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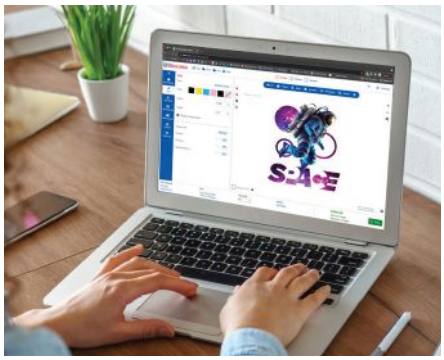
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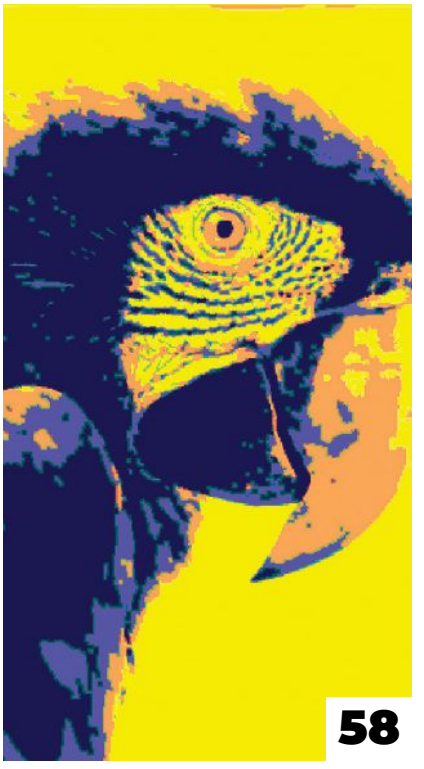
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James Anderson
is the lead editor of GRAPHICS PRO magazine. He can be reached at janderson@cahabamedia.com.

New year, new look

Happy New Year!

Typing 2025 feels somehow futuristic to a guy born way back in the 1970s. Since it's one of those quarter-century milestone years, does anyone else feel like they're tiptoeing into the future with an incomplete list of reflections and resolutions? Maybe it's just me. I once read that Jan. 1 is the worst time of year to make personal resolutions focused on things like diet and fitness. It was written from the perspective of someone who, like me, lived in Minnesota, in a state of bitter cold and snow where it's still dark when you leave for work and dark again on your way home. Since reading that article, I've decided to give myself some grace and gradually take on resolutions as spring nears. That's my philosophy, and I'm sticking to it. It's easy to do when there are still Christmas cookies in the freezer.

As for professional resolutions, this month we're excited to present you with a big one from early last year: A refreshed, redesigned look of the magazine. Led by our Art Director Iveth Gomez, our team has spent months going over new looks and revisions to image sizes, font selection, headline styles, and more. As I look over the pages now before we send the files to the printer, I think of how our professional resolution — our new look that we've been working on for months — is reflective of personal goals as well. We all strive to present ourselves with our best look forward, to seek clarity in how we convey information, and to do our best to reach folks where they are and engage how they're most comfortable.

With that said, we've also redesigned our email newsletters. You've probably noticed by now the refreshed one-column look of our GRAPHICS PRO Today newsletter as well as others. For that, we have our Web Designer Charlie Fox to thank. He's designed, tested, and retested an email format that allows for us to share the latest industry highlights with our readers as well as ensure engagement for sponsors.

We know there are countless outlets striving for your attention every day, and we appreciate the time you spend with our products. As with everything we do at GRAPHICS PRO, we take pride in our work, and we want to know if there's any way we can improve upon your experience with our brand. If you have feedback or suggestions, please reach out. Let's work together to shape 2025 into the best year we can make it.



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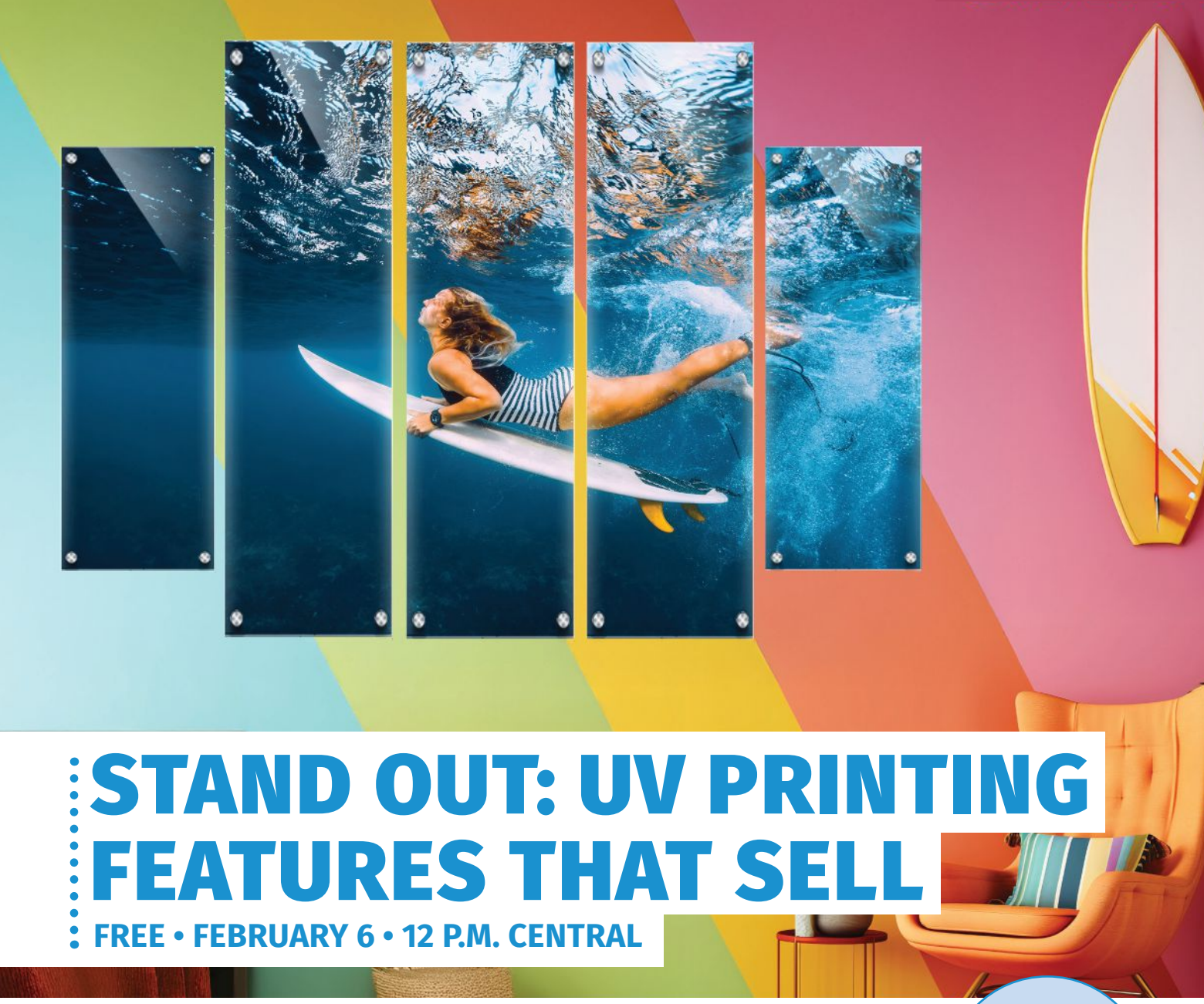
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SPEAKER



Mark Priede
Vice President of Sales
Xanté

Mark Priede brings over 20 years of extensive experience in the print industry, combining deep technical expertise in sales leadership. He began his career at Xanté in 2005 as territory manager for Latin America and has since advanced to vice president of sales. Over the years, Mark has developed a comprehensive understanding of digital print technology, including laser and inkjet systems. Mark has also been a key educator at industry events, sharing actionable strategies and insights to help businesses thrive in today's competitive printing landscape.

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INDUSTRY UPDATES

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Eric Levin
S&S Activewear
Eric Levin has been appointed as general manager of **S&S Activewear**'s newly designated "Prime Line Hard Goods" division.





Guy Dupuis & **Gary Goodhart**
iPROMOTEu
Guy Dupuis and **Gary Goodhart** have been promoted to the positions of vice presidents of affiliate sales development at **iPROMOTEu**. Both Dupuis and Goodhart will report directly to iPROMOTEu SVP of Affiliate Sales and Support **Dave Saracino** in their new roles.





Matt Medford & **David Connors**
Inkcups
Matt Medford has joined **Inkcups**' executive team as the company's new vice president of engineering. He takes over from **Mark Barrett**, who will retire in June. **David Connors** has been appointed as the the new vice president of operations. He takes over the role from **Frank Milne**, who retired at the end of 2024.





Kari Rehder & **Erin Johnson**
Crystal D
Kari Rehder has been hired as a territory manager and **Erin Johnson** was promoted to marketing coordinator. Johnson joined Crystal D in 2023 as a customer service specialist.

For more information on any of these news items, visit **graphics-pro.com/news**

UPCOMING EVENTS

GPX Irving
March 6-8
Irving Convention Center
graphics-pro-expo.com

GPX Indianapolis
June 19-21
Indianapolis Convention Center
graphics-pro-expo.com

GPX Long Beach
August 21-23
Long Beach Convention Center
graphics-pro-expo.com

GPX Meadowlands
September 12-13
Meadowlands Convention Center
graphics-pro-expo.com

GPX Charlotte
November 6-8
Charlotte Convention Center
graphics-pro-expo.com

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

Printful & **Printify** have announced a merger.

Rowmark has unified its portfolio of nine business units into The Rowmark Group.

New Heritage Capital announced an investment in **Brilliant**, a gifting and branding merchandise provider.

WEBINARS

AP Lazer
Jan. 16 · 12 p.m.
gpro.link/webinars

Xante
Feb. 6 · 12 p.m.
gpro.link/webinars

ColDesi
Feb. 27 · 12 p.m.
gpro.link/webinars

GIVING BACK

HanesBrands is celebrating 15 years of **Hanes for Good**. The company has donated over 6 million essential apparel items to support the unhoused.

JDS Industries has raised more than $100,000 to support the **United Way** to aid various organizations that help meet the needs of economically disadvantaged.

Ninja Transfers will donate to **Shopify Planet**, creating carbon-neutral shipping that offsets emissions generated from every delivery.

Koozie Group added products to **Keep It. Give It.** designation. 77% of Koozie Group's product assortment is designed to lessen environmental impact through longevity.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

BELLA+CANVAS was awarded Fair Labor Accreditation by the FLA board following a multiyear review.

Gildan rang the opening bell on the **New York Stock Exchange** to celebrate the company's 40th founding anniversary & 25th NYSE anniversary.

LG has been named 2024 Pro AV Vendor of the Year by **D&H Distributing.**

Girls Who Print presented awards to **Kiki Heron**, **Ryan LeFebvre** & **Christin Hagopian** during the Girls Who Print Day Conference in November.

Atlantis Headwear has partnered with **ONA Short Film Festival**, co-producing a short film titled 'Facing the Elements.'

NEW BUSINESSES



True Install

True Install is now serving the greater Houston area through signage and graphic installation services. The company has announced local entrepreneur and resident **Gary Wood** as the owner of its Houston business.



Big Frog Custom T-shirts & More

Big Frog Custom T-Shirts & More has opened a Stockton, California location headed by **Zoltan Varga** and his wife, **Yonie Young**. This marks the first Big Frog location in the area.



Apexgraphix

Apexgraphix, which has served Columbia, South Carolina, businesses for 30 years, has been sold by retiring owner **John Runy** to **Ken Holloway**. Moving forward, Apexgraphix will operate as **Minuteman Press** in Columbia. All staff members have been retained..



Hercules Press

Hercules Press, which has been operating for 51 years, has been sold by retiring second-generation owner **Michael Macrides** to new **Minuteman Press** franchise owner **Michael Campagnone**.

Have news to share?
Email gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com.



The power of storytelling with garage graphics

By Lauren Stern

Studio 618, a story-driven signage and wayfinding consultancy based in Charlotte, North Carolina, was commissioned to design a dynamic 3,500+ square-foot mural that wraps around the side of 110 East, as well as the graphics within its 10-level parking garage. 110 East is a newly constructed workplace building situated in the vibrant South End neighborhood of Charlotte.

According to Devon Newton, the VP of property management at Stiles, "110 East brings a premium office experience to the heart of Charlotte's South End submarket — as the only Class A+ office tower with a stop on the light rail, providing unparalleled connectivity to the greater Charlotte area. A truly distinctive addition to one of Charlotte's most desirable neighborhoods, 110 East offers sweeping views of the Queen City skyline, sophisticated spaces and amenities, and unmatched convenience."

Challenges

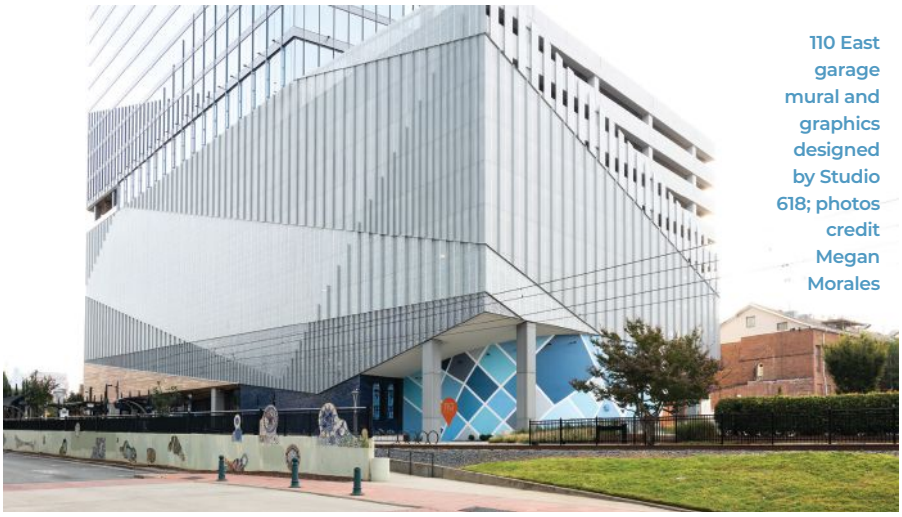
The mural wall for this project spans over 170' in width and stands 27' tall, covering more than 3,500 square feet — making it the largest surface that Studio 618 and I have ever designed in my career. The sheer size posed a significant challenge, but the wall's unique shape introduced an additional layer of complexity. Curving around the entire side of the building and sloping at the top, the design required careful attention to its geometry. Several factors had to be considered, including vandalism prevention, ease of maintenance, creating a timeless design, ensuring the artwork complemented the building's facade, and crafting a narrative that both enhanced the structure and told a meaningful story.

> "We're thrilled to see how this piece is already activating the community and becoming a part of South End's visual identity."
>
> – Devon Newton, VP of property management - Stiles

Intention

Every project that my consultancy works on follows the same approach. If I had to use one word to describe what Studio 618 strives for with each project, it would be "Intention." Intentionality is key. Whether it's a custom signage and wayfinding system for a waterfront multifamily building with a nautical flair, a custom fiber-art focal wall reflecting the history of a refurbished textile mill-turned-apartment community, or a 10-level garage with a dynamic mural like the one featured in this article, there must always be thoughtful consideration behind the design.

What is the rationale for the design choices? It can't just be because I like it. There is always a substantial reason behind every element I put on paper. Before starting my own business, I learned the importance of design strategy and storytelling at my previous



110 East garage mural and graphics designed by Studio 618; photos credit Megan Morales



company. I brought that approach with me to Studio 618. It's about focusing on the *why* first, not the *how*. Having the intention behind a project enhances its meaning. It can even become part of the story for the residents and tenants, giving the client a narrative to share about the inspiration behind the design that came to life.

> "This mural is a vibrant celebration of the neighborhood's unique energy and culture. The mural is more than just art; it's an investment in community engagement and placemaking. It transformed an otherwise ordinary wall into a creative backdrop for memorable social media posts, amplified visibility, and brand recognition for our office building."
>
> – Chris Grenier, sr. VP of development - Stiles

Behind the concept & importance of placemaking

This map concept is an abstract representation of 110 East's location in Charlotte, providing both a macro and micro perspective. The macro view covers approximately 75% of the design, featuring roads and larger shapes, along with grid and horizontal lines that add pattern and visual interest, echoing the patterns on the garage facade. On the left side of the mural, the remaining quarter offers a micro view with smaller shapes and minimal linework, providing a more detailed focus. At the exact location of 110 East, a prominent "You Are Here" icon, accompanied by the 110 East logo, marks the spot. This serves not only as a photo opportunity but also faces the rail trail and the Camden St. station exit, reinforcing the building's location while acting as a placemaking feature.

When I presented three design options to the client during our first call, all 11 people on the call unanimously chose the map concept. They appreciated how it was uniquely tied to the location, integrated elements of the building's facade, and told a compelling story. Additionally, they favored this design for its ease of maintenance — thanks to the larger shapes, which make it easier to address any vandalism or touch-ups compared to the other concepts that were presented.

The concept for the map was rooted in the idea of "placemaking." According to the talented experiential design consultancy RSMDesign, "Placemaking is a collaborative process of designing public spaces that are functional and reflective of the community's culture and identity. Placemaking creates friendly communities by building environments that encourage interaction and engagement."

The goal of placemaking is to create public spaces that enrich the community by incorporating elements such as signage and wayfinding, public artwork, unique landscaping, and lighting. All of these components contribute to a distinctive environment that tells a story unique to its space,







> **Automation and technology in parking garages are nothing new, but the expectations placed on customers today are. With fewer physical attendants to assist with navigation or safety concerns, wayfinding has become a critical component of modern garage design. At Tech Painting, we've always been at the forefront of creating efficient, visually appealing, and customer-friendly spaces. Properly executed wayfinding isn't just about signs — it's about working with experts to integrate thoughtful design and technology that ensure safety, sustainability, and an exceptional customer experience.**
>
> - Kristin Anastasiades, VP of sales and marketing - Tech Painting Company.

encouraging visitors to return and share the experience with others.

When I approached this particular project, I started by looking at the building's design — both the interior and the exterior. Specifically, the angular facade surrounding the 10-level garage captured my attention. I appreciated how the garage was framed by angular metal perforated panels, which created numerous intersections and included vertical fins throughout. Some sections even featured vertical bars with varying widths, which were inspired by the adjacent rail trail and the movement of the light rail itself. According to Hastings, the architecture firm behind the project, the facade was inspired by the rich textile history of Charlotte's South End area. The sections of the facade "weave" together, so to speak. The shapes, intersections, and use of linework inspired the numeral graphics within the garage, while the angular elements themselves influenced the angular horizontal bands incorporated throughout the space.

The map drew inspiration from both the building's facade and the color palette of the mural. Blue high-gloss tile work covers a portion of the facade, with one section in particular adjacent to the mural. The metal facade panels feature a lot of gray, complemented by natural wood materials. The color palette was a blend of grays, blues, a pop of white, and, for the "you are here" icon, a vibrant orange. I felt that the orange worked well with the blue tones and didn't detract from the overall design.

Timeline

The timeline for this project spanned about a year and a half, from when we were first approached to its completion. In June 2023, we were initially contacted to walk the space with the client. At that time, the garage was still under construction, and the large mural wall was in the process of being patched. The client had already decided they wanted to incorporate a mural into the design early on. However, our part of the project didn't begin until January 2025. It was valuable to visit the space early on, as it allowed us to see the progress of the garage and mural wall.

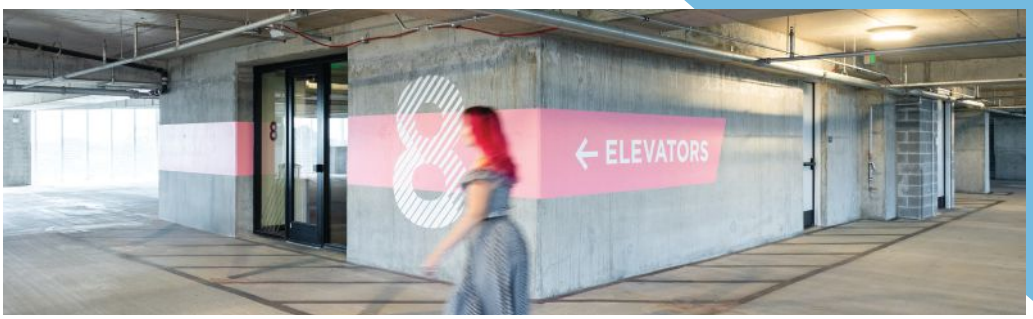
The production process took about three weeks, with two separate crews working simultaneously — one focused on the garage graphics and the other on the mural. Given that the project took place in the height of summer, weather conditions played a role in the timeline. Due to the mural's impressive height, Tech Painting Company, the painting company responsible for bringing our designs to life, had to use lifts to reach the upper areas. Before starting the painting process, Tech Painting carefully planned its approach to this large-scale project. In fact, this mural became the largest surface they had ever painted. Both my client and I agree that they did an excellent job executing our design.

Why garage graphics & murals are a good investment

Whether you're developing a new building or upgrading an existing one, investing in parking garage graphics is always a smart choice. Adding custom







graphics to your garage can achieve several important goals listed below:

1. Graphics can help address the lack of signage and wayfinding in your garage. If you don't want to miss out on guiding visitors, consider adding informational graphics that make navigation easier. What are the key features you want to highlight? For instance, if it's important to emphasize the location of elevators, you might consider coloring the walls around the elevator area to make it more visible. If you have electric vehicle charging stations or bike rooms, custom graphics can effectively point these out. Hiring an experiential designer for this purpose can have a major impact.

2. Enhance your space without overspending. While parking garage graphics can range from five to six figures, the cost largely depends on the complexity of your project — such as the level of detail, color scheme, and intricacy involved.

Think about this: the garage is the first area visitors encounter when they arrive. Do you want them to have a positive first impression? Do you want them to return? I've experienced countless garages that were dark, confusing, and off-putting, which made me hesitant to visit those places again. People tend to remember negative experiences, so it's crucial to invest in making yours stand out in a good way. This is an opportunity to set yourself apart from other garages in your area, and surprisingly, this simple touch can make a big difference. Ultimately, parking garage graphics offer an opportunity to tell a unique story and make your building stand out from the competition.

Final thoughts

Now that the project is complete, I can confidently admit how intimidating it was to work on. Not only was this the largest garage project I've ever undertaken at my consultancy, but it was also the largest in my 12+ years in the experiential design field. The mural stands out along the 3.5-mile rail trail in Charlotte, a vibrant area known for its dynamic murals and artful sculptures. Located next to the light rail, it connects neighborhoods and communities from Sedgefield all the way to Uptown, making it a unique and highly-visited landmark. I'll admit, there were moments of imposter syndrome during the process. Designing something that fit the scale, location, and tone of the building was a challenge. But the end result was a success, and I'm incredibly proud to have created something unique and artistic in my hometown of Charlotte, where I grew up. **GP**



Lauren Stern is the owner and experiential designer at Studio 618, a Charlotte, North Carolina-based consultancy specializing in story-driven signage and wayfinding. She transforms ordinary spaces into extraordinary experiences and authored "Signs Have Much to Say," a children's book about the importance of signage, available on Amazon. Learn more at studio618design.com.



The enduring power of yard signs

A cost-effective tool for local communications

By Jeff Hartman

Yard signs are a powerful and cost-effective tool for outdoor advertising and communication.

Often made from recyclable corrugated plastic and installed with wire stands, these signs deliver high-impact, hyperlocal visibility, capturing the attention of pedestrians and drivers alike.

From political campaigns to real estate promotions and local events, yard signs serve as a practical solution for businesses and organizations seeking a cost-effective way to amplify their message. Their continued relevance lies in their affordability, quick turnaround times, and weather-resistant properties.

Advanced digital printing technology has further enhanced these signs with superior print quality and vibrant colors, ensuring they stand out in any setting. Yard signs remain a straightforward yet highly effective means to communicate directly with target audiences, offering an irreplaceable, tangible presence in a crowded digital world.

Key markets & use cases

Yard signs are a ubiquitous tool, appearing across various industries and public spaces. Their affordability and hyperlocal reach make them indispensable for political campaigns, real estate agents, small businesses, and event organizers. For real estate agents, yard signs serve as essential marketing tools for open houses and property listings, while businesses rely on them for grand openings and sales promotions. Beyond business applications, yard signs also serve personal needs, marking milestones such as graduations, birthdays, and fundraisers.

Their weather-resistant nature ensures longevity, even in diverse outdoor conditions, while the ability to customize designs allows for effective communication with a target audience. Whether in busy urban streets or quieter suburban neighborhoods, yard signs continue to deliver localized reach that other advertising mediums can't match.

The materials behind the message

The effectiveness of a yard sign depends not just on its design, but also the materials it's made from. Corrugated plastic (coroplast) is the most popular choice due to its durability, weather resistance, and cost-effectiveness. This material withstands UV exposure, rain, and wind, making it ideal for long-term outdoor use. Coroplast is a favorite for political campaigns, real estate signage, and event promotions.

Other materials, such as polybag signs, offer a more budget-friendly option, especially for short-term use, though they lack the same durability. Poly-coated cardboard offers an eco-friendly alternative but may not be as weather-resistant. Increasing demand for sustainable signage has led to innovations in biodegradable and recyclable materials, aligning with environmental goals without compromising performance.



Images courtesy of Yard Sign Ninjas





Technology & processes

Yard sign manufacturing has evolved with advancements in digital printing and contour cutting, allowing for greater customization, faster production, and enhanced quality.

Digital printing has become the go-to method for high-resolution, vibrant designs with minimal setup time and cost. This technology enables businesses to produce small or large quantities with remarkable speed, making it the preferred choice for custom orders, urgent projects, and intricate designs.

Screen printing remains a viable option for simpler designs. Though it offers good durability, its setup times and limitations in design complexity make it less adaptable for personalized projects.

The addition of contour cutting gives businesses the ability to create unique shapes and designs, making yard signs more eye-catching and attention-grabbing. Digital printing combined with contour cutting ensures both speed and cost-effectiveness, making it a top choice for many applications.

The role of wire stands

The wire stand is an often overlooked yet vital component in yard signage. These stands ensure that signs remain upright, visible, and secure in various outdoor environments. Double-H stands are the most common, offering simplicity and affordability for coroplast signs.

However, newer models, like those with stability plates, offer added durability for areas prone to wind or uneven terrain. One standout option is the "ground buster" stand, which features reinforced steel construction and a stabilizing plate for easy insertion into the ground. These enhanced stands not only ensure stability but also extend the life of the signage by reducing the risk of tipping or damage. For high-visibility campaigns, choosing the right stand can enhance the overall effectiveness of the message.

Beyond signs

In today's competitive market, suppliers offer more than just signage — they provide comprehensive value-added services that simplify and enhance the customer experience.

Rush services enable businesses to meet tight deadlines without compromising quality, offering expedited production for last-minute needs. Additionally, many suppliers offer customer service for design assistance, material recommendations, and help with special requests, ensuring seamless project execution.

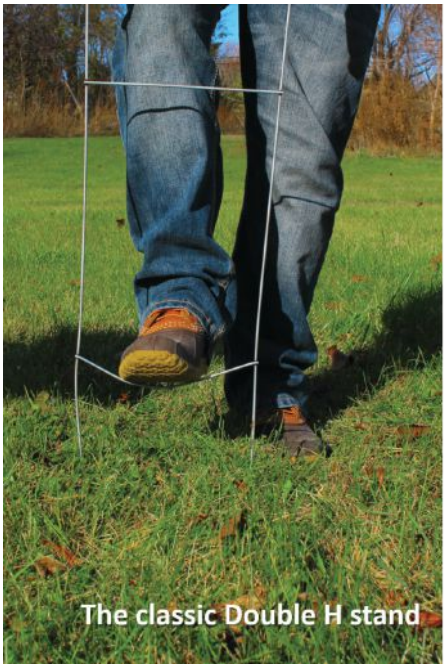
Wholesale suppliers offer blind delivery services to trade clients such as communication agencies, PR firms, and political advisors, shipping signs and stands directly to end users, keeping brand consistency intact. These services, combined with efficient production processes, help businesses meet both tight timelines and customer expectations with ease.

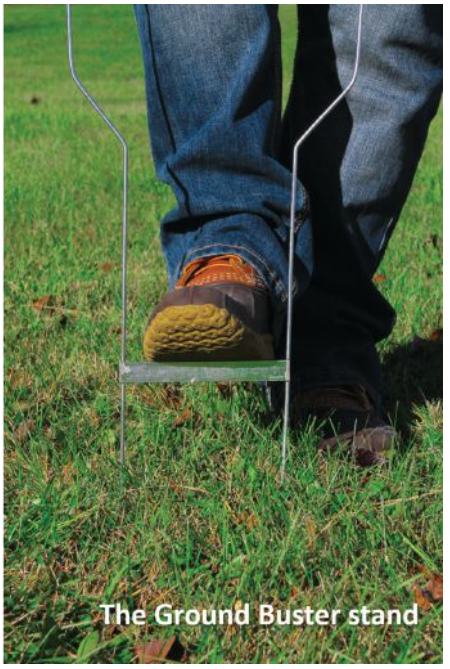
Branding & creativity

Yard signs are a powerful tool for branding and creativity, offering businesses an opportunity to connect with local audiences in a direct and meaningful way. With digital printing, companies can produce highly customized signs that incorporate logos, colors, and



Tada Images – stock.adobe.com


The classic Double H stand


The Ground Buster stand



David Gales – stock.adobe.com



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graphics, creating signage that aligns perfectly with their brand identity.

The hyperlocal nature of yard signs makes them an ideal choice for businesses aiming to target specific neighborhoods or regions. Whether used for local promotions, political campaigns, real estate marketing, or community events, yard signs remain an essential element in any marketer's toolkit. Their ability to deliver visually compelling messages with a personal touch helps businesses establish lasting connections with their target audience.

Yard sign challenges & trends

The yard sign industry faces evolving challenges, such as increased demand for customization and rapid production.

Advanced printing technologies like digital printing and contour cutting allow for more creative designs, but they also impact production costs. As more businesses seek distinctive, custom-shaped signs, balancing cost-efficiency with creative freedom has become a challenge for manufacturers. The industry is also seeing a growing trend toward sustainability, as consumers and businesses demand more eco-friendly and recyclable materials.

Still relevant in the digital age

In the face of an increasingly digital advertising world, yard signs continue to thrive. Their physical presence in local neighborhoods delivers an unparalleled connection to the audience, offering visibility that digital ads simply cannot match.

Yard signs are a highly cost-effective solution, delivering direct messages with minimal investment and maximum impact. Thanks to innovations in digital printing, custom contour cutting, and weather-resistant materials, yard signs are more versatile and effective than ever before.

Whether used for political campaigns, real estate promotions, or local events, yard signs offer a unique ability to engage a hyperlocal audience, making them an essential tool in today's marketing landscape. In a digital world, they remain a straightforward and reliable method for delivering powerful, tangible messages. **GP**



Jeff Hartman is the founder and CEO of Yard Sign Ninjas, a wholesale supplier of yard signs and wire stands, banners, and magnetic car signs. With 30+ years in the signage business, Jeff is passionate about innovation, and a pioneer in single-pass digital printing technologies.

What's ahead for WRAPSCON

Added location, cash prize & more!

Scan here to register!

By Bill Mattes

Now that the holidays are behind us, it's time to focus on the 2025 GPX schedule and what we have planned. For this article, let's focus on WRAPSCON.

What do we have planned for WRAPSON in 2025? We are expanding the presence of WRAPSCON University to include Irving, Texas, and Indianapolis, Indiana. The hands-on training we launched at GPX Long Beach and GPX Indy last year will become a key part of the GPX experience. Led by Adam Sumner and Jamison Craw, attendees will be able to work with products on all different mediums — vehicles, construction applications, and special events. The vinyl wrap market is expanding and our goal is to continue to show attendees how they can grow in this area of their business.



In Long Beach this year, we will have the full WRAPSCON experience — the competition and the university. The competition and university will take place over the three days of the event. The competition will highlight different elements such as a vehicle, brick wall, rivet wall, corrugated wall, bowling balls/pins, etc. plus a secret task. It's going to be really fun to watch. The competition will be judged by Starla Miller, Jen Carney, Steve Carney, Luis Tirado, and Kevin Kempf. The first place prize for the winning team will $15,000. It's the first time GPX will offer a cash prize to the winners and we're excited!

As for WRAPSCON University, Sumner and Craw will be on hand, showing attendees all the ins and outs, plus the newest equipment and supplies. Their space will be twice as big as it was in 2024, giving everyone a better chance to participate and learn from the best in the industry.

As we continue to invest in all elements of our shows, our goal is to make GPX the premier boutique learning and trading event in the industry. Learn, network, have fun — that's GPX! GP



Bill Mattes is Cahaba Media Group's director of events. Reach him at bmattes@cahabamedia.com.



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Elevate product offerings & sales with vehicle wraps & graphics

How print service providers can take advantage of this growing industry

By Bernard & Heather Kincaid

Vehicle advertising graphics have come a long way since the simple car top or magnetic door sign. With choices ranging from advanced materials to a rainbow of colors and sophisticated design elements, auto signage has become one of the most creative tools you can give your clients to help them share their messages and raise awareness for their businesses.

We've seen the effectiveness of this advertising strategy in our company vehicles, especially our owner's truck. Bernard gets stopped every day at gas stations, at traffic lights, and in store parking lots by people who want to know about our wrap business. It is our most profitable marketing effort yet, and we keep it fresh by rewrapping it every two years with the latest design concepts and materials.

The wrap specialty has changed quite a bit since we added it to our services in 2017. We've seen a remarkable evolution in the materials our manufacturers and distributors offer. Wraps are stronger and longer-lasting thanks to eco-friendly vinyl and UV-resistant and weather-resistant materials. They're more attention-getting with chameleon colors, matte, and textured finishes such as carbon fiber, brushed metal, and leather; and made to dazzle with reflective, glow-in-the-dark, and chrome vinyl.

Some designs are moving toward bolder colors and gradients; at the same time, minimalist designs that roll toward a retro look and feel are making a big comeback. Designers are using layering and overlays with different finishes and materials. A design can be seamlessly integrated with the existing lines and features of the vehicle, creating a marketing masterpiece — almost a work of art.

Another popular trend is adding a QR code to the design, which makes the advertisement more interactive and can yield valuable marketing analytics for companies that employ them.

Even with so many refined new choices, vehicle wraps are still the most cost-effective advertising that businesses can buy



Images courtesy of Signarama





— as little as a few dollars a day for a rolling ad that can get tens of thousands of impressions each day.

Vinyl wrapping also protects the vehicle from scratches and harsh weather, helping maintain value.

Boosting sales of vehicle wraps & graphics

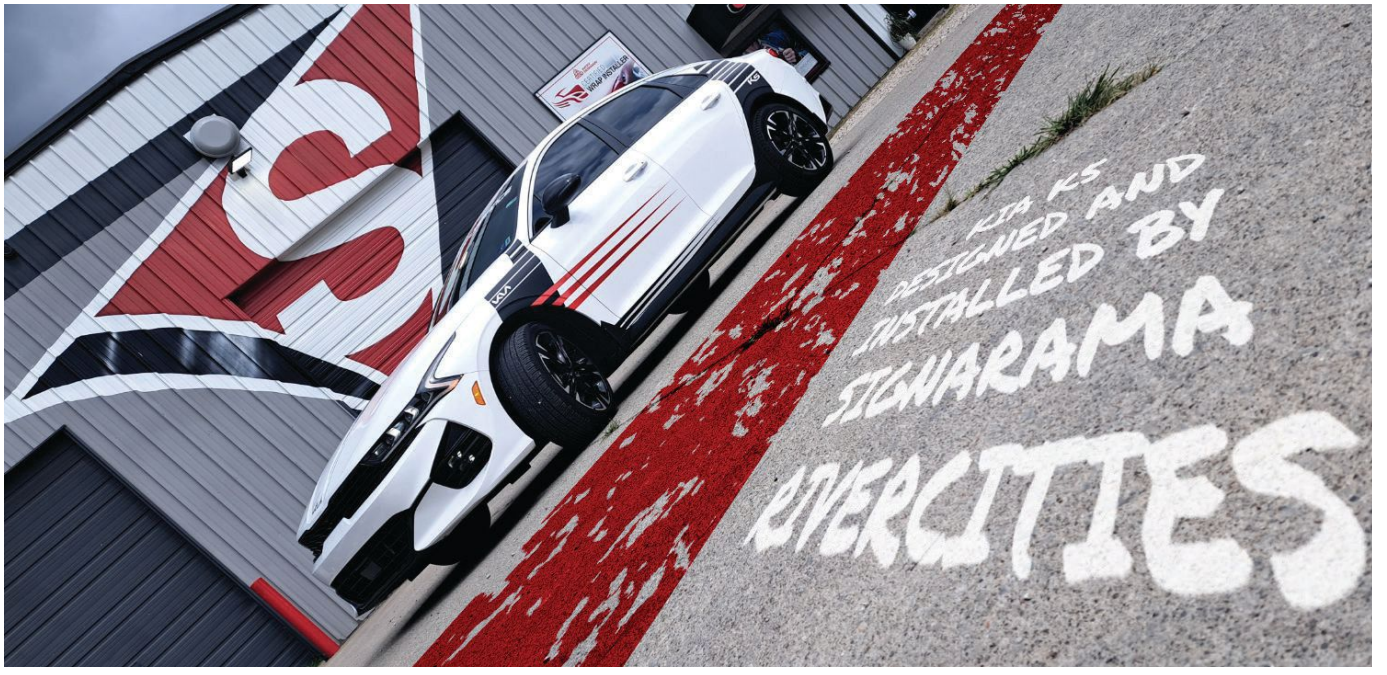
This signage category offers many opportunities to attract new customers and keep existing ones returning.

When it's time to have the vehicle rewrapped — usually in about three years — you can agree to remove the old wrap at no charge. Not only will it encourage the customer to return, but the wrap is easier to remove when the weather damage isn't too extreme. For customers on tighter budgets, offer partial wrap or decal graphics, which deliver marketing benefits similar to those of a full design.

Enter as many wrap-specific contests as you can. The awards offer priceless marketing value, and your team will find their skills sharpened with exposure to the best in the industry. Just by entering, they're raising the bar for themselves.

To proactively attract new customers, consider placing your marketing materials or business cards on vehicles you see that have been poorly wrapped or only have decals or door magnets.

Less is always more: Think about the initial message you want to convey and stick to that. Don't advertise every product or service you offer; say









just enough to grab prospective customers' attention in the 15-20 seconds of visibility when the vehicle is in motion. Give only the most essential information: business name, phone, website, and a quick, catchy tagline. Remember the three C's: clean, crisp, and (high) contrast.

Keep your team up to date: Technology and trends are constantly changing, so your most knowledgeable team should stay current on the latest installation techniques and designs. Have them take advantage of continuing education from larger manufacturers, distributors, and professional organizations. Having installers obtain as many certifications as possible from industry leaders ensures that they are experts at what they do. This adds to their credibility with customers and presents unique marketing opportunities for attracting new business. As part of this, get your wrap installers certified by major manufacturers like Avery Dennison and 3M, which will then list them on their websites. National brands typically look to those sites for local installers for their fleets and company vehicles.

Stay on top of the market: You'll get invaluable insight and networking opportunities from trade shows and conferences like GRAPHICS PRO EXPO, WRAPSCON, ISA, SEMA, SARCON, WrapFest, FESPA, etc. Subscribe to leading industry publications and online training companies. We also discuss opportunities weekly with our sales force and quarterly with the whole team. We look at our top markets and the industries trailing to identify where we need to focus our marketing attention and where we do not.

Wrapped in love

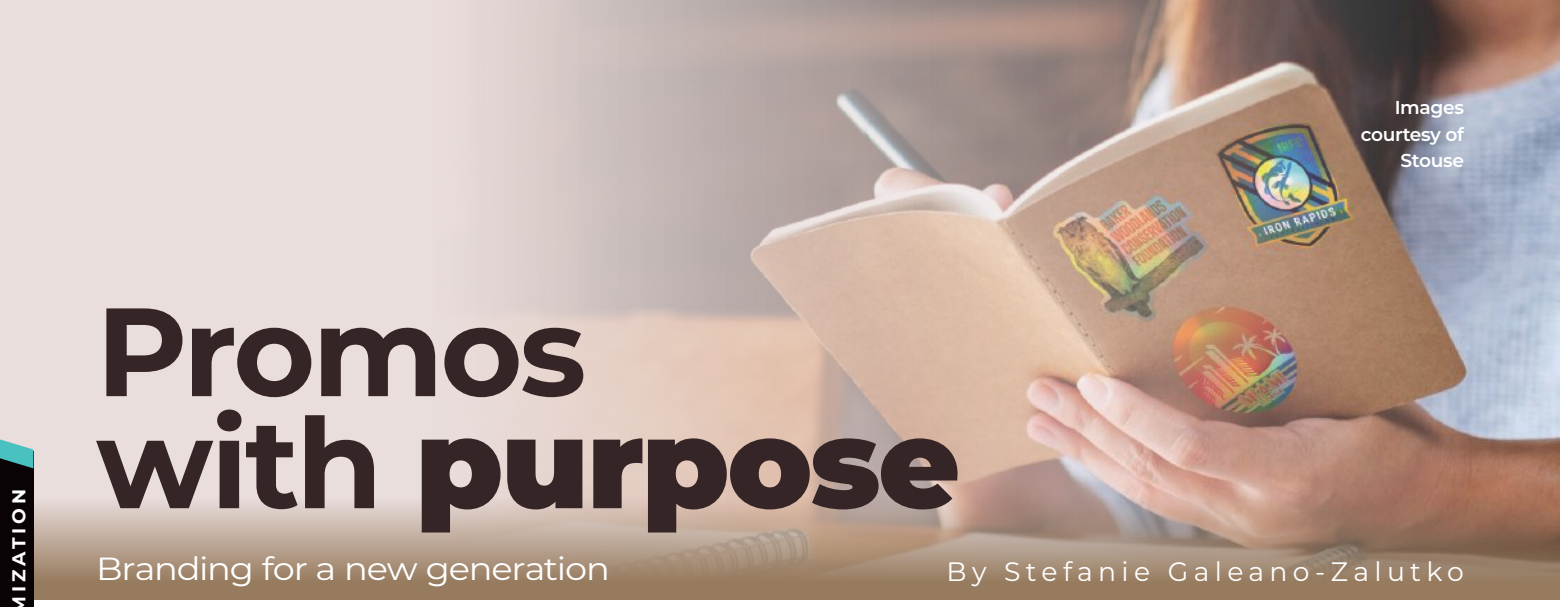
Not all vehicle wraps are about advertising.

For one of our most memorable projects, two brothers asked us to help them honor their late father, who was being inducted posthumously into the West Virginia Drag Racers Hall of Fame. His car was originally red but had been painted white over the years so that his sons could race it. We wrapped it in the original red, then added die-cut layered decals to look like the hand-painted badging from the 1960s when their father was racing it. Their mother hadn't seen the car since then; it was very emotional when it was revealed to her.

It was a story we were proud to take part in and a message we were honored to help share. When you take your vehicle wraps and graphics to the next level, you can be a part of milestone campaigns and meaningful moments for your clients too. **GP**



Bernard and Heather Kincaid own Signarama Rivercities in South Point, Ohio. Over the last seven years, the Kincaids have expanded to 17 staff members in a 12,000-square-foot facility, specializing in vehicle wraps and digital signage. Bernard leverages his 18 years as a union insulator, while Heather, a former marketing executive with four Marshall University degrees, serves as president and CFO.



Images courtesy of Stouse

Promos with purpose

Branding for a new generation

By Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko

Let's be honest: Baby Boomer-era promotional products like branded jar openers and cheap plastic frisbees are as unappealing now as they were in years past. In a day and age when TikTok determines what is trending today and sayonara tomorrow, modern consumers expect more in style and substance from the brands they support — even when it comes to promotional products.

As Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z take the lead in promotional product ownership, businesses must be in lockstep with the customers they are courting. After all, brand engagement and loyalty depend on it. Tune in with top industry professionals as they lend their expert advice on significant market shifts, current trends, and future dynamics.

State of business

According to Grand View Research, the global promotional products market size was valued at $90.5 billion in 2023 and is projected to grow at a compound annual rate of 3.75% between 2024 and 2030. While the promotional products industry were expected to finish relatively flat year over year in 2024, companies like Gemline and The Rowmark Group (TRG) are outpacing the overall market.

"In 2024, we saw about a 7% increase in the gift and promotional products category," noted Jackie Faeth, marketing coordinator at TRG.

Major sectors like healthcare, nonprofit organizations, real estate, education, finance, and government are driving demand, as branded promotional products are gifted to a variety of clientele. Many organizations turn to tried-and-true, industry-specific items, from customized ice packs, medication boxes, and first aid kits to wristbands, lanyards, tote bags, tumblers, and even retro-inspired fanny packs.

"At their core, promotional products are advertising vehicles — building brand affinity and fostering a sense of community. To be truly successful, though, it must resonate with the recipient, ensuring it is kept and used repeatedly," said Saadia Bryant, vice president of marketing, product, and design at Gemline.

Post-COVID-19, she sees a significant increase in demand for retail brands and "a general flight to quality products" across the board.



Image credit Grand View Research

"Partnering with well-known, reputable brands for promotional products ensures that items are not only of high quality but also trusted by consumers. These partnerships lend credibility and status to the promotional campaigns, allowing companies to align with brands that reflect their own values — whether that's sustainability, innovation or reliability," according to Hit Promotional Products — a promotional products provider for over 50 years. "Furthermore, as people gravitate toward items they already know and love, incorporating recognizable brands into promotional strategies can elevate a brand's image and increase consumer loyalty."

Today — in an increasingly competitive market easily impacted by the changing tides of economic conditions — businesses are challenged to conserve marketing dollars without compromising quality. Gemline witnessed this trend play out in real-time during 2024, as the sales process was extended due to companies being more mindful of every penny spent.

"Across multiple categories, we are seeing momentum in affordable, value-driven products with strong quality characteristics," added Frank Carpenito, president and CEO at Gemline. "Think of the Trader Joe's model and appeal."

While striking a balance between quality and affordability may feel like walking a tightrope, shop owners are encouraged to stay the course: maximize proven promotional product sales, study current market trends, and diversify accordingly.



Adam – stock.adobe.com

'Tis the season

Seasonality undeniably plays a critical role in annual promotional product sales. During winter, companies may be focused on outerwear, holiday gifts, and calendar magnets, while spring brings a resurgence of canopy tents, table throws, pop-up podiums, and tradeshow giveaways. T-shirts, baseball hats, and golf and running gear rule the summer, but lunch boxes, totes, backpacks, and pens are hot ticket items during back-to-school.

"At Stouse, we keep the sales cycle in mind when promoting our product line to shop owners, ensuring they have plenty of time to stay on trend and offer seasonal items to their customers," said Jennifer Hoyt, director of marketing and e-commerce at Stouse. "We also recommend balancing these seasonal items with evergreen products like stickers or roll labels, providing value at any time of the year. This mix allows shop owners the ability to maintain a relevant offering while appealing to a wide range of customer needs."

Materials

As the promotional product selection evolves, so do the materials. From glass and acrylic to wood and metal, sophisticated technology is redefining the category at large and raising the bar in quality, durability, and turnaround time.

Mike May, president at JDS Industries, pointed to leatherette as an increasingly popular material, which can be engraved or directly printed in full color. He says customization methods like sublimation, direct print, and laser engraving are on the rise, with a product selection that spans manicure sets, passport covers, portfolios, phone wallets, key chains, luggage tags, and more.

In addition, Hoyt notices a trend in creative materials like holographic and glitter decals, which add "a fun, eye-catching element to branding."

"Stickers and decals have enjoyed quite the comeback in recent years," she noted. "At Stouse, we offer a wide variety of materials, ranging from classic white vinyl to eye-catching chrome and holographic glitter. Our printed product line includes everything from everyday paper roll labels used for food products to ultra-sticky, extra-durable decals used for applications like marking recycling containers."

Tech-driven

Recent data also shows an uptick in promotional products and gifts that combine utility and innovation. As such, more companies are exploring practical items that not only put the brand front and center but also double as thoughtful everyday items. Industry professionals point to Bluetooth-enabled speakers, earbuds, wireless charging pads, power banks, phone chargers, and smart water bottles with hydration tracking features as effective ways to increase brand awareness among a tech-savvy consumer base.

Within health and wellness, for example, companies are turning to promotional products that encourage healthy habits and promote a balanced lifestyle, such as branded fitness trackers, aromatherapy sets, and ergonomic office accessories.

These desirable products complement the flexible and connected lifestyle of modern customers, while simultaneously applauding a business' commitment to "a forward-thinking brand image," according to Grand View Research.

In addition, Hoyt calls attention to complementary tech-oriented trends like QR codes, which drive engagement while promoting a brand or service. They are increasingly popular across various markets and product applications. For example, Hoyt said restaurants print them on promotional decals to facilitate online menus and ordering; pharmacies use them on signage to encourage immunization registration; and ride-share companies partner with bars to encourage safe transportation options.



Images courtesy of Stouse



Image courtesy of JDS Industries

Customized with care

In addition to an ever-expanding product selection, enhanced customization is all the rage. Shifting demographics and consumer preferences, along with increased e-commerce purchasing habits, are influencing demand in categories like personalized apparel, home decor, accessories, and drinkware.

"We continue to see steady year-over-year growth in the drinkware category, but with an interesting uptick in the drinkware accessories category like coasters," Faeth stated. "We also see higher quality home and kitchen products in greater demand due to the saturation of the market with smaller items that have a lower perceived value, like the traditional pens or plastic cups."

Industry professionals encourage companies to think like consumers and gift what they would like to be gifted, from high-end, leather-bound journals or comfortable wool socks to fine throws, picnic blankets, and hand-crafted seasonal items that can be used or displayed year after year.

"Ornaments! Ornaments! Ornaments! This is a category that is here to stay — and can be used beyond the holiday," Faeth explained, noting many realtors gift a "Welcome Home" or "First Christmas" ornament at property closings throughout the year.

Data shows personalization in any form, from embroidered or monogrammed initials to laser-engraved messages, creates a feeling of exclusivity and enhances the emotional connectivity between businesses and recipients.

Sustainability

More than ever, consumers are looking for authenticity and ethical responsibility from the brands they choose to support. Products that support sustainability initiatives or charitable causes will not only positively promote a brand, but also foster a deeper connection with audiences who value purpose over profit, according to Hit Promotional Products.

"It's more than a trend — it's a strategic imperative," added Kaeser & Blair Incorporated — a family-owned-and-operated business within the promotional products industry since 1894. "By prioritizing sustainable promotional products that align with company brand values, you can resonate with your eco-conscious customers."

From reusable straws and cutlery sets to recyclable tote bags to biodegradable pens and notebooks, the environmental focus is a "trend" with staying power. Over the past two years, Carpenito says millennials and Gen Z purchasers, in particular, are demanding more non-landfill products and greater transparency with the brands they purchase.

As a result, "We do see CSR/ESG considerations factoring more and more into purchase decisions for larger enterprise companies," added co-worker Bryant. "They want to purchase products that have lower impact and are better for the environment."

"Now, we're even providing carbon footprint information at the item level, so customers can make more informed purchasing decisions," she added.

Invest for success

Modern digital tools like state-of-the-art equipment and e-commerce will continue to direct individual business success in the years ahead.

"At Stouse, we've seen a dramatic shift from a technology standpoint. Most of our products were screen printed at one time. Now, we're continuously investing in digital printing equipment to provide our customers with high quality, outdoor-durable, printed items," Hoyt said, noting production processes and times have evolved as well to maintain demand.

Industry professionals anticipate a steady year in promotional product sales — thanks, in part, to the increased accessibility of more affordable equipment. Faeth and May both expect UV-LED, plus direct-to-garment and direct-to-film printing technologies "to take off in 2025."

"This technology is now available in smaller units and allows for quick, on-demand, full-color printing on a wide array of materials and surfaces," Faeth remarked, emphasizing other color printing methods are effective but have some limitations.

Likewise, building, promoting, and maintaining a strong brand through a company website, social media, proper SEO, and e-mail campaigns is a necessary part of doing business these days.

"Millennials and Gen Z purchasers care less about face-to-face sales interactions and do not value

vendor-customer relationships as much as older generations do, so transacting online has become a very viable method for them to order promotional products," Carpenito explained.

From a B2C perspective, Faeth said having an attractive, easy-to-use web setup along with e-commerce capabilities is "imperative to survival" in today's marketplace. The same is true for B2B, with suppliers like TRG understanding time is money for businesses who need to find new products or reorder quickly with little to no barriers, especially during peak seasons.

More importantly, a strong website and e-commerce presence is a constant work in progress.

"While our website has provided customers with real-time updates for over a decade, we've recently added new features like an online design tool to make the distributor experience similar to the B2C e-commerce interfaces," Hoyt said. "This enhancement also streamlines the ordering process and improves turnaround time to ensure we continue to service our distributors quickly."

May encourages business personnel to utilize supplier marketing resources like editable/sharable PDF files, digital imagery, online flipbooks, and e-catalogs to boost their digital efforts and reach a larger audience. Failing to tap into the wealth of materials available is a missed opportunity.

Looking ahead

Industry suppliers are closely monitoring tariff expansion across the globe, which would inevitably impact the cost of sourcing products off-shore.

"Another threat to the personalization market is potential supply chain interruptions, particularly with products that are manufactured overseas," Faeth said. "Working with a company that deals with the import process and has a diverse option of both U.S. and overseas vendors can help avoid this pain point."

While the overall cost of shipping continues to increase at a higher rate than general inflation, industry suppliers like Gemline, JDS Industries, and TRG are optimistic and preparing to launch hundreds of new products between them.

As the pros kickstart 2025 with a bang in promotional products, Faeth encourages business owners to stay abreast of current market trends without letting them control all creative direction.

"Explore a niche that works for you," she said. "Start by finding one product and do that really well, then slowly and strategically add on." **GP**



Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko is the president/CEO of Zalutko Business Services, Inc., a marketing agency based in Central Florida. She can be reached at szalutko@zalutkobusiness.com.

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Preparing for the new year

Get your shop in order for 2025

By John Morman

Just as a reminder, my articles have always been directed toward new business owners. Well-established businesses will already have their own procedure, and it isn't my place to advise anyone on what they do. My other caveat is that I base these articles on practices I have found to be most useful for my business and realize these might not suit everyone. I do assume readers are working from a brick-and-mortar store and not running a home-based business.

I hope you have all enjoyed a successful holiday season. More importantly, I hope you have all enjoyed some well-deserved time with your family and friends and are looking forward to a happy, healthy, and prosperous 2025.

On preparing for a new year, there are a number of business factors to consider. My first suggestion, before anything else, is to consider your next moves while you enjoy some well-deserved time off. You can decompress after what can often be a very stressful period as you try to stay on top of orders and inventory.

Organize

As I said, my practices may not be for everyone. I work best in a state of "organized chaos" — in some people's minds, that means a complete mess. When I get back to the shop after the holidays, my first job is to tidy the place up to my wife's satisfaction — she's the real boss, after all! It may also be useful to reconsider the layout of your shop. Would any rearrangement make your operation more practical or efficient? For the coming year, my wife and I have decided to do away with rented storage and bring all our inventory into the store. That's going to cause a loss of space in the store, but it will be more efficient for us and will save us money. That leads me directly to my second point — inventory.

Inventory

During busy times, it's not uncommon for me to over-order just to be sure I keep up with existing orders and that I will have enough stock on hand to handle anticipated customers. Inevitably, that leads to some duplication, which in turn leads to a surplus. With the margins we typically work with, we can't afford to carry too much excess stock, particularly regarding less popular items or "seasonal" items. Organize the inventory and pay particular attention to the surplus stock and stock that may not be needed for some time. Look for new customers who may have use for the surplus and consider whether or not you can afford to offer discounts to use up this surplus. I always look at the customers I've enjoyed dealing with for several years, but whose purchasing has changed. Do we need to carry as much inventory for customers who aren't buying as much?

Costs

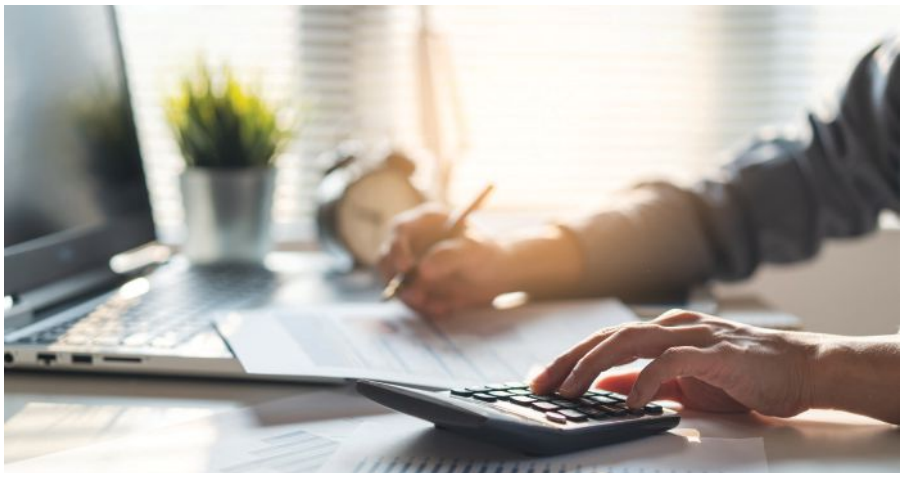
And so to the next point — cost. It's also useful to look at your existing suppliers and think about whether you're getting your orders in a timely manner. Look for alternatives and don't be afraid to start using a different source. When I feel I have to do that, I've always found it to be worth a quick discussion with an

existing supplier and see if I can't get them to speed up their own delivery or change their delivery carrier.

Particularly during our busiest times, it's possible to miss cost increases from our suppliers. Make the decision on how much you can afford — likely not much — and how much will have to be passed. Take a good look at all of your costs, taking into account things like utilities, labor, shipping costs on both incoming stock and outgoing orders, etc. After you've restructured your pricing accordingly, inform all of your customers. In my case, I'm fortunate enough to enjoy three types of customers: wholesale, repeat retail, and walk-in. Emailing my wholesale customers is 99 times out of 100 all that's required, as long as I remember to include an explanation for any increases. My repeat retail customers prefer a more "in-person" approach. Walk-ins really don't need to be told, but I find an explanation is a courtesy my customers appreciate.

Taxes

Next, taxes. We all despise taxes, but they are an essential evil. It's simply better for us to get taxes organized and returns submitted as quickly as possible. If we're fortunate enough to be due a refund, an early return normally results in getting our check more quickly. My wife records all of our transactions as the year goes on, and we use our own accountant to complete the returns. We also use a bookkeeper to make sure all of our payroll taxes are paid on time. If you want to use any of the different tax software packages available, that's completely up to you, of course. We just prefer to have someone else responsible for getting these things done in a timely manner. We have been audited once. Making sure we were prepared for it was nerve-racking, but having all of the appropriate paperwork done made it easy. We even received a compliment from the auditor!



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Labor

The most difficult part of our preparation is probably going to be an examination of labor costs. Let's be honest — in addition to qualified candidates, we tend to hire candidates we take a liking to. Over time, if we're lucky, that turns into a friendship as well as a business relationship. But — if we haven't had a good year, it may be necessary to reevaluate our labor costs. This is usually the leading expense for a business and one which can't be ignored. It's never pleasant to have to let someone go, so before taking the ultimate step, take the employee or employees aside and discuss options such as reduced hours, work sharing, etc.

Events

Events can be a very useful means of increasing revenue. We have been fortunate enough to have festival organizers become good customers by offering to produce awards and recognition plaques and supply special items for special guests and sponsors. There are many festivals, fairs, and other events throughout the year, almost every week, everywhere. If you don't take part in these events, perhaps you should think about doing so. You will be exposed to a wider customer base than you will see if you just stay in the confines of your store and might pick up a few ideas for new products you can offer.

If you do participate in such events already, it can become a matter of habit to simply sign up year after year. We used to do just that, but in the last two or three years my wife and I have started to look more closely at the events we do. In many cases, we've realized that many of these events have generated lower revenue than we have become accustomed to. When you take into account travel costs — registration, fuel, accommodation, and so on, your costs can be substantial. If you find that you're not making money, it might make more sense to simply not do them any longer. It can take a couple of years for customers to get used to you being there, so be patient, but don't be afraid to pull the plug either. There are often several events held over the same weekend, so if one event isn't working out, take a look at others.

Routine maintenance

Maintenance is crucial for your machine, and early in the year is probably the best time to think about it. There's a lot more than simply keeping your optics clean. Take a look at your operating instructions and see what the manufacturer recommends. If you like, ask about local technicians if you don't think you can do the work yourself.

You might think the period after the holidays is going to allow an easy start to the new year — and it might — but there is a lot of work you can be doing. Happy New Year to you and yours, and here's to a successful 2025. GP



John Morman is the owner of Celtic Tides in Lexington, Virginia. He and his wife, Mary Jo, have been running the shop since 2005. John started laser engraving in 2003.

Crystal imprinting: Getting the details

Four wow-worthy crystal imprint processes customers love most

By Natalie Albers

Crystal awards and gifts are a timeless choice for customers who want to express their appreciation for things like years of service, retirements, partnerships, achievements, commemorations, and more.

Every order for a crystal award or gift is special, and with each one, customization is key — but the array of options and combinations can sometimes feel overwhelming. This guide can help make it simple, easy, and fast to source what your customers need while exceeding their expectations.

Your supplier's reps can confirm which imprints work best for the designs and the personalization desired. They can also provide guidance and recommendations on how and when two or more processes can be combined to maximize an award or gift's visual impact — and the recipient's emotional response.

Working with your supplier opens the doors to talking about incredible ideas, but knowing the lingo is a great place to kick off the conversation. Let's break down (pun not intended!) four popular crystal imprint options and how they differ: deep etch, color fill, subsurface laser engraving, and Illumachrome.



Color fill, a hand-applied enhancement to deep etching, adds visual interest and complements branding.



Deep etch is a classic engraving option for crystal, an elegant option for both text and graphics.

Images courtesy of Crystal D.

Deep etch

You know it by its frosty-white appearance that stands out in contrast to the clear optical crystal. This deep etch, whether of text or a graphic, is created when the smooth surface is blasted away to create a recessed, textured area. Deep etch is a timeless, elegant, and subtle way to make a statement with a crystal award or gift.

This deep etch imprint is created meticulously by hand, one piece at a time. Each award begins with the application of a mask that outlines the artwork and protects the rest of the smooth surface. Then, highly trained artisans carefully apply pressurized air and sand to carve the design. This process of etching requires a great deal of precision to achieve the desired depth and detail while making sure the design is perfectly legible, both on its own as well as in preparation for any added enhancements such as color fill.

Even with the painstaking nature of creating a deep etch, many awards featuring this imprint can be offered under quick shipping timeframes.

Color fill

As eyes are naturally drawn to color, this is one of the most popular ways to enhance a crystal award or gift. While techniques vary by supplier (and some use proprietary methods), the process is precise, and the end product pops.

All color-fill applications require



Subsurface laser engraving can be done to produce an image (like the sailboat shown) in 2D, 3D, or relief, making it "float" within the crystal.



Illumachrome can be applied as translucent color (letting light through) or with a white backer for an opaque finish. It can be included as a full flood (shown at left) or accent (at right).



Adding a lighted base to an award, such as the one with the subsurface laser engraving shown, makes the designs pop even more.

a deep etch with crisp recesses that can hold enough pigment to create the desired effect — whether it's opaque color for a bold appearance or translucent tones allowing light to pass through.

Color fill works best with larger, non-script fonts without superfine details and lines. This is because a minimum width (indicated by the supplier) is needed for the color to take hold without spilling into unintended areas. More than one color can be used within a design as long as there's enough space between the recesses being filled to prevent any unintended mixing of hues.

One final thing to keep in mind is that the process of color fill excludes awards with this treatment from being available for quick shipping, though the process can be performed within most standard production timelines

Subsurface laser engraving

How did that get in there? It's the top question people ask when they see an award or gift featuring subsurface laser engraving. The next thing they do is hold the award and turn it around — and around — and around.

The answer? Science! And technology.

Getting an image inside of crystal is impressively cool. A high-tech laser fractures the crystal, one dot at a time, to produce a clear 3D image. No image is too big, too small, or too complex for this kind of state-of-the-art tech.

There are three types of subsurface laser engraving:

- **2D**: Where the front features a detailed replica of an image, with a flat side view.
- **Relief**: Where the image appears 3D from the front but is hollow in the back.
- **3D**: Where the image is fully dimensional from all sides and is an exact recreation of the art provided.

Suppliers may have stock 3D images available for reproduction, but custom designs can also usually be created using 3D modeling for an additional cost. Subsurface laser engraving typically works within standard production times, depending on the item quantity and image detail.

Illumachrome

Perhaps the ultimate in color treatment, llumachrome is the process where any four-color digital image — photo, logo, artwork, or other graphic — is applied directly onto the optical crystal.

Customers can choose for the image to be translucent or opaque, and they may even opt to double the imprint space by incorporating two Illumachrome images: one facing forward and one facing backward.

Additionally, Illumachrome art can be flooded onto the entire back side of the award, or it can be placed in a smaller area to serve as an accent. This imprint provides unmatched flexibility as it can accommodate a range of award sizes and shapes, but it is limited to flat crystal surfaces.

Whether complemented with additional imprints like deep etch or showcased alone, an award with Illumachrome presents a magnified appearance and elevated presence.

End with a good base

The saying may go, "Start with a good foundation," but we like to think of bases as the finishing touch. A beautiful base instantly enhances crystal awards by providing an impressive stage for displaying it — and there's something especially magical about lighted bases. These immediately illuminate a design's details and take it from being a showpiece to a showstopper! **GP**



Natalie Albers is a Minnesota-based writer and editor with more than two decades of communications experience for small businesses and large corporations. Her storytelling style has been honed by natural curiosity and journalism training — as well as her own limited attention span. Natalie serves as communications manager at Crystal D.



Images courtesy of Gravotech

From concept to shelf

How to incorporate personalization into your product line

By Rodney Fann

Trends come and go, but personalized products are proving to be a full-blown consumer movement that continues to reshape the retail industry. The global market for personalized gifts was valued at $41 billion in 2023, and Zion Market Research experts have estimated it will reach $142 billion by the end of 2032. With those types of projections, diving in now and establishing your brand could prove quite valuable to your company's bottom line. As a retailer, differentiation is crucial in today's competitive market. Offering personalization through engraving can be an instrumental strategy to attract new customers, enhance your product offerings, and stand out in a crowded market. From engraved jewelry to personalized drinkware, people are searching for products that are unique and meaningful.

So, how do we successfully implement this plan to deliver these products to our physical and virtual shelves? Let's explore together, step by step, how you can incorporate engraving into your retail product line, from concept to shelf.

Product selection

While buying engraving equipment might seem like an obvious first step, there are some aspects you need to consider before jumping in. The products you select for engraving will dictate what machine technology you need, the machine engraving area required, and expansion capabilities you want your machine to have. You should also remember that not every product lends itself to customization, so selecting the proper items is crucial.

Popular materials for engraving are solid, organic materials such as wood, leather, glass, coated metals, and some plastics. In the retail gift market, typically CO_2 lasers



are used to personalize items like leather journals, wallets, bags, etc.

Drinkware has also been a highly successful product for many years, and manufacturers continue to innovate in this space, introducing more products that lend themselves to personalization. Names, initials, and logo designs are typical on tumblers and glassware. Similarly, wooden cutting boards, coasters, and tech products like phone cases offer a perfect canvas for laser engraving. Customers love to add family names, monograms, personal messages, and quotes to these types of items, which instantly convert them into a more personal, cherished gift.

Beyond just selecting customizable products, consider those that have an emotional connection. People are drawn to items that commemorate special occasions like birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries. Engraved picture frames, glasses, and keepsake boxes are perfect for these life events.

While there are many products on the market that lend themselves to customization, don't limit yourself! CO_2 lasers can cut and engrave many materials, which opens a world of possibilities to the artistic, creative types. Creating your own products out of various materials can instantly set you apart from your competition and create a loyal customer following. For existing, established retailers, there's a good chance some of your current product line is customizable, so start with what you have and build on that. You are only limited by your imagination!

Equipment investment

As with most skills in life, we start with the fundamentals and foundational principles. In other words, we have to walk before we can run. With today's technology, engraving equipment is more accessible and affordable than ever. Selecting the right machine can positively transform your business while selecting the wrong one can send you down a path to utter frustration.

It is important to note that not all engravers are created equal. Sure, they all operate on the same basic principles, but you must consider some key factors when making your selection. Engravers — whether rotary or laser — come in different sizes, laser technologies, wattages, and price points. Depending on the scale of your business, you may elect to go for an entry-level machine with a smaller engraving area or for a larger industrial model that offers a larger engraving area or higher laser wattage that will allow you to scale your production. Again, your product selection will dictate your machine selection. Your product materials, finishes, and sizes will help you choose what engraving technology and machine size will work best for you. For example, CO_2 lasers are the most common option when starting out due to the diversity of materials they can process, but a jeweler who wants to personalize precious metals, for example, would benefit from a rotary engraver or fiber laser technology rather than a CO_2 laser. Also, keep in mind your business will depend upon the machine's quality and uptime, so ensure the machine you choose, along with its manufacturer, has a long history of success and support.



While most people focus solely on the machine, you also need to consider the design software the machine uses to operate. Many manufacturers bundle their own software with their machines, while some recommend other graphic design programs on the market. You want to select a machine with software that will not only support your design needs now but also give you options for capability expansion as you grow. Some manufacturers also offer custom software solutions



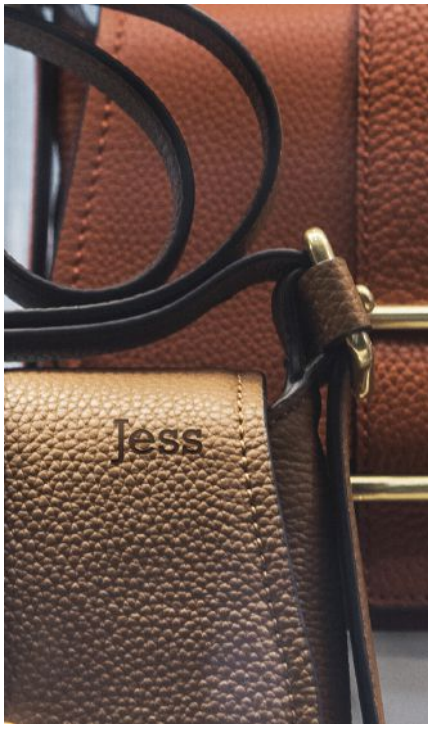
for your specific brand needs to make it as simple as possible for your employees. This is a great option for companies to leverage increased product sales with little to no graphic design capabilities. You should always consult with industry sales professionals to help guide you through the process and determine the right fit based on your product selection, design capabilities, and growth goals when making an equipment investment decision.

Design & customization

Now that you have selected your products and the right machine, you can begin to structure your design options. This is the moment you decide just how creative you want to be. The design options to make your products truly unique are virtually endless.

Offering vector art optimized for engraving such as themed symbols (e.g., geometric patterns, floral designs, or sports) along with a set group of font style choices can give your customers a quick and simple option. Many shops offer a bit more with full customization capabilities, allowing their customers to upload their designs or collaborate with their team to create something more unique. The fact is, you will likely have both types of customers, so a diverse menu of options will allow you to cater to each customer, resulting in more sales.

Additionally, e-commerce technology is advancing rapidly, and many online retailers offer an interactive design experience for their customers. This option engages the customer and provides them with a preview of their product selection with their design superimposed. Giving font, symbol, and position choices further elevates the experience and provides a sense of confidence and ownership in their choice. This type of solution can also be implemented in-store, where customers are not only involved in the design process but also get to see the machine engrave their product right before their eyes. This strategy provides a more powerful impact on customers and can encourage impulse buys. This in-store buzz can also pay dividends, creating free marketing through word of mouth and social media posts.



Workflow & production

With any successful business, careful planning and process implementation are essential to smooth operations. Laser engravers are precise and relatively fast, but owners must consider the design and cycle times to maintain efficiency and profitability.

A small shop might offer same-day service for products such as name badges or an engraved charm. Larger shops producing more volume use bigger machines with larger engraving areas to accommodate several products at once to maximize efficiency. Some companies may also use multiple machines depending on order flow, particularly during seasonal peaks. Custom jigs or fixturing can also help facilitate batch engraving to save time and labor costs. These work particularly well with irregularly shaped items, and most can be created easily on your CO_2 laser with readily accessible sheet materials like acrylic or wood. Utilizing fixtures can also reduce costly errors while increasing your engraving consistency.

In addition, larger shops or online stores can now automate their engravers with their inventory management and order processing systems. When customers place an order online, the automated system will send the product and customization information from the order straight to the engraver for processing. This eliminates manual order entry and helps reduce unnecessary errors, which saves owners on overhead and waste costs.

Marketing & customer engagement

We've discussed some of the methods used to create an interactive experience for your customers with design, but the final piece of the puzzle to success will be reeling in the customers at the outset. Showcase your personalization capabilities across all your channels: website, social media, email marketing campaigns, and in-store displays. Customer testimonials are also a great way to engage your potential buyers with your customers who have had a positive buying experience.



Constructing marketing campaigns for limited-time offers or promotions around special occasion holidays such as Valentine's Day, Christmas, or Mother's Day can help drive business by creating a sense of urgency. Keep customers returning by introducing loyalty programs with discounts or free engraving for your frequent customers. Always include these programs and promotions on your website, social media, and in your email marketing.

Never forget the power of user-generated marketing. Encourage your customers to share photos of their personalized products on social media, tag your business, or use a specific hashtag. Remember, personalization isn't just offering a product; you are selling an experience. Your customers are looking for something unique, tailored specifically to them and whoever they may be buying for. These feelings captured and shared in photos and videos can help build your brand and social community.

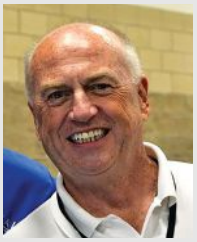
Implementing engraving into your product line is a wise way to tap into the ever-growing demand for personalized products. By selecting the right products that consumers want, investing in the proper equipment and software for your design needs, and streamlining your workflow, you are well on your way to building additional revenue for your business. With creative design options and memorable marketing strategies, you will begin fostering exceptional and personalized shopping experiences that will keep your customers coming back again and again. **GP**



Rodney Fann is an experienced representative in the engraving machine manufacturing industry. He is currently a territory manager for Gravotech. With over 24 years of expertise in the engraving industry as a service and sales consultant, he has assisted clients entering the diverse markets where engraving equipment is utilized.



5 questions *with...* Terry Combs



Terry Combs is a long-time garment decorator and co-host of the 12-year running industry podcast 2 Regular Guys. Beyond his years running production operations around the country, he is in sales and training with Equipment Zone, working from the Tempe, Arizona office.

1 Since it's January, what do you think should be the top New Year's resolutions for apparel decorators?

I was doing a consulting job once and after my report, the president of the company said, "We already know 80% of this." My reply was, "And you paid me to come here to tell you that you haven't done anything about it." In 2025, be your own consultant and look at your business as if you're an outsider. What things can you change to make your business better. Take one thing at a time. Don't get ahead of yourself.

2 How did you get your start in the industry?

I often say, "Armed with my degree in journalism from Ohio University, I accidentally became a screen printer." Starting a part-time screen-printing business right out of college, I fell in love with the industry and have been here ever since.

3 Equipment Zone distributes products in several business categories. How do you stay on top of industry trends?

As a company, we have a lot of interaction with decorators via webinars, in-house training events, trade shows, and literally talking to customers every day. Bottom line, we listen to what our customers and potential customers are saying.

4 Speaking of trends, DTF is here to stay, as they say. How can screen printers best leverage this technology in their shops?

First, I will say "embrace it." No, it does not feel like a screen print. Get over that, because the consumer has far less resistance to this technology than decorators do. For screen printers specifically, there is no dye migration with a DTF transfer. Dye migration is the bleeding of shirt color dyes into your inks when printing man-made materials. With the flood of these man-made fabrics into our marketplace, DTF is the perfect solution to a problem that drives screen printers crazy. Add to that, the trend in the industry over the past several years of more orders, but smaller per order quantities. And of course, the ability to print an unlimited number of colors with a quick and simple set up.

Building on 20 years of DTG decorating at this point, DTF printing has had a quick turnaround from concept to fully commercial production. Screen printers want to compare the speed of an auto to the speed of producing DTF transfers. The new Equipment Zone EZ JET 24 MAX has a production speed of 300 square feet per hour. DTF production has quickly gained ground on comparative production rates, with a fraction of the set up and tear down time of an automatic screen printing press.

5 What's the most important lesson you've learned about the decoration and personalization industries as co-host of the 2 Regular Guys podcast (along with GRAPHICS PRO contributor Aaron Montgomery)?

In our 12 years podcasting every Friday, I've learned how passionate decorators and all participants in our industry are about what they do. Running a garment decorating business comes with the same highs and lows, frustrations, and achievements as running any other kind of business, but few endeavors give you the satisfaction of creativity that our industry does. That's why so many people come into the industry and never leave. **GP**

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Add these items to your *T-shirt* shop

8 ideas that sell

By Marshall Atkinson

If you've been in this industry for a good chunk of time, you probably have T-shirt sales down pat. They are the bread and butter of your business. But if you want to spice things up and keep your shop growing, it may be time to think beyond the T-shirt. Here are eight fresh ideas that go beyond the basics, plus a few tips on marketing them like a pro.

Hoodies: Function meets fashion

Hoodies are like the cool older sibling of the T-shirt. They are stylish, practical, and a lot more expensive — which always adds to your bottom line. Whether you are selling to corporate groups, schools, sports teams, or fashionistas, hoodies are always a great upsell.

Selling tip: Bundle hoodies with T-shirts with similar but different creative designs to create a matching set. Create a bundle with the T-shirt and the hoodie, and add a limited-edition hat that can only be purchased with the bundle.


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Marketing idea: Offer samples to customers or influencers and create social media posts showing them wearing the hoodie. Make sure they post the ads on their channels. Also, to drive traffic, add a QR code in every garment that links to an online store.

Sampling insight: Decorate one hoodie and send it to the decision maker or buyer for your top customers. The creative should be custom to them, as this is a sample for the customer. Make sure it is in their size and favorite color. Include a handwritten notecard with a QR code link to a custom video you made or an online store for them to place a bulk order.

Hats: Small but mighty

Hats may seem small, but they pack a mighty branding punch. Everyone loves a good hat, especially when it has some creative style or is personalized, from trucker hats to beanies. Hats always work for fashion, corporate branding, schools, and sports teams.

Selling tip: Create a "fun collection." How many ways can you decorate a hat? Try using laser-etched leather patches, DTF transfers, silicone high-density emblems, screen-printed logos and graphics, and embroidery. Don't just do the "normal" way of doing something. Consider location, dimension, and coordination with other garments.

Marketing idea: Have a live-activation hat bar. Bring a variety of patches and transfers, and have attendees pick and choose what to embellish a wide assortment of hat styles and colors. Encourage social media engagement with a branded backdrop and signage with hashtags and pre-written phrases.

Sampling insight: When customers order over a certain sales threshold, throw in a complimentary branded hat with their creative embellished. Add a branded flyer showing an assortment of colors, styles, and decoration options. Schedule a sales call follow-up two business days after delivery of the original order and ask how they liked the hat.

Bags & totes: Mobile advertising

Custom bags and totes are like walking billboards, but better because people actually use them! From gym bags to shopping bags to eco-friendly totes, they're perfect for promotional and retail purposes.

Selling tip: Pitch custom bags to corporate customers, local stores, groups, or schools. You'll make them look good to their audience and gain eyeballs on their brand as people use the bags daily.

Marketing idea: The next time you box up an order, place some (or even all, if it is small enough) of the items in a custom-branded tote bag with their logo. Use a style that works for the customer that you can envision them ordering.

Sampling insight: Bags come in all shapes, sizes, colors, construction, and price ranges. Bring in a few and try different embellishment ideas to understand how easy — or difficult decorating the item could be. Get creative and develop some go-to ideas that you can bring to market to customers as an upsell.


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Don't forget the kids!

Children's clothing can be a goldmine for a shop. Entire brands have been built around this market, so rethink how much attention you have paid to this in your area. Parents will buy practically anything from school spiritwear to fun, funky fashion if it makes their little ones look cute.

Selling tip: Create "family matching" or youth versions of best-selling adult offerings. Even if you are marketing corporatewear, branded merch for kids sells.

Marketing idea: Partner with local schools, kid-friendly organizations, and popular area attractions with families. Design something different and beyond making a logo smaller. Have an on-site activity for kids to heat press or print their own shirts. Create an experience they will never forget.

Sampling insight: Don't simply show virtual mock-ups. Produce a few garments and have kids wear them for a photoshoot. Film videos of them wearing the garments and happily playing or doing activities. Sell the sizzle, not the steak.

Bandanas: Versatile & trendy

When was the last time you considered printing a bandana? Whether it's a festival look, a pet accessory, or a fashion statement, bandanas are versatile, easy to decorate, and surprisingly trendy. They are also extremely inexpensive to mail as they can be folded and sent in a regular envelope.

Selling tip: Market them as an extra upsell for outdoor events such as charity runs, music festivals, or fundraisers. The key is to highlight their multiuse appeal.

Marketing idea: Bundle in a bandana with an online store offering. This little accessory adds value, and when customers realize how versatile it is, they might just order a few more.

Sampling insight: For events, include custom-branded bandanas in swag bags. They are useful, low-cost, and bound to give your brand plenty of visibility.

Custom socks: The underrated fashion statement

One fashion tip that has been heard forever is, "Your socks can't be funnier than you." These days, is that really true? Socks used to be the boring gift you dreaded getting for Christmas from your mom. Now? They are quirky, colorful, and can make a fashion statement. Plus, they're an easy upsell with apparel orders.



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Selling tip: Create examples of sock designs to help customers understand their potential. These don't have to wait for the holidays or company swag bags. Ensure the designs are fun, unique, and show off your creativity. You want to spark a conversation.

Marketing idea: Offer a "free pair of socks" campaign for new customers. It's a low-cost way to reel people in and get them talking about your brand (and let's be honest, everyone loves cozy socks).

Sampling insight: Include a free pair of custom socks with every large corporate order. Not only will the client's employees enjoy them, but you'll also get your brand on everyone's feet.

Pet apparel: A growing niche

People love to spoil their fur babies. This sales idea could add some revenue from your current customer segments. Whether pet T-shirts or bandanas, people will go all out to dress up their dogs or cats.

Selling tip: To prime the pump, partner with local pet stores, veterinarians, or groomers with point-of-sale displays, offers, and samples. Use DTF technology to make it incredibly easy to offer custom, digitally-decorated products.

Marketing idea: Host a cute (or even ugly) pet photo contest on social media. The winner will receive a free custom pet shirt. Co-brand it with your sales channel collaborator from the pet store, vet, or groomer.

Sampling insight: Attend local pet events or adoption days and hand out pet bandanas for your brand. Have plenty of samples to show, and an easy-to-use process starts with a QR code on a pop-up banner.

Trendy womenswear

One way to augment sales is to build out items that don't exist anywhere else. Partner with local women's boutiques or stores to offer exclusive, limited-edition collections.

Selling tip: Play up creative and fun local city names, parks, and scenes with fashion-forward decoration. Relabel the items with the boutique name, or create a clothing collection of your own.

Marketing idea: Host a pop-up shop or fashion event to showcase your women's line. Collaborate with influencers, stylists, and personalities to model your pieces and drive buzz. Don't forget the social media!

Final thoughts: Be ready

Being willing to innovate will make a world of difference in keeping your business growing. You have to try new things to see what might stick. Thinking beyond printing a T-shirt doesn't just open up a new source of revenue; it can keep things exciting.

Whatever you learn from trying new ideas will certainly circle back to your best-selling staples. All you have to do is to keep an open mind, be ready for an opportunity, and push your idea forward. Great things can happen when you do! **GP**



Marshall Atkinson lives and works in Mesa, Arizona. He is a frequent contributor to industry magazines and a popular trade show educator. Recognized for his industry education contributions, he was elected to the Academy of Screen and Digital Printing Technologies in 2020.


Alena Ozerova – stock.adobe.com



Image courtesy of Amanda Ferguson, Your Name Here Embroidery.

Embroidery on T-shirts made easy

Tools, tips & techniques for beginners

By Jennifer Cox

Adding embroidery on T-shirts may seem counterproductive. After all, T-shirts are perceived to be a low-end and more disposable garment than most. There is a tendency to think that T-shirts should always be printed or decorated using DTG, vinyl, transfers, or DTF rather than embroidered. There are times when adding embroidery to T-shirts is the best option, based on what the customer is trying to accomplish with these custom shirts.

Choosing the right shirt is the first step to creating quality embroidery on a thin garment like a T-shirt, go with high-quality cotton or cotton-blend shirts that have a smooth, stable, and consistent knit. Avoid the lightweight, slubbed, or more sheer shirts, as they will not hold up well to the embroidery process. Work with mid to heavyweight shirts that have at least a 5.5 oz. or higher weight for the best results.

As is true with all embroidery, the quality of the final product is directly a result of the digitizing. Designs that are sewn onto lightweight knits need to be digitized differently than designs that will be added to a sweatshirt or a hat. Ideally, your digitized design will have an underlay that will help the embroidered area remain stable and flat. The stitch density will be adjusted to generate enough stitches to make a good-looking design while not adding any bulk. No one wants to wear a T-shirt with bulletproof embroidery, take my word on that.

Some designs may need to be



modified to create a good-looking embroidered T-shirt. Tiny lettering often does not fare well on T-shirts, as the stitches fall into and between the ribs of the knit fabric, making the lettering unreadable. Recommend that the tiniest lettering not be included in this particular design or ask if there is a simplified version of the design available. Can any of the layers of the background be eliminated or combined into a single layer? Sometimes walking stitches and outline stitches can make the finished design look messy if there is too much detail. Can the detailed elements be simplified, with less detail in that part of the design? Having an example of a great-looking design adapted for embroidery on T-shirts and a sample of that same design that has not be adapted sewn next to it is a great way to demonstrate the value of modifying a design for this product.

Customers often indicate that they want the design to be a certain size, and that size is often larger than may look good on the finished T-shirt. How often do we hear them say, “Make it as big as possible.” In reality, a left chest design that is roughly 2" high by 3" wide looks right. Larger designs tend to not look as good in that location. One way to demonstrate this design size is to hold up a business card over the design on your customer’s shirt, or on your shirt (you ARE wearing a shirt with your company’s logo on it, right?). Most of the time, the design (or most of it) fits behind the business card, reinforcing the concept that this is an ideal size for this location.

Selecting the right stabilizer is the next step. T-shirts, by their very nature, are made of a fabric that is supple and has very little body to it. Because of this, you need to add a stabilizer that will provide enough support so that the embroidery stitches have something to hang on to and remain where they are placed when the shirt is washed and worn repeatedly. If you are working with a white or light color T-shirt, a traditional cutaway backing creates a shadow behind the embroidered area. For that reason, using a non-woven no-show mesh cutaway stabilizer works



Images courtesy of Amanda Ferguson, Your Name Here Embroidery.



Images courtesy of Adriane Cropley, Rocking My SewJo.



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alenthien – stock.adobe.com

well, as it will not create a footprint behind the embroidered design while providing enough body to create quality embroidery. Several manufacturers offer a no-show mesh product that is also fusible. These are versatile and work well for lightweight and stretchy fabrics like T-shirts. If you are working with a shirt made with performance fabric, use the stabilizers created for this particular fabric, as that backing is designed to support this kind of slippery, stretchy fabric specifically. No-show mesh backings are well-suited for designs worn directly against the body, as they are not at all abrasive.

Needle and thread selections also impact the overall quality of the finished product. Use ballpoint 75/11 needles, as they slide between the fibers of the knit fabric instead of piercing them. If you have not changed out your needles in a while, check them for burrs, as they can snag the fabric and lead to quality issues such as skipped stitches, irregular stitches, and thread breaks. Polyester threads are the way to go on T-shirts, particularly if they are white shirts. Poly threads will hold up to harsher laundry chemicals without fading.

How you hoop the fabric is the next key component to creating excellent embroidery. Once you have fused the stabilizer to the shirt, hoop the T-shirt tightly, evenly, and completely. This is not the time to "cheat" and use a smaller piece of stabilizer. It needs to cover the entire hooped area to effectively stabilize the sewing area. The shirt should be taught in the hoop, yet not stretched out to the extent that the ribs of the knit are no longer straight. By its very nature, knit fabric has stretch. If you stretch it too much in the hoop, the resulting embroidery can sag. If you hoop the fabric too loosely, the embroidery stitches can pull the knit fabric together, creating puckering or curl the design so that the shirt will not lay flat when worn. Using a hooping station will help you achieve consistent hooping and design placement.

Some embroidery equipment runs just about any hooped product well at



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the same speed. Other machines are more sensitive to the materials that are being run, requiring that you adjust the sewing speed to create the best embroidery. Our multihead machine ran at its regular speed, while we had to slow down our older single-head machine by at least 200 smp to create the same results. Keep track of the sewing speeds and the results generated to make it easy to get those same results on similar orders in the future.

One of the final steps for embroidery on T-shirts is the removal of the excess cutaway backing. Few things undermine the impression of quality as quickly as backings that have not been removed or that have been removed poorly, leaving jagged edges of backing. Hold the excess backing in your non-cutting hand and let the shirt fall away from you and the backing you are holding. With a sharp pair of fabric shears, not the embroidery nippers, slice away the excess backing around the design. This will help you avoid cutting the shirt and create a smooth edge on the backing that remains on the shirt.

Understanding why your customer wants to order embroidered T-shirts will help you recommend the best products and make design modification suggestions so that they meet their objective. A limited-edition embroidered T-shirt gives a much different impression than a printed one. Embroidered T-shirts may be the best choice for an organization that needs a lower cost but long-lasting shirt for its staff. Businesses that sell their branded apparel products may like the higher perceived value of an embroidered T-shirt, as they will get more profits from these shirts as compared to printed shirts. Knowing how to create top-quality embroidered T-shirts will ensure that your customers keep coming back for all their decorated apparel needs. **GP**



Jennifer Cox is a co-founder and 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.

2025 DTG outlook

Direct-to-garment printing is far from over

By Kristine Shreve



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Whenever a new decoration technique comes along, the first thing a lot of "experts" in the industry do is proclaim the demise of the last "hot" decoration technique. Sublimation was supposed to kill screen printing. Direct-to-garment (DTG) printing was supposed to knock out sublimation, at least for clothing. Direct-to-film (DTF) printing is now being proclaimed as the "DTG killer" and so on down the line. The reality is that all the techniques that were supposed to be killed off by the one that came next are still thriving, and all still have their place and their utility. That's not a good story, or good fodder for an article, so you don't hear that as much. It's much more fun to pronounce gloom and doom than it is to say "Hey, this new thing has happened, and it probably won't have much impact on the old things that came before it." Who's going to get riled up over that headline?

DTG was once the hot new thing and, back in the day, a lot of people were losing their minds over it. Printing directly on garments! Printing on dark colored garments! White ink! It seemed like a whole new world of printing had opened up. Of course, there were blips along the way. There's a learning curve with DTG. Shirts had to be


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pretreated. Ink formulations didn't always work so well in the beginning, and printers had issues too. As with any new technique, there had to be a few shakedown cruises before the kinks got worked out.

Advances in DTG technology

As time has gone on, DTG printing has evolved, and new advancements in technology and ink formulation have occurred. In a press release shared by Printing United Expo, Ricoh Printing Systems of America announced the release of a "cutting-edge direct-to-garment (DTG) printing technology for polyester fabrics." Kornit Digital is touting a "water-free and pretreatment-free DTG printing solution that reduces waste and pollution" for the eco-friendly and sustainability crowd. There have also been advances in printhead technology and improved drop ejection control, allowing the ink to be placed precisely. These advancements ensure that DTG printing is keeping up with the times and addressing the concerns and needs of those shops that will be using it.

Another way DTG printing is keeping up with the times is through the use of 3D printing. A company called Stratasys, which is an American-Israeli additive manufacturing company, launched a printer in 2024 that 3D prints designs onto denim and other textiles. This technique uses a 3D printer, rather than an inkjet printer, but the print is still going directly onto the garment, which qualifies the technique for the DTG printing category. The company also offers tray kits in two sizes, so those who already own a

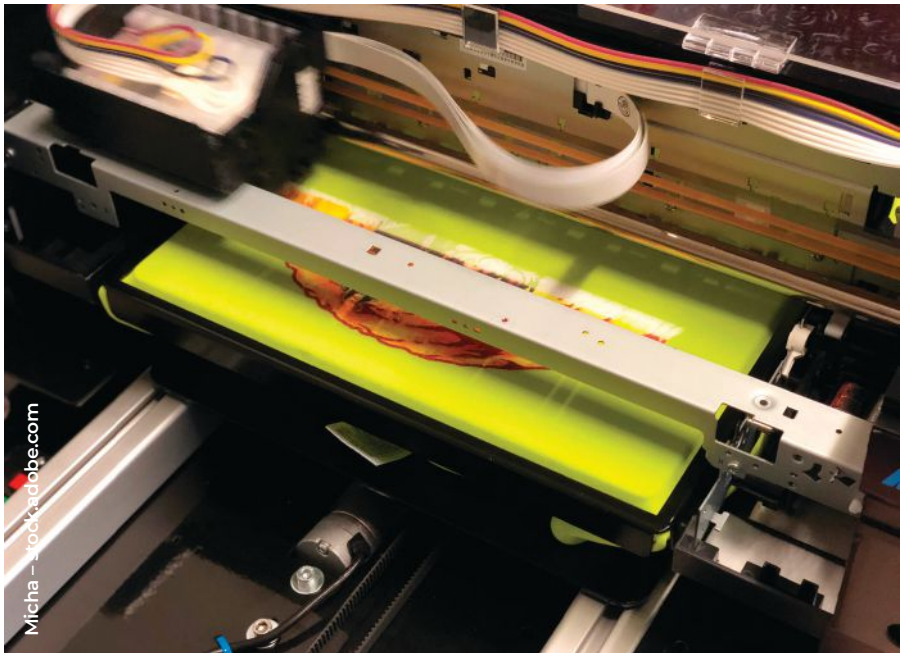

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Image coutesy of ColDesi

3D printer can convert their printer to this sort of printing. 3D DTG printing may have a huge impact on the trend of upcycling garments, decreasing waste and giving garments which would otherwise be discarded a new lease on life.



Images coutesy of Karl Tipre

Another advancement in DTG printing technology and processes as to do with artificial intelligence (AI). While there may be controversy in some spots in the industry about using AI to create art or designs, AI does have other uses when it comes to DTG printing. It can be used in production processes to automate the printing process, predicting when printer maintenance will be needed and order supplies. AI can also be used for quality control, monitoring print quality and managing print color.

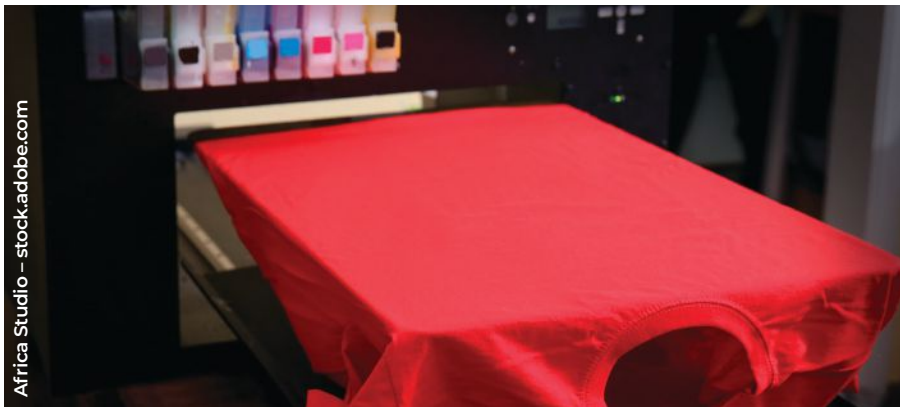
DTG printing fills a niche

Leaving aside innovations and environmentally-friendly advancements, there are also many traditional reasons why DTG printing has been popular and will remain popular. One reason is that DTG printing is ideal for smaller garment runs. You can create one-offs or small runs of a particular design at a lower cost than screen printing. DTG can also be very useful for rush orders as you can fire up the printer and print off a number of shirts fairly quickly. Virtually every article on DTG ever written, including this one, will mention the relative ease of setup and the fact that it's relatively cost effective to do smaller runs with DTG, when the same can not be said for other garment decoration disciplines. If your shop does a lot of one-offs or small orders, DTG printing may well be the right decoration technique for you.

Another advantage of DTG printing is the durability of the prints. Now, granted, in order to achieve this durability, shirts need to be pre-treated and cured properly before wearing and washing but, provided that happens and provided washing is done according to fabric care directions, the print should last the life of the garment. The "official" number of washes a DTG print can last is 50, but it's entirely probable that a print will last longer than that if properly created and properly washed.

Along with durability, DTG prints, done correctly, are also about quality.





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Images coutesy of ColDesi



The prints are high resolution with sharp detail and can be photo realistic. DTG is also a good choice for prints with lots of colors or gradients. Prints done with a DTG printer are also relatively lightweight with very little hand. For some garments, like T-shirts, this can make a great deal of difference. Heavy prints that weigh down the fabric are uncomfortable to wear and often don't present the nicest finished look.

Of course, when talking about DTG printing and why it's still relevant, one area not to neglect is ease of set up and the ability to duplicate results. While screen printing is an art form, it's one that requires a variety of equipment and a knowledge of various inks. There are also things to understand about interactions between various types of ink and various types of fabric (hello, dye migration) and other issues that may occur. While DTG has a learning curve as well, and good printers aren't exactly inexpensive, once you get the basic procedure down, you're likely to be able to turn out garments quite quickly and recoup your investment.

We have to talk about the ability to print on dark clothing. That has always been the holy grail for many decorators and, for years, it was only possible with screen printing. The advent of DTG printing put decorating dark garments in the reach of more decorators. While a DTG printer can be a significant investment, and supplies are not inexpensive, DTG is, in some cases, a more affordable option than screen printing. DTG printing is also something that can be relatively mobile, so decorators could theoretically go to sporting events or conventions and print garments on-site. Live event personalization can be a very profitable niche for decorators.

Like any garment decoration technique, DTG printing has evolved since its introduction. When DTG first came out, printers were temperamental and had issues with clogs. Since then, ink formulations have improved, as has printhead technology, which means printing goes more smoothly and has less issues. Pre-treatment formulations and options have gotten better as well. You can also now buy pretreated shirts from some suppliers. While DTG is no longer the new kid on the block, it has by no means been replaced. Like every other garment decoration technique that has come before it, DTG has found its niche and will most likely thrive there for a very long time. **GP**



Kristine Shreve is the founder and CEO of Kristine Shreve Consulting which offers writing, marketing, and business development services. She is also the creator of the Business + Women podcast and founder of Women in Garment Decoration Facebook group.



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MIAMI VICE *oasis*

From '80s TV to modern volleyball merch

By Lon Winters

Miami Vice was an American crime drama television series starring Don Johnson as Sonny Crocket and Phillip Michael Thomas as Rico Tubbs, two detectives working undercover in Miami, Florida. The show ran for five seasons in the 1980s and drew upon that decade's new-wave culture visuals featuring pop music of the time. It was said to be the first show to look new and different since color TV was invented.

Most episodes focused on drug trafficking and prostitution and usually ended in gun battles before the criminals were apprehended. An undercurrent of cynicism and futility underlies the entire series. The stars repeatedly refer to the "Whac-A-Mole" nature of drug crimes. There were a fascinating number of industries that revolved around the drug trade, including money laundering, bail bondsmen, and attorneys who service drug smugglers among others. Miami was a sort of Barbary Coast of free enterprise gone berserk.

The series was an instant hit, and its first season saw an unprecedented 15 Emmy Award nominations. While the first few episodes contained elements of standard police procedures, the producers soon abandoned that in favor of a distinctive style. Influenced by an Art Deco revival, no earth tones were used in the production. Each episode of the series cost $2 million to produce and much of it was filmed in Miami's South Beach area, which at the time was a bit rough and even undesirable. Some street corners were so run down that the production crews repainted the exterior of buildings before filming. The crew went to great lengths to find the right settings and props. Miami Vice is credited with a wave of support for preserving Miami's famous Art Deco architecture. Many of the buildings and beachfront hotels have been renovated, making South Beach a popular destination for tourists and celebrities.

> "You've gotta know the rules before you can break 'em. Otherwise it's no fun."
> Sonny Crocket

The Oasis

The Oasis opened in 2004 in Broomfield, Colorado, as a premier volleyball facility with seven indoor and three outdoor sand courts along with a full restaurant and bar. The Oasis offers year-round league play and tournaments for all levels of volleyball player, from recreational to competitive. The team at The Oasis has worked hard on the details — from the beach chairs in the sand to the music playing throughout the building. That brings us to our story — a new design for the fall and early winter.

Direction for this project was straight forward: "Want to use the Miami Vice logo and sub in Oasis Volley for the type." Can do.

We did need some reference, however. We took to Google and found the traditional Miami Vice logo. We imported a version into Adobe Illustrator. This layout guided our composition. The bright colors would draw strong contrast against the substrates.











With transparency pushed way back, we could start drawing and coloring.

The shapes were easy to build using the rectangle and oval tools. First, we worked on the yellow ring with the fade drop off. We selected the ring and opened the Gradient Menu with "linear gradient" set from the build and spot color at 100% opacity and transition of the same color at zero. We had the drop off at zero opacity and 66% on the location. While selected, we took our base plate designated spot color and drug it to the gradient slider and set it for 100% opacity and repeated the process for the other 0%. We didn't want our white printer or base stopping at the same place as our color, so we slid the opacities to 5% to 61%, tucking the base back a bit so the color would overlap. Since we had such bright colors, we had to get creative on how these colors lift during wet-on-wet printing. We sacrificed the turquoise and, to avoid a stucco texture from the ink split, we chose those areas in the transparency menu and set the opacity to a 60% halftone, allowing some of the turquoise ink to fall onto the shirt directly. Finally, we gave some gutter room for the inks to stay clean. We selected the base (less the black), went to the stroke menu, added a 0.35 point stroke, and designated 100% white, which would not output. We then adjusted to our favorite gutter settings. For Cap we selected "round cap," on "corner" we selected "round corner," on "align stroke" we selected "align stroke to inside." Magic. Though the white printer or base plate



wasn't technically a color (really more of a support system) it had a very necessary role and the biggest part to play. We reduced the amount of base where it counted and kept it solid where we wanted opacity and vibrancy.

Once our seps were complete on





layers and in spot colors, we placed the file on our Illustrator art board where our registration marks, grayscale spies, and job information live and outputted on CTS (computer to screen) with a frequency of 45 lpi half-tone at a 22.5 degree angle and a round shape. Screens were work hardened beginning with the N-166 threads per inch followed by a flash and heated smoothing screen. The colors were on N-272s and all at 45 N/cm^2. We used 65/90/65 triple ply, duel durometer squeegees with flood and print speeds moderate with minimal pressures.

A film adaptation based on the Miami Vice series was released in 2006 and had the same director. The conception of the show may have simply been "MTV cops." The initial idea was for a movie about a pair of vice cops in Miami originally titled Gold Coast was ultimately renamed Miami Vice. **GP**

Lon Winters is founder and president of Colorado-based Graphic Elephants, an apparel decorating studio and international consulting firm. He was inducted into the Academy of Screen and Digital Printing Technologies in 2013 and is widely recognized for his contribution to the graphic printing industry. Learn more at graphicelephants.com.

Economic forecast

Expect a welcome economic rebound

By Phillip M. Perry

Clearing *skies with a chance of showers.* Businesses can look forward to a gradually improving operating environment in 2025, thanks to lower interest rates, moderating inflation, and steady if unspectacular growth in the nation's overall economic activity.

"We look for real GDP growth of 2.5% in 2025," said Bernard Yaros Jr., Lead U.S. Economist at Oxford Economics. (Gross Domestic Product, the total value of the nation's goods and services, is the most commonly utilized measure of economic growth. "Real" GDP subtracts the effects of inflation).

The good news is that the 2.5% boost is not far off what economists peg as the nation's "natural growth rate" — one that supports business activity and maintains full employment. And reduced volatility in the GDP growth pattern in recent years suggests the nation is on a glide path to a so-called "soft landing," avoiding a recession after a lengthy inflationary binge (see chart on page 52).

Despite its positive nature, the GDP figure for 2025 is slightly lower than the 2.7% anticipated when 2024 numbers are finally tallied. That's because the nation is in a so-called "late-stage expansion," characterized by a tendency to slow down while maintaining sufficient force to invigorate commercial operations.



Who is Danny – stock.adobe.com

Fair winds

In 2025, business owners can look forward to a decline in both interest rates and inflation — two bugbears that have drained profits in recent times. "We anticipate a federal funds interest rate of 2.75% by the end of 2025, down from a recent 4.75%," said Yaros. "And we look for inflation to average 2.2% in the final quarter of 2025, which will be within spitting distance of the Fed's 2% target." That's an improvement from the 2.5% inflation level toward the end of 2024. (These figures represent the Federal Reserve's preferred measure of inflation: the "core personal consumption expenditure deflator (PCED)" which strips out volatile food and energy prices).

Relief from the costs of interest and inflation will help fatten the bottom lines of businesses everywhere. "We anticipate corporate profits will increase 9.6% in 2024 and 9.0% in 2025, up from their 6.9% gain in 2023," said Yaros.

Reports from the field confirm the economists' optimistic view. "Our members are looking forward to a growth year in 2025, largely from expectations that interest rates will decline," said Tom Palisin, executive director of The Manufacturers' Association, a York, Pa.,-based consortium with nearly 500 member companies. The change in fortunes can't come soon enough,

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he added. "High interest rates have been putting constraints on many of our members who have been trying to maintain their financial margins, so relief in this area will be helpful."



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Healthy employment

The economy does better when people are optimistic, since consumer spending accounts for a large portion of the nation's business activity. While consumers remain troubled by the residual effects of inflation in the form of high prices for gas and groceries, they remain in a fairly good mood. "We look for consumer confidence to move slightly higher in 2025," said Scott Hoyt, senior director of consumer economics for Moody's Analytics.

Why the optimism? Healthy employment levels. "We look for the unemployment rate to end 2025 at 4.2% and 2026 at 4.2%," said Yaros. This is roughly in line with the 4.1% reported toward the end of 2024. (Many economists peg an unemployment rate of 3.5% to 4.5% as the "sweet spot" that balances the dual risks of inflationary wage escalation and economic recession.)

If favorable unemployment figures will encourage consumer spending, employers should also enjoy relief from the deleterious effects of the past year's tight labor conditions. Indeed, a slowdown in the rate of hiring has already helped loosen the employment market. "Labor shortages are a thing of the past in most regions," said Bill Conerly, principal of his own consulting firm in Lake Oswego, Oregon. "When companies want to hire, they're able to find the people they want, unless they're looking for something really unusual or if they're not willing to pay the required salary."

And speaking of salary: Softening employment growth has given workers less bargaining power, so employers are experiencing some much-needed relief from the rising trendline of worker wages. Entry-level hourly wage increases came to 3.7% in 2024 at Palisin's member companies, markedly lower than the vigorous 8%-10% levels clocked for each of the previous two years. (Historically, such increases have tended to settle in the 2.5% to 3.0% range).

National figures concur. "The Employment Cost Index (ECI) is slowing," said Hoyt, referring to a common measure of average worker wages. "We are forecasting 2.8% growth in 2025, compared to 3.9% in 2024 and 4.5% in 2023."

Despite the ongoing de-escalation in the ECI, Hoyt said it remains healthy enough to support consumer spending, as does the expected increase in the nation's total personal income level, an important driver of business activity. Like the ECI, it is expected to follow a familiar 2025 trendline: a healthy increase despite de-escalation. "Mainly because of slower job growth, we have the increase in wage and salary income slowing to 4.7% in 2025, compared to our expectation of 6.6% for 2024, and 5.4% for 2023," said Hoyt.

Maybe it's a looser labor market, but employers are in no hurry to trim their employee rosters. "Employers want to maintain their ability to jump on the growth side once the economy rebounds a little," said Hoyt. "So, employment levels have held fairly steady."

Housing rebounds

Economists expect healthy growth in housing activity, a mighty driver for the economy. "We forecast housing starts to increase by 6.2% in 2025, after falling by 4.7% in 2024 and declining 8.4% in 2023," said Yaros.

Why the rebound? A decline in the cost of money and a concomitant


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loosening of credit standards. "Lower mortgage rates should help the single-family home market," said Conerly. "It will be a little less painful for people with 3% or 4% mortgages to give them up, sell their current houses and move up."

Lower interest rates should also reinvigorate commercial construction activity — a sector that has been underperforming. "The nonresidential side has a kind of bad reputation right now, especially when people think of downtown office or downtown retail," said Conerly. "But office and retail are doing okay in many suburban areas. And a lot of the retail sector has been under-built. People thought we were totally abandoning going to the store, and it turns out we're not."

However, many areas of the country may continue to experience lackluster activity when it comes to multifamily residential, hotel and office construction. A change in fortune will not happen overnight. "With lower interest rates, there'll be an easier time lining up project financing at acceptable cost," said Anirban Basu, Chairman & CEO of Sage Policy Group (sagepolicy.com). "But these things take time. We might see some softness in a meaningful fraction of contractors in 2025. And then perhaps things get a bit better in 2026 as these lower interest rates prompt more activity."

One sector that will do well out of the gate: large-scale infrastructure projects, computer chip and battery manufacturing plants, and data centers. "This is the era of the megaproject," said Basu. "Future prospects are quite positive for contractors who are able to participate in major public works." Much of this is driven by the reemergence of industrial policymaking in America, an economic transformation that has led to programs such as the Inflation Reduction Act, the Chips and Science Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

All told, while economists expect lower interest rates to fuel a positive turn in business sentiment, they are hedging their bets for 2025. "We look for business investment to rise 4.1% in 2024 and 4.1% in 2025, compared to 6.0% in 2023," said Yaros.

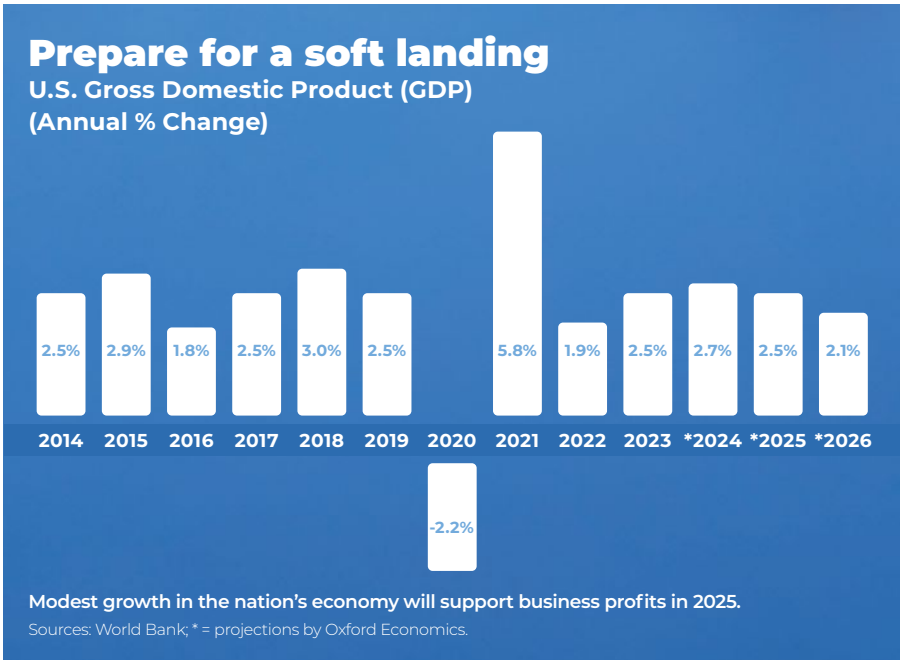
Supply chains

Businesses in all sectors will benefit a national commitment to reposition supply chains in the United States. "Logistical issues are persuading many CEOs to place production closer to final consumers," said Basu. "There is also a trend toward favoring nations that provide significant protection for intellectual property."

Relief from delivery disruptions can't come soon enough for many operations. "Supply chain issues are still present," said Palisin. "We are seeing shortages around semiconductor chips and some other technological products, as well as chemicals, equipment assemblies, and metal parts. That's causing production delays and late deliveries."

Palisin cites a number of causes for supply chain issues. Over the past year the nation has lacked sufficient skilled workers to meet production demands. And in an environment of high interest rates and slowing growth, companies did not invest as much as required in new facilities. "As for the semiconductor situation specifically, there's this huge demand coming up against a shortfall in global supply," said Palisin.

While the U.S. is committed to the reshoring of production, the task of increasing domestic manufacturing and delivery systems will take





Shevon – stock.adobe.com

time. "We are not going to turn things around right away," said Palisin.

The road ahead

Despite optimism on the part of businesses and consumers, economists eye some dark clouds on the horizon. In the opening months of 2025, they advise keeping a close watch on the following areas for any deleterious changes:

- **Interest rates:** "Going forward, the major concern for businesses will be the pace of interest rate cuts and where they will end up," said Yaros.
- **Inflation:** "If the consumer price index returns to positive territory, that could throw a wrench into many business plans," said Conerly.
- **Tariffs:** "Tariffs amount to price increases for our members who have to buy materials from abroad," said Palisin.
- **Geopolitics:** "An increasing level of turmoil around the world can disrupt supply chains, throwing a monkey wrench into the economy," said Conerly.

Concerning as these risks are, economists anticipate a fairly benign operating environment in 2025. "The U.S. economy has been remarkably resilient despite all the hits it's taken over the past few years," said Yaros. "We don't anticipate a recession, as the Federal Reserve will be dialing back the restrictiveness of monetary policy, and there are no glaring imbalances in the economy." GP



Award-winning journalist **Phillip M. Perry** has published widely in the business management press. He can be reached at linkedin.com/in/phillipmperry.









Essential shop tools for 2025

Take your customization business to the next level

By Howard Potter

A key factor to take into consideration when purchasing tools for your shop are your goals. Ask yourself and your team:

- How long do you plan on being in business?
- What type of space do you currently have? Is there room to grow if you choose?
- Can you hire enough staff if needed, or are you a one-person show?
- What is your power source and how much can it handle?
- What types of products do you want to customize?

Every company is unique and offers something different to their customer base, and I hope this article allows you to see your full potential. If you choose to grow your company or simply maintain, the best tools make the workload easier.

It's well after the COVID-19 pandemic and it seems everyone is still having issues finding help. Those who aren't scrambling for employees researched and invested beforehand to get ahead of the curve during the pandemic. They worked to find processes that truly expanded in-house product customization and made it easy for teams to teach new hires who haven't done customization work before.

First, let me list which processes I suggest you look into investing in and why, since I have personally invested in and built out pricing and production for each — while working with my team in the process.

- Direct-to-film (DTF) printing
- Laser engraving
- UV printing
- Embroidery
- Vinyl graphics

Direct to film

Why did I list DTF first although it is still such a new process for our industry? I have been in this industry for 21 years and I have never seen a process so powerful out of the gate. We ordered our machine from ColDesi, which was the DTF 24H4, at the end of 2023 and had it installed and up and running by the end of January of 2024. We slowly rolled it out to our customers to educate them on the process of the full-color print along with the quality they get for the money. We purchased the largest printer they had, and then over a three-month period, we purchased four Hotronix Air Fushion heat presses to keep up with the demand. All of this equipment takes up less than 250 square feet of space to pack a production output punch! This year we will produce around $750,000 with the printer.

Laser engraving

We have only been doing laser engraving for three years. We started off with our 3D laser to be able to pound out several units of drinkware per hour. It also allows us to laser engrave on to wood and more! Depending on the size of the design, we can hit 100+ pieces per hour with ease.





Two months later, we invested into a 2D laser which allows us to laser engrave leatherette patches and anodized metal — like pens, awards, and more. We can laser a pen in under three seconds and easily produce around 60-plus patches an hour.

The last laser we invested in was our UV laser. What a game changer. We can now laser engrave glassware and crystal in-house. We easily get 50 to 60 glasses done per hour. And all three of these machines only take up 100 square feet of space.

UV printing should really be second place as you can print full-color onto just about anything — depending on the machine you have. I invested in the LOGOJET UVx90i which has a print area of 24" X 36" and can fit anything up to 6" under the print heads to print full color onto the surface. The other game changer is creating UV transfers to hand-apply certain items to ramp up production even faster. Our main goal was printing normal yard signs and 24" X 36" yard signs to reduce our cost in vinyl graphics and labor, ramping production up faster. While this machine prints yard signs, our team can be doing something else and doubling our output. This machine takes up less than 50 square feet of space and packs a major punch!

Embroidery

Embroidery is the second process our company started with from our home 19 years ago. It is a very expensive process to get into, but it is worth it in the end. We started with two single heads in our home with a 14' X 14' room, where I also designed and did sublimation. Now, we have four single heads, a two-head, and a six-head machine. This all fits in a room that is only 650 square feet and produces around $900,000 in production. And we still haven't maxed out what we can produce. The other fun fact is average loans on these machines are five years and the average machine, if taken care of, can last more than 20 years. So, while the machine is not cheap, your ROI is huge because you don't have equipment payments for 15 years. Our total investment with software is around $225,000 and all of the equipment, except for two new single heads, has been paid off for years. No matter what, you will always want a minimum of one single head for sew outs, names, numbers, etc. to ramp production up. Always create production options.

Vinyl graphics

Vinyl graphics are another old school technology that can make your shop well rounded. We have a 54" and a 64" vinyl printer that both print and die cut if needed. We also have a 60" plotter and two laminators. At one point, we had all of them in one space and it took up around 200 square feet. I have to be honest about this process — it is a moneymaker, but I never have really pushed it the way we could be due to how fast we naturally grow. We produce around $300,000 a year in vinyl graphics. We use this process both for our in-house needs and to make us well-rounded for all customer needs. You can make serious margins with this process.

So, no matter if you are looking to simply offer one process or add to what your company offers, it pays to become well-rounded and less dependent on anyone else doing work for you. These processes and equipment recommendations will allow you to offer more and do more work with the same amount of staff members, making it easier to pay the equipment off, keep your clients coming through your doors, and investing more into your staff. This essential list can take your company and team to a whole new level, and our company is proof that it works! GP



Howard Potter is the co-owner and CEO of A&P Master Images, along with his wife, Amanda Potter. Their company offers graphic design, screen printing, embroidery, sublimation, vinyl graphics, and promotional items. Learn more at masteryourimage.com.



Outsourcing

The smart strategy for business & e-commerce owners

By Matthew Rhome

WrightStudio – stock.adobe.com

In the world of small business and e-commerce, staying competitive is a constant challenge. One highly effective strategy is to outsource the production of items you don't manufacture yourself. Not only can this approach streamline your operations, but it also offers numerous benefits that can keep your customers satisfied while boosting your business.

Prevent customer exodus

In a competitive marketplace, retaining customers is essential. If your product range is limited, customers may be drawn to competitors who offer a more comprehensive selection. By outsourcing products you don't manufacture, you can effectively meet your customers' diverse needs and retain their loyalty.

For example, you might produce uniforms and T-shirts for a local school. However, by also providing parking stickers, buttons, or temporary tattoos for spirit week from a reputable manufacturer, your store can address all their needs. This reduces the likelihood of customers seeking these additional products from your competitors.

Moreover, ensuring that these outsourced products meet your quality standards fosters trust and loyalty. Customers will value the consistency and reliability of your offerings, confident they can rely on your business for both unique and complementary items.

Furthermore, by maintaining a consistent supply of diverse offerings, you enhance the shopping experience, ensuring that customers perceive your business as reliable and staying ahead of emerging market trends. This approach not only encourages repeat business but also strengthens customer loyalty.

Reduce overhead

Investing in manufacturing equipment can be prohibitively expensive for small businesses. However, by outsourcing the production of items you do not manufacture in-house, you can significantly lower these costs and allocate your resources more efficiently. This approach also helps to reduce labor expenses.

Outsourcing enables you to focus on your core business. For instance, instead of investing funds to create yard signs — which necessitates additional machinery, space, and employee training — you can source them from a reliable supplier. This approach allows you to offer a wider product range without the high costs associated with acquiring new equipment.

The savings gained from avoiding substantial capital investments can be redirected toward other critical areas of your business, such as marketing, updating essential equipment, or further expanding your core product offerings.

Expand product range

Outsourcing products that you don't manufacture yourself allows your business to swiftly broaden its product offerings without the limitations imposed by in-house production. This approach enables you to tap into a wider array of goods and services, potentially increasing your market reach and customer base. The flexibility gained through outsourcing is especially advantageous for small businesses and e-commerce owners, who often face the pressure to rapidly adapt to fluctuating market trends and evolving customer demands.

Furthermore, diversifying your product range through outsourcing lets you explore new categories with minimal risk. If a specific product line underperforms, you won't have made significant investments in expensive equipment or skilled labor, making it easier to pivot your strategy without crippling losses. This can lead to a more agile business model that is capable of seizing opportunities as they arise and navigating the challenges of a competitive market landscape.

Quality control

Outsourcing doesn't mean relinquishing control over the quality of the products you offer; in fact, it can significantly enhance your overall business strategy. By carefully selecting reputable suppliers who align with your brand values and establishing stringent quality criteria, you can ensure that the outsourced products consistently meet your brand's high standards and expectations. This process begins with conducting thorough research to vet potential suppliers, which may include checking their industry reputation, analyzing reviews and testimonials, and evaluating their operational capabilities.

Forming strong partnerships with these suppliers based on trust and transparency is crucial. Open communication and regular updates can help both parties stay aligned on quality expectations and any changes in demand. By maintaining high standards and implementing regular quality checks — such as sample inspections and performance evaluations — you reinforce your reputation for excellence in the marketplace. This



commitment to quality is essential for building customer trust and loyalty, as customers are more likely to return when they know they can count on the quality of your products. This not only contributes to long-term success but also fosters a loyal customer base that advocates for your brand.

Time savings

Time is the most valuable resource for any business, and managing production in-house can be a significant drain on this resource. By outsourcing production, companies can save valuable time and concentrate on other critical aspects of their operations, such as marketing, customer service, and strategic planning.

Reducing time to market is pivotal in staying ahead of the competition and meeting consumer demands effectively. In this fast-paced world, businesses must rapidly turn concepts into tangible products, ensuring they reach consumers while demand is high. A quick time to market not only maximizes revenue opportunities but also solidifies a brand's reputation as an innovator. Efficient time management and strategic outsourcing can streamline production and reduce development cycles, allowing businesses to launch new products swiftly. Adapting to market trends with agility while maintaining quality ensures long-term success and customer satisfaction.

Risk mitigation

Manufacturing in-house comes with various risks, including production delays, equipment failures, and supply chain disruptions. By outsourcing, you can mitigate these risks and ensure a more stable and reliable product supply.

Outsourcing not only streamlines your operations but also enables you to diversify your supply chain, thereby reducing dependency on a single source of materials or services. This strategic diversification is crucial in today's unpredictable market, as it can help safeguard your business against unexpected disruptions, whether they stem from natural disasters, geopolitical issues, or supplier failures.

By having multiple suppliers or service providers, you create a buffer that enhances your resilience and ensures continuity in your product offerings. This approach not only mitigates risks but can also lead to improved quality and cost-effectiveness, ultimately allowing your business to remain competitive and responsive to market demands.

Focus on core competencies

Every business possesses unique strengths and core competencies that define its identity and competitive edge. These strengths can range from specialized knowledge and skills to proprietary technologies or exceptional customer service. By outsourcing products and services that fall outside these core areas, businesses can concentrate their efforts and resources on what they do best, ultimately enhancing their brand's distinct value proposition.

If you're a sign company facing a request to provide custom shirts for a customer, outsourcing this task can be a strategic move. Normally focused on creating visual displays and signage, your core competency might not involve textile production or apparel design. By collaborating with a specialized garment printer, you can ensure high-quality shirts that meet your customer's specifications without diverting resources or expertise away from your primary business operations. This partnership allows you to offer value-added services and expand your product offerings, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and potentially driving new avenues for profitability.

This strategic emphasis on core competencies allows your business to maximize efficiency and innovation, enabling you to refine your offerings and improve overall quality. By focusing on your strengths, you not only stand out in the market but also deliver exceptional products and services that clearly differentiate you from your competitors, fostering customer loyalty and driving sustainable growth in the long run.

Cost efficiency

Outsourcing presents a valuable opportunity for substantial cost savings by minimizing capital investments, labor costs, and operational expenses linked to in-house production. By delegating certain tasks or functions to external providers, businesses can significantly reduce the financial burden associated with maintaining a large workforce and the infrastructure necessary for production. These savings can then be strategically reinvested in various aspects of your business, such as research and development, marketing efforts, or enhancing customer service, all of which foster growth and innovation.

Moreover, the cost efficiency gained from outsourcing enables businesses to offer more competitive pricing on their products and services. This not only attracts additional customers but also boosts sales volume, as a wider audience is drawn in by lower prices and improved offerings. By leveraging the expertise and resources of specialized outsourcing partners, companies can improve their operational effectiveness without compromising on quality. This strategic advantage positions your business for sustained long-term success, allowing you to adapt to market changes more quickly and effectively while maintaining a focus on your core competencies. In a rapidly evolving business landscape, outsourcing serves as a powerful tool to enhance overall performance and drive profitability. **GP**



Matthew Rhome launched the first commercially available DTG Printer, Revolution, obtaining the first U.S. Patent for DTG printer technology. With over 45 years in garment decoration, his contributions greatly influenced DTG's success at Brother International and Epson America. Matthew has excelled in printer technology, business ownership, invention, and equipment design.

A quick guide to color mapping in Photoshop

By Stephen Romaniello

Color is one of the most significant factors in our visual experience. Humans react to color emotionally. Cool, subdued colors can calm our senses, and warm, saturated colors can excite and motivate us. Color affects the decisions of our daily lives, such as whether we purchase a certain product or whether to cross the street. It affects our physical and mental state and contributes to our sense of well-being.

Color mapping

Because color plays such an important role in our lives, how we use it to visually communicate ideas is essential to the success of our images. The term "color mapping" refers to operations that go beyond brightness and contrast adjustments and simple color fills. These operations provide the means to alter the basic characteristics of color without compromising image detail. They are used to change the entire color scheme of an image or to create eye-popping graphic effects such as brilliant color transformation, high-contrast art, gradient-based colorization, and vibrant posterization. There are also new AI techniques that produce astonishing color shifts.

Image editing software packages such as Adobe Photoshop and Corel PaintShop Pro provide a plethora of features that map color. This article uses Adobe Photoshop to demonstrate these features.

Adjustments

The color-mapping operations are found in the Adjustments panel **(Fig. 1)**. Keep in mind that when an adjustment is performed with any of these techniques, a new *adjustment layer* is automatically generated along with a *layer mask*, so that the adjustment can be altered or concealed at any time during the workflow. **(Fig. 2)**.

Changing the hue

The most basic color mapping process command is the Hue/Saturation control that alters the three basic color characteristics of an image: hue, saturation, and lightness. Dragging the Hue slider to change relative color relationships of the image or selection, can produce some beautiful and unexpected color combinations, changing the reality of an everyday landscape into a brilliant fauvist work of art. After all, who can resist the temptation to transform an everyday blue sky into an electric green and ordinary green foliage to an explosion of pink and red? **(Fig. 3)**.

By default, the numbers you see in the Hue field are based on the affected color's position on the color wheel and are expressed in degrees. Values in the box reflect the amount of rotation from the original color. Dragging the slider to the right, to a positive value, indicates a clockwise rotation of the color wheel. Dragging it to the left, to a negative value, indicates a counterclockwise rotation.

The colored bars at the bottom of the panel are a graphic indicator of how the colors change as the Hue slider is dragged. By default, the color bars are aligned. The top color bar represents a color wheel that has been cut at the 180 degree point, or blue. As you drag the Hue slider, the top color bar remains in place and represents the entire range of colors prior to the change. The bottom color bar is dynamic and realigns with the colors on the top bar to reflect the relative change of colors.

Targeting color ranges

The pop-up list at the top of the panel targets a specific range of colors. The

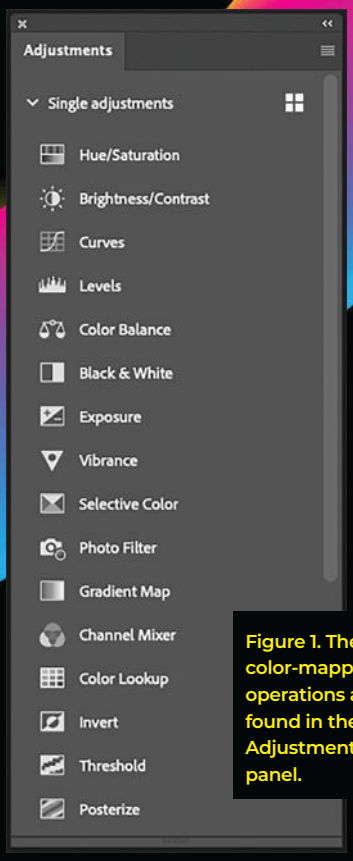


Figure 1. The color-mapping operations are found in the Adjustments panel.

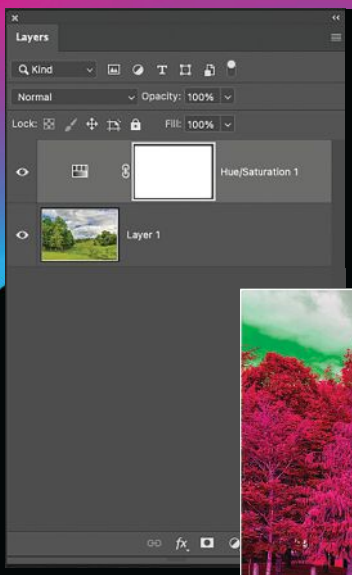


Figure 2. When an adjustment is performed with any of these techniques, a new adjustment layer is automatically generated along with a layer mask.



Figure 3. Who can resist the temptation to transform an everyday blue sky into electric green, and ordinary green foliage to an explosion of pink and red?

colors are divided into basic color ranges of 90 degrees each, including the overlap (the amount that the colors adjacent to the target color on the color wheel are affected). The Master option (the default range) permits the entire spectrum of color to be affected when you move the Hue, Saturation, or Lightness sliders. The other options perform as follows:

- **Reds:** Colors to be affected from 0 to 45 degrees clockwise and 360 to 315 degrees counterclockwise
- **Yellows:** Colors to be affected from 15 to 105 degrees clockwise
- **Greens:** Colors to be affected from 75 to 165 degrees clockwise
- **Cyans:** Colors to be affected from 135 to 225 degrees clockwise
- **Blues:** Colors to be affected from 195 to 285 degrees clockwise
- **Magentas:** Colors to be affected from 255 to 345 degrees clockwise

Choosing a color from the Edit list limits the changes to a specific range of hues **(Fig. 4)**. An adjustment slider appears between the two color bars, indicating the colors that are being affected. To add to the range of color that is affected, drag the dark gray horizontal bar slider to the left or right.

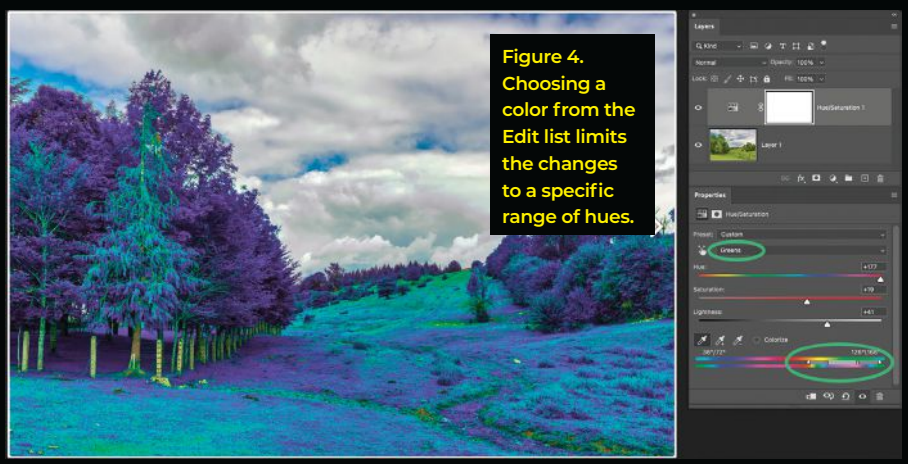


Figure 4. Choosing a color from the Edit list limits the changes to a specific range of hues.

Altering the saturation

The intensity of the colors in an image can be altered by dragging the *Saturation* slider. The default saturation value on the center of the slider is zero, representing the relative saturation of the color. Dragging the slider to the right, produces more intensity. At 100%, the pixels reach their maximum intensity. Dragging the slider to the left desaturates. At -100% the colors are completely desaturated or black, white, or gray.

Most of the time, the values will fall somewhere between the two extremes.

Modifying the lightness

Modify the brightness values of an image by moving the *Lightness* slider. Drag it to the left to darken the selected pixels, or to the right to lighten them. The zero point marks the existing or *input* lightness of the image. The extremes are +100% lightness that produces white, and -100% lightness, that produces black.

Lightness tip

If an area is very light and and adjusting the Hue and Saturation sliders have no effect on it, darken it a little by dragging the Lightness slider to the left. Then drag the Hue and Saturation sliders. The light areas will change color.



Figure 5. The goal of using the Threshold feature is to find the perfect balance of black and white to produce the best possible line art.



Figure 6. A Gradient Map applies color to an image or selected area based on a gradient's properties.

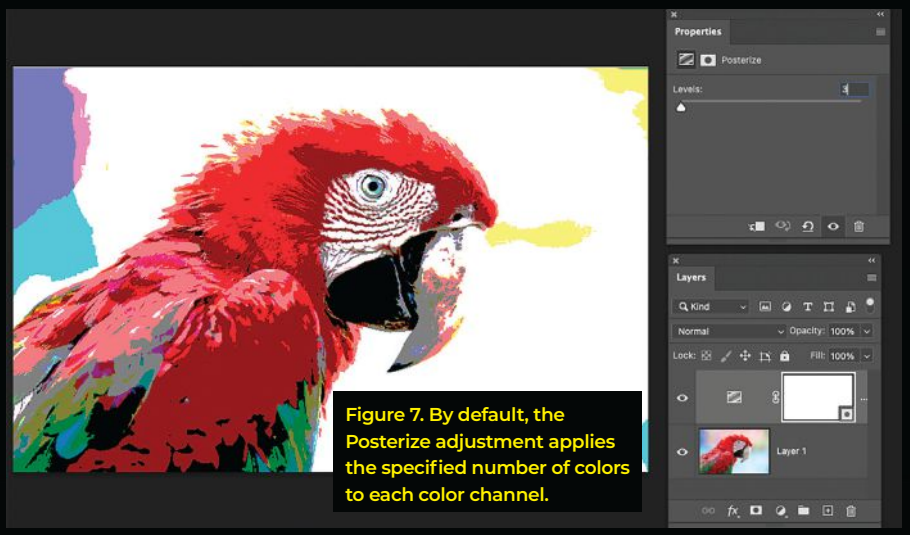


Figure 7. By default, the Posterize adjustment applies the specified number of colors to each color channel.

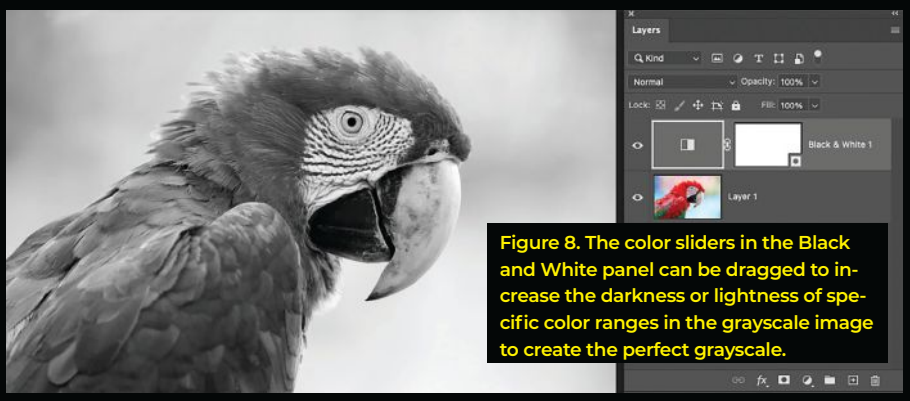


Figure 8. The color sliders in the Black and White panel can be dragged to increase the darkness or lightness of specific color ranges in the grayscale image to create the perfect grayscale.

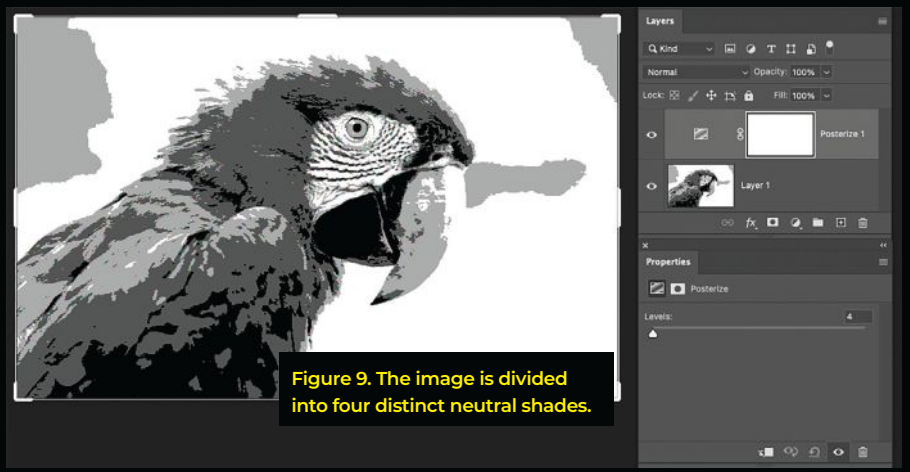


Figure 9. The image is divided into four distinct neutral shades.

Adjusting the threshold

The *Threshold* icon in the Adjustments panel maps colors to either black or white, creating line art from a grayscale or color photograph. The Threshold panel displays a histogram of the 256 levels of brightness values. By default, the slider reads 128, or the midpoint. Values on the right side of the slider are white. Values on the left are black. As the slider is dragged to the left, more pixel values are included on the white side as the range of pixels indicated by the mid-point turn white. Conversely, as the slider is dragged to the right, more pixel values turn black and the image gets increasingly darker. The goal is to find the perfect balance of black and white to produce the best possible line art **(Fig. 5)**.

Gradient maps

A Gradient Map applies color to an image or selected area based on a gradient's properties. If an image is mapped to a three-color gradient, for example, the lightest colors of the image are mapped to the colors on the right side of the gradient, the midtones are mapped to the colors in the middle of the gradient, and the darkest areas are mapped to the colors of the left endpoint **(Fig. 6)**. Because the application of color is based on a gradient, the feature produces smooth transitions between dark and light colors

Posterizing

Threshold divides an image into two colors. Posterize applies multiple colors to an image. By default, the posterize

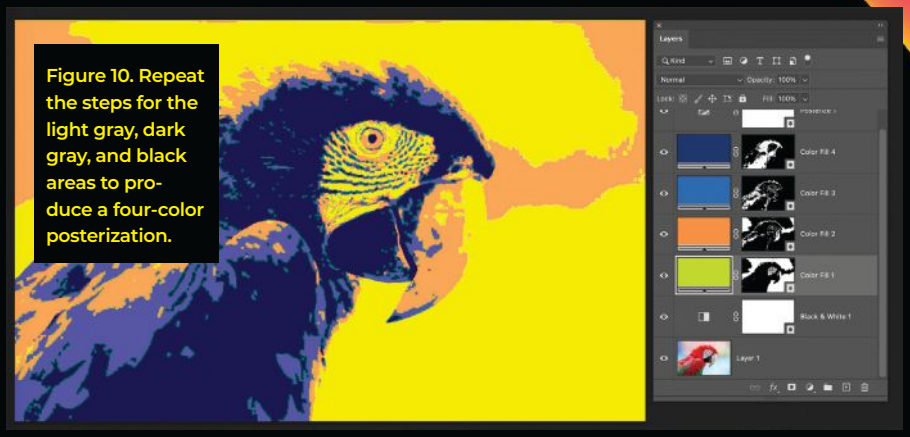


Figure 10. Repeat the steps for the light gray, dark gray, and black areas to produce a four-color posterization.

adjustment applies the specified number of colors to each color channel **(Fig. 7)**. If three colors are specified to a full-color RGB image, then nine colors are applied (3 X 3 = 9). This effect can be interesting depending on how many colors are input into the Levels field of the Posterize Properties panel — although the results can be somewhat unpredictable.

1. For more control, using two color-mapping features produces a precise number of colors for a classic posterized look.
2. Choose *Black and White* from the Adjustments panel to desaturate the image. The color sliders in the panel can be dragged to increase the darkness or lightness of specific color ranges in the grayscale image to create the perfect grayscale **(Fig. 8)**.
3. Click *Posterize* in the Adjustments panel and set the number of levels to four. The image is divided into four distinct neutral shades: white, light gray, dark gray, and black **(Fig. 9)**.
4. Choose the Magic Wand tool. Click the *Contiguous* checkbox in the Options bar to turn it off. Click a white area of the image to select all the white areas in the image.
5. At the bottom of the Layers panel, click on the New Fill or Adjustment Layer icon. Choose Solid color. Then choose a color from the Color Picker. A new fill layer is generated that replaces the white areas with the color.
6. Repeat the steps for the light gray, dark gray, and black areas to produce a four-color posterization **(Fig. 10)**.

Neural filters

The Neural filters interface, found in the Filters menu, contains artificial intelligence-driven options for modifying the surface texture, skin tones, style, and color of an image. It is well within your interest to experiment with this feature and to marvel at the kind of radical alterations it can instantly produce.

The *Color Transfer* option alters the colors of an image based on the color scheme of the existing image. First, click the Color Transfer button to activate the filter. Choose a color thumbnail from the menu or import an image. Adjust various characteristics from the color control sliders. The sliders include Luminance, Color Strength, Saturation, and Hue. Applying this filter automates the color-mapping process and can produce very interesting results — as you can see in **Fig. 11**.

Nonlinear workflow

The techniques presented in this article cover a small but important section of color-mapping options. On the Adjustments panel you can see quite a few more. These same techniques are also available in the Image >Adjustments menu, but when applied, they are not dynamic, so changing or deleting them can be problematic. It's always best to work in a nonlinear workflow that adjustment layers provide.

Of course, experimentation is the key to producing the best results. Since there are so many color-mapping options and combinations, you'll want to explore the numerous variations that can be generated. Once you become familiar with their controls you won't hesitate to employ them as a mainstay of your workflow. **GP**



Stephen Romaniello is an artist and educator who has seen the evolution of digital graphics since the beginning of the digital revolution in the 1980s. He is CEO of GlobalEye Systems, a graphics software and creative imaging consultancy, and founder of Gorilla Geeks, a creative consulting firm.



Figure 11. The Color Transfer filter alters the colors of an image based on the color scheme of the existing image.



Legacy cut five-panel cap

The new Legacy cut five-panel cap from **Sportsman Cap & Bag** is made of a no-sheen, 93% recycled polyester/7% Spandex blend. The structured cap is five-panel, mid-profile and features perforated laser cut side and back panels. The cap has a slightly curved bill and a legacy woven label on the right side. Closes with soft snapback. Available colors include black, navy, stone, and white. All products are available thorough Sportsman Cap & Bag's 17 distribution locations. **sportsmancaps.com**



Natron G2 glass primer

Developed for UV printing on glass, the Natron G2 glass UV adhesion promoter from **Boston Industrial Solutions** is engineered to provide a superior foundation that enhances adhesion and resilience of UV inks on glass, tiles, and ceramic surfaces for items exposed to moisture, weather elements, or the rigors of everyday use. The product is designed to improve work with UV flatbed or cylindrical inkjet printers. G2 glass primer features enhanced moisture resistance, is dishwasher safe, and applies with a two-step process. **bostonindustrialsolutions.com**



Mimaki TXF300-1600 from Hirsch

The new **Mimaki** TXF300-1600 includes a wider 63" media width, and ink circulation technology designed to prevent white ink sedimentation. The TXF300-1600 is engineered to deliver consistent prints on a wide range of materials while supporting skin-friendly textiles with OEKO-TEX ECO PASSPORT-certified inks. A three-way intelligent heater is said to speed up ink drying, improving output consistency and overall efficiency. **hsi.us/mimaki**



GCC LaserPro Spirit LS PRO

The **GCC** LaserPro Spirit LS PRO now includes a fiber laser option alongside the original CO_2 laser. With a 29" X 18" working area and power options of 30W or 50W, the fiber laser is designed for large-scale engraving on stainless steel, metals, and plastics. The laser is said to be best used for text, logos, and barcodes, delivering performance for industrial, architectural, and signage applications. **gccworld.com**



Avery Dennison digital overlaminate

Avery Dennison has increased its digital overlaminate (DOL) product line with the addition of two new DOL Max series finishes: DOL 1370 Max, a 1.3 mil luster finish, and DOL1380 Max, a 1.3 mil matte finish. Overlaminate films are pressure-sensitive and engineered to enhance the durability and longevity of printed vinyl, especially in exterior applications such as fleet graphics, vehicle wraps, marine wraps, and outdoor signage. Overlaminates protect the graphic from environmental conditions including harsh weather, UV exposure, chemicals, and abrasion. They may also incorporate a special finish that enhances the overall color vibrancy of the graphic. All DOL Max films come with up to seven-year vertical durability and up to two-year horizontal durability. **graphics.averydennison.com/dolmax**



Melco SUMMIT

Melco International has launched the SUMMIT embroidery machine. Engineered for speeds of 1,500 stitches per minute and a fast color change motor, the machine is said to drastically reduce production time for complex, multi-colored designs. With features like Acti-Feed automatic thread tensioning, laser alignment, and a built-in barcode scanner, the SUMMIT is designed to minimize manual intervention and maximize output of 16 needles. The machine's 10.1" full HD touch screen provides an interface developed for ease of use. The integration with Melco DesignShop and cloud-based Fusion and EFS software services is said to allow for seamless design creation, real-time previews, and improved file management. **melco.com**



Epson Auto Chart Reader

Designed to automate and simplify color management using the **Epson** SD-10 Spectrophotometer and Epson Edge Print, the Auto Chart Reader and Epson Edge Color Lite software solution creates color profiles and verifies and calibrates color, helping print shops save time and resources by avoiding reprints due to color inaccuracies. The lightweight, portable accessory allows users to create, print, and measure color charts to keep colors consistent and accurate, helping to save on time and costs. The Auto Chart Reader detects and measures charts on a wide variety of media, including thick media, without the need for manual alignment. When paired with the Epson SD-10, the Auto Chart Reader provides quick, easy, and automated color chart measurements. The compact accessory helps to achieve precise, consistent, and repeatable color regardless of changing print conditions, and can measure a single chart in about five minutes. **epson.com**



Elevate collection by PCNA

Polyconcept North America (PCNA) has introduced Elevate by PCNA, a refreshed Trimark apparel line offering over 368 apparel styles, from modern, on-trend designs to timeless, classic essentials — each tailored to fit various budgets. Elevate by PCNA staples are available in sizes XS to 5XL. The products are one price for all sizes and one flat decoration fee. According to the manufacturer, the line is highlighted by new product photography featuring modern, fresh looks. FSC-certified, eco-friendly materials are used for over 120 styles, with more to come. The new product launch features promotional assets such as an Elevate video, a mini catalog, and an overview of apparel decoration capabilities where customers can learn more about each method. **pcna.com**



EZ-JET PRO 32 Powder/Shaker/Dryer from Equipment Zone

The **EZ-JET PRO 32 Powder/Shaker/Dryer** is designed for business owners seeking commercial-grade DTF printing solutions. The advanced powder application and drying system has been engineered with a robust frame and support system and has been optimized for indoor environments, featuring an onboard dual-filter system that eliminates the need for outdoor venting. An automatic vacuum belt provides for an advanced feeding system. The EZ-JET PRO 32 DTF dryer is designed to pair seamlessly with the EZ-JET PRO 24 and EZ-JET PRO 24 MAX DTF printers and is also compatible with other printers on the market. Comes with free training and unlimited support as well as a one-year warranty. **equipmentzone.com**



STAHLS' EasyRip DTF transfers

STAHLS' has introduced EasyRip DTF transfers for UltraColor MAX direct-to-film (DTF) transfer orders, a brand new service for apparel decorators designed to save time by eliminating the need to cut transfers apart before application. According to STAHLS', decorators can now rip, position, and press, with no extra tools or prep steps need. EasyRip is available for free on all UltraColor MAX orders of $300 or more. **stahls.com/easy-max**

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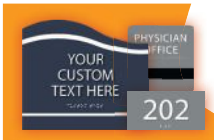
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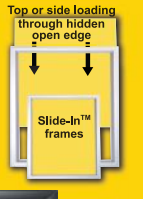
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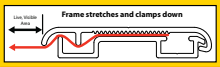
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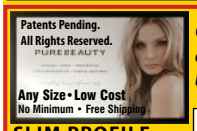
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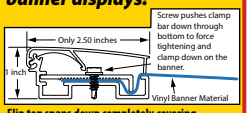






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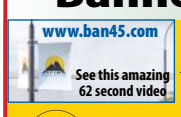
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Ban"45" means it pivots 45 degrees to either side to deflect and re-direct the force of high winds off the banner.

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Nylon Coaches Jacket.

We gave our Nylon Raglan Coaches Jacket an oversized fit with generous armholes that allow ease in movement and 2 deep side pockets. This jacket features a snap button closure and sleek collar with elastic cuffs and adjustable bottom hem.

Kimia is shown here wearing our **RNF401** Nylon Raglan Coaches Jacket in 'Charcoal' & **BD310GD** Garment Dye Tank Thong Bodysuit in 'Heather Grey'.

LOS ANGELES APPAREL
Wholesale-Imprintable Division
www.losangelesapparel-imprintable.net
info@losangelesapparel.net
(213) 275-3120

RNF401
- Unisex
  S | M | L | XL
- Made in the USA
- Nylon Taffeta
- 50% Cotton /
  50% Poly Jersey Lining

Black
Midnight Navy
Shadow
Charcoal
Mahogany

BD310GD
- Unisex
  XS | S | M | L | XL
- Heavyweight
  Cotton Spandex
- Shrink-Free
- 95% Cotton /
  5% Elastane

Black
Chocolate
Navy
Dolphin Blue
Red
Heather Grey
Creme
White



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That's Los Angeles.



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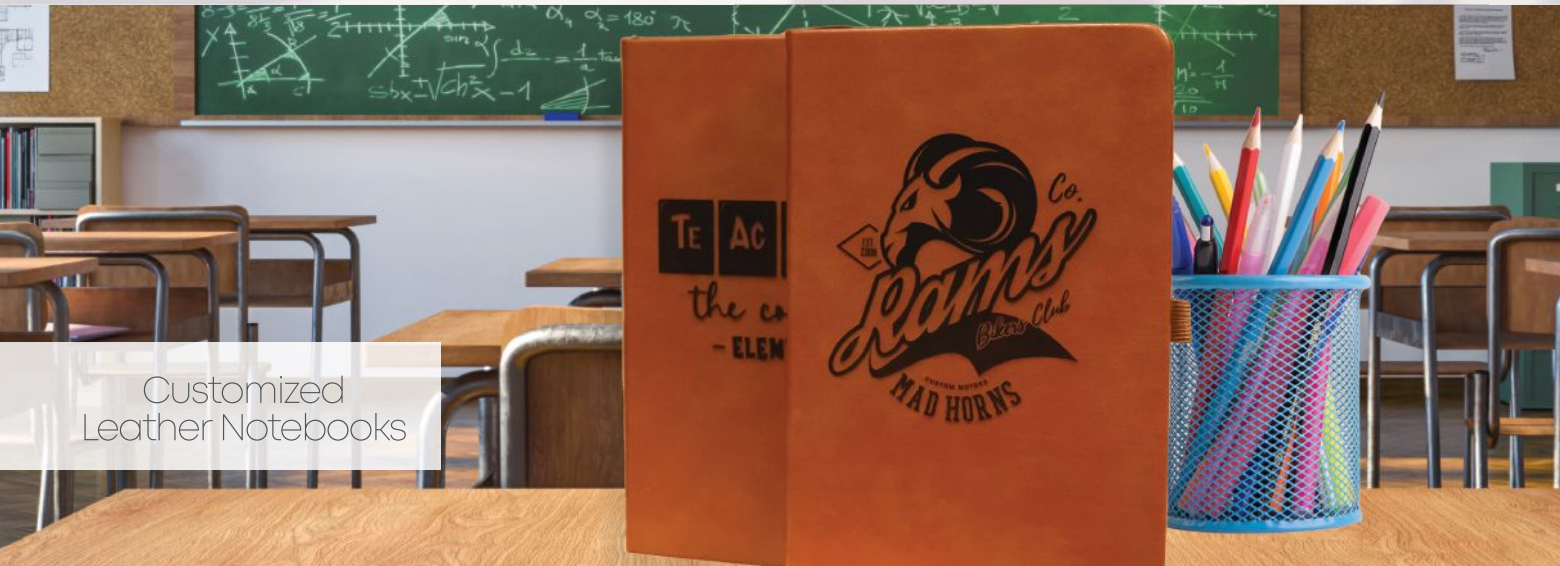
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