2023, for instance, the blog at KidsBlanks.com tells us that neutral shades like cream, beige, and black are big for kids, closely followed by *nearly neutrals* like sage and blush pink. The eParenting.co.uk blog predicts that denim, floral patterns, the color yellow, and neutrals will be the big fashion and color trends in 2023.

Knowing color trends can also be helpful when choosing threads, inks, or blank garments to offer. One resource for color trend information is Pantone. For Spring/Summer 2023, Pantone is predicting a color palette of mostly vibrant shades like Beetroot Purple or Tangelo, with a few classic shades like Gray Lilac and Leek Green to round things out. Chances are, not every parent is going to pay attention to color or style trends and what's fashionable, but it's still something of which designers and decorators should be aware. Whatever is trending in stores or fashion magazines or blogs may filter down to your customers, so having a heads-up and a head start on being trendy is always a good thing.

Another trend to be aware of is gender neutrality. Whether it's gender-neutral baby showers or gender-neutral clothing, the idea is that nothing specifically points to gender. When creating products for a baby shower, it might mean bibs or burp cloths that say "thank God for little blessings" rather than "thank God for little boys/little girls." It may mean not sorting decorated clothing options on your website so the trucks are labeled "boys" and the princesses are labeled "girls." Basically, the gender-neutral fashion movement is working to get us away from "blue is for boys and pink is for girls." It also rejects ideas like the one that boys are rugged and rough-and-tumble, while girls are delicate and dainty. In a nutshell, this movement supports the idea that there are no things or traits specific to boys and no things or traits specific to girls, there are just things and traits. For some, this might be overthinking things, but it is a trend that's happening, so every decorator should know about it.







"These are some photos of shirts I created last year for a co-workers summer vacation," says Becky Kirkner. "She goes with her family, and while there they collect sea glass. She wanted something the kids could color." (Images courtesy BakDraf Creations, LLC)





(Image courtesy of Love That Cotton)

Children's clothing and the law

Another facet of creating clothing for children that must be addressed is copyright. The first thing to cover is what specifically can and can't be copyrighted. Things that *can* be copyrighted include graphic designs, logos, and textile or fabric designs. Granted, there are rules about how original the design or logo must be, and it must demonstrate a minimal amount of creativity. Brands with logos may also trademark them, so even if they would not be protected under copyright, they may be protected under trademark.

So how does copyright affect you in your shop? Well, almost everyone has heard a horror story about a shop that created something that infringed on a popular company's copyright and got caught. It may be tempting to take a chance with the idea that you're too small to be noticed, or that you can change the image of the final design enough to escape infringement, but it's a roll of the dice that has huge consequences if you come up snake eyes. The same thing applies to buying a design and violating the licensing agreement.

A good rule of thumb is to always read the licensing agreement or terms of sale before you buy a design, and then make sure you follow that agreement. For designs that are based on things like cartoon characters, sports teams, or other elements that were created by someone else, buy a licensed design and use it accordingly. Keep in mind that buying a design with a license does not always mean that you can use the design to make things to sell. Read the licensing requirements of the design carefully to be sure that you can put the design on items that will be for sale.

Please also remember that any designs you buy are for *your* use only. There are groups on Facebook and in other places where people share copyrighted designs. When you buy a design, you are paying for your ability to use it. If another decorator wants to use the same design, they should go buy their own copy. Sharing copyrighted designs is stealing profit

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from the creator of the design and is illegal. Copyright exists for a reason, and that reason is to protect the rights of the creator and ensure that others can't disseminate their work without paying for it and agreeing to whatever licensing rights are available.

Also, just to bust this myth once and for all, there is no mythical percentage by which you can change a copyrighted design so you don't get sued for using it.

Some people will tell you there is such a percentage and that it's 10% or 30%, but that's neither accurate nor safe to believe. Even if there was such a percentage, you'd have to go to court to determine if your design changes fell within that percentage and then it would be up to the opinion of experts to determine if that was so. There would be court costs and stress and it would be a subjective judgment. It's far easier, and safer, to simply buy a licensed design and use it to create whatever you want to create.









(Images courtesy of Love That Cotton)

The second aspect of the law and children's clothing that we shouldn't forget is the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA). A lot of times, when people think of this act, they mostly think of subjects like flammable fabric in children's sleepwear, but it covers more than that. CPSIA requires that all children's products, including clothing, meet minimum federal safety requirements.

The regulations impact clothing intended for children 12 and younger. Requirements of CPSIA may be of particular interest to screen printers, as they discuss things such as the allowable levels of lead in coatings—like ink—that may be used on a garment.

CPSIA also has added requirements about third-party testing, requiring the use of Consumer Protection Safety Commission (CPSC)-accepted labs, the issuing of certificates of conformity, and the affixing of permanent tracking labels on children's products.

One important provision of CPSIA is the requirement for a Children's Product Certificate (CPC), in which a manufacturer or importer certifies that their product complies with all applicable regulations. A CPC is issued after third-party testing, generally in a CPSC-approved lab. A CPC must be provided to, or available to be accessed by, each company that uses the manufacturer's or importer's product. According to the law, decorators are considered manufacturers since they alter the garment by adding decoration; however, you may be able to avoid some of the requirements of the law by registering as a small batch manufacturer.

To be considered a small batch manufacturer, a company must certify that total gross revenue for all products from the prior calendar year is less than $1,337,894, and that they've produced 7,500 units or less. Being certified as a small batch manufacturer will not exempt a business from all of the law's provisions, but it can help. Keep in mind that a business must register with the CPSC to be granted an exemption from third-party testing. GP

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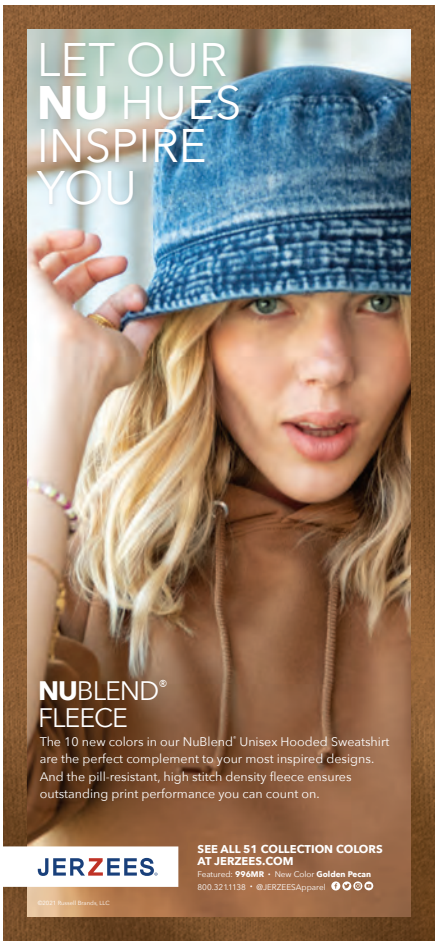
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Blue Mustang

Incorporating a Denver icon with a run of volleyball shirts



At 21 years old, Lon Winters was the production manager for Ocean Pacific and started his 30+ year career reclaiming screens. He's the president and founder of Colorado-based Graphic Elephants, an international consulting firm and apparel decoration studio specializing in screen printing technical advances, plant design, layout, troubleshooting, productivity, quality analysis, and complete apparel decorating solutions. Lon is also a presenter at GRAPHICS PRO EXPO (g-p-x.com).

When you fly into Denver, it's hard to ignore the big blue horse that rears up in power and rebellion at the airport. The 32-foot-tall fiberglass sculpture towers over Denver International Airport's main highway in and out. Its eyes glow red with a menacing stare at the cars racing by.

Us locals refer to this mighty equine as *Blucifer.* Some love it, some hate it, some love to hate it, and visitors are curious about it. Officially, the artwork's name is *Mustang,* and the piece is a point of pride for the airport.



This fierce blue mustang is kind of a protector of travelers and guards the airport. Denver International Airport (DIA) is full of intrigue and rumor. There are plenty of conspiracy theories. The horse seems very Colorado, yet it takes a hard left turn with the red eyes and the blue physique.

New Mexico artist Luis Jiménez created the stallion that was his ultimate demise. Jimenez died in 2006, after a part of Mustang came loose and fell on his leg, severing an artery while he was working on it in his studio. Jiménez's studio later completed Mustang and installed it more than 15 years after it was commissioned in 2008.

Those red eyes that people point to as evidence of Mustang's demonic nature are actually a tribute to the artist's father, who worked in a neon sign shop. Mustang is defiant and an expression of identity, having a place, standing strong, being fiery, and being gigantic.

The striking blue color and glowing red eyes were controversial from the start. There was even a Facebook page called DIA's Heinous Blue Mustang Has Got to Go. The sculpture has not only withstood public scrutiny, but it's also had to hold up against Colorado's intense weather and extreme environment.

Incorporating Mustang

Speaking of Colorado weather, it's beginning to warm up a bit, so time to get the outdoor spring grass volleyball leagues going again. So, our most recent project for Volleyball of the Rockies (VOTR) was a design featuring, wait for it … Blucifer/Mustang.

The big blue Mustang's head under the type solution for VOTR next to the Colorado flag C with a golden volleyball for the sun. Clever, eh? Probably couldn't say Colorado

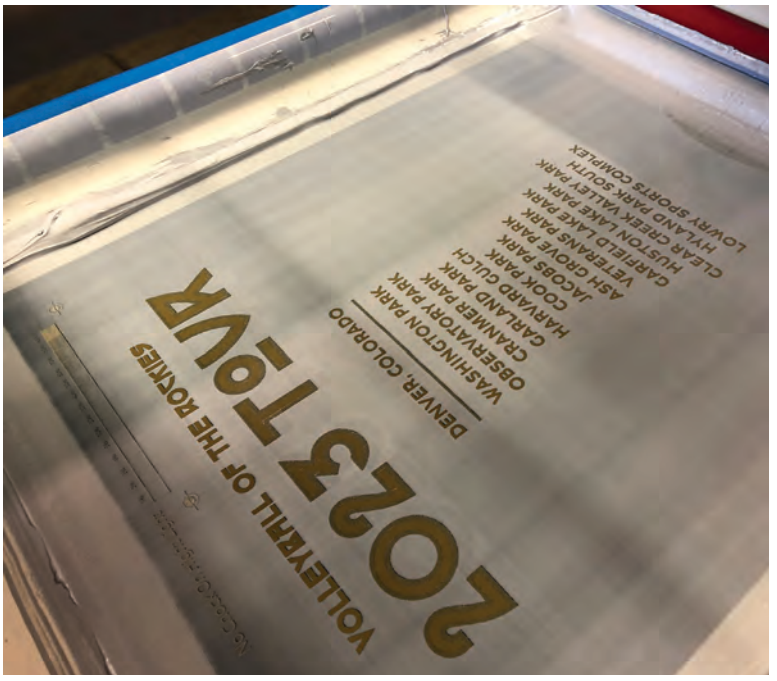


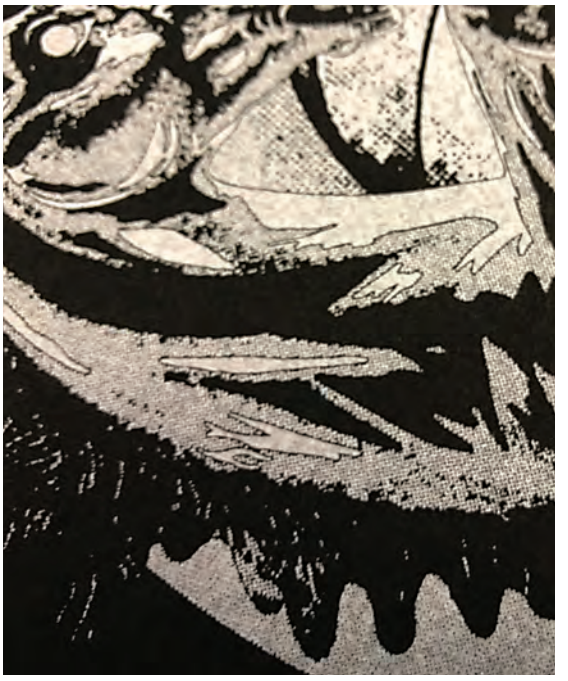


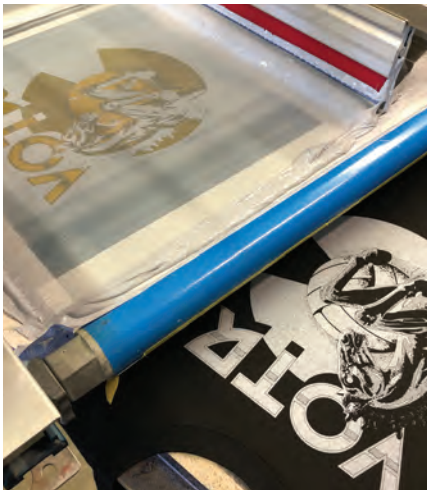




(Images courtesy of Lon Winters)







White primer.



Color builds.







We also would get clever with the layout of TOUR. Notice how it's using the same letters from the front VOTR in a different order?

any more than that! Full front with matching back featuring all the parks they will be playing in; sort of a rock-n-roll tour shirt feel.

Both sides were straightforward designs. This client provided portions of art that were built layer upon layer as they are not concerned about the separations at the creative stage. There was art hiding behind other art and mystery paths intersecting that would require some work.

We worked in Adobe Illustrator in vector format. For a workable file and to turn all the strokes into paths, we selected the art, pulled down Object and flattened transparency. Using Pathfinder, we merged what we needed and cut the parts we did not. After grouping colors appropriately and separating on sublayers we made them spot colors. Here we were able to isolate areas and remove the unwanted noise.

Using the Trace feature, we brought in rasterized photos of Mustang and traced out the elements using the black and white option. This removed all the transitional tones and left us with just general shapes all in vector format. The texture, however, left random objects and bits of image floating out along the edges of the circle. We used the Circle Object to select and Divide Objects in the Pathfinder Tool to remove them. Once divided, we manually selected the pieces and parts to be used and or deleted.

For the white printer or base plate, we applied a .35 point stroke with rounded corners on the inner path for an overall choke and a gutter between all the colors to keep everything clean and the white from peaking.

We also chose to use an 80 percent halftone under the red and a 60 under the blue to give the inks a place to go. All this was to facilitate maximum wet-on-wet printing with as few flashes as possible. This would also minimize smearing, buildup, and screen cleaning during production. Because we would be printing on royal as well as black we had to add a black plate. The highlight white would also change to a light blue.

Now for some additional back deets ... VOTR has a logo or icon we print on the back of everything we decorate, a silhouette jumping up to hit a volleyball, which is kinda their Nike Swoosh. We call him the little dude. We have printed him hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of times. We snuck him in on the lower back. We also would get clever with the layout of TOUR. Notice how it's using the same letters from the front VOTR in a different order?

Once seps were completed, we output to screen on CTS. We ran black first for the royal shirts on a high mesh and then

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the white printer or base plate on N-166 stretched and work-hardened at 45 N/cm2 using a 65/90/65 triple-ply duel durometer squeegee.

We followed that up with a flash and then a Teflon screen with a heated iron for smoothing. Finally, the balance of the colors and the highlight — darkest to lightest, and least coverage to most— all printed wet on wet on N-272s all at the same tension using 75/90/75s.

The prints matched proof almost perfectly. It ran great on royal and black with 5,000 pieces for this one. Volleyball is a big deal here on the Front Range.

Commissioned for $300,000, the city of Denver ended up paying $650,000 for the sculpture. A 2007 appraisal performed just prior the statue's completion valued the work at over $2 million. GP

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Applying Color the Smart Way

Working with fill layers



Stephen Romaniello is an artist and educator who has taught computer graphics since 1990. He is Professor Emeritus and the founder of the Digital Arts program at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona. Stephen is a certified instructor in Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, and Adobe Premier and the author of numerous books, articles, and media on the creative use of graphics software. Stephen is the founder and CEO of GlobalEye Systems, a company that offers training and consulting in graphics software and creative imaging.

In the digital workflow, there are always a million paths to one particular end result. Similar effects can be applied with a multitude of methods to achieve the same outcome. That being said, the mantra I've been chanting over the years is, "Keep the workflow dynamic!" Those four words make the difference between producing an image that is fluid and flexible and one that is static and immutable.

In graphics, fluidity means, above all, to make changes that are reversible with the intent that any command can be reversed or changed at any time without compromising the entire image.

One of the most important reasons to produce images in a digital environment as opposed to an analog one is that choices are always prevalent in every phase of the design process. In this Digital Eye, I'll discuss options that provide greater flexibility when filling areas with color, gradients, or patterns. I'll be using the latest version of Photoshop 2023 to demonstrate these techniques, but of course, similar features are available in Corel PaintShop Pro.

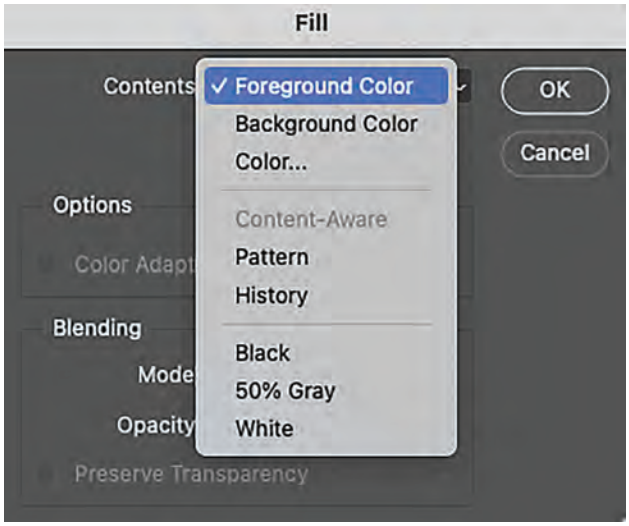


Fig. 1: The Fill dialog box.

Fill 'er up

Filling an area with color is super easy. Select a region with one of the selection tools and choose Fill from the Edit menu. A dialog box is displayed that applies the current foreground or background color or a variety of other choices to the area (**Fig. 1**). A blend mode or opacity can also be specified. If you want to avoid the dialog box altogether and just apply 100 percent of the color, a key command worth remembering is Option + Delete (Mac) or Alt + Backspace (Windows).

These techniques are simple and straightforward, but they are not dynamic. Once the fill is made and the image is saved and closed, the fill cannot be easily altered without reselecting the area and modifying it, which usually affects the areas around it — an editing process that can be quite labor intensive.

Layer it

A far better and more dynamic method for applying color is to create a fill layer. Fill layers combine the potential of the Fill command with the flexibility of layers. As a layer, the color is independent from the rest of the image and accessible at any time during the workflow. You can create and edit fill layers with solid colors, gradients, or patterns.

Solid colors

To create a solid-color fill layer, choose Layer > New Fill Layer > Solid Color, or click the circular icon at the bottom of the Layers panel (**Fig. 2**). The New Layer dialog box is displayed with the layer named Color Fill 1 by default. Type a custom name for the layer to better identify it and click OK.

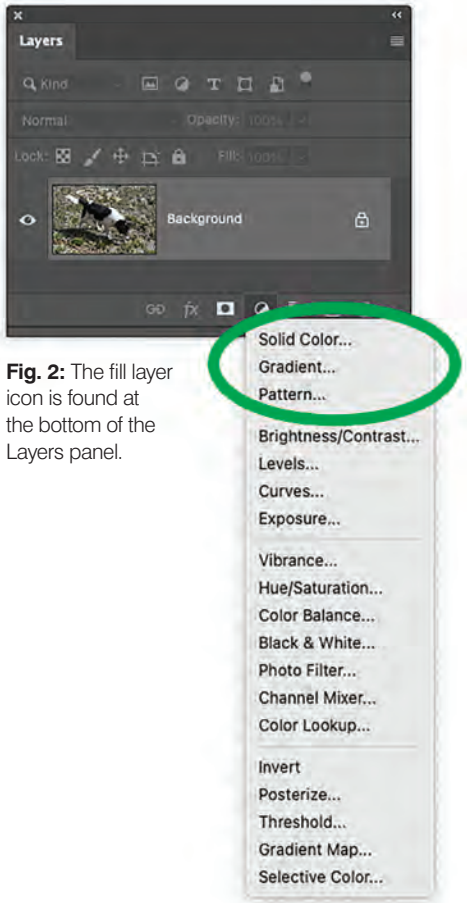


Fig. 2: The fill layer icon is found at the bottom of the Layers panel.

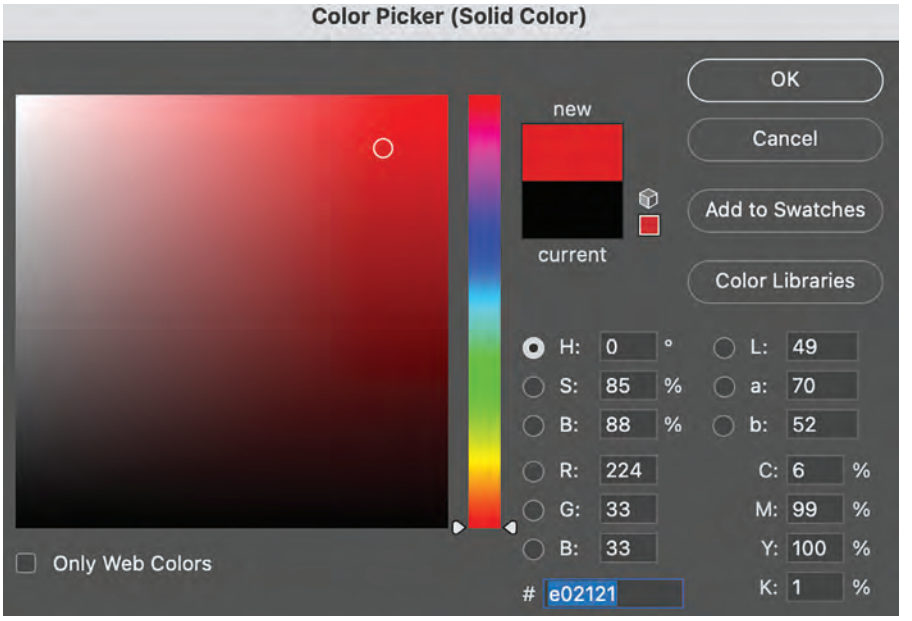


Fig. 3: The Color Picker determines the color of a solid color fill layer.

Color Picker

The Color Picker (**Fig. 3**) is then displayed. The Color Picker is an efficient way to apply the three characteristics of a solid color (hue, saturation, and brightness) to the fill layer. Here's how the Color Picker works…

The color ramp in the middle of the picker determines the hue. It is actually a color wheel that's been cut at the red point, or 0/360 degrees. Drag the slider on the ramp to the desired hue. You'll notice that, as you drag, the large square field at the left changes color.

The horizontal axis of the square field controls the saturation of the color from white, black, or gray (zero percent saturation) on the left to 100 percent intensity on the right. The vertical axis of the square controls the brightness of the color, from brightest at the top to darkest at the bottom.

Click and drag anywhere on the square to select the saturation and brightness of the hue. Two color swatches to the right of the saturation/brightness square indicate the former color on the bottom, with the new color that you chose on the top. Modifications can be made by moving the little circle on the square field or entering numerical values in any one of the four color mode fields. Click OK to apply the color to the fill layer.

Layer mask

The new fill layer that appears in the Layers panel has a layer mask linked to it and is represented by the thumbnail to the left of the layer's name. If you draw a selection prior to creating a fill layer, the new fill layer will fill only the selected area and create a layer mask that conceals the unselected areas.

The layer mask thumbnail that appears in the Layers panel displays the revealed area as a white shape and the masked area as a black shape. **Fig. 4** shows the layer mask and the red fill layer icon. The color is filtered through a soft light blend mode.

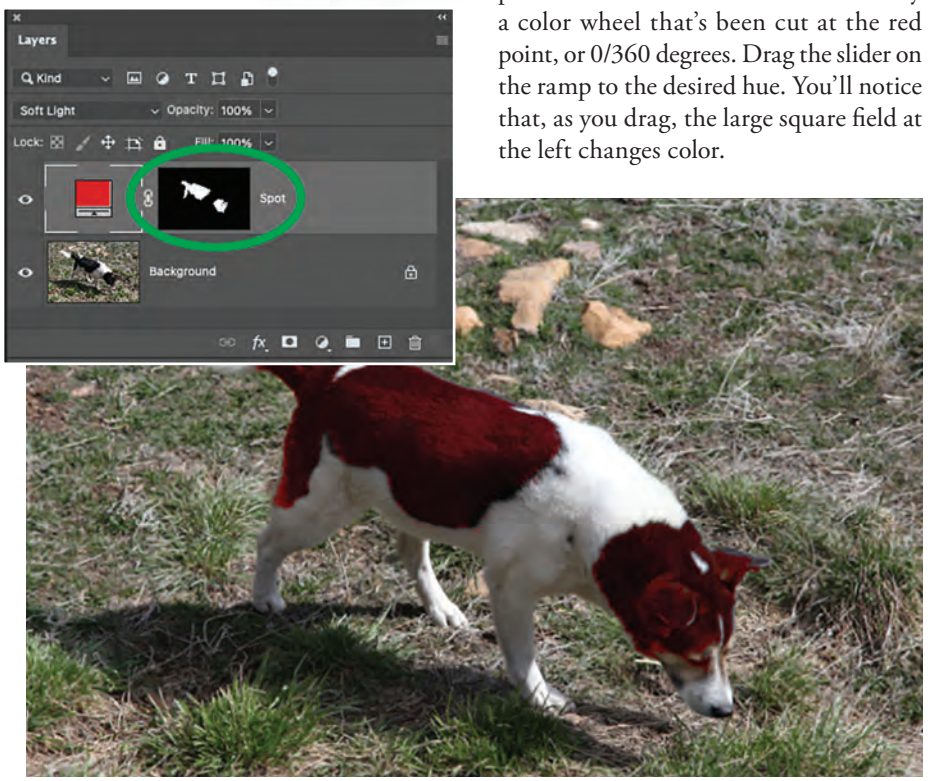


Fig. 4: The layer mask and the red fill layer icon showing the effect of the color filtered through a soft light blend mode.

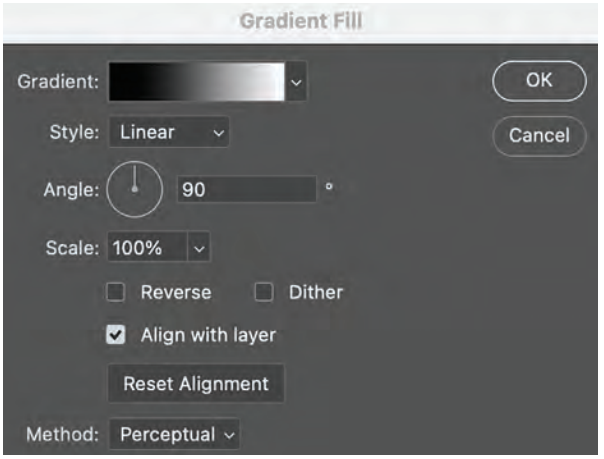


Fig. 5: The Gradient Fill dialog box.

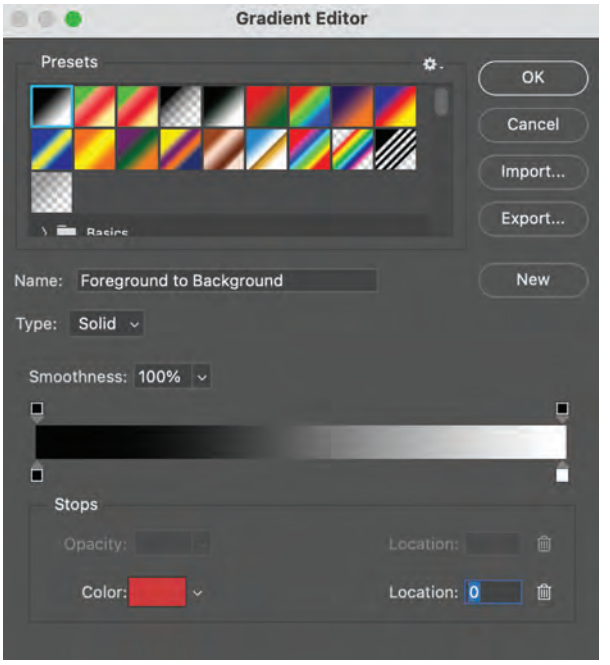


Fig. 6: The default Gradient Editor (right).

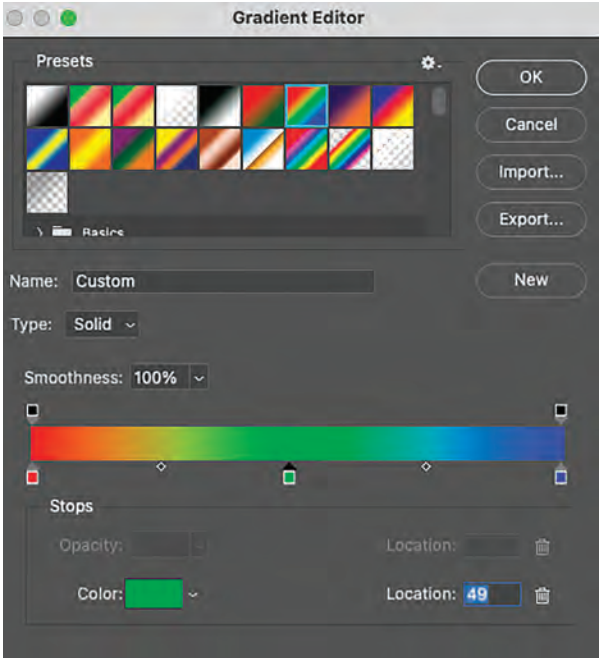


Fig. 7: The Gradient Editor with colors edited and added.

Modify color

It's easy to make changes to the fill layer. Double-click on the fill layer thumbnail in the Layers panel to bring the Color Picker up again. Adjust the hue, saturation, and/or brightness, click OK, and *voila!* The color is modified.

Gradients

A gradient is a continuous blend of colors. Just like solid colors, gradients can be applied to the image as fill layers.

To create a gradient fill layer, choose Layer > New Fill Layer > Gradient, or click the icon on the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Gradient. When the New Layer dialog box appears, the name of the new layer defaults to Gradient Fill 1. Rename the layer to better identify it. Then click OK, and the Gradient Fill dialog box will appear (**Fig. 5**).

I really can't talk about gradient fill layers without mentioning the Gradient Editor. To edit an existing gradient or to create a new one, click on the gradient ramp in the Gradient Fill dialog box to display the Gradient Editor.

Choose a gradient from the swatch list that is displayed. I usually start with the default — Foreground to Background (**Fig. 6**). Name the gradient. Choose a type: Solid or Noise. Solid is a simple display of colors while Noise presents a control panel for editing in various color modes. Solid is much easier to use, but Noise presents some interesting effects.

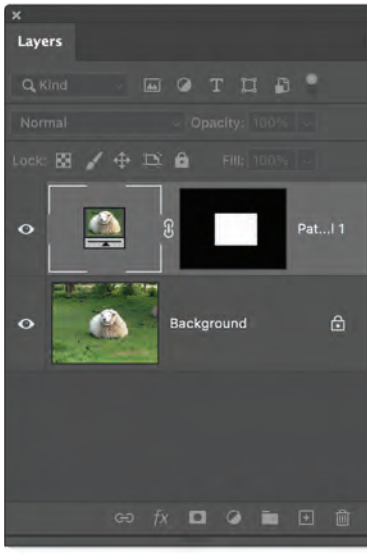
The colors of the gradient are displayed as a ramp with little house-shaped stops. Click the left lower stop to display the Color Picker and assign a color. The ramp changes to display the gradient in its current state.

To add a color, click just below the ramp to generate a new stop (**Fig. 7**). Once again, assign a color. To adjust the distribution of the color, drag the stop to the right or left. Drag the mid-point diamond icons to adjust distribution between two colors. Add as many colors as you want and distribute them. To delete a stop, drag it away from the ramp.

The upper stops adjust the opacity of a section of color on the ramp. Click on a transparency stop and enter a value from 0 to 100 percent. The transparency stops are



Fig. 8: To make a pattern from any image, make a selection with the rectangular marquee tool, then choose Define Pattern from the Edit menu.



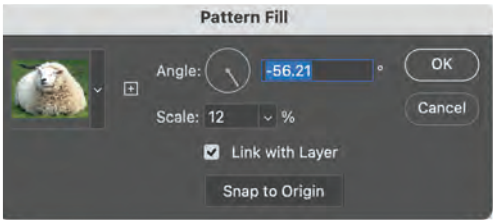




Fig. 9: The Pattern Fill dialog box, the Layers panel with the fill layer, and the resulting pattern that has been scaled and rotated.

similar to color stops and can be redistributed by dragging to the left or right. Click OK to apply the gradient to the fill layer.

Pattern fills

A pattern is a repeating rectangular element. To make a pattern from any image, choose the rectangular marquee tool and drag it over an area on an image (**Fig. 8**). The marquee must not have a feathered edge. Choose Define Pattern from the Edit menu to store the pattern in the pattern presets.

The pattern can be applied in several ways, either with the Pattern Stamp tool or with the Fill menu, but the most efficient and flexible technique is to create a pattern fill layer.

Choose the Pattern option from the Fill Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel to display the dialog box. Click the down arrow to choose a pattern, and set the following options:

- **Angle:** Enter a value in degrees or drag the angle line to adjust the angle of the pattern
- **Scale:** Choose a percentage to determine the size of the pattern from zero to 1,000 percent
- **Link With Layer:** Check this box if you want to align the pattern's layer mask to the layer
- **Snap To Origin:** If you want to move the pattern, drag your cursor over it in the image window Snap it back to its original position by clicking the Snap To Origin button

Click OK, and the pattern appears within the selected area as a repeating series of images. In the Layers panel on the fill Layer, a thumbnail of the pattern is displayed along with a layer mask (**Fig. 9**).

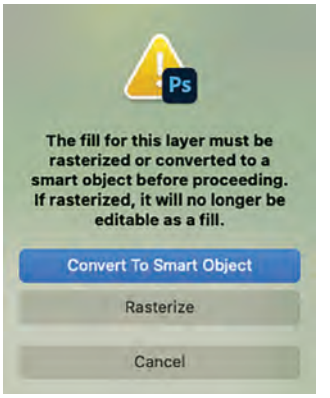


Fig. 10: To apply a filter, rasterize the fill layer to convert it to editable pixels.

Editing

After they have been created, color fill, gradient fill, and pattern fill layers can be edited by double-clicking their thumbnails in the Layers panel to reveal the Color Picker, the Gradient Fill dialog, or the Pattern Fill dialog.

If you want to apply a filter to a fill layer, it will have to be rasterized, which converts the layer to pixels. However, a rasterized fill layer is no longer editable as fill content (**Fig. 10**), so you may want to plan your workflow so that rasterization is among the final techniques that you apply.

Advantages

Fill layers have all the advantages of layers, including the ability to adjust opacity or apply them through a blend mode to alter their strength or color. Furthermore, they can be repositioned in the stack.

Unlike content layers that are filled with pixels, fill layer effects are dynamic and will resize if the canvas is resized. Since fill layers are isolated to individual layers, they can be edited at any point in the workflow. I recommend that you consider using them whenever you need to fill a region of the image to maintain flexibility and keep the design and editing process fluid and dynamic. GP

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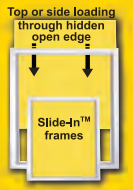

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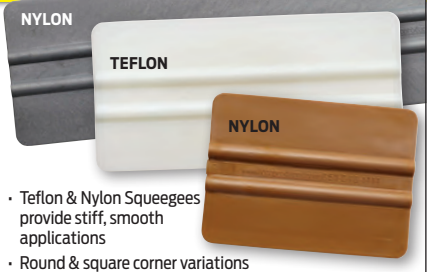

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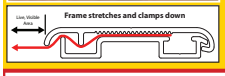



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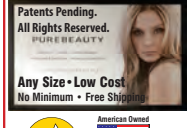

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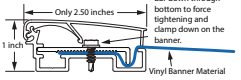

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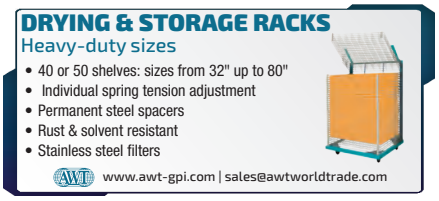



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