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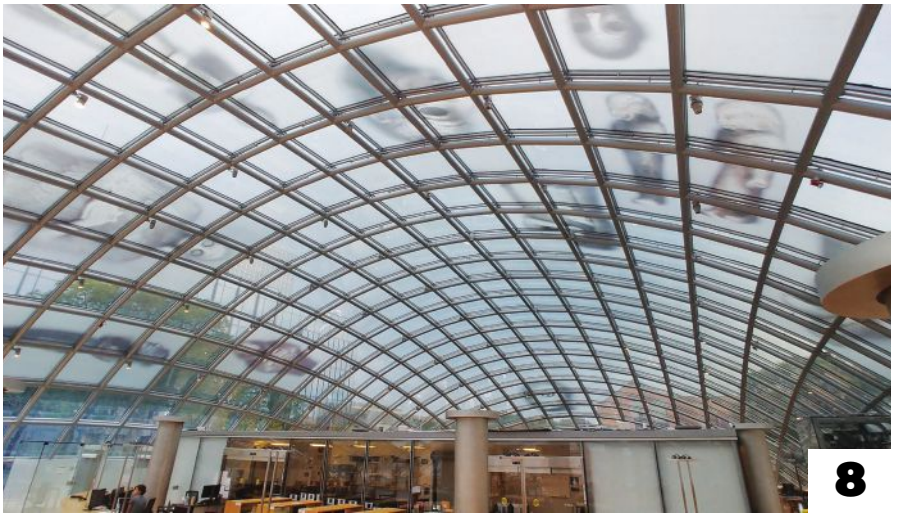
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Brad Bartlett of OptiGraphics shares his experience
(Image courtesy of OptiGraphics))

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SPEAKER



Marc Vila
Director of Marketing
ColDesi

Marc Vila, with over 15 years in the customization industry, is the director of marketing at ColDesi and Host of the Custom Apparel Startups podcast. He excels in educating business owners about embroidery, DTG printing, transfer printing, and the emerging DTF market through his engaging content. Marc's expertise and passion make him a trusted voice in the industry, dedicated to helping entrepreneurs succeed in the world of custom apparel.

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

Full February issue

It was just a few months ago that we wrote in the pages of this magazine about disastrous flooding in North Carolina and other areas in the path of Hurricane Helene. Here and on our website we shared stories of companies in our industry giving to relief and restoration efforts. Now, we're writing eerily similar posts about recovery in the Los Angeles area after the deadly Palisades and Eaton wildfires.

Since news of LA relief efforts is moving quickly as we go to press with this issue, we're compiling information on our website about how companies in the graphics, signage, and apparel decoration space are donating products and funds. I encourage you to visit gpro.link/lafire to learn what these organizations are doing and, if you choose, how you can contribute as well.

There's no witty transition into a column boasting the content we've prepared for this month's issue, so I'll leave that out. Inside these pages you'll find a roundup of stories from throughout the graphics industry, from window and floor signage, to embroidery, business strategies, and more.

First off, you're going to love Managing Editor Marie Fennema's cover story on Brad Bartlett at OptiGraphics. Bartlett shares how his company manages merch design for some of the biggest brands and personalities on the planet. Since sending this magazine to the printer each month is enough to cause me to lose sleep, I can't imagine presenting art to Taylor Swift's team, or The Rolling Stones, or U2. But for Bartlett, it's all in a day's work. Be sure to check out the story on page 16. To learn even more from Bartlett, or to meet the man himself, register for GRAPHICS PRO EXPO in Irving, Texas, this March. He'll be there presenting in even more detail how he manages high-profile (dare I assume also high-maintenance?) clients. Register to attend at g-p-x.com.

Also in this issue, learn how you can start your own embroidery business on page 36. Jennifer Cox shares key factors to consider for long-term growth. On page 26, John Mormon offers insight into custom products you'll want to offer as wedding season approaches. We've also packaged a couple of articles offering expert approaches to the same topic. Both Aaron Montgomery and Adam McCauley go in-depth on how your business can make the most of spring sports season.

As always, there's much more in store in this issue. Thank you for reading.



James Anderson
Editor-in-Chief

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GIVING BACK

Gildan aided Hurricane Helene relief efforts by donating $200,000 worth of apparel to those impacted by the storm.

Infinity Product Group (IPG) and **Infinity Her**, a division of IPG that specializes in blank headwear designed exclusively for women, hosted a sample sale fundraiser to raise funds for Hurricane Helene relief.

UPCOMING EVENTS

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Indianapolis Convention Center
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GPX Long Beach
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November 6-8
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WEBINARS

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MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

Grimco has acquired **Graphic Solutions Group** (GSG), a supplier in the sign, digital printing, and apparel decorating marketplace.

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS





Connor Knutson & Dan Heyden
L2 Brands

Connor Knutson (left) has been named chief executive officer (CEO) of **L2 Brands** and **Dan Heyden** (right) joins as chief operating officer. After more than three decades of leadership since co-founding Legacy in 1992, **Paige Wingert** (former CEO) is now executive chairman.



Sean Macilvain
Vantage Apparel

Sean Macilvain joined **Vantage Apparel** as vice president of business development to lead the company's U.S. sales team. Macilvain brings over nine years of industry expertise and more than 12 years of sales experience.

NEW BUSINESSES



Minuteman Press
Hometown natives **Samantha and Robin Hilliker** are the new owners of the **Minuteman Press** franchise in Grand Blanc, Michigan. In conjunction with opening their new location in August of 2024, Samantha and Robin acquired the 25-year business **Kendall Printing** from **Scot Brown**.



Big Frog Custom T-Shirts & More
Tamara and Alex Turkai have opened a **Big Frog** franchise in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This grand opening marked the first Big Frog location in New Mexico.

PARTNERSHIPS

A4, a manufacturer of performance sports apparel, joined **SanMar's** team of industry brands as its largest nationwide distributor in 2025.

Have news to share?
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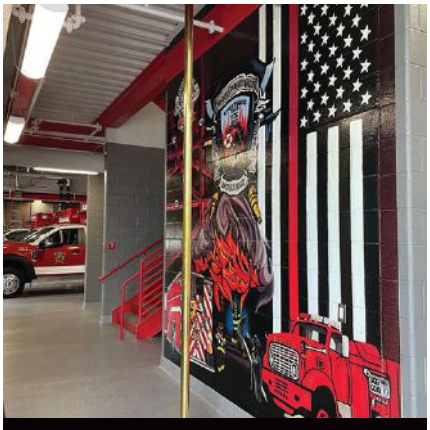
ER2 Image Group utilized Crystal Cling (SS299) for a project for the University of Chicago. A key priority of the project was to maintain the sunlight coming through the windows yet soften it with necessary illumination. (Image courtesy of Mactac)

Making it stick

Creating a message that clings using window, wall & floor graphics

By Bill Schiffner

Custom window, wall, and floor graphics can heighten a business as well as a product's appearance to potential customers. Graphics can share news of promotions, sales, store hours, and new inventory, as well as making a business logo pop or creating a huge sign for an ad campaign or sporting event. For example, custom window decals are a crucial driving force for attracting new customers into retail or storefront business. There are a host of options to get your client's message across, from solid to clear, one-sided or two-sided, and see-through graphics with either permanent or reusable adhesives. Each of these applications for windows, walls, and floors requires different types of materials for the projects they are going to be used on and for the surfaces to which they will be affixed.



Central Graphics install for the Streetsboro Fire Department in Ohio. (Image courtesy of Mactac)

Jay Kroll, product manager for cut, transit, and wall solutions at General Formulations, said that from a surface level, it's easy to look at the world of window, wall, and floor graphics and think they are all just essentially the same sticker in different sizes and stuck on different surfaces. "As we look closer, we can see that each one carries its own specific features and requirements for a successful install. Whether it's a window film that has the clarity or block-out feature we need, the wall graphic that overcomes the challenges of paints and surface types, or the floor graphic with a laminate designed for safety and durability, they all have unique characteristics that need to be understood and embraced for successful, repeatable, and profitable jobs," he said.

New developments in technology

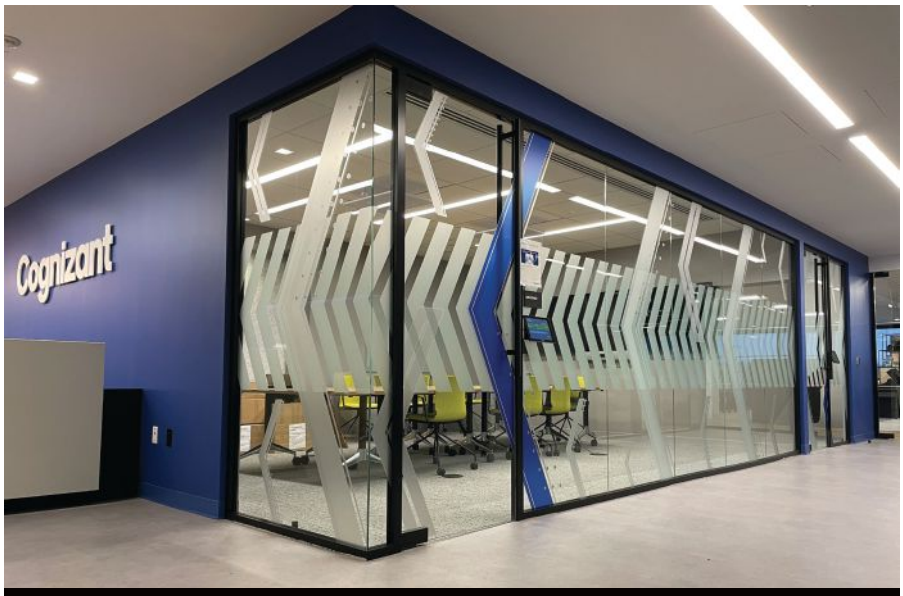
Kroll explained that as printer technology advances and white ink sets become more popular, shops have more options on projects. "One trend that seems to be growing is single-pass push/pull graphics with five-layer print on a clear removable film. For projects like these, an optically clear vinyl pairs beautifully with UV, UV gel, or latex ink sets to bring the concept to life."

Kroll added that window perf applications also continue to grow beyond just simple storefront displays and transit windows to large building installations. "A glass facade wrapped in window perf can provide the same impact as a wall wrap on the exterior of a building, but with a much easier application surface than brick or block. Working with a 70/30 or 80/20

perf will still allow plenty of light to enter the space and provide good visibility out, all while creating a visually solid image for the audience."

Kroll said that from a business and workflow standpoint, the best films are the ones that work reliably, are readily available, facilitate your creativity, and make you the most money.

Kroll explained that office decor is trending toward creating a sense of space with intentional environments, and that is often done with a mixture of window and wall materials. "One easy way is by mixing privacy with design, incorporating films that mimic the look of etched glass."

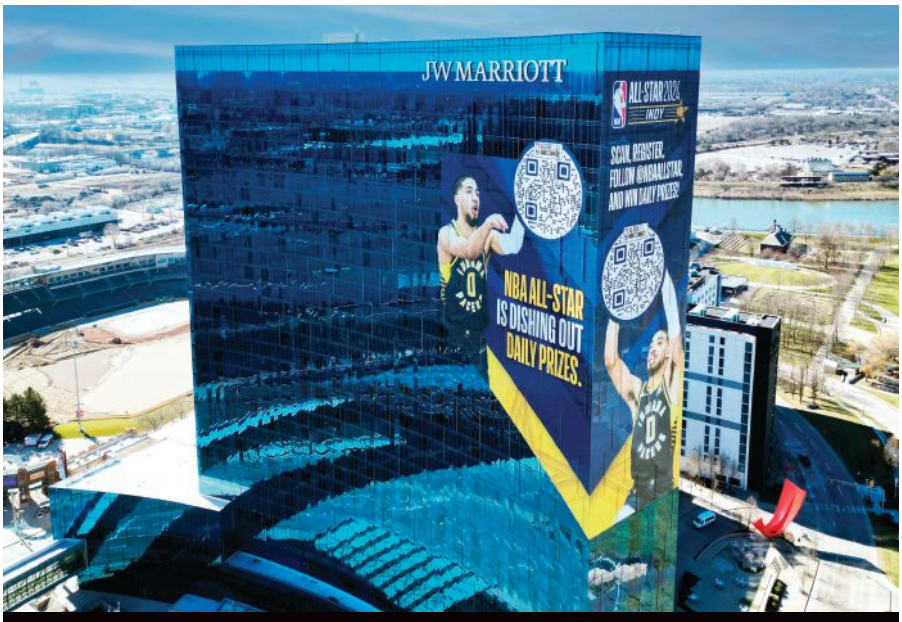


Mixed Media's Nick Basile suggested IMAGin B-free Frosted Window Film to create a consistent finish for both printed and unprinted graphics. (Image courtesy of Mactac)

Amanda Smith, marketing and communications manager at Mactac Graphics & Signage Solutions, said that there are several differences between window, wall, and floor graphics. "The first that comes to mind is the adhesive. It is important to use different kinds of adhesives to get the best results when applying them to concrete, glass, and drywall. Another point is the application in dry spaces or wet conditions like floor graphics. Keep in mind that the difference is the film used for the applications. For example, windows and privacy films differ from what is needed for walls, like gloss versus matte white and the texture and anti-slip needs of floor wear-and-tear applications."

Smith pointed out that when it comes to window graphics, there has been an increased awareness in recent years of how PVC affects the environment, which has led many consumers to seek out more eco-friendly alternatives. "I think the demand for PVC-free media and green alternatives is likely to continue growing as more people become aware of the environmental impact of items and seek out alternatives."

She noted that working with PVC-free window media options for print service providers can have several benefits. "First, it shows they are taking steps to be environmentally responsible and cater to the growing demand for eco-friendly materials. This can help attract and retain clients who prioritize sustainability. Additionally, green alternative media may offer better durability, resistance to fading, and improved print quality compared to PVC-based materials. This can lead to higher customer satisfaction and repeat business," she said. "Finally, using PVC-free media may help the print service provider comply with any regulations or incentives that encourage the use of eco-friendly materials. Overall, working with PVC-free window media options can benefit both the print service provider and their clientele."



GF 270 WindowMark was used for this building and window wrap project for the 2024 NBA All-Star game in Indianapolis, Indiana. (Image courtesy of General Formulations)

Molly Waters, senior technical specialist at Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions, said as film technology continues to evolve, the differences aren't necessarily about the products but rather are more about the applications and the nuance of surfaces required for adhesion.

"These days for wall applications, we typically default to films using a permanent adhesive," said Waters. "This is because most of today's wall paints are low-VOC, which makes it



"The window graphics are Avery Dennison Dusted Crystal decorative window film, which offers easy die cutting and weeding for a beautiful etched glass effect," said Waters. (Image courtesy of Avery Dennison)

difficult for adhesives to stick to them. Sometimes shops have had to go to a high-tack adhesive to ensure adhesion to walls with low-VOC paint."

For example, she said the company recently had their textured wall films tested to the UL410 slip resistance standard (used for floor films), and they passed. "Now these films can be used for walls and short-term floor graphics," Waters said.

She explained for windows, optical clarity and removability usually drive material choice. "We have printable white films that go on easily and are also relatively easy to remove, which makes them a great choice for short- to medium-term promotional signage."

Waters said that the biggest trend they are seeing in window film is requests for more decorative looks. "Texture and patterned glass designs, like the trendy art deco-inspired fluted glass finish, are in high demand. Decorative films give shops the ability to expand their film and installation services to offer options for both commercial and residential applications. Film and adhesive technology are evolving creatively in today's marketplace for sign shops to grow their service offerings. "Window films that specialize in a certain function — such as deterring bird strikes on high-rise buildings — represent another example."

Applications

Mactac's Smith points out that for indoor/outdoor window displays, she has seen many large installations in college and university settings. "This market has ample window space to promote the schools' upcoming events and students while being both long- and short-term applications. Low-tack adhesives can make short-term application installs go easily up and down quickly."

When the University of Chicago contacted local shop ER2 Image Group about creatively promoting a traveling art exhibition within the space, sign shop ER2 offered some great creative options. With a motto to make branding bigger, the full-service grand format printing company — which specializes in the design, creation, and installation of large-scale graphics projects — designed and installed graphics across the glass dome to reflect the featured artist's work.

A key priority of the project was to maintain the sunlight coming through the windows yet soften it with necessary illumination. To achieve this, ER2 used a printing technique on its Vutek GS3250LxPro printer that encompassed UV-curable ink and a three-layer print process. "This printing technique is best for back-lighting applications, so it worked perfectly for keeping the printed image strong while allowing light to pass through," said ER2 Vice President and Partner Mark Schellerer. "Also, we decided to go with Mactac's polyester Crystal Cling film because it is optically clear and can be butt-seamed to ensure the passage of light while eliminating possible shrinkage or expansion."

The wet installation was completed in roughly five days by four installers who primarily worked in the evenings when there was lighter library foot traffic. The team used a lift with an extension arm to access hard-to-reach installation areas and maneuver around the limited floor space.

Smith said for office decor, window films designed for privacy and finishing purposes offer several benefits apart from privacy and aesthetics. "It can help reduce the amount of UV rays entering a space, which can help prevent fading of furniture, floors, and other interior elements. They can also offer energy-saving benefits by reducing the amount of heat entering a space during summer months and retaining heat during winter months. Additionally, some window films can provide safety benefits by strengthening the glass, helping to prevent breakage and shattering during natural disasters or break-in attempts. Overall, window films designed for privacy and finishing purposes are a cost-effective solution offering several benefits to both residential and commercial settings."

Smith reported that when multinational technology company Cognizant sought a unique way to incorporate company branding and employee privacy, the team turned to local graphic design and signage company, Mixed Media Concepts.

Specializing in wide-format printing and architectural signage, Mixed Media Concepts recommended a combination of printed and unprinted window graphics that could be applied to the glass surfaces. Nick Basile, Mixed Media's owner, suggested IMAGin B-free frosted window film to create a consistent finish for both printed



GF 285 RoughMark (wall & floor) with GF 109 Traffic Graffic Lam was used on this project.

and unprinted graphics. The product worked great and in just one week, three installers put up 4,000 square feet of material. They installed printed and nonprinted material on both the first and second surfaces. The printed material was printed using an HP Latex 360 printer.

"We transfer-taped all frosted film for the project, which made it go down like a dream. It saved time being able to install dry, cutting our installation time in half," Basile said. "The customer was very particular about the project and was ecstatic about the quality of the material and installation."

Smith said another recent project involved the Streetsboro Fire Department in Ohio, which wanted to honor the lifesaving work of its firefighters by incorporating an inspiring display of artwork within its fire station. An exposed interior brick wall presented the perfect canvas. Seeking a mural with a paint-like appearance without using paint, the department turned to Central Graphics, a print, production, and graphics installation shop in Akron, Ohio.

Central Graphics led the department straight to Mactac Roughrap RR100 wall wrapping film. They knew the material would sink into the wall and offer a painted look and better longevity and protection than paint with the addition of the Mactac Rayzor overlaminate. Artist Jessica Lofthus was commissioned to design the art for the 11' X 12' wall graphic, and Central Graphics printed it using a large-format Epson printer.

Looking ahead

Kroll added that advancements in film technology, especially cast but also with calendared films, have driven the industry to develop materials with characteristics like longer outdoor durability or greater conformability. When paired with adhesives that can be applied on more challenging substrates or at a wider range of temperatures, these innovations help to allow sign shops to be more creative knowing that the materials they use will stand up to the rigors of their creativity.

"These developments are also being made with sustainability in mind, through improved chemistry and manufacturing practices, encouraging responsible growth as new materials and paths are pursued," he concluded. **GP**



Bill Schiffner, a former freelance writer/editor based in Holbrook, New York, covered the imaging industry for over 25 years. He was the editor for several imaging publications and websites. He can be reached at bschiffner@optonline.net.



The fabrication experience

What to expect & tips to succeed

By Dawn Bent

Technology is adding dynamic new options to outdoor signage, like upgraded lighting and digital displays. Businesses are well aware of this new direction and are increasingly requesting signs that incorporate technology to help them better engage with their customers. Sign shops that want to stay ahead of the trend should understand its unique considerations, not only in creative matters like design and fabrication, but also in the more mundane local permitting process.

Customers have never had so many ways to make their signs stand out in a crowded marketplace. Their top goals for large architectural signage are enhanced visibility and brand identity, and they want clear messaging and eye-catching aesthetics that make passersby stop, take notice, and walk through their doors. A common request is LED technology for dynamic content, allowing for real-time updates and audience engagement. Additionally, there's a growing interest in sustainable materials and eco-friendly production methods, reflecting a broader commitment to environmental responsibility. Your customers may be intrigued by your ability to create striking 3D letters and logos, fascia and building signs, pylons, illuminated signs, and more.

But as you're introducing them to these exciting possibilities, don't ignore the basics.

Critical concerns

It's essential that you make sure customers understand the differences in materials and installation of indoor and outdoor signs so the product matches their purpose. New design issues will probably come up as well. These questions may seem obvious, but they may not be in your customer's world.

Material matters

This is an area where you really must guide the customer. When fabricating outdoor signs, durability and weather resistance are paramount. Underestimating material durability and not considering local climate impacts are two of the most common mistakes we see in outdoor fabrications.

Outdoor signage must withstand various environmental factors such as UV exposure, rain, wind, and temperature fluctuations. Materials like aluminum, stainless steel, acrylic, and high-density urethane are popular due to their durability and versatility. New finishes, such as powder coating and advanced laminates, provide additional options for aesthetics and longevity.

Sustainable materials are another forward-looking development in outdoor signage. They're at the top of many customers' priorities and may be on your list, too. Sustainability doesn't just cover the material (such as biodegradable formats rather than fossil-fueled plastics) but can go as deep as the manufacturing process itself. Does it waste water or dump chemicals into the local water supply? Many educated consumers will want to know.

Additionally, outdoor signs often require more robust mounting solutions to ensure stability and security. This may add to the project's cost or take up more space than the customer expects, so be ready to explain this factor.

Design issues

Size, shape, and graphic style become more significant issues with outdoor signs, which must complement the customer's building architecture while



Images courtesy of Signarama

fitting into the surrounding environment. Your customer may even operate in an area where local regulations dictate the design.

Before finalizing the project plan, you should conduct a thorough site survey and collaborate closely with landlords, architects, and designers to achieve this. Designers should consider color palettes, architectural styles, and materials used in the existing environment. Customization is key; tailoring the design to complement the architecture enhances the overall aesthetic and ensures the sign feels integrated rather than tacked on.

Permitting process

To streamline the permitting process, all sign companies should familiarize themselves with local regulations and zoning laws related to signage. Build a relationship with local authorities to keep up with rules and be aware of potential legal issues. The better-known you are to the local permitting office, the less likely you are to learn of problems after your client does.

Work with your client to provide comprehensive documentation, including detailed designs and specifications, which will result in quicker approvals. You can avoid misunderstandings by having a clear point of contact or a lead project manager who communicates regularly with clients. Keep the customer informed of everything as it arises, especially delays and unexpected fees. Customers don't like delays, but they really hate feeling uninformed and left out of the process.

Successful outdoor installations hinge on careful planning and execution. All your installers should be well-trained in these key factors: site preparation, proper anchoring and mounting techniques, and compliance with safety regulations. Weather conditions should also be considered to avoid installation delays. Work with your client to schedule post-installation checks and ongoing maintenance to enable longstanding success of the installation.

Outdoor and architectural signage is an ever-evolving field driven by advancements in technology, materials, and design. As the industry shifts toward sustainability and digital integration, smart sign shops will work hard to stay informed about trends and innovations. **GP**



Dawn Bent is the owner of Signarama in Huntington, New York, and over the last 36 years, has grown the location to one of the largest Signarama stores in the world. Today, her business employs around 30 artisans, craftspeople, and welders and is recognized as a full-service design and manufacturing hub in the New York City/Tristate area.



Commercial wraps pricing know-how

Key customer & project considerations for accurate pricing

By Charity Jackson

"How much to wrap [insert vehicle type]?" is a question we hear often. The answer to that question isn't as cut-and-dried as a customer may imagine. I often describe my response as the start of an interview of sorts.

To accurately respond to the request for a wrap quote, we must gather a bit of information. Once we've gathered this info, we break our wraps pricing into three sections: design, graphics, and installation.

Coverage

The first determination is the coverage of the graphics. This should include all areas on the vehicle that will be wrapped in vinyl, including windows. You should also add a few inches on top and bottom for overlap.

It's important to clarify exactly what areas of the vehicle the customer wants to wrap because sometimes customers will call spot graphics a wrap. Other times they really mean a partial or full wrap. We have instances where the customer knows the coverage they want from the beginning. Maybe they're matching another vehicle or they've already done their homework and determined the look they're going for.

Most of the time, though, the customer doesn't really know what they're looking for. They may have some rough ideas, but often they just know they want to advertise on their vehicle.

Budget

At this point, we ask about the budget, because that's a big determiner of how much coverage we can give them for their price range. It also saves time for both us and the customer to know the parameters we need to keep the coverage within so we're not planning beyond the customer's budget.

Interview

The interview, so to speak, continues as we discuss what they hope to achieve with the wrap.

- Is it simply to look professional when you drive up to a client's house? Here, we may go with less coverage. Perhaps spot graphics are enough if they simply want identifying graphics.
- Are they wanting to advertise a particular product or service? Here, we may look at a partial wrap or large image with supporting vinyl text.
- Are they wanting to incorporate their company brand into their vehicle? If this is the case, then a partial to full wrap might be the best plan to incorporate their brand colors, logo, and supporting text.

These questions help the customer think about what kind of return they're expecting on their investment in the wrap. More questions often come up as we work through their expectations. Once we've narrowed them down, the questions continue.

- Is this vehicle part of an existing fleet? This question helps us determine if there are other vehicles we're trying to match or that we need to tie in this vehicle with, so they build a consistent fleet. Many times, there will be other vehicles in their fleet that are a completely different make or model. The key is to plan the graphics to work across all different body styles.
- Is this the first vehicle with plans for additional vehicles? Here, we'll keep those additional vehicles in mind as we plan the graphics. If a customer is just starting out and knows their business type will require multiple vehicles, I recommend creating a vehicle wrap design that clearly states who they are, what they do, and how to contact them. Then, we keep the coverage moderate, eye-catching, and effective. Overdoing it on the first wrap, knowing they'll need many in the future, can hinder their growth.

Square footage

The first part of pricing out a vehicle wrap is asking a lot of questions. Once we've gathered that information, it's time to determine the total square footage.

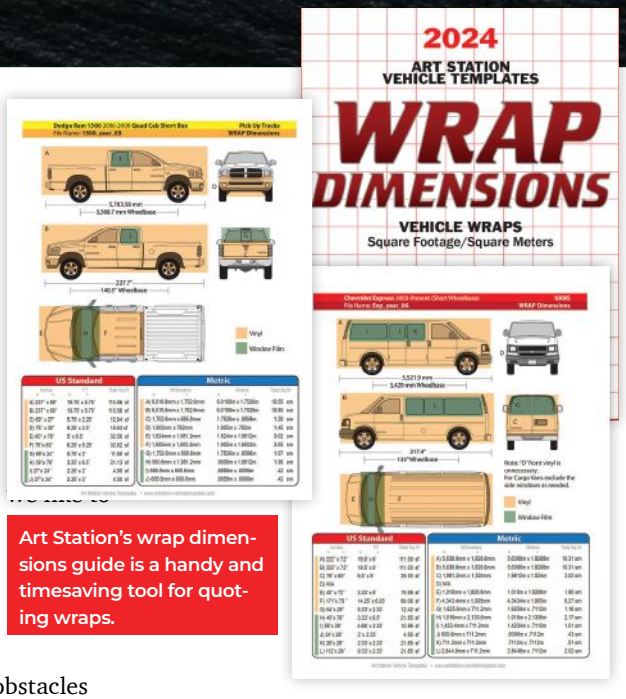
We always want to see the vehicle before we finalize the quote, but if the customer doesn't have the vehicle yet or is out of the area, you can start with a template. We like using Art Station vehicle templates for estimating coverage, sketching design ideas, and designing simple layouts.

Art Station also produces a wrap dimensions guide, which is an excellent tool for determining wrap square footage quickly. The templates and square footage noted in the guide consider the excess vinyl you need — top and bottom — to wrap around the vehicle.

The guide also notes window square footage separately. You may wish to price perforated vinyl graphics higher than regular vinyl, so having this separately figured allows you to price them out. Also, the absence or presence of windows in some vans means the separated information lets you accurately determine the total square footage.



Despite the large amount of square footage, trailers and box trucks with flat sides are quicker to wrap per square foot than a smaller vehicle with more obstacles. (Images courtesy of Visual Horizons Custom Signs)



Art Station's wrap dimensions guide is a handy and timesaving tool for quoting wraps.

We've created a pricing guide for our shop that considers the total square footage and the material type. We have a separate price per square foot for premium, calendared, transit, perforated, view-through, and color-change wrap media. The total square footage of the graphics for the vehicle, times the type of media used, is our graphics cost.

For each media type, we've broken the pricing down with a sliding scale based on the total square footage. The higher the square footage, the cheaper the price per square foot. For example, a customer with a full vehicle wrap will pay less per square foot versus a customer with just a tailgate wrap.

You'll often spend just as much time talking with the customer, loading material, and moving the graphics through production on a small wrap as you will a larger wrap, so the per-square-foot pricing helps cover this.

Design

The pricing for the design of the wrap itself is a separate charge. In our shop, we determine this price based on how long we think it will take us to design the wrap to fit the customer's vehicle. This is considering what artwork the customer can provide us digitally, what we may need to reproduce or purchase, and how much we need to typeset. During the design phase, you should also consider color matching and sample prints that the customer may require.

For smaller wraps or those with simpler body styles, we can simply lay out the graphics on the template, since we won't have tight coverage around obstacles. This also cuts down on design time, so we account for that in our quote.

On full wraps, design the graphics on photos of the actual vehicle. This gives us the most accurate sizing and considers obstacles on the vehicle. We account for the extra time to create a custom template when estimating the design costs.

Custom template

To get an accurate custom template of the customer's vehicle, we take straight-on photos of all sides we're wrapping. The next step is to get accurate reference measurements of the vehicle so you can scale the photos to the actual size.

Horizontal measurements are the most accurate for scaling the photo. I also take vertical measurements for reference. You'll need those reference measurements to correctly scale your final print files vertically.

Once the photos are scaled to the actual size using the reference measurements, you can design "on" the photo in either Photoshop or your vector program. This allows you to work around obstacles on the actual vehicle and looks professional when proofing the wrap for the customer.

Installation

This is the last element we take into consideration to give the customer a quote for their vehicle wrap. Some companies like to quote installation based on a per-square-foot price. For our shop, we determine the installation cost on how long we think it will take to apply the graphics to that particular vehicle.

A box truck may have a lot more square footage than a sedan, but we can wrap panels of graphics on a flat-sided box truck a lot faster than around the contours of a four-door car. When estimating the time, I look at the number of panels, ways we can make a wrap as seamless as possible, areas we're going to have to trim, places we may use knifeless tape, concave areas we'll have to pay special attention to, and any other areas that may take extra time.

If we're wrapping a fleet of vehicles, the first couple of vehicles will typically take longer as we get used to the contours of that vehicle. But we usually get a lot faster as we go, so we'll keep that in mind as we quote the job. If they're ordering just one or two vehicles to start, we'll keep the pricing at the higher price. If they're ordering multiple vehicles at a time, we'll often price a bit more competitively on the installation as we keep our speed in mind. GP



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

Working with high-profile clients

Printing for Taylor Swift, The Rolling Stones, Broadway & more

By Marie Fennema

The average small- to medium-sized graphics shop typically produces products and services for local businesses, events, educational institutions, sports teams, and, of course, individuals. As a shop gains reputation and credibility, this may extend to higher-paying, higher-caliber clientele such as large corporations, athletic associations, and concert and event venues.

If you're an extra-ambitious and credible service provider, you may even find yourself contemplating even larger clients — the kind that are generally well-known in popular culture. But venturing into this high-profile territory isn't for the faint of heart, and it comes with its own set of risks and rewards.

Brad Bartlett, president and owner of OptiGraphics — a full-service print provider specializing in lenticular printing — knows this well. Bartlett is no stranger to the printing world, and his work has been recognized by numerous organizations, earning him awards across the industry.

Here, Bartlett shares his experience, dives into notable projects, and offers advice for working with high-profile clients ranging from Taylor Swift, U2, The Rolling Stones, Broadway, and more.

Printing with the pros

OptiGraphics is a print service provider that has been in business for 55 years, 34 of which Bartlett has been with the company. Based in Dallas, the company offers lenticular, OptiChrome, and RevealSeries printing. These printing methods range in application from small product packaging to large-format signage.

- **Lenticular printing:** This printing method results in full-motion holographic-type images that mimic movement. When viewing these prints, the human eye perceives a flat, stationary image as a moving one. According to OptiGraphics, this illusion of three dimensions is achieved through a printing process that combines two or more images on a specialized lens material. Lenticular printing is commonly used for wide-format projects, including murals, billboards, city lights, promotional stands, posters, and trade show signs, in addition to smaller formats such as product packaging, drinkware, and point-of-purchase (POP) displays.
- **OptiChrome printing:** Dubbed by OptiGraphics, this technique



Images courtesy of OptiGraphics & Brad Bartlett



enhances an image's depth and allows metallic highlights to be built into artwork through a metallic background. This printing method is also referred to as 3D chrome printing or metallic printing. OptiChrome printing can be used for trading cards, POP signage, gift cards, and a variety of promotional products.

- **RevealSeries printing:** A wide variety of printing techniques and special effects are included under the RevealSeries line, such as water reveal, light reveal, red reveal, flash reveal, hot and cold reveal, dark reveal, scent reveal, and scratch reveal. As the name implies, this printing results in a product in which an image is revealed via the activation of a variety of ink technologies. Products printed with these methods range from magazine inserts to beverage packaging and promotional prints and products.

OptiGraphics currently boasts 30 Promotional Products Association International Pyramid Awards, 100 best-of-category awards from the Printing Industries of America, 19 Benny Awards, The Most Irresistible Mail Award from the United States Postal Service, and two Grammy nominations for best recording packaging — to name a few.

Who's who

OptiGraphics began conducting business with high-profile clients about seven years ago when the company made the decision to focus on being "the best lenticular and specialty printing company in the world."

Bartlett explained, "When you make that statement, you have to be able to back up what you say and one of the key objectives of that was to work with high-profile clients that could do large volumes of business."

Notable clients OptiGraphics has worked with include musical artists such as Taylor Swift, U2, The Rolling Stones, Madonna, Bono, Mick Jagger, Queen, Brian May, Adam Lambert, Demi Lovato, Ariana Grande, and Caroline Rose; Broadway production companies including Death Becomes Her, Wicked, Aladdin, Into The Woods, and Cabaret; Topps, Leaf, Upper Deck, and Panni trading cards; films such as the original Star Wars Trilogy, Marvel's Ironman, and Wicked; and 19 of the Fortune 100 companies, as well as Delta Airlines, Verizon, Kraft Foods, The Coca-Cola Company, and PepsiCo.



"Most of our clients tend to deal in high profile, high style, cutting edge,





and trendsetters in their respective categories. These partners come to us looking for something different, something out of the ordinary, something that will put them on the leading edge in their respective industries," said Bartlett.

Working with these clients, like with any customer, can range in frequency — from a one-time event to a decade-long relationship, with orders coming in throughout the year.

Bartlett attributed his formal music education to his success in becoming a service provider to chart-topping singers and musicians, saying, "Having played professionally for over nine years, I'm able to talk the talk, walk the walk, and have instant credibility because I understand the marketplace and how musicians think."

He continued, "But the most important thing is we have unique products and an amazing track record of helping other musicians get exactly what they want."

High-caliber projects

After 34 years with OptiGraphics, Barlett has worked on a host of printing orders for a wide variety of clientele. Of the high-profile clients, he shared his experience working on the following projects:

Caroline Rose's 'The Art of Forgetting' album jacket

When asked about his favorite high-profile project, Bartlett referenced the album jacket he printed for American indie pop singer and songwriter Caroline Rose.

"She asked us to design her album jacket for her now No. 1-selling album, 'The Art of Forgetting,' which was nominated for a Grammy for Best Album Packaging. [It involved] over 80 hours of prepress, seven days of printing, and 14 days of hand assembly. [It was] a true labor of love," he remarked.

According to Bartlett, what made the project stand out was the collaboration between the artist, the agency, and the printer.

He explained, "The concept started with the artist, who wanted to show that, on this album, she was going to be on fire. The agency, with input from us, designed the cover so that it could have both full motion and 3D in the same picture. This is highly unusual in that, most of the time, we either go with motion or 3D but not both together."

"Once that was decided and input [was] given by us on the photo shoot, [we] took the pictures and turned them into a composite 3D with animation. [It] was extremely time-consuming, to say the least," said Bartlett. "The agency was fabulous to work with, and the client did a great job of giving us comments, direction, and telling [us] what she was looking for. It was truly a team effort."

Kraft Foods' Mio magazine insert

Referencing the Benny Awards that OptiGraphics has won, Bartlett referred to the accolade as "the equivalent of an Oscar in the printing industry." He reflected on one particular product that earned OptiGraphics a Benny — a magazine insert for Mio.

"One that stands out the most in my mind was the last Benny that we won. Kraft Foods, along with their agency from New York, Taxi, came to my office in Dallas […] and gave me a product brief concerning their introduction of Mio. They were looking for 14 million pieces, and these were going to be magazine inserts that were going to run in People, Entertainment Weekly, and Rolling Stone for four months. What they were looking for was an ad that would interact with water."

Bartlett continued, "They gave me











one week to figure this out. I had seen some things on the internet about a company in Japan that had developed a coating that would interact with water, and [after] flying over there and speaking with them, I figured out that they had no idea what they were doing. It did not work, but I did gain valuable information."

"I came back, met with my team, and we developed a coating — that we now have patents on — that is made out of silica and could be mixed with a carrier and screen printed with multiple hits using multiple screen meshes. This coating is white, and when it interacts with water, it goes from white to clear, therefore revealing what's been printed underneath. After about 15 minutes, it dries and goes back to its original state and can be repeated," he explained.

"Then we had several other hurdles to overcome in that these magazines must be completely recyclable and can only be printed on real paper, not plastic paper. We worked with a paper mill to get a very hard sheet and then developed a special UV coating that is water resistant.

"I'm proud to say the 14 million pieces were delivered on time with not one piece failing or being late to the publications."

Delta Airlines' plane cards

Bartlett cited Delta Airlines' OptiChrome plane cards as the most challenging project he's worked on to date.

"[I was] called in to make a presentation on lenticular trading cards to replace the metal and plastic pilot wings that each of the plane's pilots give out to young children who ride their plane," he explained. "They wanted to stop giving them out because the kids would stick themselves with the pins."

Bartlett recalled, "[I] started the presentation with lenticular cards, and the boss said, 'Those are Cracker Jacks toys, and they'll have no part of anything that Delta does. What do you [have] that's super high-end and premium?' Calmly, I reached into my presentation satchel, pulled out OptiChrome cards, and the rest is history — [they're] one of our top five biggest accounts."

Broadway's 'Death Becomes Her' signage

Bartlett told us that OptiGraphics has had a proud tradition of being on Broadway and working with the biggest productions of the season.

"'Death Becomes Her' is a perfect example of that. We were chosen to provide both the outdoor and the indoor signage for the entire theater," he remarked. "Because of the subject matter and the very message of the play, lenticular [printing] was absolutely the perfect solution for all the signage as well as direct-mail campaigns out to targeted consumers."

That's show biz

Working with high-profile clients and taking on these high-caliber projects isn't for the faint of heart — and comes with its own set of rules, skills, and know-how.

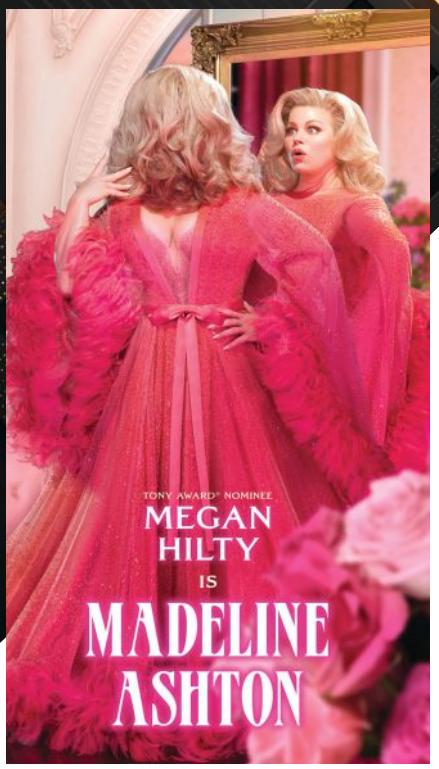
"High-profile clients tend to demand your complete focus, are used to getting exactly what they want in the time frame they need it, will simply not take no for an answer, and are willing to spend whatever it takes to get exactly what they want and need," explained Bartlett. "Figure out what they want and give them lots of it. And just like a doctor, you are on call 24/7. I routinely get and take calls at 4 a.m. and on weekends."

In addition, it's not uncommon for most high-profile clients to require nondisclosure or strict confidentiality agreements. For example, while working on projects for Taylor Swift's Eras tour, Bartlett mentioned that the confidentiality was "even ramped up further, with no samples, etc. ever able to get out."

Bartlett described working with high-profile clients as high risk, high reward. "It can be difficult because we all tend to stay in our comfort zone. And the comfort zone for most of us is usually smaller projects with lower-profile clients. Also, it can be extremely intimidating to talk with some of these high-profile clients and the demands that they require."

He added, "You may go through four, six, eight, or even 12 months and not sell one of these clients, and it can become very discouraging."

Barlett explained that working with these sorts of clients has "Taught us that you need to focus your time and energy on clients that can produce high-volume and high-profile projects that truly will make a difference in the marketplace. All clients are important, and we try to service as many as



possible, but what we have found is that you can waste a lot of your time and energy on clients who produce very small programs and tend not to be on the cutting edge of their industries."

However, the advantages of this tier of business and production can be highly rewarding. "The rewards are gigantic," said Bartlett. "Yes, they can be very profitable and very rewarding, but also, there can be great satisfaction in providing something to a high-profile customer that is truly unique in the marketplace and something that they and their organization truly enjoy."

For graphics shops interested in working with these types of clients, Bartlett advised service providers to break out of their comfort zone and "Find an industry that you can specialize in, have a good knowledge base, and find the leaders in that industry and show them what unique products and programs you can bring to their marketplaces."

The power of three

Bartlett's most emphasized piece of advice for working with high-profile clients hinges on knowing three specific types of people: the gatekeeper, the coach, and the decision-maker.

"When dealing with high-profile clients, you're going to be put into a situation where you're going to meet, talk, and interact with various different people within the organization, he explained. "It is imperative that when you first start a relationship with this client that you figure out what role each person plays so that you understand how and with what you need to provide that person as far as information."

He continued, "Especially during the selling process, it's important that you understand who is going to be the person that is going to put you in touch with all the people you need to interact with [the gatekeeper] and that you have them on your side so that they will not be a roadblock. You want to be the one that gets through immediately to the person you need to speak to."

"Next, you need to find out who the coach is in your circle," said Bartlett. "The coach is usually a person that has input into the final decision but rarely is the person that makes the ultimate decision. They're usually a person who's been with the company for an extended period of time, knows the ropes, knows the hot button, and most importantly, knows what the ultimate decision-maker wants and needs. They are invaluable in providing you with lots of information without boring other people and it's imperative that you get them on your side.

He concluded, "The final person that we try to identify is a decision maker. This is the person who makes the ultimate decision about what is going to be done, what it is going to look like, what the cost will be, and the person who must be satisfied at the end of the project."

Bartlett offered an example within the Taylor Swift organization to illustrate this trifecta, explaining, "Taylor's personal assistant is the gatekeeper, and everything goes through [her]. Taylor's mom, Andrea, is the coach who keeps everything on track, on time, and within budget. Taylor, of course, is the ultimate decision-maker."

He continued, "Taylor and her mother, Andrea, are one of the most unique combinations that I've had to deal with. As you can imagine, they play 'good cop, bad cop' with me, and it works [perfectly] for them. Taylor, the good cop, is the creative one, giving me ideas, what she's looking for, how [the product] needs to look, act, and perform, and most importantly, telling me what unique feature, benefit, and look she is after. She then turns it over to her mother, who plays the bad cop and [discusses] deadlines, price, and every detail including shipping, packaging, arrival points, etc."

"After seven years, I have learned that you never, never say no. You simply figure out how to do it because they don't care [about] the cost, they only care [about] the result," Bartlett remarked. "I also know my place; I am a vendor and I could be replaced immediately at any time and any point if I don't deliver or perform exactly the way I tell them I'm going to — my word is everything."

Parting advice

Lastly, Barlett shared the following advice, "Most importantly, be genuine, be real, and never overpromise and underdeliver."

He referenced a Blues song — recorded by artists such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King — with the lyrics, "In order to be convincing, you gotta be convinced," and stated, "You need to be convinced that what you're telling your customer is the absolute truth, that it is what you promised, and that what you are doing for them is the best in the industry." **GP**

Editor's note: Learn more at Brad Bartlett's session "Managing a Major Swag Portfolio" at GPX in Irving, Texas, on March 7. Register at g-p-x.com.



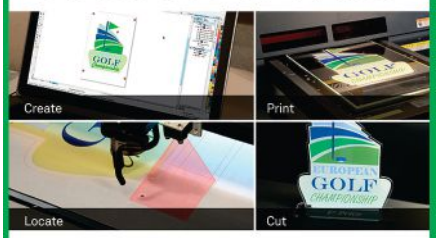
Marie Fennema is the managing editor of GRAPHICS PRO, including GRAPHICS PRO Today, covering news and guidance in apparel decoration, awards and engraving, and sign and digital printing.

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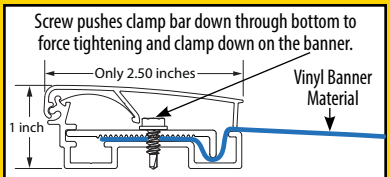
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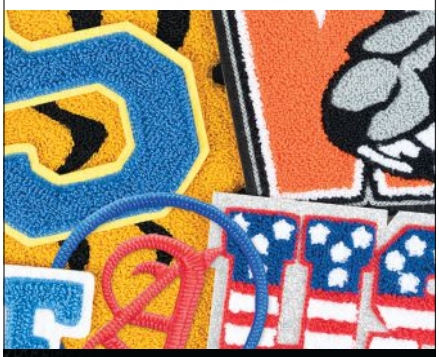


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Getting started on new student & grad season

Gifts for students, graduates & families

By Natalie Albers

Ask the parent of a high school upperclassman and they'll tell you: the college hunting process means getting free trinkets, T-shirts and tchotchkes — all in an attempt by schools to capture attention (and business). Prospective students are inundated with so much stuff they'll hardly look at, let alone save, once they make their final decision.

What they *really* want are things that represent their institutions of choice — things they'll keep long after commencement as a symbol of their accomplishment.

Help schools in your area rise above the rest with branded crystal awards and gifts. Crystal is a timeless symbol of excellence, as well as a reminder of the priceless investment made in education. A beautiful crystal piece that sports a school's name, logo, or mascot is a striking and permanent way to express school spirit and student pride. No matter where it's displayed, it will be a conversation starter for years to come.

The versatility of crystal makes it perfect for customizing and personalizing, and there is a mind-boggling array of imprint options and



combinations to consider, depending on the piece. The only limitation is your imagination! Whether you choose a design with a classic deep etch, a color-filled deep etch, an image, or a 3D subsurface laser engraving, each gift is crafted to be as unique as its recipient.

There are many different kinds of crystal awards and gifts perfect for school-related purposes (and at a wide variety of price points)! We gave it the old college try in showing off some of our favorites. These ideas can be helpful to share with local schools, event planners, professional photographers, and, of course, parents.

Gifts for new students

When a student has decided where they want to attend, it's cause for celebration! These designs and more can stand alone or be included as a part of welcome kits mailed out to incoming students. Each piece can be emblazoned with school name, logo and/or mascots, and even personalized with students' names. Tip: As this is a welcome gift, it's OK to leave off the projected graduation year and area of study (in case students make any changes along the way).

Contact each school's admissions office to get the ball rolling on having welcome gifts ready to ship out as soon as a student commits to it — or even waiting to greet them on move-in day.

- **Cellphone holder:** As handy as it is unique, you can etch the school logo or mascot on the back, and the student's or school's name on the front.
- **Lighted key chain:** Keep it simple with the school's logo laser-engraved in 2D or 3D subsurface.
- **Achiever award:** Creatively customize it with deep etch, color





fill, Illumachrome direct-print, and subsurface options.
- **Cut corner cube:** Perfect for a 2D subsurface image.

Gifts for graduates

Each person's alma mater is a part of their identity and each student is part of their school's legacy. That's why the perfect complement to that new framed diploma is something that reflects the time and place where the student earned their degree. Help graduates celebrate their achievements and showcase their pride with a crystal gift that will last for decades to come.

Contact the school's events or ceremony-planning department several months ahead of commencement (which may occur more than one time a year, such as in the winter as well as the spring). Ensure they know how simple customization can be, even in large numbers, and that these gifts can be shipped to be handed out in person or mailed directly to homes.
- **Clock:** A crystal clock reminds them of what they're capable of! Accent with a deep etch of a logo or special sentiment.
- **IllumaPix crystal print:** Capture a beautiful image of a campus, building, or other special moment.











The print comes ready to hang on a wall or be placed on a table or desk.

- **Camby rectangle:** Simple yet stunning, use a deep etch or laser engrave a 3D image to commemorate their graduation year and school.
- **Pen holder:** Add a deep etch to this desktop item, and they'll not only never lose their favorite writing utensil, they'll also never forget the education that got them to the present.

Gifts for families

In addition to gifts for new students and recent grads, there's a big market you may not have tapped into yet (and you'll want to). We're talking about current students and their families! If you're not selling to college and university bookstores, make this the year you start.

These shops sell a lot of things other than books and supplies. They're high-traffic areas and often a must-stop destination for students and parents when doing campus tours and visits, or when they want themed swag for family and friends. Many schools also have online stores where items can be shipped anywhere, anytime.

Contact the store's manager about including school-branded crystal gifts in their assortment. You can supply them with ready-made pieces with the college or university's name, logo, and mascot. In addition, you can provide samples of other gifts that stores can display and work with you to customize with additional information like student name, area of study, or special achievements.











Crystal awards and gifts make a statement unlike any other. Stand out today by offering these customized items to schools near you and working with your favorite supplier to bring that school spirit to life! **GP**

- **IllumaPix refrigerator magnet:** Display a full-color image or sentiment on this small magnet.
- **Carmel square:** Level-up an ordinary photo with a subsurface image of the graduate done in 2D or relief. Make it come to life even more with a lighted base.
- **Summit bookends:** These provide a stunning way to organize books and periodicals on desktops, shelves, or mantels.
- **Flame award:** The flame of knowledge and the school's branding will "burn" brightly for all time.
- **Wine stopper:** Easy and elegant, this pairs well with a celebratory bottle of red or white.



Natalie Albers is a Twin Cities-based writer and editor with more than two decades of communications experience for small businesses and large corporations. Natalie serves as communications manager at Crystal D and is passionate about recognition, as well as about helping organizations connect with their people in meaningful ways.

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GRAPHICS|PRO



Here comes wedding season

Custom products & services you can offer couples-to-be

By John Morman

As we enter the new year and are recovering from what I hope was a successful holiday period, we take time to set up for 2025, tidy up the store, and check and reorder inventory. Please understand that I love my job. I really do. There's one thing, though, that has irritated me since I switched from my engineering career to owning a retail business. There is always the next holiday, special event, or occasion we need to prepare for.

But wait! Valentine's Day is on the horizon, and it comes with marriage proposals, wedding planning, and weddings. Make no mistake, this is another period that can prove very profitable!

It goes without saying that these very special and personal items are completely driven by the couple-to-be or the person placing the order. Other than very basic options such as graphic choice or font, I leave the choices up to the customer. There are a lot of things we can offer for the newly engaged and their upcoming nuptials. Don't forget to offer gifts that friends of the happy couple might purchase as wedding party gifts. Engagement presents are also popular, and don't forget anniversaries either!

Wedding products

What should you offer? I think we can break down our offerings into a couple of categories: decorative and practical. Although they are often intended to be practical gifts, crystal or glass decanters, glassware, cutting boards, butcher blocks, pewter plates or bowls, etc., often end up as decorative gifts. I can't tell you how often I've prepared an engraved cutting board, butcher block, or custom piece and provided the appropriate care instructions, only to be told, "This is much nicer than I thought. It's going to be hung up in the kitchen and not used."

Decorative wall plaques and shields, mirrors, pewter or glass cups, bowls, plates, crystal or glassware, and wedding favors work very well. In the United Kingdom, engraved coat hangers have become popular. The choices of what to do are virtually limitless. You can offer text only, graphic only, or a combination of the two. What wood choices and size do they want? If you have a good photo engraving package, that can present another option. Do you offer color fill or not? If you're fortunate enough to have access to any specific types of graphics, make sure you offer that to make your product even more personal.

- **Wall plaques & shields:** I personally don't believe "award-style" plaques and shields (wooden plaques with a painted metal plate) are suitable for this purpose. There are several suppliers who offer plaques and shields in a variety of solid wood, and I think that solid wood provides such a rich look. Wood also offers the option of selective color fill.
- **Mirrors** offer a choice that most people won't think of. If you haven't tried engraving a mirror before, I would respectfully suggest you give it a go! There are a couple of options for mounting a mirror and, depending on the size of your furniture, several shapes and sizes to consider. One thing I like to do



Images courtesy of John Morman

is to fit the mirror into a frame. Most frames are designed with the thought that it's a certificate or photograph that will be installed. Such a frame will not readily accept a mirror secured by a conventional backing because the mirror is simply too thick. To avoid splitting the frame, you must widen the slot where the hinged clips will fit. There isn't a lot of material to work with, so great care must be taken when widening the slot. If you are going to err, err so that the bulk of the material is taken from the inside of the slot. Then, if the frame fails, the hinge clips will still be secured, but if the frame fails on the outside of the slot, there is virtually nothing for the clip to fit against. A razor, knife, or very narrow grinding fixture or cutting tool on one of the readily available small rotary tools works very well.

- **Pewter or stainless steel:** Cups, bowls, plates, and flasks are great choices, but remember that your only option may be to use a marking compound. Some manufacturers provide special optics, or hybrid machines, that will engrave in much the same way as a rotary engraver, but I have no personal experience with these options.
- **Crystal & glass:** Decanters and the wide range of barware available are extensive and lend themselves to being great gifts for the wedding party or for the couple. Perhaps the most popular gift we prepare for weddings is personalized champagne flutes, and again, there is the option for graphics and/or text. In some cases, my wife, Mary Jo, has embellished the flutes with special ribbons.



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Customizing a special item

The elephant in the room, of course, is what to do when a customer comes in with a piece of Granny's crystal or some other custom piece they might have made just for the occasion. No matter the project, I always advocate discussing all the potential problems that might arise. But I believe something being done for a wedding is even more important.

The first point to emphasize with your customers is that their pieces may not be replaceable if something goes wrong. Crystal ordered just for the event can be reordered, but an heirloom or handmade item could be "one and done." Problems can include crystal shattering, glass cracking, and the myriad of things that can go wrong with working with a type of wood you may not be familiar with.

You may want to prepare something for the customer to sign, advising the customer that they've been made aware of potential issues and that they understand you won't be responsible for the loss of custom pieces. You don't want to be on the hook for a $1,000 piece of crystal or something else that's irreplaceable.

This might cause a customer to think again or even try another engraver, but you need to weigh the potential of damaging or destroying their item against your reputation. A satisfied customer may not say anything about your work, but a dissatisfied customer is likely to tell everyone they know. It's best not to take the chance.


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Marketing

Marketing your services is paramount for this specific market. It is very important to share your marketing materials with wedding venues, restaurants, hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, and wedding planners. I have been fortunate enough to have an agreement with a couple of B&Bs where I engrave custom champagne flutes for their newly married guests.

Prominent displays in your shop are essential. In our case, our engraving work is a service we offer through our wider retail store, and we get a lot of business from walk-ins who come in looking for something else entirely.

Weddings are one of the most meaningful niche markets we work with on a regular basis. The number of thanks and appreciation we receive from recently married couples, couples celebrating anniversaries, and families is gratifying and helps us as we jump from one holiday or special occasion to the next.

As always, good luck! **GP**



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

Creative plaque design

How to make your awards stand out

By Sara Thompson

The award-making community has been booming with innovation, with new machines, full-color processes, and new substrates being introduced faster than anyone can keep up with. The true roots of this community are the trophy and plaque builders. There's something special about the original award of all awards: the trophy. Right beside it are the tried-and-true commemorative plaques lining school hall of fame hallways, police office walls, VFW memorials, or even the employee of the month plaques hanging at your local grocery store.

A plaque offers more surface area than a small trophy plate attached to a base and can easily be displayed with a simple nail in the wall, hung for all to admire, or even help decorate a room. Innovation is necessary for progress, and I'm all for a full-color display of honor and achievement, but there's also something my black-and-white laser mind finds special and fun to create solely with a laser. The standard of a metal plate with double-sided tape stuck to a plaque board is always going to be around, but let's explore some slightly elevated, creatively designed plaques made only with one laser and a few extra materials — no ink, printer, or CNC machine required.

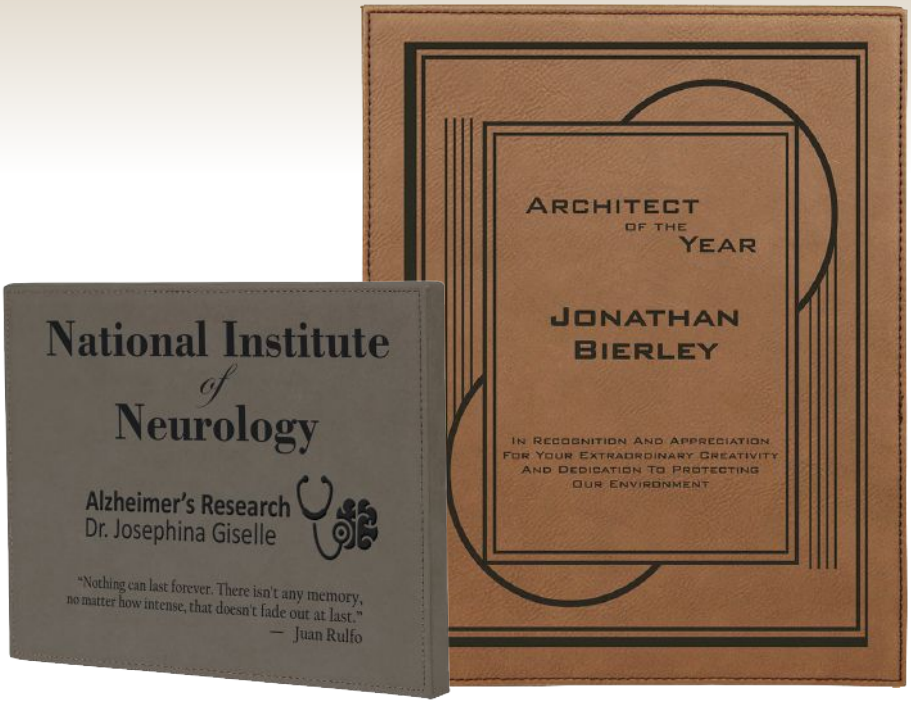


Images courtesy of JDS Industries



First up is the piano finish plaque with paint fill. While a UV printer may be on your shop wish list but not quite in the budget yet, you can still achieve an eye-catching pop of color with some low-tack masking and spray paint. These colors really pop on shiny piano finishes. Many piano finish boards are compressed MDF, so lasering directly onto them exposes an unattractive brown color underneath, as they are intended to have a plate attached. Wrapping them with some low-tack masking tape before placing them in your laser to engrave will essentially leave you with a stencil. Then, using a spray paint of your choice (I recommend the Rust-Oleum multipurpose brand, but the color and finish are up to you), you can spray one to two coats of paint directly onto it. After letting it completely dry, some manual labor of picking and weeding will be necessary.

Next is the plaque board of your choice mixed with an adhesive plastic product which requires less post-laser work than the paint-fill method and is the most comparable to the metal plate on plaque look. This material can look like a metal plate with its brushed metal finishes, but it's 100% laser-safe to cut and raster all in one laser job. No need for a metal shear or pre-cut plate to attach. Simply design your plate to match the face size of the plaque and the border you want to show. Your laser can cut through this material with ease and raster quickly and smoothly. Another plus is the custom shapes you open your design to — as you're not limited to simple square cuts as you would be with just a shear and metal. Round or notch corners right in your design



file or create simple shapes such as state shapes to go with premade state shape plaques. With adhesive already applied to the back, you simply take it out of your laser, peel, and stick it to the plaque board of your choice. This material opens up a lot more design choices of color finishes and shapes to be applied to plaque boards.

Lastly, lasering directly onto a plaque's surface is the quickest and most hassle-free method. Design and laser with no spray paint and no plate attaching. With the right design and artwork layout, a red alder custom shape plaque may be a good choice for you. Another direct-to-substrate option is the leatherette plaques. With multiple sizes and color options, these plaques offer the look and feel of genuine leather, are nearly 1" thick, and are completed with a felt back with keyholes.

There is and always will be a time and place for the standard plate on plaque to be displayed or added to the wall that has had the same plaque for decades. It's a timeless look that commemorates achievements, people, and events, but the next time your customer is looking for something just slightly out of the box, fire up that laser and present a plaque worth a double take. **GP**



Sara Thompson is the UV/laser coordinator at JDS Industries. She has been with JDS for over eight years and works with nearly every department. She assists with technical support and JDS YouTube and social media. She enjoys working hands-on to be able to build a vast knowledge of as many products and processes as possible.









5 questions with... Tim Evans



Tim Evans enjoys the daily challenges of being an owner of two successful wrap shops based in Columbus, Ohio, as well as being an active promoter of the print and wrap industry around the globe. Additional skills as a professional published photographer, an avid bush crafter, and an advocate for electronic music keep Evans busy, active, and creative.

1 Many readers will know you from your business Pro Sign and Graphics, where you specialize in vehicle wraps and wide-format printing. How did you get started in the industry?

My father started as a sign painter at age 16 back in the 1960s and later started his own business when I was very young. We built everything from banners to large neon letters, electrical cabinets, sand-carved signage, screen printing, and more. I was raised in the sign shop, with some of my first memories being the smell of paint thinner and the sight of blue chalk patterns.

2 You also started wrappermapper.com, a website for connecting pros in the wraps industry. What's your biggest lesson from the 10 years you've been maintaining the site?

Personally, I have learned so much about web development and content creation as well as been exposed to entirely new aspects of the industry as we grew into a global resource. Perhaps the biggest lesson I try to impress upon the shops in the industry is the critical need to take extra time to showcase their wraps well in their own content. We have so many incredibly talented wrappers in the world and it is still a common mistake as they fail to use those projects to create excellent photos and videos that really present the work well.

3 You've attended wraps events around the world. What international event do you recommend to wraps professionals?

I recommend the Federation of European Screen Printers Associations (FESPA) series of shows. Not only do they have an amazing circuit of events all over the world, but they also combine those shows with the World Wrap Masters series of wrapping competitions. Ole "Sunshine" Ravn, Kiss Lajos, Ivan Tenchev, Duncan MacOwan, and Michael Ryan have spent years developing and running these great wrapping competitions around the planet. The next World Wrap Masters Finals will be in Berlin, Germany, May 8-9.

4 Over the years you have become the 'official unofficial' wraps industry photographer. What's your go-to camera setup?

I'm not sure about the title, but I learned a long time ago that good photographers shoot what they love. Perhaps that's why I get such good results with my wrapper photos. I know the craft, appreciate the skills, and can anticipate the angles. I still get such a thrill capturing these guys and gals doing what they love as well. I'm a Sony user personally, due to its excellent capability in low light. I started shooting underground techno events in dark rooms with lasers, fog, and fast-moving people so that experience has served well with the Sony products. My most-used pairing currently is my Sony A9ii with the Sony G-Series f2.8 24-70mm lens.

5 What's your advice for wrap shops looking to document and promote their work through photos and videos?

Either take the time to learn how to improve your photo and video skills internally or hire a local professional to regularly do that work for you. I firmly believe that a shop can improve significantly by doing this work in-house with some dedicated time. Pay attention to things like clearing the environment (don't shoot clutter), taking a moment to wipe the surfaces down, and staging the vehicle in interesting locations. Simplify the image composition and find interesting angles. Even a moderately recent smartphone can capture great images if you take the time to think it through. Also, learn a bit about developing your images well. You would be amazed at the effect that a little editing can have on a shot. GP

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Visit g-p-x.com and check out our faculty for GPX Irving. We have some great folks coming to the show to share their insights.

Scan the QR code above to see the full program for GPX Irving 2025. **GP**



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









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Your guide to maintaining a heat press

Expert tips for longevity & performance

By Stephanie Briske

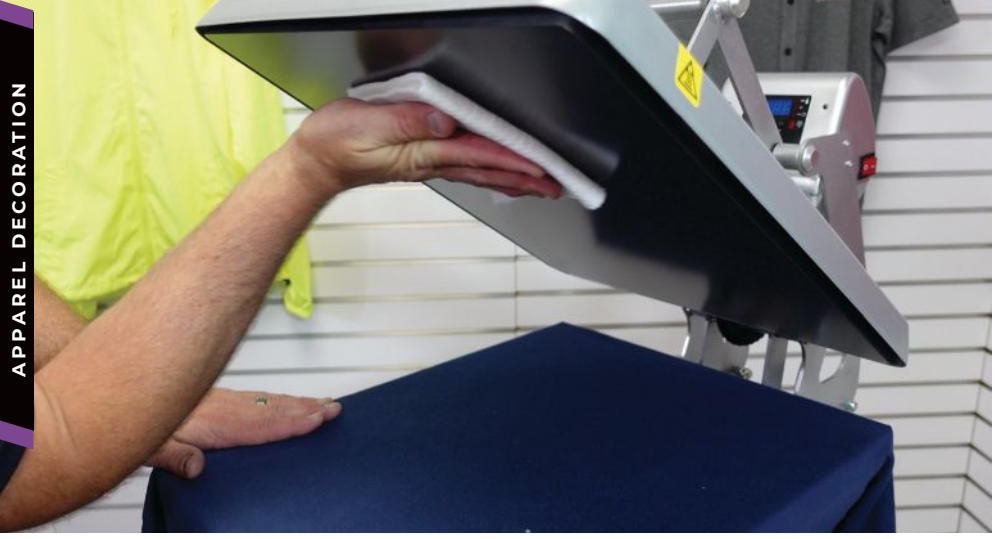
Heat printing has become a cornerstone of the custom apparel decorating industry, enabling businesses to deliver high-quality, on-demand apparel with speed and precision. Investing in a heat press that delivers accurate time, temperature, and pressure is essential when pressing today's fabrics, ensuring a flawless application that extends the longevity of your designs. This level of care not only elevates the quality of your products but also builds customer trust and loyalty, resulting in repeat business and new opportunities. As more entrepreneurs and decorators embrace heat printing to meet customer demands, the importance of reliable equipment has never been greater.

However, not all heat presses are created equal. While affordable imports may seem appealing, investing in a UL-certified heat press is the smart choice for any professional operation. UL certification guarantees that a heat press meets rigorous safety and performance standards, providing peace of mind for your business and ensuring compliance with safety regulations. A certified heat press protects your reputation, reduces operational risks, and demonstrates a commitment to quality that customers recognize and value.

No matter the make or model of your heat press, proper maintenance is essential to maximize its lifespan, minimize costly downtime, and maintain the high standards your customers expect. This guide offers practical tips to keep your heat press running smoothly and help your business grow and thrive.

Daily maintenance: Start each day right

Power up the smart way: Your heat press is a powerful machine that deserves a reliable power source. Heat presses are available in 120-volt and 240-volt options, and both require a dedicated 20-amp circuit breaker to operate safely and efficiently. Always plug your heat press directly into this



outlet, avoiding power strips or extension cords, which can cause electrical problems and even damage your machine. Take a moment each day to inspect the power cord and connections. Frayed or damaged cords can lead to interruptions or safety hazards, so replace them immediately if needed.

Keep it clean & tidy: Dust and debris can sneak into your machine and interfere with its performance. A quick wipe-down daily with a lint-free cloth keeps your heat press in peak condition.

Don't forget about your workspace! A clean, organized area not only improves efficiency but also prevents stray particles from affecting your prints. There are plenty of solutions to help keep your workspace organized, such as investing in equipment add-ons like an adjustable-height, portable heat press cart. This handy tool allows you to keep your heat press, transfers, and supplies in one organized space while offering the flexibility to move them wherever you need.

Quick visual checks: Before diving into production, take a minute to check for loose screws, misaligned platens, or anything else that looks off. A stable, level surface for your machine is equally important — this reduces vibrations that could impact your results.



Weekly maintenance: Deep cleaning & fine-tuning

Clean the platen thoroughly: The upper platen is the heart of your heat press, and maintaining its condition is critical for achieving flawless results and extending the life of your machine. Set aside time at least once a week to give it a thorough cleaning. Use a damp cloth with mild dish soap or a nonabrasive cleaner to gently remove residue, ink buildup, or adhesive. Be cautious — never use abrasive tools or harsh chemicals, as these can scratch or damage the platen surface, potentially compromising your prints.

For an added layer of protection, consider using an upper platen cover. This accessory acts as a shield for your platen, protecting it from ink, adhesive, and other contaminants. Not only does this help maintain the integrity of the platen, but it also prevents unwanted marks from transferring to your apparel. An upper platen cover can save you time on cleaning and ensure your heat press performs at its best for years to come.

By keeping your upper platen clean and protected, you're safeguarding your investment and ensuring that every press delivers the quality your customers expect.

Keep moving parts debris-free: Dust and dirt can accumulate in joints, pivot points, and other moving parts, potentially hindering the performance of your heat press. A quick blast of compressed air clears these areas and ensures smooth operation.

To take your precautions a step further, consider investing in a heat press that allows you to thread your garments. Threading not only improves precision but also minimizes the risk of garments or transfers encountering areas that might harbor hidden dust or fabric particles. This extra layer of protection helps maintain the integrity of your apparel and ensures consistently flawless results.

By maintaining clean moving parts and adopting garment-friendly practices like threading, you're enhancing both the efficiency and quality of your heat printing process.

Manage moisture in air systems: If your press uses air power, remember to drain any moisture from the air compressor and regulator. Excess moisture can wreak havoc on pneumatic components, so this step is crucial for maintaining performance.

Monthly maintenance: Get into the details

Your heat press's heating element is its heart, and ensuring it's working correctly is essential for achieving high-quality results. Use a thermometer or temperature strips to test the platen's heat, and ensure readings are within ±10 degrees of the set temperature. If not, consult technical support for recalibration.

When selecting a heat press, consider whether it features cast-in tubular heating elements. Not all heat press models include this design, which is crucial for temperature accuracy. Cast-in heating elements are embedded within the platen, providing even heat distribution that eliminates cold spots. This ensures consistent heat transfer, precise temperature control, and enhanced durability. With robust construction and resistance to wear, cast-in heaters also contribute to greater energy efficiency and faster heat-up times, making them a vital component for achieving superior heat transfer results and extending the lifespan of your equipment.



Silicone pads play a key role in even heat and pressure distribution. Check them for signs of wear, like tears or uneven surfaces. Replace them promptly if needed. Using platen covers also helps protect these pads and makes cleaning easier.

Proactive care: Stay ahead of the game

- **Act fast on residue:** Ink and adhesive residue can build up on the heating platen over time. Clean these immediately with a mild cleaner and a soft cloth. This simple step prevents defects in your prints and keeps your press looking professional.
- **Replace consumables:** Silicone pads, platen covers, and other consumables won't last forever. Keep extras on hand and replace them as needed to avoid downtime and maintain consistent results.
- **Keep a toolkit handy:** Unexpected hiccups happen. Having basic tools like screwdrivers, Allen wrenches, and pliers at the ready ensures you can handle small issues without missing a beat.
- **Protect your machine:** When your heat press isn't in use, cover it with a dust cover or protective sheet. This small step prevents dust buildup and keeps your machine ready for action.

Long-term strategies

- **Watch for warning signs:** Unusual noises, uneven heating, or inconsistent pressure are your machine's way of telling you something's wrong. Address these issues as soon as they arise to avoid costly repairs later.
- **Schedule regular inspections:** Make it a habit to thoroughly inspect your heat press at least once a month. Look for wear and tear, test all components, and tighten any loose parts. Early detection of issues can save you from unexpected downtime.
- **Keep spare parts stocked:** Downtime is frustrating, especially when it's avoidable. Keeping spare silicone pads, platen covers, and other parts on hand ensures you're prepared for quick fixes.
- **Lubricate moving parts:** For clam-style presses, a little lubrication goes a long way. Apply light-duty oil to pivot points for smoother operation. Skip lubricating gas shocks — these are self-lubricating and don't require extra care. Grease the pressure adjustment spindle on manual units with high-temperature lithium grease to keep it moving smoothly.
- **Don't hesitate to ask for help:** Sometimes it's best to call in the experts. Reach out to technical support for advice or repairs. Many manufacturers offer resources that can make troubleshooting a breeze.

With daily care and a little proactive attention, you can ensure your machine remains reliable for years to come. These maintenance habits protect your investment, improve efficiency, and help you deliver the high-quality results your customers expect. By investing in reliable equipment and giving it the care it deserves, you'll enjoy consistent performance and peace of mind while setting your business up for long-term success. GP





Stephanie Briske is a brand manager for Hotronix, committed to empowering businesses toward a future where they thrive with the help of heat press solutions. With years of experience supporting companies of all sizes, she specializes in creating meaningful, educational content designed to help them succeed in the dynamic heat-printing industry.

Start your own *embroidery* business

21 key factors to consider for long-term growth

By Jennifer Cox

Starting a new embroidery business is an exciting adventure. There are many factors to consider and decisions to make as you create the framework for your business. Putting a solid foundation in place increases the chances of achieving your goals more rapidly and with fewer unnecessary and potentially costly missteps. Here are some of the key factors to consider as you establish and launch your business, broken down into categories.

Business model

Decide how you will establish your business as a legal entity. Options include sole proprietorship, LLC, partnership, and corporation. Meet with a legal advisor as well as a tax advisor to determine the benefits, tax benefits, and differences between these types of business structures to select the one that best suits your needs.



Images courtesy of Jennifer Cox.

Location

Determine where you will establish your business. More than 75% of the embroidery businesses in the U.S. are started at home. Nearly 50% of them remain as home-based businesses. Other options include but are not limited to a retail shop, a mobile business model, a commercial or industrial location, or a shared location with another business. There is no right or wrong choice, and no two businesses are the same. Define the environment that best suits your ideal business hours and supports your personal life and family needs all while making it possible for you to earn an income.

Target markets

Consider whether you will focus on business-to-business (B2B) customers or business-to-consumer (B2C) customers. Identifying your ideal customers will influence many of the decisions you make. A business created to serve the local schools, community organizations, and businesses will work well with a considerably more casual vibe than a business launched to serve corporate customers.

Business name & brand

Choosing a company name and designing a logo for it is challenging. Factors to consider as you evaluate your favorite options include: if the name is easy to say and to spell, if the name is memorable, if the domain name is available, and if the social media handles are available. Your company name creates a pivotal first impression of your business. Consider “Sadie’s Stitches” and “Corporate Apparel Pros.” Both are good potential names, yet they will attract very different kinds of

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customers based on the company name alone. Design a logo for your company, and make sure it looks excellent when created with embroidery!

Business registration

Apply for the business permits and licenses required to operate the business in your chosen location. File the paperwork with the proper agencies for collecting and submitting sales tax in your location, if applicable. Check with your insurance professional to add coverage for the business. Note that a homeowner's policy offers little to no protection for your business, even if it is located in your home. Open a business bank account.

Business plan

Create a business plan to define your goals, budget, and operational strategy. This becomes your road map, helping you determine where you are with the business and what you need to do to get where you want to go. Review and update it annually, using this tool to guide as well as measure your business as it grows and evolves.

Embroidery machine & software

Invest in a commercial-grade embroidery machine. These machines are designed to run hour after hour, day after day, creating top-quality embroidery. Research the brands that are available in your area, and that can support your need for parts and servicing the machine over time. Most commercial machines are paired with a specific digitizing software, or the machine company will recommend one that works well with their equipment.

One of the questions I am asked frequently is, "Which brand of embroidery machine should I get?" Here's the thing: all the machines form an embroidery company stitch the exact same way. What you are deciding is which company you want to have a long-term relationship with, as that is what you are about to embark upon. Trust your gut, and choose the partner that best fits your needs.

The next question I often hear is, "What kind of machine; a single-head or a multihead machine?" Every embroidery operation will be able to use a single-head machine. It is ideal for running sewouts, small runs, and filling in around larger orders. If you are unsure of your average order size, start with the single-head. Once you know what your average order quantities are, you can then add multihead equipment or even more single-heads to increase your production capacity.

Supplies

Select a high-quality embroidery thread, a variety of stabilizers, and



Kristin Gründler – stock.adobe.com



a basic needle selection. Start with a basic range of thread colors and add more colors as you need them. Pick up good fabric shears and multiple sets of nippers. Consider getting a hooping aid to ensure that you place designs on garments accurately and consistently.

Workspace design

Establish a dedicated, well-lit workspace for your business. You will need space for your machine, a flat surface for hooping, and room to manage the products you will embroider. Many successful businesses are started in a closet, a bedroom, a dining room, a basement, or a garage. Many of them never expand past their original footprint. Others evolve and ooze throughout the building, taking over more and more of the space.

Organize your embroidery threads, stabilizers, hoops, tools, and inventory so that all these things are easy to find, easy to use, and easy to manage. Look at vertical surfaces for thread storage and hoops storage. Consider boxes or laundry baskets on shelving to sort products into their respective orders.

Training

There is a learning curve to becoming proficient with your embroidery machine and digitizing software. Experience is indeed the best teacher; there are few effective shortcuts. Consider attending industry training events and trade shows to learn all you can about operating your machine and taking online classes to master your digitizing software.

Design skills

If you cannot design good graphics and create good digitizing, leave it to the professionals. You can farm out design development and digitizing indefinitely without any negative impact on your business.

Product inventory

"Just in time" inventory is the model followed by most apparel decoration professionals. There is rarely a need to have inventory on hand because you can purchase exactly what your customer needs when they order it from you, and it will arrive at your business within a few days.

Copyrights

If you are unsure if a design is copyrighted, you should avoid creating it in embroidery. A good rule of thumb is to consider if a company that owns a particular name, image, or brand and sells products with that name or image on it, that design is off-limits. For example, Disney makes considerable amounts of income from selling Disney apparel and merchandise. Anything Disney is 100% off limits.

Website

Create a basic website showcasing your services, work you have done, and your contact information. If your business cannot be found online, you may as well not open the business.

Social media

The adage, "Be where your customers are," applies to embroidery business owners. Nearly every adult is on social media at some point daily. Sharing photos and short videos about the orders you are creating and the designs you are putting on products may attract your next best customer.

Networking

Establish yourself in the fabric of your community. Join the local chamber of commerce, and get involved in setting up and running the local community showcase. Work the concession stand at the high school during sporting events. You will have a better chance of doing business within your community the more you connect within your community.

Pricing strategy

Establish your pricing in one of these ways: cost-based, value-based, or market-based. Track the numbers in your business so you know your costs. Unless you charge more than your costs, you will not make a profit. Your price should be the sum of your costs + the product + the cost to decorate



the product + profit. If you do not cover all of these, you will find it very challenging to pay yourself, much less add profits to your bank account.

Decoration services

Explore creating embroidery on more challenging products as your business evolves to help your business stand out. Some businesses excel at doing hats, applique, varsity jackets, horse blankets, karate belts, or Carhartt jackets. They win customers from many surrounding communities because they've developed these specific skills.

Deadlines

When your customer says they need their order by a specific date, that should be set in stone. You will quickly distinguish yourself from the competition, as this is one flaw many embroidery businesses have.

Communication

Connect with your customers to effectively meet their expectations. If the products are back-ordered, let the customer know. If the shirts arrived damaged, let the customer know. If you cannot make a deadline, let the customer know before that deadline. Failing to clarify design details, timelines, or costs with customers can lead to misunderstandings and complaints.

Feedback

When your customers provide feedback, reviews, or criticism, pay attention. By adapting your business, you can shore up the relationship with that customer and possibly earn more customers when they share their experience with others.

With intentional attention to detail, you can create a solid foundation that will stand the test of time, serving your business well into the future. Succeeding in business is a marathon, not a sprint. It does not happen by accident. Plan for the long haul and you will end up a winner with a successful business. If you have specific questions about launching your new embroidery business, let's connect. You can reach me at jennifer@nnep.com. **GP**



Jennifer Cox is a co-founder and president of the National Network of Embroidery Professionals, an organization that supports embroidery and apparel decoration professionals with programs and services designed to increase profitability and production.



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Cycling & wine

Where do we sign up?

By Lon Winters

DuVine is an international cycling and adventure company that curates what they call "unforgettable travel experiences." DuVine's luxury bike tours focus on exceptional food and wine. The vision for a DuVine tour is to experience authentic character and connections across cultures. The guides are said to understand the tour regions deeply. They are tapped into family restaurants, less-traveled routes, and boutique accommodations that transcend tourism. DuVine is fascinated with character and culture. Said to be full of simple, genuine moments, the trips are all about the local details. Tours are opportunities to refresh world perception, connect with people, and find a place at the table. There is no detail too small, no surprise too extraordinary, and no nuance too subtle. DuVine guides are charismatic hosts and cycling pros who anticipate every need. They speak the language, share personal connections, and put the spirit of spontaneity to their work. Every traveler gets an intimate experience. Obsessed with food and wine, every region is revealed through its cuisine. DuVine's singular focus is bike travel, and tours have been meticulously perfected through 30-plus years of expertise.

Each year, our company gets to print the merch for DuVine through our long-term partner of over three decades, Primal. Typically, multiple designs and concepts are submitted, in which we separate and sample. Usually, once a design is determined, the client will want several prototypes for men's, women's, and sometimes youth styles. For 2024, we couldn't even tell

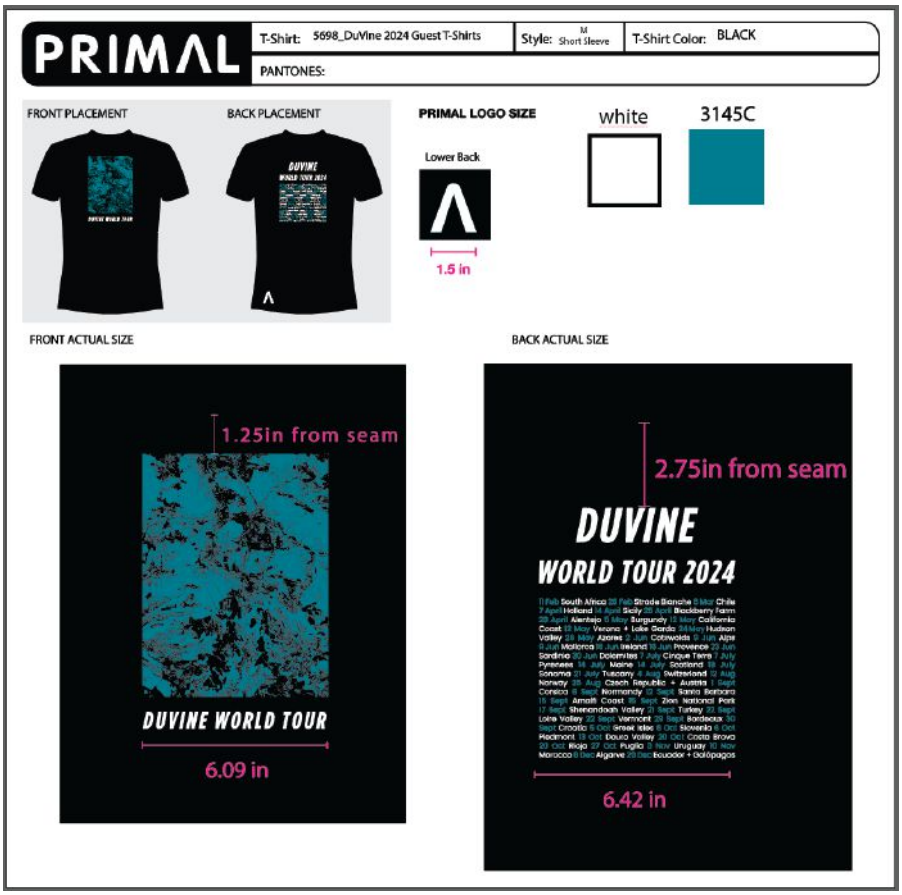


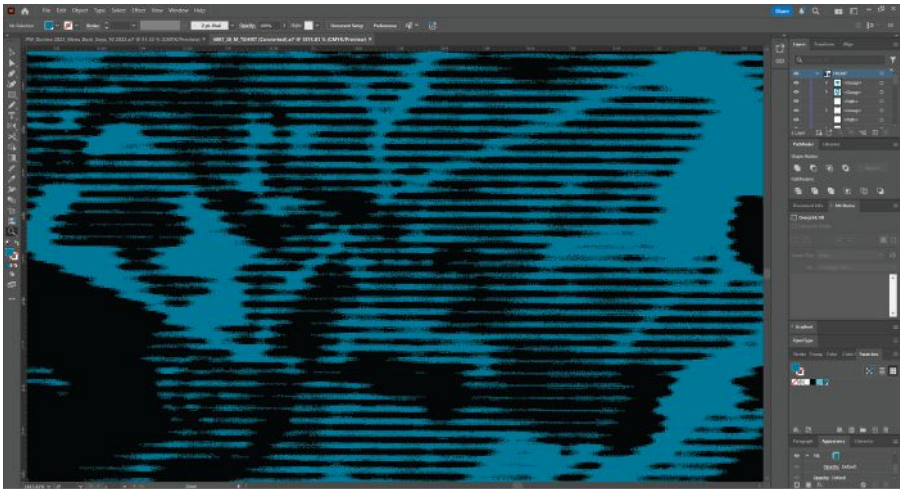
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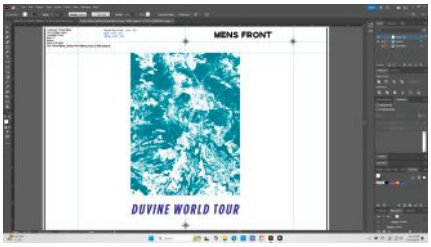
you what the graphic was. We surmise it is an inside thing. We are weekend mountain bikers, but these trips are probably above our — how shall we say — expertise and pay grades.

We do the same lower back print year after year and won't bore you with that. Simple print flash print. The full back was straightforward as well: two color type solutions, Illustrator vector fonts converted to outlines, and teal and white printed on the white printer or base with a half-point stroke under only the teal.

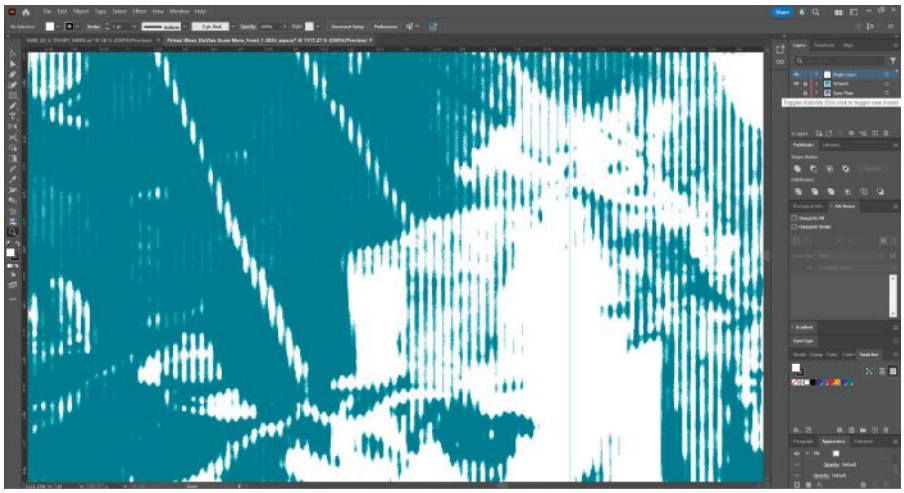
Simple up to this point. For the front, we needed original art at reasonable resolution. We opened a new document in Photoshop. The art was at 300 DPI (dots per inch) to size. After merging away a few colors and deleting the channels without any image, we manipulated the remaining channels, including the whites, to match the original. For the white printer or under-base, we created an additional channel and made a composite of the colors and white, reversing or knocking out the black. To create some color variation, we would use the base on part and not on other areas, using the black of the shirt to build the shadow areas. Did we say perfect? Not so much. The file was a TIFF and impossible to trace with all the tiny negative spaces and detail. We



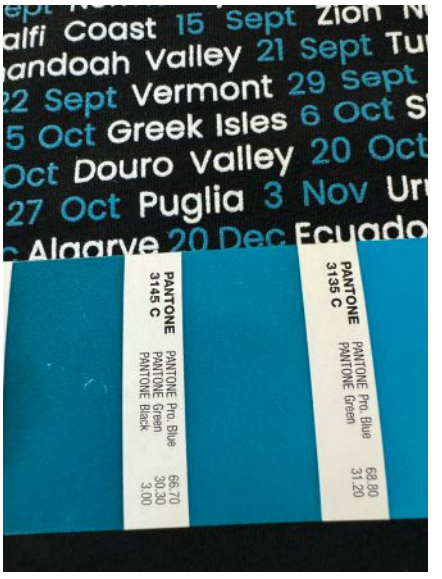




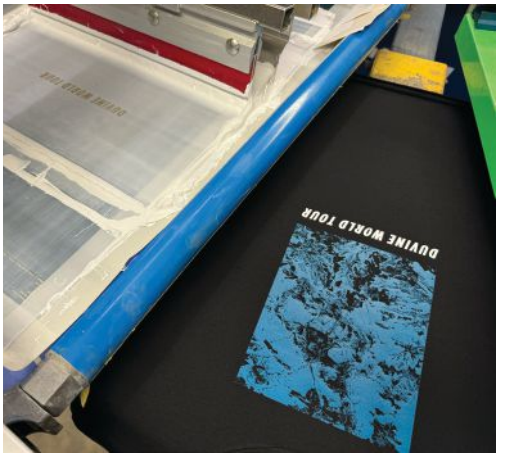


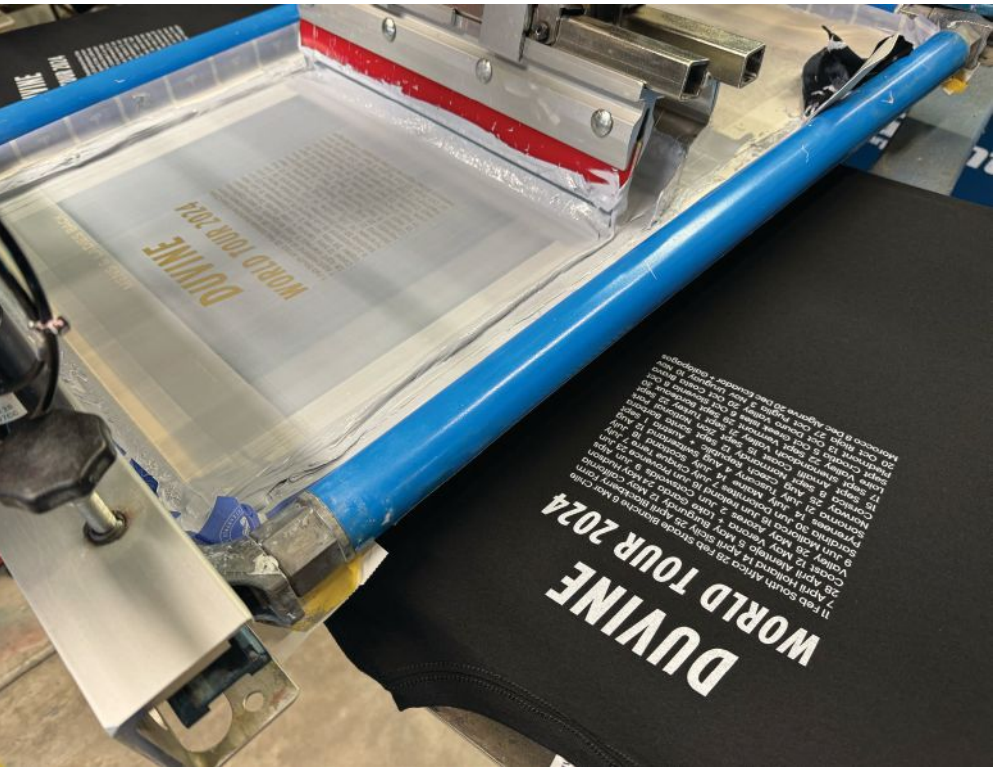








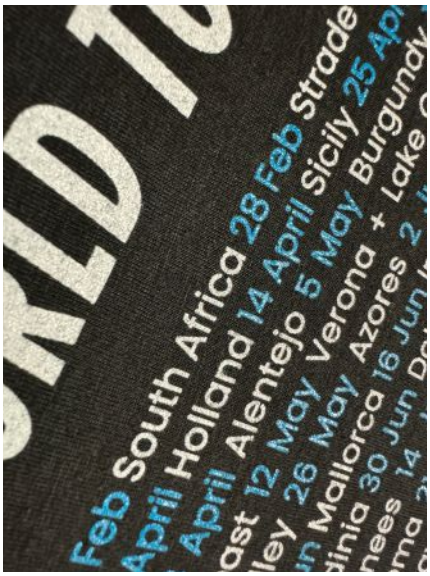




really couldn't put a choke on the base to keep the white from peaking in those tiny areas. This would compromise the intense detail and subtleties.

DuVine chose a black tri-blend fabric for all the garments this year. The sensitivity of the 50% polyester, 25% cotton, and 25% rayon can sometimes create shrinking, burning, or melting issues. This was easily combated with a low-cure ink solution, which also can minimize any bleeding we might get at higher cure temps. After multiple sample runs, we couldn't burry the white from peaking on the black fabric. Most of this TIFF was made up of tiny points that were less than a point. We would change the ink color of the base to black. The teals were dark enough, and we didn't really need the white for pop, but instead could hide that peaking by printing the same color as the garment. The base wasn't technically a color anyway; really, it







was more of a support system. It had a very necessary role but didn't have to be white. After saving as a DCS-2 file, we placed the EPS onto our art board in Illustrator with registration marks and pertinent information added. We output on CTS (computer to screen) with halftone frequency set at 50 LPI (lines per inch), 22.5 degree single Flamenco angle.

We exposed our black on an N-166 mesh and double stroked it first in the print order. Then we flashed and smoothed it in the next two heads. That black created a bit of an elevated surface to set the other inks on, which made them a little easier to manage wet-on-wet. The color was custom-matched teal. That went on an N-228 so that we could hold detail but get sufficient ink deposit. Finally, the highlight white we on the same N-166. All screens were tensioned to 45 N/cm². Setup was painful. Chasing around black-on-black isn't easy.

Finally, the strike-off was completed and sent off to the folks at DuVine for final approval. Oh [insert expletive here]! The client had sent the wrong "final" art. After some tears were shed, we started the whole process over.

The new art would be handled exactly the same way, so we already had a road map. With some scrambling, we were still able to meet the client's needs.

DuVine pairs must-see sites with lesser-known roads and every detail is designed by locals. They create luxury bike trips in the world's most amazing places. They were recognized as one of Travel + Leisure magazine's World's Best Tour Operators in 2024, and are nominated again in 2025.

DuVine was pleased with the shirts. We know this because of multiple reorders throughout the year. We start on DuVine 2025 as this article goes to print. It looks a whole lot easier in the new year! **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.



the proven process:

A framework for partnership

By Adam McCauley

Editor's note: This article is part of a package on strategies for spring sports season. Turn to **page 50** for an article from Aaron Montgomery.

Imagine this: one day, you receive an unexpected call from a brand-new baseball organization. They need everything: uniforms, hats, ball bags, fan gear, and even fundraising tools like online stores. It's the kind of opportunity that excites you, not just because of the potential business but because it's a chance to make a real difference for an organization in your own community. Energized, you dive headfirst into the project, determined to exceed expectations.

Over the next month, you collaborate closely with the team. You meticulously design their jerseys, balancing cost, style, and functionality to create something they'll wear with pride. You coordinate fan gear, carefully selecting a mix of premium and affordable options to suit every family's budget, knowing how much parents sacrifice for travel fees and expenses. You even schedule after-hours fitting sessions and attend practices to ensure every player gets a perfect fit. And when a handful of parents miss those fittings, you personally follow up, going the extra mile to finalize every detail.

Your enthusiasm doesn't stop there. You create a sleek, professional online store for the group's merchandise, a platform so polished it rivals those of major league organizations. The store generates $3,000 in fundraising, a massive win for the team's budget. Despite managing hundreds of other clients, you deliver exceptional service, driven by the joy of seeing this team succeed.

At the end of the season, your hard work is recognized in the most touching way. The organization's president honors you with a framed picture of the players, their signatures surrounding a heartfelt message: "Thank you for making this season so wonderful. We couldn't have done it without you." They share their exciting plans for next year, telling you they're expanding with three new teams. You're overjoyed. You feel like you've hit a home run, and the promise of an even bigger partnership next season fills you with pride.

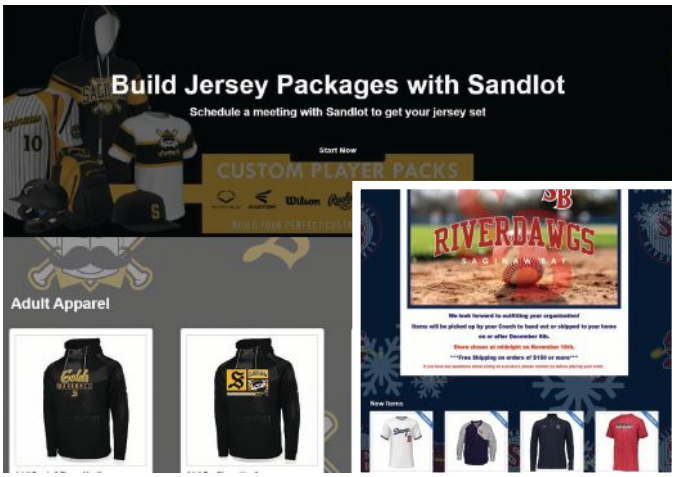
But then, as the new season approaches, everything changes. You open your laptop one morning and see a post on social media. The team is promoting their new online store — with another company. Their fitting sessions are scheduled in two weeks, and they've not only added three new teams but also launched a softball division. Just like that, they're gone.

The heartbreak is real. After pouring your time, energy, and passion into their success, the loss stings deeply. And while you may never know the exact reason, be it pricing, convenience, or simply a new connection, it doesn't ease the pain. This is a reality many businesses in the team sales world will face. The competitive nature of the industry means









that while attracting clients is vital, retaining them is where the true challenge lies. A proven process won't guarantee retention, but it will provide you a playbook that can help guide you and your clients to secure long-term success — a partnership.

Step 1: Prospect

The first step is prospect, where we lay the foundation for meaningful client relationships. This stage involves planning outreach strategies, executing those strategies, qualifying opportunities, and scheduling discovery meetings with potential clients. By carefully targeting our efforts, we ensure that our outreach is both purposeful and relevant. This step is essential for identifying clients whose needs align with our capabilities, setting the stage for a successful and long-lasting partnership.

Step 2: Purposeful discovery

The second step, purposeful discovery, is where we dive deeper into understanding our clients. At Sandlot, we refer to this phase as "Get the goods." GOODS stands for:

Goals: Understanding what the clients are looking for. "We need new uniforms." Sure, that seems easy enough — but keep digging for information.

Objectives: Do you want instant recognition and visibility on the field? Do you need something strong that promotes brand consistency and identity for a new organization? Do you need top-performing apparel that attracts top talent to your organization? These are all the questions you need to be answered to help create a unified vision between you and the client.

Obstacles: Identifying potential challenges. Are the timelines aligned to be successful? Is the budget appropriate? One of the most crucial obstacles to reviewing is your inventory. Is there an inventory issue for the apparel you are promising? Nothing sets a coach or team parent off more than when you set up a uniform, only to realize that the pants are on back-order until after the season. Here, you need to think about all potential obstacles. This is where you shine as a professional. You're the expert — think about your obstacles.

Desired results: Clarifying the specific outcomes the client wants.

Success: What does it look like for everyone. This must be a home-run for everyone. Both sides need to understand what it takes to be successful in each other's eyes.

This step is pivotal because it allows us to align our efforts with the client's vision, creating a clear roadmap to success. By understanding their goals and challenges, we can offer solutions tailored to their needs. This is also the part in the process that you can decide whether or not this is a client for you. After you get the "GOODS" you have to be honest with yourself to make sure you can fulfill your end of the agreement. Remember, you aren't just building a client for today, you are searching for a long-term partner that can grow with you and your business. If







you can't meet expectations after going through the steps to get the "GOODS," this client will surely leave and likely never come back. However, after you walk through the purposeful discovery that you aren't able to meet their needs this time, be honest. Let them know up front. This will leave the door open for you to come back when you can finally meet their needs.

Step 3: Propose strategy

In the propose strategy phase, we translate insights gathered during discovery into actionable plans. This involves discussing the tools we'll use, such as screen printing, sublimation, embroidery, and online stores. Here we learn if the tools in our toolbox even work with the needs of our clients.

- **Confirming timelines to ensure alignment with the client's schedule:**
  Uniforms are always time sensitive. Some coaches show up the week before the games start and want a miracle. Sometimes we can accommodate that miracle, sometimes we can't, but either way, be upfront and honest about time. If you tell a coach three to four weeks, they hear three weeks. When you say 15 production days, they count Saturday, Sunday, and holidays in between. Be concise. Tell them 15 days of production after artwork approval — nothing moves without approval. Once approved, the production begins. After 15 business days, your order will be shipped. It will take three business days to ship. The more information the better.
- **Setting mutual expectations between you & the client:**
  We agree to work with you, and you agree to work with us. It's not an official contract, but it feels good to know that you both agree to work together. Again, you are framing this as a partnership.
- **Providing a detailed quote for the job:**
  No one likes surprises. Get this quote to the hands of a decision-maker as fast as possible. This step is critical for establishing clear communication and setting realistic expectations. By doing so, we minimize misunderstandings and build trust, which are key to a healthy partnership.



Step 4: Finalize proofs & approval

- The finalize proofs and approval step ensures that all details are reviewed and agreed upon before production begins. This phase includes:
  - Finalizing proofs for client approval.
  - Confirming invoices and payment information.
  - Updating communication to keep everyone informed.

Communication is key when building a partnership. If something changed or went bad, make the phone call and let clients know. If the jersey got a wrong number applied — CALL. Tell them what happened, tell them the solution, and tell them the delivery date. Don't call without information. All that does is create a panic of uncertainty. Strangely, the way you fix an error with a client's order is more memorable than the order itself. Communication is crucial.

This step is vital for ensuring accuracy and transparency. It's where we double-check every detail to guarantee the client's vision is realized, reducing the risk of errors and reinforcing our commitment to quality.

Step 5: Execution

Execution is where you deliver on your promises. During this stage, we:

- Execute the proposed strategy with precision. If we told you screen-printed jerseys, don't decide on last-minute digital decals because

it's easier. That wasn't the strategy you and your partner created.
- Fulfill the expectations set in the earlier stages.

This step is where trust is solidified. By meeting or exceeding expectations, we demonstrate our reliability and expertise, laying the groundwork for a long-term partnership.

Step 6: Nurture

The final step, nurture, occurs after the delivery of products to the client. In this phase, we:
- Conduct follow-ups and customer satisfaction surveys.
- Listen, respond, and adapt to concerns.
- Perform quarterly follow-ups to maintain the relationship.
- Identify future opportunities.
- Keep clients informed about new offerings that could meet their future needs.

This step ensures that our relationships remain dynamic and forward-focused. By continuously engaging with our clients, we demonstrate our commitment to their success and ensure that they see you as a trusted partner.

The full circle

When all six steps are followed, the process naturally comes full circle, leading back to prospecting the next opportunity with the client. Each step builds upon the previous one, creating a comprehensive framework for client retention and long-term success. A proven process is more than a workflow, it's a commitment to building strong, healthy partnerships that stand the test of time.

Even with a well-defined and thoroughly executed proven process, there is always a chance that a client may leave. Factors such as pricing, personal connections, external incentives, or unrealistic promises from competitors may influence a client's decision in ways that are beyond your control. The purchasing process within an organization often involves variables that may not always be apparent. All you can do is build a strong process, follow it diligently, and stay true to your commitment to excellence and integrity. By doing so, you create the best possible foundation for lasting partnerships.

When clients leave, it can hurt — sometimes deeply. Other times, it's a blessing in disguise or a valuable learning moment. The client above is real. They left because they did not perceive a partnership forming, they felt they were simply purchasing uniforms. Because we were not clear throughout our process, we lost a client that turned into a huge account for another company. We have created our process to help us identify what we need to do to attract and keep clients that want to build partnerships not just transactions. Ultimately, maintaining a clear vision and approach will guide you through challenges and toward future opportunities.

By engaging clients in a systematic, purposeful way, we change simple transactions into partnerships. Through clear communication, mutual understanding, and alignment with their goals, clients come to see us not just as a supplier, but as a trusted collaborator. When clients see this level of investment, it builds trust, fosters loyalty, and solidifies a sense of partnership. In the end, introducing a process isn't just about closing a sale, it's about laying the groundwork for long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. **GP**



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





Editor's note: This article is part of a package on strategies for spring sports season. Turn to **page 46** for an article from Adam McCauley.

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Winning business strategies for the SPRING SPORTS MARKET

Establishing a game plan for success

By Aaron Montgomery

Spring is in the air, and for those in the graphics industry, this season brings a unique opportunity: the spring sports market. From outfitting youth leagues to creating custom designs for local tournaments, 5Ks, or event fan merch, the possibilities are abundant. To make the most of this busy season, businesses need a game plan. If you're experienced in marketing to sports teams, my goal is to give you some strategies to refine your strategies. If you are interested in adding sports printing to your business, this article is a must-read. Let's dive into three winning strategies that can help you score big this spring: niche marketing, timely promotions, and partnerships.

Finding your sweet spot

Think of the spring sports market as a giant buffet. You can't (and shouldn't) try to eat everything on the table. It will leave you feeling overwhelmed, unsatisfied, and could make you throw up. Instead, focus on your favorite dish so you can eat just the right amount, and leave feeling good, satisfied, and with the right amount of energy until the next meal. In business terms, that's your niche.

As I wrote back in the April 2024 edition of the magazine ("Building success with integrity: A journey beyond business ethics," p. 54), "Let's get real about who's going to love your [products] the most. It's not just anyone with a few bucks to spare. I've seen too many small businesses fall into the trap of trying to win over everybody, and guess what? They end up grabbing nobody's attention. It's like shouting into a void — frustrating and fruitless. Trying to please everyone is a surefire way to become nothing to no one."

Niche marketing is about identifying a specific audience or need and tailoring your services to meet it. Maybe it's youth soccer leagues, high school baseball teams, or even corporate kickball tournaments. By narrowing your focus, you'll stand out as the go-to expert for that particular group.

One of the major hurdles to going all in on a niche is the fear of missing out. As I shared in my earlier article, "We think the jack-of-all-trades type mindset allows for more flexibility and more reach in our potential sales. But the opposite is true. The jack-of-all-trades type mindset only allows those businesses to get the leftover customers who missed their ideal match." It's tempting to take on every project that comes your way, but spreading yourself too thin often leads to burnout. Instead, take a strategic approach. Ask yourself three very important questions:

1. **Who are my ideal customers in the spring sports market?**
   Meaning what specific customers or groups can you help the most? Do you want big leagues with lots of shirts because you can crank out larger orders efficiently, or are you better suited working with one-off personalized merch because of your design ability and desire to charge premium pricing? Get as specific as possible.
2. **What unique value can I provide to them?**
   Regardless of the customer you want, you also need to identify what will make you unique in the marketplace so those ideal customers will want to choose you over someone else.
3. **Why would your ideal customer buy from you?**
   And this is the most important question of the three. This will help answer No. 2, point you to

> THE SPRING SPORTS MARKET IS FULL OF OPPORTUNITIES, BUT SUCCESS REQUIRES STRATEGY.

your unique value proposition, and ultimately it is what all good marketing is founded upon. The 'who' and the 'what' will not show up until you are clear about the 'why.'

Once you've identified your niche, you can tailor your marketing efforts to speak directly to that audience. Your messaging becomes more targeted, your services more relevant, and your results more impactful. It's a win-win.

And to be clear, your niche isn't about limiting what you do; it's about refining your marketing focus to create deeper connections and drive meaningful sales. By being specific — such as targeting youth volleyball clubs or showcasing your expertise in direct-to-film (DTF) printing — you'll attract customers who truly value what you offer.

Strike while the iron's hot

In the sports market, timing is everything, and your promotions and outreach must be planned to meet the potential customers at the ideal time. Spring sports teams operate on tight schedules, and businesses that can deliver quickly and efficiently will have the upper hand. A strategy to consider is running seasonal promotions that align with the needs of your target market. For example:

- **Early bird discounts:** Offer a discount to teams that place their uniform orders early in the season. This serves to reward the customers who plan ahead, making your production easier and less stressful.
- **Last-minute rush service:** On the other side of the coin are those organizations that need a quick turnaround. If you can help with this need, you should be paid for that service and sharing that you have rush-order services for teams that waited until the eleventh hour to order.
- **Championship bundles:** Part of your strategy is knowing the needs of your ideal customer, and allowing them to stick to the sports while you are the expert in what you do. Make it easy for them to order as much as possible by creating packages that include uniforms, banners, and custom awards for end-of-season celebrations.

One technology that's a game-changer for timely promotions is DTF printing. This method allows for quick, high-quality prints on a variety of materials, making it perfect for fulfilling tight deadlines without sacrificing quality. Highlighting your ability to deliver fast, professional results can be a major selling point.

Building a team off the field

No team wins alone, and neither should your business. Partnering with local organizations, schools, or even other businesses can create a mutually beneficial relationship that boosts your visibility and revenue. Like all things in our business, we need a strategy and a plan to maximize our efforts. Here's how to approach partnerships:

1. **Identify potential partners:** Look for local sports shops, schools, or community organizations that align with your target market. Be creative with this and don't limit yourself to just the obvious choices, but reach out to other not-so-obvious opportunities as well. Event planners, fitness centers, chiropractors, and, my favorite, photographers
2. **Offer value:** Propose a partnership that benefits both parties, like providing discounted team gear in exchange for advertising your services at their events. I have found that before approaching a potential partner, the best way to go into it is focusing on what you can do for them first. Once they are interested you can refine how you can benefit from the relationship.
3. **Collaborate creatively:** Consider sponsoring a youth league or designing exclusive merchandise for a school's sports teams. These efforts not only generate income but also establish your brand as a key player in the local sports community. And I also suggest being a pillar of that community and supporting those organizations that support your community as a whole.

The best partnerships are built on trust and mutual goals, so focus on creating long-term relationships rather than one-off deals.

Overcoming common challenges

Let's address the elephant in the room: the challenge of saying "no." It's tempting to accept every job that comes your way, especially during a busy season like spring. But taking on too much can dilute your efforts and harm your reputation.

Instead, be choosy about the jobs you accept. Focus on projects that align with your strengths, your niche, and your long-term goals. Saying "no" to the wrong opportunities frees you up to say "yes" to the right ones. This approach not only preserves your energy and resources but also ensures you're delivering top-notch results for your clients.

The spring sports market is full of opportunities, but success requires strategy. By focusing on a niche, running timely promotions, and building strong partnerships, you can position your business for a winning season. As you gear up for spring, take a moment to reflect on your goals and game plan. The key is to stay focused, strategic, and confident. **GP**



Aaron Montgomery's company, Our Success Group, assists with business plans and pricing strategies, as well as customer service and marketing. He is the author of "The FUNdamentals of Business Success" and the co-founder of a facilitated six-month mastermind collective called Radical Goal-Getters. Aaron also co-hosts the 2 Regular Guys podcast.



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Groundhog Day: *Turn failure into success*

By Marshall Atkinson

If there is one movie that encapsulates what it's like to run a shop in the decorated apparel industry, it is Bill Murray's "Groundhog Day." In the film, Bill plays a cynical TV weatherman, Phil Connors, who relives the same day repeatedly when he goes on location to the small town of Punxsutawney to film a live report about their annual Groundhog Day festivities. He has to relive the same day until he gets it right.

Like Phil Connors, you may make the same mistakes daily in your shop. Some of these are obvious, but you haven't learned to correct them yet. Others could be completely invisible to you currently, and you'll only discover them after you seek positive change.

Repetition isn't a bad thing. If you repeatedly perform at a high level, you will want to keep doing whatever you are doing correctly. But this article isn't about that notion. Today, we'll explore four common challenges that businesses face and offer actionable solutions to transform these problems into repeatable successes.

Remember, you are what you repeatedly do.


Deemerwha studio – stock.adobe.com

1 Bottlenecks in workflow

The theory of constraints says that you can only move as fast as the slowest part of your process. Do you know what that is in your shop?

This could be delays in design approval, screen setup times, embroidery trimming, or scheduling so you have a consistent on-time delivery record — or thousands of other issues. Whatever your challenge, the impact can be slowed production timelines, frustrated clients, and costly overtime to keep up.

Do your shop a favor: Walk around the building and ask your employees what bottleneck affects their work and slows them down. Trust me, they all have an opinion. It's what they usually complain about.

Solution:

Take the time to map out your current processes. Your mission: simplify it so it takes less friction, effort, or time to complete each process part.

You want it like a fast-food drive-through lane. There is a reason why when you say, "I'd like a No. 1 with a Coke," it is much easier to process than "I'd like a double cheeseburger with lettuce, tomatoes, and onions, with a medium French fries side and a medium-sized Coca-Cola drink."

What can you do in your shop to compress the meaning and timing of things so that they flow faster? Can you standardize the language, process steps, or decisions your employees must make? Also, how many steps in your process can you change so there is only one way to do something? It is either right or wrong.

For example, there is only one way to tape up a box, prioritize jobs on the schedule, mix ink, or do thousands of other things. While there may be reasons for doing things multiple ways, matching the process steps to the outcomes can create a faster workflow and hold trained employees accountable.

This might mean you don't offer everything imaginable in production but only concentrate on the most profitable. Learn to say no to what isn't a good fit.

2 Inconsistent quality control

In your shop, do you have a challenge with quality? Something may have been handled correctly today, but the same task will be wrong tomorrow. If you think that these problems only exist in your shop, let me tell you that you are not a unicorn.

Many shops struggle with inconsistent results. This could be misaligned prints, incorrect colors, or errors in purchasing. A lack of quality control leads to increased waste and, ultimately, unhappy customers.

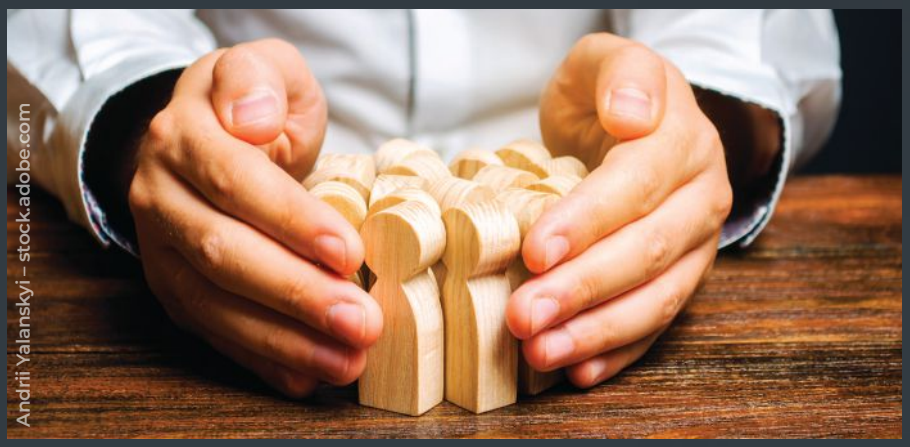
Solution:

Better quality lives in everyone understanding the expectations before they start with whatever task they need to complete. What does success look like when entering an order, designing a T-shirt, running some Carhartt jackets in embroidery, or shipping an order to a customer?

If you do a root-cause analysis on your problems, the origination point is often missing or erroneous. Try to get "one source of truth" for how you do your work.

Take a step back and start charting out your problems and errors. Start a spreadsheet. This won't only be for production issues but everywhere in the building. I can tell you that sometimes production delays are caused by problems with purchasing, so don't drop every problem squarely on your production team's feet. You want to get the data to connect the dots on how your problems begin.

> "How many steps in your process can you change so there is only one way to do something?"


Andrii Yalanskyi – stock.adobe.com

3 High turnover in entry-level positions

Finding staff members is difficult for many shops in the industry, and keeping them is even worse. This leads to repeated training and onboarding cycles for new employees.

This problem fosters lost productivity, higher costs as tasks take longer, and lower team morale. It's simply not a good situation.

Solution:

Answer this question: Why would anyone want to work for you? Is your shop a destination employer in the area? Do you treat your employees well and think about their roles in your company as careers?

Also, this is key: can someone make more money in your area working at a fast-food restaurant or other low-wage job? If someone can make more money flipping burgers or bagging groceries, why would they want to start a job that is often more difficult, like working for your shop?

If you have an employee retention problem, you must treat employees better. You want your crew to see their jobs as a career. This means when they are hired, there is a route they start taking to higher wages and more complex work with your business. Map it out.

Build a culture of growth with clear career paths, mentorship programs, and bonuses based on milestones or performance awards. Offer small perks. Catered lunches, flexible schedules, free apparel, and/or other ideas show you care about them. Have empathy and say "Thank you."

Remember, most people don't leave their jobs over money; they leave their jobs because of how they were managed. If you have a shop with an employee retention problem, chances are the reason is you.

4 Repeating nonprofitable work

We've all been there. We said yes to a job with zero chance of making money. If you really looked hard enough, dozens of those jobs are clogging up the schedule now. The fear is that you'll lose that customer if you say no to something.

Non-profitable work steals time and resources away from work that could be more beneficial to the shop. Any shop that splits contract decoration and more profitable direct business should know and understand this. Saying yes to low-profit work feels good because "It keeps production going."

But the problem is that nobody has worked out the math in a long time, and now the shop sales are on autopilot. We just take whatever is placed before us and crank it out.

Solution:

Sorry, it is called math. And math is something that no one wants to do. Like the old man who doesn't want to go see a doctor because he doesn't want to know he has cancer, plenty of shops blindly accept whatever is sent in, regardless of whether it is a good fit for running a healthy, profitable shop.

You have to do your math. What does it cost to print or embroider a shirt? Not a guess. The real math. There can't be guessing.

Once you know these numbers, the next question is, what type of profit do you want to make? Many shops I speak with don't know the answer to this question or even what they made last year. ("Sorry, I'm waiting on my accountant to tell me what I made" is an excuse I've heard dozens of times.)

Here's a fact: I don't have your shop's numbers, but I can tell you that the top 80% of your sales come from only 20% of your customers. Fact-check me. Pull that report; you'll see that I'm right. Of course, if that is true, 80% of your work is responsible for 20% of your overall profit.

That's a lot of work for little money. Those stinky, low-profit jobs are often why you have overtime, scheduling problems, and cost issues.

Once you have identified the problem, you can start making changes. Raise your minimums. Have some price increases. Say no to unprofitable work.

> "The top 80% of your sales come from only 20% of your customers."

Train your sales team to go after more valuable clients, using value-based pricing and upselling other services and offers.

Your mission is to work half as hard for twice the money.

Conclusion: A framework for success

Every shop that I speak with has a different set of challenges. No two shops are the same, and it is ridiculous to think that any answer for one shop will work perfectly for another. There are simply too many variables.

However, repeated challenges can feel overwhelming, but they also present an opportunity to build better systems that create long-term success. (You know, the whole "every problem is an opportunity" thing.)

By addressing any issue head-on, you can transform that recurring problem into a predictable, repeatable, and consistent success.

Here's a simple framework to get started:

1. **Identify the challenge:** You have to name it and be able to describe it. Work on them one at a time. If you have to, prioritize the problem that will make the most significant impact if you resolve it.
2. **Brainstorm solutions:** Get the team together. Go where the work takes place. Walk through the problem, taking careful notes, pictures, or videos. List potential solutions and prioritize them based on ease of success or likely impact.
3. **Test a solution:** Start small. Implement one idea. See what happens. Keep testing and pushing, all the while evaluating effectiveness.
4. **Measure results**: Remember, you can't manage what you don't measure. Track the outcomes and refine your solution based on what you learn.
5. **Scale up:** Once you have steady success, expand the solution idea across your entire operation.

Remember, repetition can be a powerful tool when done right. It is up to you and your shop to define success and work toward having it repeat every time. You can do this! **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.

Pause & plan

How stepping forward started with stepping back

By Howard Potter

As a business owner, you must do your research and learn to forecast what the next few years will look like for yourself and the economy, while trying to reach your goals at the same time. No matter the size of your company, it is important to learn this sooner rather than later.

This year, we have had a ton of changes in our economy, including more companies buying each other out, several smaller companies along with larger companies closing their doors, and all during a time when we have the next five years of the largest retirement group, the Baby Boomers, leaving the workforce.

Before I dive into all that, let's hit the pause button and talk about what we did with our company this year and why. In 2022 and 2023, our company grew by 42% which equaled a $1.2 million growth. During those two years, we invested in the following:

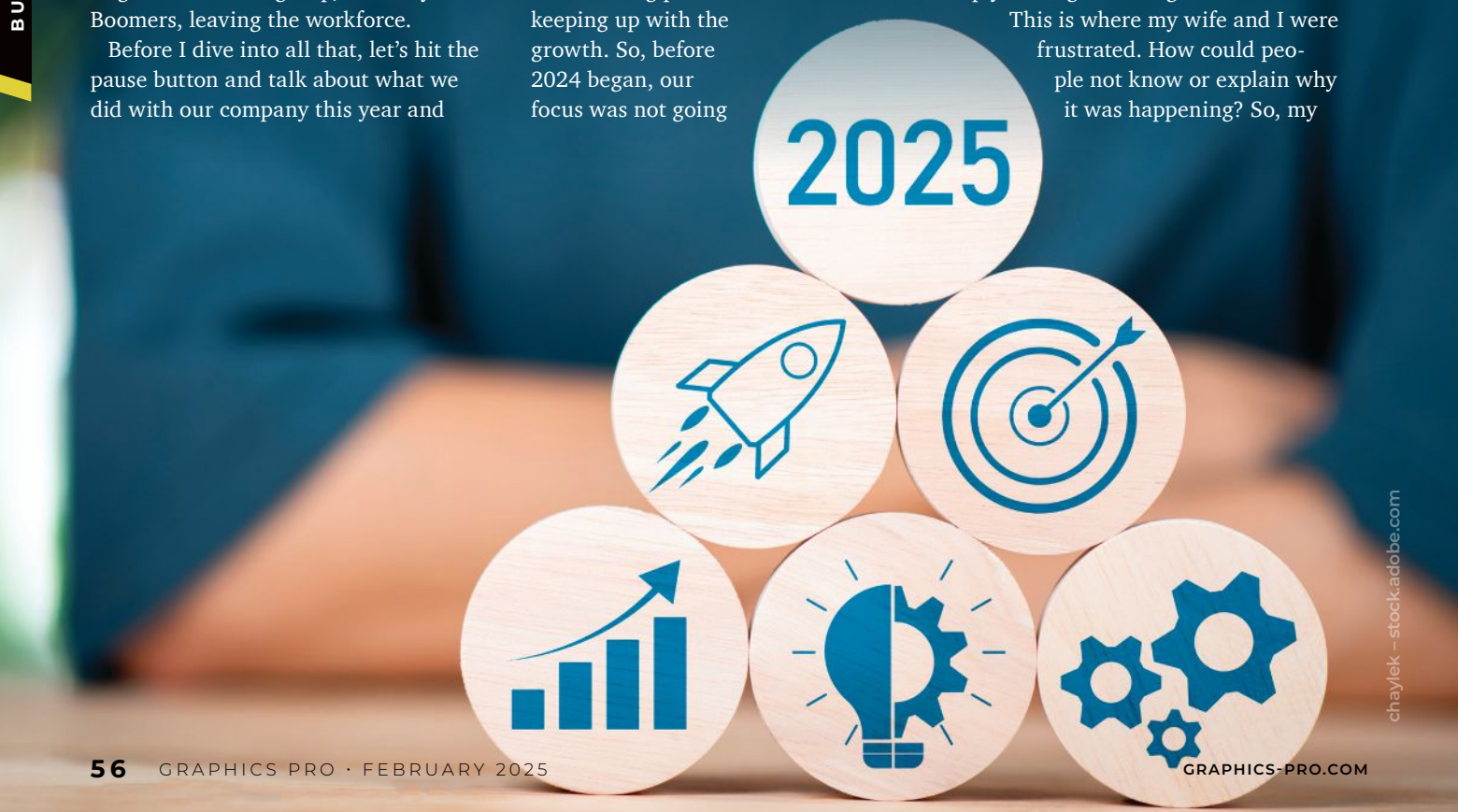
- 3,000-square-foot building
- UV laser
- Direct-to-film technology
- UV printer
- More embroidery machines
- Secondary showroom for uniforms
- Mobile showroom
- Proprietary software
- Increased staffing

That is a lot to undertake in just two years for us two business owners while selling products and keeping up with the growth. So, before 2024 began, our focus was not going to be on growth. Last year was focused on streamlining each department, cleaning up, improving our company morale, improving our training, and focusing on our production. Why you do this amid such growth? Well, not all growth is good. During major growth periods, you will have growing pains that hit, and we had hit several without anticipating.

Error rate

Our error rate in the first quarter of 2024 rose above our 2% goal and we could not figure out why by simply talking to management or staff.

This is where my wife and I were frustrated. How could people not know or explain why it was happening? So, my



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wife and I, along with our daughter, teamed up in multiple areas and discovered several things were happening right under our noses.

Our No. 1 issue at the time was that we had a general manager of 13 years and a design manager of 10 years who were stonewalling us without us knowing it. This was a huge issue considering I personally trained them years back to be my left and right arm. They both knew our 18-year-old son was coming on full time and our 21-year-old daughter was already working full time with us, and though that was never the plan, the kids fell in love with the company. What we did not know is both of the managers were highly against it and never told us. So, they did not want to see the company grow and they did not want to work with our kids, which created a companywide issue as consistency in quality and morale started to slip.

What neither of them realized is that by the kids coming in and learning everything, they actually protect the company from failing. If anything happened to my wife or me, the kids can keep the company running. This protects all of the staff and customers.

Needless to say, both managers left on their own terms once they realized we would not allow them to continue on the negative path. This was the hardest time in our company's history to work through. It was easier to physically move the company 11 years ago than it was to go through that.

Investments

Over those past two years, our sales were strong, but our rate on our investment was not. In a nutshell, we achieved all this extra growth, and the net profit increased, but not nearly as well as it should have. As a business owner, looking back, you start to question your sanity. Why did we work this hard to net this much and for what?



So, we said enough is enough. After dealing with the two managers, we explained to our children what we saw happening and what we needed to do to work with our existing managers to fix it all and get it all back on track even better than ever before. We held a company meeting, and we were fully transparent with our team about the new company mission and goals. A handful did not get on board and they were removed from the company. Those were also the people who were often negative, took extra time on breaks, came in late, refused to retain basic information, etc. Then we attacked our artwork files and organization further. We built in continual training all year.

Prepare to pause

What is the moral of this article? Never be afraid to hit the pause button! Because we did, our sales are down 6% equaling around $225,000. Our minimum growth rate is 15% yearly. Now, I know what you are thinking — that's a huge loss. But that is where you are wrong.

Because we had the will power to hit the pause button, our staff are happy at work. They're working together and training each other faster than before. Our error rate is back to 2% or less. Instead of us being one to three days ahead on orders, we are an average of four to six days ahead. Our design team went from handling 30 to 40 proofs daily to handling 50 to 70 proofs each day. Our wasted overtime is next to zero. We did a quarter less in sales and netted a higher profit than the previous year. This was a massive mental win for us as the business owners and we know over the next six months of this year, even doing the same numbers, we can extract $75,000 to $100,000 in profit out of our company from fixes that occurred in the past six months.

So, while the world's markets were all over the place, companies were going out of business, businesses were being bought out, and so on, we were internally making our company more sound and ready for more growth than ever before.

What are we planning in 2025?

- Increase sales by $500,000 to $750,000
- Maintain all our standards that are currently in place
- Make final plans to build in 2025/2026 to make our newer building around 12,000 to 16,000 square feet larger
- Focus on continuing to improve our internal software
- Keep streamlining where we see opportunities to do so

The hardest thing to do is not grow your company when that is all you are used to. Doing so takes a lot of willpower, but I am here to tell you it was not only the hardest thing in business to do, but the most rewarding as well! Seeing happy customers and happy staff while we all win together is priceless. Here's to a great start in 2025. **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.



Photoshop filters are smarter than you think

By Stephen Romaniello

Nonlinear editing is the key to sustainability when constructing an image in Photoshop. The workflow must be manageable so that at any point in the process changes can be made without having to reverse gears and repeat commands that have previously been applied. I can't stress enough how important it is, for the sake of efficiency and to maximize creativity, to set up a process that enables nonlinear changes to be made.

Image editing software like Adobe Photoshop provides numerous methods to maintain a fluidity in virtually every aspect of the editing workflow, guaranteeing that the process can continue if adjustments need to be made without reverting to earlier states of the image.

Filter basics

Filters are mathematical formulas that alter the numerical values of pixels in specified ways. Certain characteristics of an individual pixel can be modified, including its hue, saturation, brightness, and position in relation to other pixels. When these effects are applied to a group of pixels, great variations can be achieved over a specified range, following specific constraints.

Some filters work subtly; others can be brash and flamboyant. Some effects gain strength when used gently and reapplied; sometimes a filter can be mitigated or softened by fading. Like other aspects of image editing software, the application of filters can be nonlinear so that modifications can be made at any time.

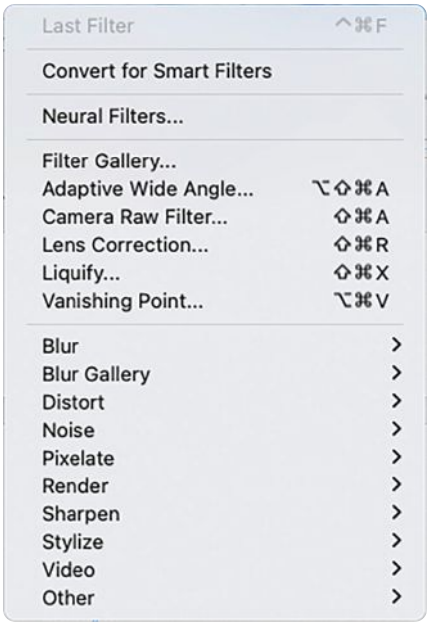


Figure 1. The list of filters is long and extensive.

The application of filters is an easy way to dramatically alter the appearance of an image. There is a large variety of filters in Photoshop that do everything from enhancing clarity and color and applying artistic effects to distorting and warping images. The list is long and extensive **(Fig. 1)** and includes recently introduced Neural filters that rely on artificial intelligence (AI) to produce astonishing results.

Smart objects

Because the application of filters can be so dramatic, it's important to be able to reverse or at least mitigate their effects. This can be achieved by first converting the layer to a *Smart Object*.

Conversion is quite simple! Select the layer and go to the Layer panel's options menu and choose *Convert to Smart Object*. Any filter applied to a smart object automatically

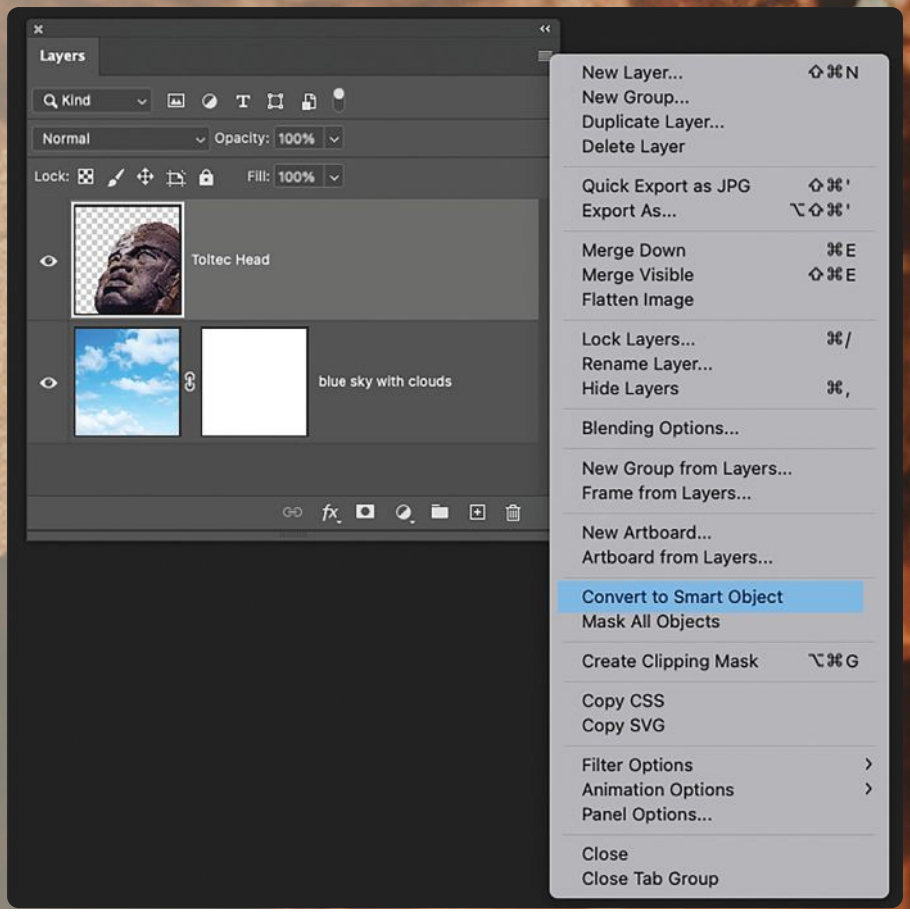


Figure 2. Select the layer and go to the Layer panel's options menu and choose *Convert to Smart Object*.

becomes a *Smart Filter* **(Fig. 2)**.

Choose a filter from the Filter menu. A few filters are applied directly with no adjustable settings. Most filters though have extensive controls that can adjust the strength of the filter's characteristics **(Fig. 3)**. If there are controls, adjust them by dragging sliders to increase or decrease the effect while observing the live changes in the preview window. Most Photoshop filters can be applied as a smart filter except for Lens Blur, Flame, Picture Frame, Trees, and Vanishing Point.

Modifications

Once applied, the smart filter's name appears in the Layers panel below the smart object layer **(Fig. 4)**. Click the filter's name to redisplay the controls. Make the necessary adjustments at any time during the session or save and close the file. When reopened, modifications can still be made.

Masking

A smart filter automatically produces a mask. Like any other mask, it provides the ability to determine the location where the filter is applied and the strength of the application. To erase the filter effect on a specific area, select the mask in the layers panel, choose the brush tool, and paint black on the region to completely conceal the effect **(Fig. 5)**. Conversely, paint white to completely reveal the effect. Any percentage tint of black, from 1% to 99%, painted on the mask partially conceals the effect, mitigating its strength.

Blending

The icon on right of the filter's thumbnail enables the adjustment of two aspects of the filter — its global opacity from zero to 100% and any of 27 blend modes. When double clicked, this icon displays a dialog box that applies either of these two characteristics **(Fig. 6)**.

Filter characteristics

Consider the comprehensive nature of image editing software. The philosophy behind its development and success is to create a tool that can modify an image into any configuration. If it can

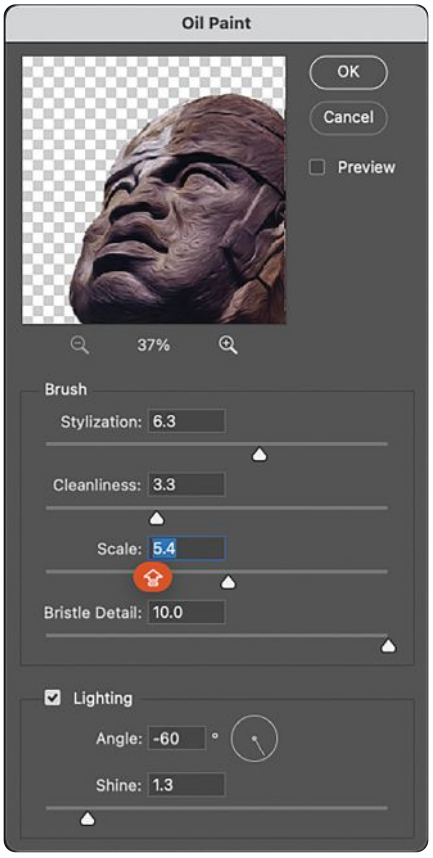


Figure 3. Most filters have extensive controls that can adjust the strength of the filter's characteristics.

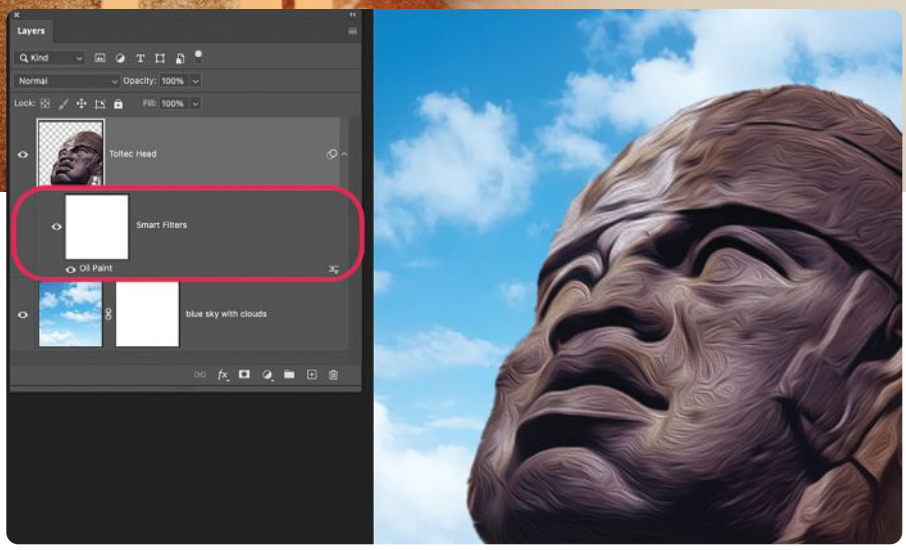


Figure. 4. Once applied, the smart filter's name appears in the Layers panel below the smart object layer.

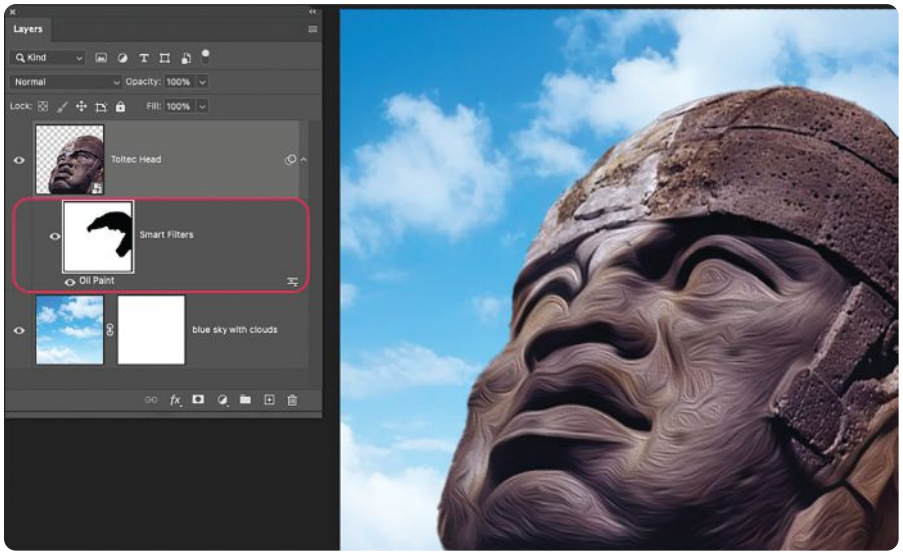


Figure 5. To erase the filter effect on a specific area, select the mask in the layers panel and paint black on the region to completely conceal the effect.

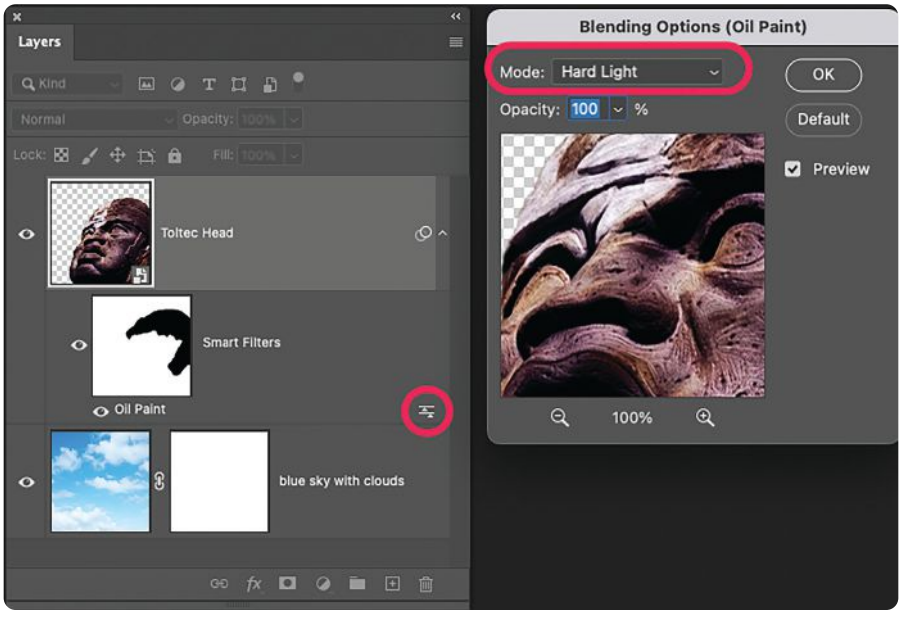


Figure 6. The icon on right of the filter's thumbnail enables the adjustment of global opacity and blend modes.

be imagined, it can be created. That is why the filter menu is so all-embracing and provides virtual tools that can produce an infinite number of results.

There are seventeen different categories in Photoshop's filter menu, each containing numerous submenus. Within each of these submenus are numerous filter effects. These filters can be categorized into two general groups: *Constructive* and *Destructive* filters.

Constructive filters modify and enhance images for printing or screen display. This list includes filters that blur, sharpen, alter color, reduce or add noise, or otherwise enhance pixel configurations. Constructive filters are the bread and butter of Photoshop power. The workhorses that are used more frequently due to their ability to make images pop.

Destructive filters, on the other hand, are used to displace pixels, radically redistributing image elements or colors. These special effects are responsible for distortions, pixelizations, liquefications, and the generation of effects like fibers, clouds, trees, and even fire. Used with care, they can be useful assets or used excessively, they can render the image into mud.

Filter gallery

Filters that provide textures, painterly techniques, and fine-art effects are found in the *Filter Gallery*. The potential to convert a photograph into handmade simulacra of a work of art is tempting. Often, though, simply applying an artistic effect to an image doesn't quite produce the intended result, and the image looks photoshopped. At this point, consider experimenting with multiple effects at different strengths from the same interface.

The Filter Gallery is an entire interface. A software program unto itself. With these controls are a plethora of sub-menus that open the doors to dozens of image-altering

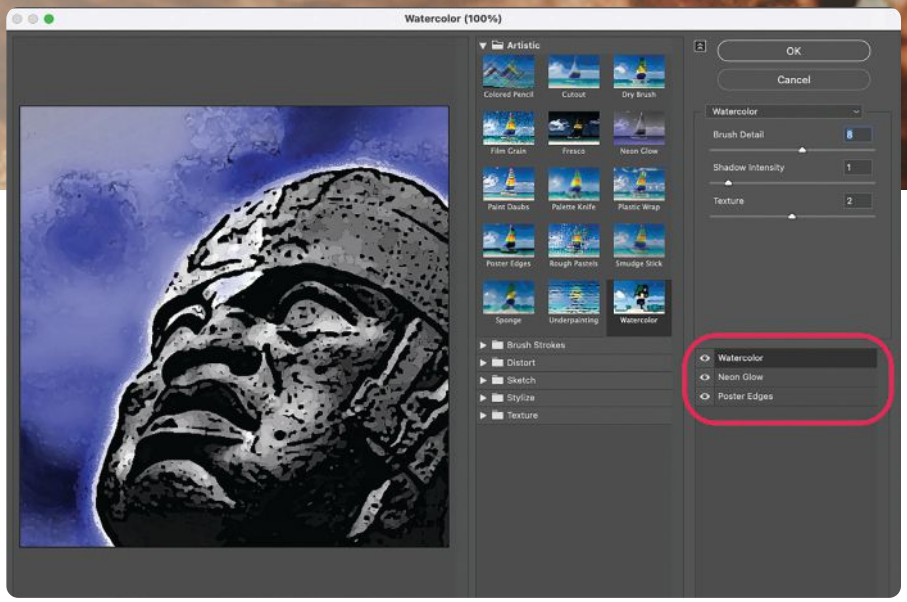


Figure 7. Filters can be combined and stacked so that combinations of filters can be applied in various strengths.

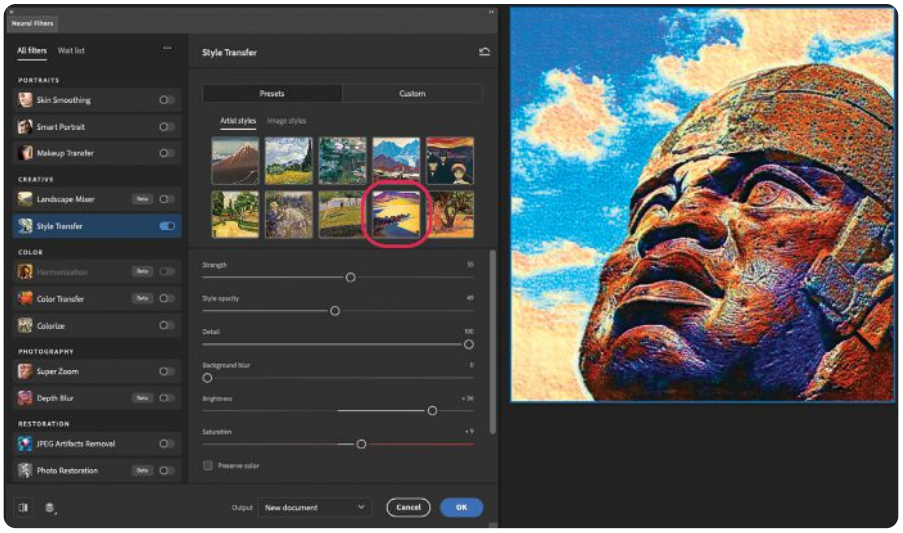


Figure 8. Some of the filters such as *Style Transfer,* for example, provide a menu of artistic images that apply stylistic characteristics to an image.

effects. These filters can be combined and stacked **(Fig. 7)** so that any combination of filters can be applied in various strengths. The preview window displays the results in real time as the filters are applied.

As a reminder, it's essential to convert the layer to a smart object prior to the application of these effects. More likely than not, you'll want to tweak and alter the initial results. Applied as a smart filter, there are no worries in modifying the settings at any point in the workflow.

Neural filters

It would be remiss of me to write an article about Photoshop filters without mentioning the latest AI features. Neural filters were released three years ago as the first AI-generating feature in Photoshop. They are extremely versatile and push the boundaries of image manipulation by automating filter effects. Neural filters are accessed from the Filter menu. Each filter must first be activated by dragging their On/Off buttons to the right.

Neural filters rely on a database of images to produce alterations. Depending on the filter, each has specific sliders that control the intensity of various characteristics such as opacity, saturation, luminance, and detail, among others.

Some of the filters, such as *Style Transfer,* provide a menu of artistic images that apply stylistic characteristics to an image **(Fig. 8)**. If you want your picture to look like a painting by Vincent Van Gogh, for example, here is where you can make it happen. Like the Filter Gallery, multiple filters can be applied simultaneously from the interface.

Other items in the Neural filter interface modify skin tones, enhance color, sharpen photographs, remove artifacts, colorize, and restore photos.

Once again, be sure to convert the layer to a smart object prior to the application of Neural filters because you'll want to experiment with the combination of effects.

Work efficiently & have fun

Though smart objects have other uses, such as the ability to seamlessly import and alter vector graphics for example, probably their most common use is in the application of filters. As we have seen, smart filters provide an extraordinary array of dazzling effects that can be instantly applied, extending the breadth of creativity and polish to an image. The ability to modify these effects at any time during the creative process is an undeniable asset. You can experiment without the fear of making mistakes or committing to undesirable results.

Convert those layers to smart objects and have fun with smart filters and the amazing effects they can produce. GP



Stephen Romaniello is a certified Photoshop instructor and the author of numerous books and articles on the creative use of computer graphics applications. He is the founder and CEO of GlobalEye Systems, a company that offers training and consulting in digital graphics software and creative imaging. He also founded Gorilla Geeks, a creative consulting firm.



Avery Dennison SkyWay Bird Film

Avery Dennison has introduced SkyWay Bird Film, engineered to effectively reduce bird window collisions, conserve wildlife, and meet building codes. SkyWay Bird Film features a specific dot pattern developed to break reflections on glass, enabling birds to see that there is an obstruction. The film's neutral dot pattern is also designed to allow building occupants to retain their view of the outside with minimal interference. SkyWay Bird Film is compliant with the major North American bird-safety building codes and guidelines and is recommended by the American Bird Conservancy. **graphics.averydennison.com**



Color-Logic's Volume 2 of Text-FX

Color-Logic has released Volume 2 of Text-FX, the feature that provides graphic designers with a unique, stylized Illustrator palette of 40 text effects. Color-Logic Text-FX is specifically designed for creatives and graphic designers, enabling them to change the way text can be used in various design projects, including signage, posters, and greeting cards. Key features include: fully editable text styles, color customization, enhanced creative control, font versatility, and compatibility with Color-Logic Pattern-FX, Gold, and Pro Palettes. **color-logic.com**



SanMar's spring arrivals

SanMar has announced its 2025 spring new arrivals featuring more than 135 styles across 20 brands. The rollout includes a sustainable brand launch, sports uniform program, expansions in warm weather and UV protection options, and new from retail favorites including Nike, Carhartt, The North Face, TravisMathew, Brooks Brothers, the permanent inclusion of Tommy Bahama, and the move of industry athletic apparel A4. Based on the introduction of Sport-Tek in 2024, SanMar also introduced the new Club on-field performance collection. Sport-Tek aims to be a destination for complete kits including matching headwear and socks. The Carhartt collection expands with the introduction of Sun Defender, a range of lightweight tees and performance wovens built with Force and FastDry technologies. Through an exclusive distribution partnership, SanMar has also launched Stanley/Stella imprintable apparel. The collection features 20 of the brand's fashion organic tees and fleece redesigned for the U.S. market. In addition to the launch of Stanley/Stella, over 20 sustainable styles from leading SanMar brands including polos from Nike, Move to Zero, recycled poly fabrications from TravisMathew, and an inaugural polo offering from The North Face. **sanmar.com**

Sportsman Cap & Bag expands Imperial line



New Imperial hats from **Sportsman Cap & Bag** include: the Wrightson (style 5054), a five-panel retro-fit cap is crafted from 100% recycled polyester performance fabric; the Wingman (style 7054): A six-panel, mid-profile cap made from 100% recycled polyester performance fabric featuring a woven rope; the Barnes (style 5056), a lightweight take on the original rope hat; the Rabble Rouser (style 5055), a five-panel, retro-fit trucker hat with a polyester mesh back and snapback closure; and the Night Owl (style 7055), a six-panel, structured, midprofile trucker made with 100% recycled polyester fabric and featuring a woven rope. Other hat releases include the Live Wire (style DNA012), a five-panel made with poly ripstop sublimation print mono mesh fabric; the Aloha (style DNA010) and the Golden Hour (style DNA014), with fresh patterns debuting this year. **imperial1916.com**



Stickers International Domed Stickers

Full-color, high-resolution badges from **Stickers International** come in a range of metallic vinyl options constructed of a durable, polyurethane resin coating. The stickers are engineered to have strong adhesion to most flat, dry surfaces and are water- and scratch-resistant. With no setup or design fees, these digitally printed domed labels are supplied in sheet format, not on a roll or individually cut. According to the manufacturer, the stickers are ideal for product labeling, to sell as branded merchandise, as a loyalty gift or perk with purchase, for handing out at trade shows, as a swag bag item for grand openings and events, and as signage for doors, walls and windows. They also are ideal for branding or personalizing a wide range of promotional products such as water bottles, coolers, portfolios, lunch boxes, and more. The minimum size is ½" X ½" up to 9.125" X 9.125". The required radius corners are 1". The product is not intended for outdoor use as the resin is not UV resistant. **stickersinternational.us**



Perform Full Zip Hoodie from Independent Trading Co.

Independent Trading Co. offers the EXP30PZ full zip, one of three new styles in the Perform Activewear Collection. Intended as a crossover activewear/corporate wear style, this shirt is made of four-way stretch French Terry designed to offer a comfortable range of movement combined with a sleek, modern look. Offered in a men's standard fit, the fabric composition is 60% cotton/35% polyester/5% Spandex in an 8.5-ounce, 280-gram weight. The face yarns are 100% ring-spun cotton for better printability, and it's prelaundered to reduce shrinking. Other features include a reverse-coil full-front zipper and a double-layer three-panel hood. Hidden welt pockets are added for a streamlined look and the tearaway label is designed to make it easy to rebrand. Available in in unisex, standard-fit sizes ranging from XS up to 3XL, and three classic colors: smoke, pine, and black. **independenttradingco.com**

Luxinar 450W CO_2 Laser



Luxinar has launched its latest addition to the OEM series of CO_2 laser sources. The OEM 45iE is a 450W sealed CO_2 laser source with a reduced footprint, designed for installations where space is restricted. Based on the OEM 45iX lasers already in use worldwide, the OEM 45iE sealed CO_2 laser source provides a separate RF module. By splitting the RF driver from the tube assembly, the laser head can fit in tight spaces, while the RF unit can be mounted remotely. Delivering the same speeds and productivity for industrial processing applications as the OEM 45iX, this 450W laser incorporates a RF-excited slab laser design with technologies including: a high-quality beam, a short optical pulse length, a compact industrial-grade design, and a minimum guaranteed shipment power of 540W. **luxinar.com**



GCC LaserPro Piolas 400

GCC LaserPro has introduced the Piolas 400 laser engraver, engineered to reach an engraving speed of 175 IPS. The laser's 40" X 24" work area is designed to handles projects of all sizes. Equipped with SmartEYES CCD technology, positioning is said to be seamless, and the live-view camera is ideal for educational use. The brushless DC motor with closed-loop servo control is designed to ensure fast, precise laser movement. **gccworld.com**



ExoShield GT3+

ExoShield has released an upgraded version of its ExoShield GT3 WPF. According to the manufacturer, ExoShield has elevated the stability of the GT3+ hardcoat technology to deliver unparalleled benefits, including superior resistance against delamination, heightened UV stability, and an extended film lifespan, all backed by a three-year warranty. ExoShield GT3+ features resistance against delamination and an expanded film lifespan. **exoshield.com**



ION-Plated finish from JDS

JDS Industries has introduced another option for personalized Polar Camel drinkware with Prism ION-Plated finish. White or black powder coating lasers to prism plating are designed to offer a unique multi-color effect that appears to change with movement and light. Prism ION-Plating is available in JDS's most popular items, the 22 oz. Skinny Tumbler, 20 oz. Ringneck Tumbler, 40 oz. Travel Mug with handle and straw, 12 oz. Stemless Wine Tumbler, and 32 oz. Water Bottle. **jdsindustries.com**

SIGNAGE & PRINTING





AWARDS & CUSTOMIZATION







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21338

- Unisex, S-2XL
- 14 oz/yd² Heavy Fleece
- Oversized Fit
- 100% Combed Cotton

- Black
- White



2x1 Crop Tank
21308

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- Black
- White/Black
- White/Baby Pink
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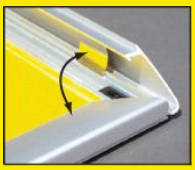
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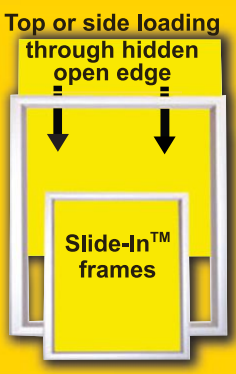
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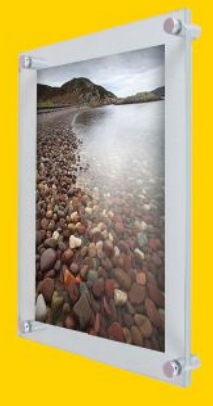




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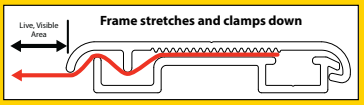
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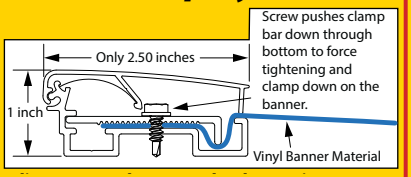






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