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(Image courtesy of JDS Industries)

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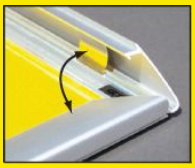
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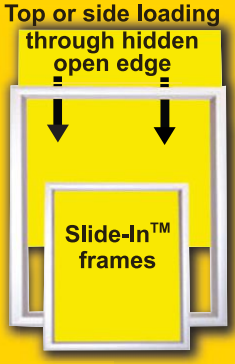
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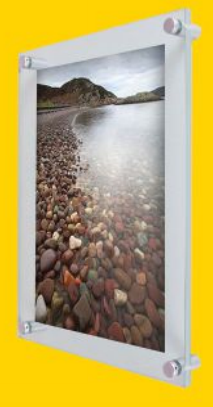




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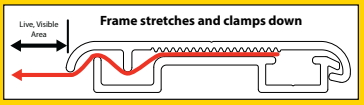
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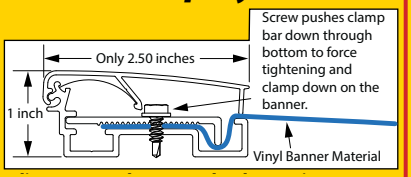






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James Anderson
is the editor-in-chief of GRAPHICS PRO magazine. He can be reached at janderson@cahabamedia.com.

The Heart of Wrapping

Later this month at GRAPHICS PRO EXPO (GPX) in Indianapolis, Brad Felty of B-Wrapped.com is unveiling an important organization he has established to help, as he says, "Give people a real shot at a skilled trade that changed my life — by providing access, training, and community to those who need it most."

Felty's nonprofit, called The Heart of Wrapping, aims to eliminate barriers for folks who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford to get into the vinyl wraps industry. Felty and his group are on a mission to provide hands-on training in the art and trade of vinyl wrapping for vehicles, walls, furniture, electronics, and more.

There's no argument that learning to wrap and then growing professionally in the field isn't easy. And it isn't cheap either. That's how you can help. Donations to The Heart of Wrapping will make it possible to provide:

- Tools, vinyl materials, and workspace access
- Professional instruction and certification programs
- Mentorship from industry experts
- Workshops, internships, and job placement support
- Scholarships for those with financial need

The Heart of Wrapping's mission is one I think many of us can get behind: Empowering individuals with hands-on training in an artful trade with a bright future. Felty, of course, is dialed in on that mission but also knows he'll all have some fun along the way, starting at GPX Indy.

"I'm bringing a hands-on experience. Attendees can test their skills on real-world challenges using a unique IndyCar part, a mounted mirror stand, and a rooftop antenna — some of the most notoriously tricky elements in vinyl wrapping. It's all about showcasing smart techniques, sharing tips, and spreading the word of a local training program."

And if there was any doubt that he knows what he's talking about, it's worth mentioning that he's a three-time winner at GPX WRAPSCON. Oh, and he wraps IndyCars. Sounds like a good guy to learn from.

If you're at GPX Indy, stop by booth 315 and check in with Felty and his crew to learn more about how you can contribute to this cause. If you can't make it to Indy, please visit the organization's website at theheartofwrapping.com.



James Anderson
Editor-in-Chief

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INDUSTRY UPDATES

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Jim Weber
SanMar

Jim Weber, former Brooks Running CEO, has been appointed to **SanMar's** board of advisors. Weber is a leader and author known for transforming large-scale businesses with a strong sense of purpose. His leadership is said to have helped shape Brooks Running into a successful, values-driven company that puts people and purpose at the heart of its success. With this appointment, SanMar said it further strengthens its board of advisors.



Kitt Jones, Mauricio San Martin, Matt Myers & Matt Koenigsmann
Roland DGA

Kitt Jones, Mauricio San Martin, Matt Myers, and Matt Koenigsmann joined **Roland DGA's** New Markets & Business Development department. **Jones**, who served most recently as Roland DGA's business development and co-creation manager and earlier as application specialist, has been appointed to the newly-created position of segment manager of interior design and surface decoration. **Martin**, a print industry veteran with over 25 years of experience supporting digital and commercial end users and channel partners throughout Latin America, most recently for HP, has joined as sales manager for DIMENSE and emerging markets. **Myers**, who brings with him more than 25 years of experience in digital and wide-format printing, will serve as North American sales manager for DIMENSE and design. **Koenigsmann**, previously Roland DGA's Atlanta Imagination Center manager, will now serve as business development applications specialist.



Matt Petry
Sharp Business Systems

Matt Petry, former Xerox exec, was hired as vice president of the West region of SIICA's direct sales and services operations for **Sharp Business Systems** (SBS). In this role, Petry will lead the strategic direction and performance of SBS operations across the Western U.S., with a focus on growth, customer engagement, and operational efficiency. He will report to Joe O'Malley, senior vice president, SBS.



Jeremy Davis
Imperial

Jeremy Davis has been appointed as **Imperial's** new CEO. Davis brings expertise in global operations, strategic acquisitions, and market expansion. Having worked across industries including aerospace, medical devices, specialty chemicals, and electrical components, he recently served in the life sciences industry. According to Imperial, his leadership in acquiring and integrating companies will be instrumental in advancing market position.

GIVING BACK

Infinity Her participated in a **Samaritan Community Center** volunteer event with its parent company, **Infinity Product Group**, packing "snack packs" for children in need across the Northwest Arkansas community.

Thanks to the results of its writing instrument giveback program, **Koozie Group** presented three regional **United Way** chapters with checks for over $8,800. Koozie Group also announced the graduation of its third **4 Paws for Ability** service dog, Bodie, was matched with Madison, a four-year-old girl from Texas who has nonverbal autism.

Orbus stated that, in 2024, it recycled approximately 70% of its total waste.

Legacy announced it is the supplier for **Hope Academy**, a bilingual Spanish English school for children in Guatemala and Pennsylvania. Headwear featuring designs like the Hope Academy's mascot — the Avocados — is being sold to support children's education.

UPCOMING EVENTS

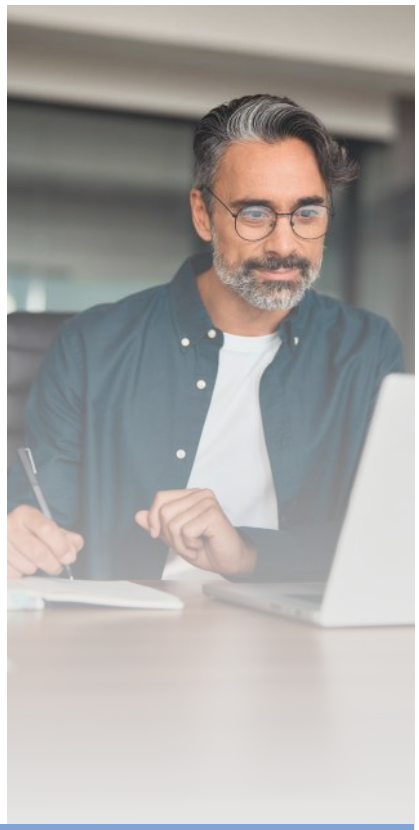
GPX Indianapolis
June 19-21
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g-p-x.com/in

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August 14-15
Chicago, Illinois
mscprinthouse.com/colorways

GPX Long Beach
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GPX Meadowlands
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August 21

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September 25

Xante
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November 13

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ACQUISITIONS

CapitalSpring acquired **Coast Sign LLC**, a manufacturer of exterior signage and provider of related products and services.

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Chris Figueroa & Sergey Yakobchak
Avery Dennison

Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions added two industry veterans, **Chris Figueroa** and **Sergey Yakobchak**, to its team of trainers for paint protection film (PPF) training classes. **Figueroa** founded Bay Image in 2014 in Brodheadsville, Pennsylvania, after developing a passion for translating designs into vehicle wraps during his early career at a commercial wrap shop. Over the past decade, Bay Image has grown into a leading restyling business, with Figueroa earning multiple certifications. Located in Troy, Michigan, **Yakobchak** founded New Layer Customs in 2017 after years as an independent installer. Yakobchak has gained industry-wide recognition for his meticulous techniques and commitment to quality installations.



Yassan Adachi, Jeff Bojarski, Mike DeRosa, Jim Garvey, Rebecca Lipscomb, Chris Rodgers & John Sweeterman
INX International Ink Co.

INX International Ink Co. promoted seven key people to vice president positions.

The seven executives are **Yassan Adachi**, executive officer and vice president of site operational excellence; **Jeff Bojarski**, vice president of liquid ink sales; **Mike DeRosa**, vice president of liquid operations; **Jim Garvey**, vice president of coatings; **Rebecca Lipscomb**, vice president of regulatory affairs; **Chris Rodgers**, vice president of operational excellence; and **John Sweeterman**, vice president of digital sales. **Adachi** joined Sakata INX in 1987. **Bojarski** began in the quality control department at INX in 1994. **DeRosa** joined INX as a divisional in-plant director in 2003. **Garvey** was hired by INX as an in-plant technician in 1999. **Lipscomb** was hired at INX as a product steward for EH&S in 2011. **Rodgers** matches Jeff Bojarski for the longest tenure with INX at 31 years. **Sweeterman** joined INX in 2016.



Hamza Ahmed
Vantage Apparel

Hamza Ahmed has been appointed as **Vantage Apparel's** new director of apparel decoration and production. His career includes operational roles at companies such as Sayre Enterprises, Ira Green Inc, and Rainbow Embroidery. Ahmed's portfolio includes work on high-profile projects for brands and organizations such as HBO, Disney, the NBA, the Department of Defense, and the Institute of Heraldry.

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Shelley Bednarski
Crystal D

Shelley Bednarski has joined **Crystal D** as a sales team territory manager. Bednarski brings to the role her expertise in sales and business development, which positions her well for building strong customer relationships. She will be an active partner in coaching distributors on selling awards and helping their clients establish and foster recognition programs.







Jim Sturgell, Nick Blannin & Bill Topf
S&S Activewear

S&S Activewear appointed three senior executives to strengthen its commercial leadership team: **Jim Sturgell** as senior vice president of sales, **Nick Blannin** as senior vice president of merchandising, and **Bill Topf** as senior vice president of commercial strategy and operations. **Sturgell** joins S&S Activewear with more than 30 years of experience in the foodservice industry. **Blannin** brings experience in merchandising and building apparel brands globally across e-commerce, retail, and wholesale. **Topf** joins with experience as both a management consultant at Booz Allen & Hamilton and in senior leadership roles at Diageo.



Thomas Heuer
STAHLS'

Thomas Heuer has joined **STAHLS'** as director of sales for the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East, and Africa). With more than 25 years of experience in textile printing, garment decoration, and international sales, Heuer joins STAHLS' at a key time of global growth. In his new role, he will lead sales efforts across the EMEA region and work closely with Martin Borley, executive managing director for STAHLS' UK and Europe, and Stephanie Schnur, managing director of STAHLS' Europe, to drive regional growth and strengthen customer relationships.



Steve Lynn
Durst North America

Steve Lynn has been promoted to **Durst North America's** newly created role of executive director, North America. With 30 years in the industry, Lynn has specialized in large, complex technical solution sales, including hardware, software, services, and consumables. According to the company, Lynn's expanded responsibilities will further strengthen its focus on equipment solutions while ensuring customers continue to receive support.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

Charles River Apparel has been awarded a bronze medal from EcoVadis on its first-ever submission.

Three of **MUTOH America's** ink lines — US-11, UH-21, and MP-31 — are now compliant with U.S. toy safety regulations, including the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act and California Proposition 65.

Roland DG Corporation's TrueVIS XP-640 wide-format eco-solvent inkjet printer has been certified compliant with the 3M MCS Warranty Program when using new TH inks in CMYKLkOrGr.

Flint Group achieved the Gold Rating from EcoVadis.

David Goldvug of **Minuteman Press** in Greenwich, Connecticut is now a member of the company's President's Club for achieving over $1 million in gross sales for the year ending 2024.

Kongsberg Precision Cutting Systems's Kongsberg Ultimate cutting table won this year's Red Dot: Product Design 2025 award, under the industrial equipment, machinery, and automation category.

FiberLok Technologies Inc. received a 2025 Innovation Award for Decoration for LumoTex.

ANNIVERSARIES

Sportsman, one of the two in-house brands at **Sportsman Cap & Bag**, has launched eight all-new styles as part of a celebration of the brand's 25th anniversary.

Fully Promoted celebrated its 25th year in business and honored outstanding franchise owners during its annual convention.

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

PARTNERSHIPS

ROQ.US, **GRIMCO**, and **GSG** announced a strategic partnership that will expand ROQ's presence across Texas, the South, and the Midwest.

Nazdar SourceOne is now a nationwide distributor for **M&R Printing Equipment**.

BHS Corrugated and **Agfa** announced a strategic commercial agreement in which Agfa will exclusively supply printing engines to several BHS systems and become a BHS-certified ink supplier.

M&R Printing Equipment teamed up with **Xaar** to release the POLARIS S4 direct-to-garment pretreat unit.

Legacy is partnering with **Johnnie-O** to launch revamped custom Legacy headwear.

SRG (formerly St Regis Group) has partnered with luxury Austrian house **Swarovski**, introducing a curated selection of crystallized products to the promotional industry.

Atlantis Headwear launched custom-designed, eco-conscious beanies in partnership with the **Kronplaz Ski Arena** for the 2025 Audi FIS World Cup women's slalom race.

BELLA+CANVAS and **Stakes Manufacturing** announced a strategic partnership to offer capabilities in both near-shore and fully "Made in the USA, Printed in the USA" models.

Gemline and **XD Connects** launched TransAtlantic Advantage, a program designed to simplify the sourcing and delivery of promotional products merchandise across the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Aaron Montgomery
American Print and Supply

Aaron Montgomery joined **American Print and Supply** as its new education and community outreach partner. Montgomery, a GRAPHICS PRO contributor and veteran in the garment decorating and digital printing industries, brings nearly three decades of experience, including leadership roles at U.S. Screen Print and Inkjet Technology, Coastal Business Supplies, and his ongoing work as co-host of the 2 Regular Guys podcast. In this new role, Montgomery will spearhead initiatives to deepen customer loyalty, expand educational resources, and foster community engagement through podcasts, webinars, events, and specialized training programs.



Noah Jones
MUTOH America

Noah Jones is the newest marketing manager for **MUTOH America** and is based at the company's headquarters in Phoenix, Arizona. Jones will oversee the marketing and product teams and lead initiatives that strengthen brand presence, elevate customer engagement, and drive growth across North and Latin America.

UPDATES

Crystal D experienced a cybersecurity attack on March 7 and has reported its systems are back online, with no evidence to suggest customer information had been compromised.

S&S Activewear and **alphabroder** released an integration update stating that the company will close its Pompano Beach, Florida, warehouse in August.

Koozie Group has completed its integration of **Skinner & Kennedy Co.'s** product line; the Skinner & Kennedy Co. website, main phone number, and email addresses are now forwarded to Koozie Group.

Minuteman Press in North San Antonio held its grand re-opening, celebrating its move to a larger location.

Atlantis Headwear has adopted the Carbon Footprint Atlantis — a tool designed to accurately measure the carbon footprint of its products.

Ninja Transfers announced it will not increase prices on any DTF transfers through the end of 2025.

Atlantic Coast Cotton is now known as **Apparel Coast to Coast**.

Fabric, a vetted membership community for progressive print shop owners, is accepting applications for its second cohort, launching in July.



Vegas Vibe

Designing trade show shirts

By Lon Winters & Dane Clement

Tomasz Zajda – stock.adobe.com

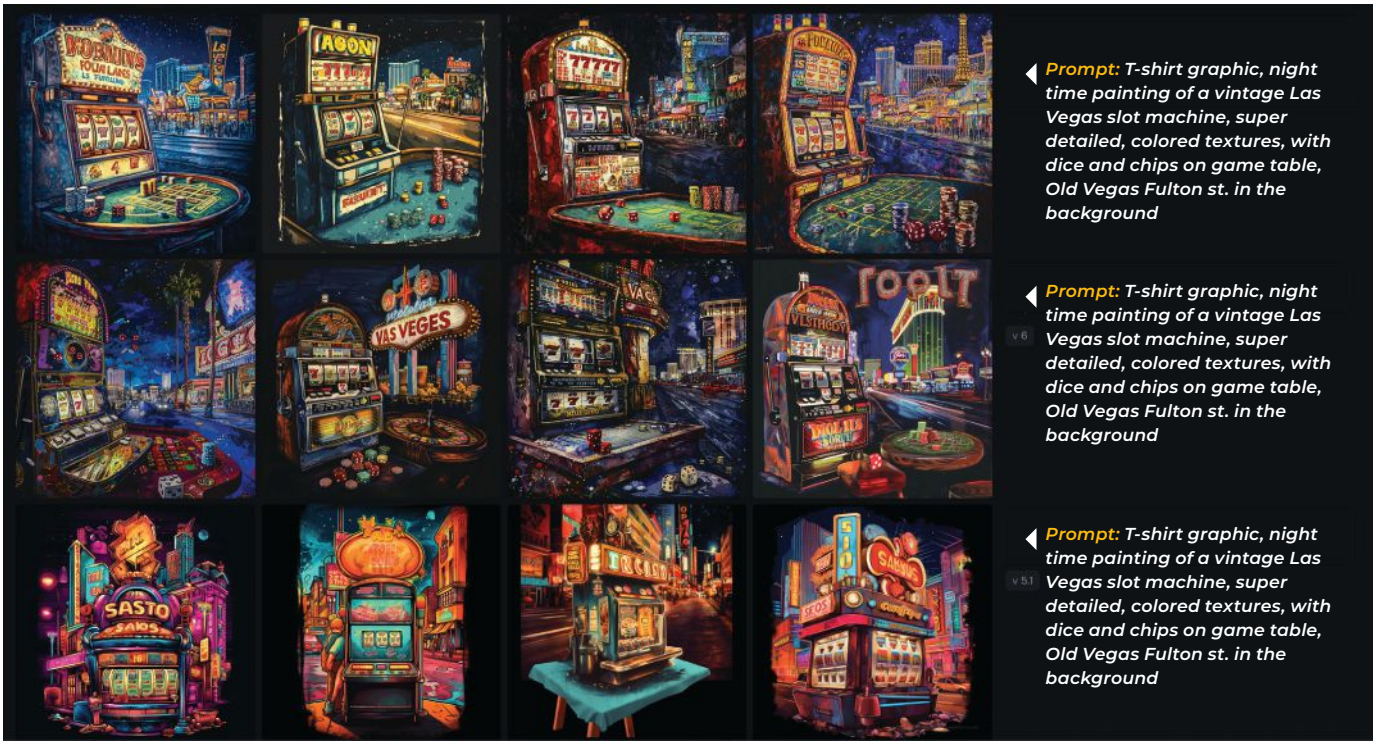
When we approached Dane Clement, VP at STAHLS' about collaborating on a T-shirt design for live screen-printing demos at a big trade show in Las Vegas last year, it was an easy yes. We've been friends for over three decades and always know that working together means the final product is going to be something truly special: an excellent design, expertly printed, visually strong, and memorable. We decided to work together on a concept and design. Dane would make it all come to life, and we would handle the production and the demos. We've done this a few times.

On the surface, this sounded like a straightforward project. But as with most creative endeavors, the simplicity was deceiving. We had a rough vision in mind, but getting there would be anything but simple. It never is.

Though we are still not completely sure how we feel about artificial intelligence, rather than building the artwork as an illustration from scratch, we decided to utilize AI as a creative tool, specifically Midjourney. We've used it quite a bit and found it to be a powerful platform. That said,



Images courtesy of Lon Winters



Prompt: *T-shirt graphic, night time painting of a vintage Las Vegas slot machine, super detailed, colored textures, with dice and chips on game table, Old Vegas Fulton st. in the background*

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Prompt: *T-shirt graphic, night time painting of a vintage Las Vegas slot machine, super detailed, colored textures, with dice and chips on game table, Old Vegas Fulton st. in the background*

Mastering DTF Printing:
Pro Tips, Challenges, and Limitations

- DTF RIP Software
- How DTF film affects color and washability
- How tariffs have affected the US market and the importance of buying American Made
- The importance of automation for high volume garment decorators
- How to increase profit margin for gang sheets by charging a service fee to increase revenue

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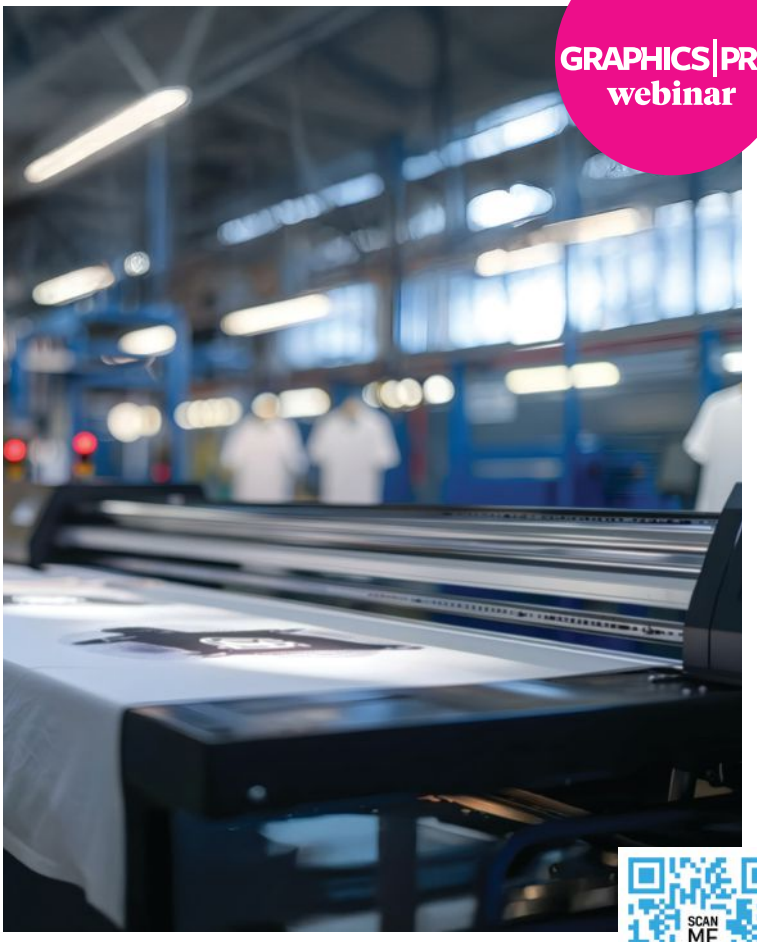


Shahar Turgeman
Founder
STS Inks

Shahar Turgeman is the founder of STS Inks, a Florida-based company that develops and manufactures inks for the global specialty graphics marketplace.
His 20 year success as an innovator has demonstrated a rare combination of entrepreneurialism and chemical engineering.

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getting specific imagery from AI can be tricky. We're flexible and always open to surprise. AI can sometimes deliver gold, but chasing this precise subject matter required us to roll up our sleeves. We knew it was a great place to start our ideation.

We had an ambitious goal to capture vintage iconic Las Vegas in a single image. We were thinking old school slot machines, playing cards, roulette, dice, chips, and a nod to the Vegas skyline of the past. We wanted the texture and depth, and the grit and glamour of the Strip's heyday. That's a tall order. It made sense to try to prompt for an item or two at a time before we worked them together in Photoshop later. From our prompts, the initial outputs from Midjourney gave us a handful of direction, some of which was pretty solid right out of the gate. No human could generate these rendered images in mere seconds. But even the best AI-generated pieces didn't check every box for us. That's when we started thinking like artists and looked for the skeleton. If the structure was there, we could fix the rest, often with Photoshop's Generative Fill. We selected our favorite slot machine and roulette table to become the backbone of the final piece. Ironically, the playing cards, which seemed simple to generate, turned out to be the hardest. After multiple attempts, we ended up shooting photos on the kitchen counter. Sometimes, old school beats AI! We worked through multiple iterations of the details of the image before finalization.

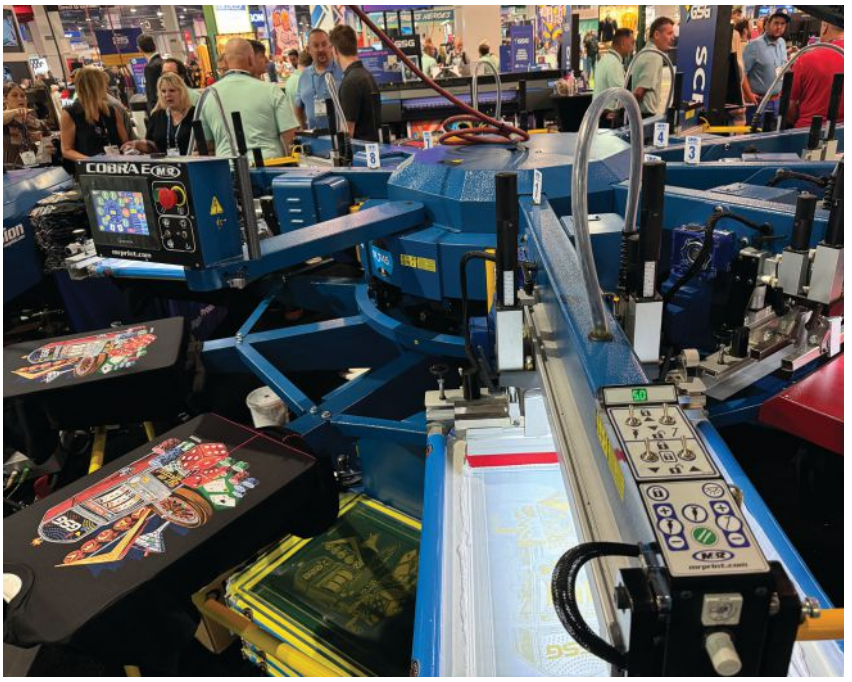
With the composite image dialed in, we moved to separations where we

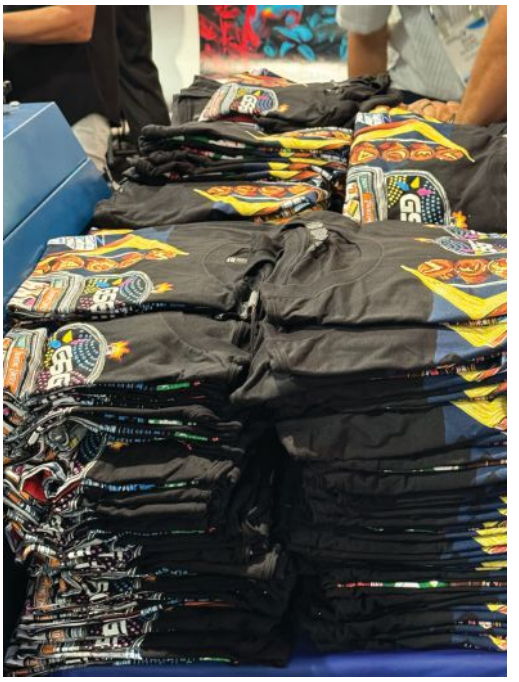


would employ Separation Studio NXT. We would go back and forth between the software and then open the channels in Photoshop for additional manipulation. We would need two sets of seps. One was a six-color version for the live demo with a smaller press in Vegas. The second was a larger, 11-color version designed for a bigger automatic press we have at home where we would utilize special-effects inks and specific spot colors for maximum visual punch. Once the color was developed, we carefully considered our white printer or base plate's opacities. The black fabric helped us achieve secondary and shadow colors. We managed a number of tones with each color using various percentages. By removing positive information of the black areas and defusing densities, we built our deep tones. To make the color bright and bold, higher percentage densities were used.

Once seps were completed, we outputted on CTS with a frequency of 45 LPI (lines per inch) at a 22.5 degree angle. We ran the white on a N-166 tpi (threads per inch) screen at 45 N/cm^2. All squeegees were 65/90/65 a triple ply duel durometer. Next, the colored











inks and the highlight white all ran wet-on-wet on N-272's. The SFX screens were on N-102's with 400 micron stencils. We ran the bulk of the order at our place and shipped to the show for attendees. The dumbed-down version printed live at the show using similar screens, inks, and squeegees.

We picked bright primary and secondary colors as well as the CMY that are part of the logos. Straight forward color theory. To add a little Graphic Elephants stank, some special effects textures and foil were also used. That added a tactile component and some reflectivity to catch the light. The high-density plate required a little thought since it printed under other colors. We choked it with a full point stroke so that it had room to expand and kept the shapes simple. This printed before the other colors that were knocked out from each other. The smaller shapes on the clear printed last and randomly. The clear was also used as an adhesive hold for the nontraditional foil treatment applied at the end of the dryer.

We also prepped files for direct-to-garment (DTG) and direct-to-film (DTF) printing. For the DTF transfer, we removed the black for a softer hand and applied a 20 LPI halftone — large enough dots to ensure good adhesion of the adhesive powder and allow for a clean transfer to the garment. If you want to dig deeper into this and other processes, learn more at DaneClement.com and GraphicElephants.com.

This was a project that merged human creativity with cutting-edge tech. A true collaboration between vision, experience, and tools that are reshaping how we work. And, as always, working together made the process just as rewarding as the final print. **GP**





Lon Winters, founder at Graphic Elephants, and **Dane Clement,** vice president, creative at STAHLS'



What's new at GPX Indianapolis 2025

This month, the GRAPHICS PRO EXPO (GPX) team travels back to Indianapolis for its second installment in 2025 of the regional trade show — we hope to see you there! We're bringing all the familiar hits you look for year after year, from longtime exhibitors to our popular speakers and industry experts, but we're also excited to share a few new things with you, too.

Read more:

Big news from team GPX

Cahaba Media Group, parent company of GPX and GRAPHICS PRO, is excited to announce the promotions for Katie Ditallo to associate director – GPX sales and Jackie Ramsier to associate director – GPX operations. In their new roles, Katie and Jackie will take on leadership of the regional shows and work with Cahaba Media's executive team to establish stronger exhibitor and attendee relationships, work to improve show offerings and management, and strategize for growth for GPX in 2025 and beyond. Join us in congratulating Jackie and Katie on their new roles! Visit cahabamedia.com/press-releases to read more on this news.

Exhibitor list

New exhibitors

In addition to the familiar faces you saw at GPX Indy 2024, check out some of our new-to-the-show partners for 2025:

- AMAGIC Textile Foils
- Barudan America Inc.
- Direct Color Systems
- Eagle Signage
- IT Supplies
- Procolored Technology Inc.
- Ranar Screen Printing Equipment
- Restylers International
- WeMust

Education schedule

New educational sessions

While our entire educational lineup has been updated for all GPX 2025 shows, you can expect a few new sessions in our offerings for Indianapolis, including:

- Epson's Latest in DTF, DTG & Dye-Sublimation: Compare, Contrast & Choose with Confidence (sponsored by IT Supplies)
- Know Your Customer: How Client Preferences Shape Your Heat Printing Strategy (sponsored by STAHLS')
- Organic Growth Engine: The Local-First Digital Marketing System, *with Stan Banks* (GPX University)
- Becoming an Engraving Expert: Top Tips for Beginners and Intermediates, *with Lori Champagne* (sponsored by GRAPHICS PRO)
- Protect Your Business: Preparing for an OSHA Inspection, *with Susan Caldwell*

Read more:

GPX Ambassadors

Finally, if you missed last month's column, we announced a new ambassador program unique to each GPX location. We're recruiting both longtime and rookie GPX attendees in each city we are coming to in 2025. The goal? Improving your experience at the show. We would love to hear from you on what you love, what you want to see more of, and what's missing at GPX. Get all the details on what you can expect at the QR code above. Scan the QR code below to apply to be a GPX Ambassador in your city. GP

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Images courtesy of P&M Apparel

We don't sell T-shirts here

Go deeper than simply decorating tees by connecting with your clients, community & causes

By Megan Griffith

Most days, we don't take ourselves too seriously in the T-shirt industry. We're not brain surgeons, and we're not out here risking and saving lives with plastisol. If we mess something up, it's as easy as ordering a replacement, and the customer goes home happy.

But the truth is, we don't actually sell T-shirts here. Sure, it may look like a T-shirt when it goes out the door, but what we're actually selling is the brand for that business you've been dreaming about for years. We're selling the pride of your kid who holds your whole heart, getting into the sport you've been a fanatic of for years. We're selling the solidarity and support of your friend who just got a diagnosis they didn't want, and you making sure they know they're not alone. We're selling the thing that tells the whole world who you are and what you stand for. And that's a whole lot more than a T-shirt.

The special thing about this industry is the opportunity to connect directly with the dreamers and hopers of the world and use your skills to make your piece of it a little better. Some of the easiest ways to do this are through fundraisers. E-commerce makes it easy: build a webstore, run a campaign for it, produce and distribute the goods, and cut a profit check to the customer. It's a fast way to get all the communication out to the intended





audience and collect funds without having to use paper order forms and all the hassle that comes with them. We also use our e-commerce platform to report what sales are looking like, give customers tips for improving sales, and let them know who has ordered in case they need to track down who hasn't. It takes all the work off the client's hands so they can smoothly get the financial support they need for their cause.

Our favorite way to not sell shirts, however, is going deeper. The difference between your local printer and a big box store should be the relationship. I don't just want to hear if they need a performance tee or cotton, I want to hear how your mom's doing, tell me about your new puppy, and if your kid made the honor roll this semester. I want to hear about how your parents started this tiny business with hopes to turn it into something to support their family, and you've taken this legacy and created something beyond their wildest dreams. Because hey, me too. Our goal as a print shop should be listening to the client's story and applying our expertise of the products and decorations to communicate the message they want to tell the world.

Once the mental shift of considering the story more than the shirt happens, doors start to open for opportunities. We once had a client who was looking to raise money to buy a bike for a child with a terminal diagnosis. They just wanted him to have as many normal childhood experiences as he could get in between hospital visits. But his diagnosis required a special kind of bike to support him, and the single-mom income for his family couldn't make it work. So, we got to work making and promoting the fundraiser, but in the meantime, we bought the bike out of our own pocket. At the fundraiser party, we presented them with a check for the funds they raised, but also with a brand-new bike for this little boy who had been through so much. After that, we started looking for opportunities within these fundraisers to surprise them at the end with not only the check, but the very thing for which they needed the funds raised. Over the years, we've covered team jerseys, memorial benches, giant sponsorships, the works; all for an opportunity to jump into the trench with them and be part of the success story.

We also discovered print shops have a great ability to organize local races, as they already have so much access to the merch, the promo products, tents, banners, race bibs, registration platforms, etc. — virtually everything but the runner. We started hosting a local fun run for our community in October called Monster Dash. It was a costume-friendly 5k, with money raised going directly to families affected by cancer. We gathered other local businesses to help sponsor and could give back even more than the typical fun run because we were the source for everything, and we could donate our time and profits to the beneficiaries. We ran it for years until we couldn't find any other beneficiaries in town.

A surprising side-benefit of jumping into the community and their stories headfirst is how it affects the culture in our shop. I've seen my staff cry over shirts because of the cause it represented. I've seen them volunteer for different organizations that came to us for merch, just because they resonated so much with the ethos. They've stayed long after their shift is over to make sure the product is perfect. Why invest so much emotional, mental, and physical energy into an order just because of what is printed on it? Because to this staff, it's much more than a T-shirt. **GP**



Megan Griffith co-owns P&M Apparel in Polk City, Iowa, with her brother Ryan Griffith. Their print shop is third-generation family and woman-owned, and founded by a WWII veteran. Megan is a 2024 Women in Screen Printing award winner, 2018 Business Person of the Year award winner, and 2017 Screenprinting magazine Rising Star Award winner.

5 questions with... Stan Banks



Stan Banks is the owner and entrepreneur behind T-Shirt Side Hustle. He is also a favorite presenter at GPX events. Visit tshirtsidehustle.com to learn more.

1 Many of our readers who attend GRAPHICS PRO EXPO (GPX) events know you as the T-shirt guy in the GPX University area. How did you get your start in the industry?

Let me tell you I was a serial hustler from birth, just trying to figure out how to truly become an entrepreneur and successful business owner. I grew up being told to get a job at McDonald's and I told myself I could make minimum wage doing anything, and the entrepreneurial upside offered me so much more. To make a long story somewhat short, I took the longest route possible to becoming an apparel decorator and print shop owner. Like most people who end up here, I started out doing something different that led me here, but I found out that it's way easier to sell custom apparel than anything else I was doing.

2 What's the biggest key to a profitable T-shirt side hustle?

I look back now after helping over 100,000 people get started and I can say that if you want to grow and build a successful print shop, you have to plan it! You need to know where you want to go and what you want to get out of it first and then make a plan to get there. Once you have that figured out, you need to put yourself in position to work on your business instead of in it. Too many of us get stuck in the learning phase and we never get to selling products at any significant level, or we get stuck in production of orders we have already sold, and we never get out to actually do more selling. We take what comes, which is basically living off word of mouth.

3 What's the biggest opportunity ahead for apparel decorating shops?

Large shops have this figured out already, but those who don't need to understand that in this business it's not about this decoration method versus that one, whether it's DTF printing, screen printing, DTG printing, or embroidery. It's all about really just finding the best tool for the job. When you approach your business any other way, it forces you to take the easy way out, which doesn't often lead to being the most profitable. Anyone getting started needs a strategy that works for their specific goals. If there is a gap I can see for all shops, large shops included, it's that no apparel decoration shop is doing enough in the digital and promotion space, and they can grow 15% to 30% with a little more focus in that area. It's the same art and the customers are getting the products already, just not from us.

4 What's your biggest concern looking forward?

Looking forward, the only concern I have is the gap between getting into the business and getting to the $250,000 to $300,000 revenue mark. To me, the education space on helping people grow their revenue from side hustle to six figures and beyond is lacking.

The industry is set up to sell you equipment, and, don't get me wrong, that is needed. I don't have true numbers, but from what I see, much of the equipment doesn't get used to any true potential if it even gets used at all. So, I have set out to fix that issue. It's something that I believe every company needs to think about when it comes to the health of our industry.

5 Circling back to GPX, why do you think it's important for early-stage entrepreneurs to attend GPX?

I can't stress enough how much networking is worth in what we do. I give my life away on the internet, but even in that you can only receive so much.

The most valuable knowledge I receive today is directly from other business owners I have met at shows. One thing I can tell you is that if you're just getting started, the "Start Here, Grow Here" mission of GPX University is so closely related to the T-Shirt Side Hustle mission of "Start, Learn, Earn." If you come to a show you will get to experience and hands-on training in the University area and if you attend any of the classes I, or others, teach, you will leave with actionable steps that will help you grow, no matter where you are in the journey today. And that, I think, is well worth way more than the cost of entry. GP

Editor's note: Watch for more content from Stan Banks in coming issues of GRAPHICS PRO.

What's trending in pet products

Pampered pets are great for your business

By Cheryl Loban



For most families, the resident dogs and cats are more than pets; they're an important and much-loved part of the family, and they're spoiled silly! From pet food to apparel, tags to tutus, the pet supply industry is one that continues to grow and shows little sign of slowing down. In 2023, the U.S. pet industry reached a record $147 billion in total expenditures, according to the American Pet Products Association. Anyone in the personalization industry can use that to their advantage and grow their own business by offering many of the items "pet parents" are looking for. Let's look at just a few of those items you can provide and personalize using the equipment you likely already have in your shop.

One of the first things that probably comes to mind is personalized pet tags. There is a large variety of quality tags available for personalization, whether engraving, UV printing, or sublimating, ranging from the very basic round tag to blinged out and fabulous. Your customer can choose from an array of shapes, sizes, and colors personalized with their pet's name and their contact information, or even indicating that the pet is microchipped and should be scanned for contact information. This simple little item can be fun to create, but could be what ultimately ensures that someone's wandering lost friend makes it back home safely.



You'll need something to attach the tag to, and there are collars available that can be personalized for your pet with their name, your phone number, their vet, or whatever you wish. Leatherette collars in various colors, for example, are perfect for this and are available in sizes for the tiniest teacup pup to the bigger breeds.

They'll be the envy of the dog park when you take them out in style with a sublimated personalized bandanna that slides right over their existing collar. You can also turn any T-shirt or jersey with polyester content into an adorable custom personalized "outfit" for a pampered pooch. Just remember, the higher the polyester content, the better, brighter, longer-lasting results you'll get. Heat transfer material also works great for T-shirt or bandana decoration and gives you more options for the fabric and colors that can be used. Toddler or child shirt sizes will work best for most dogs, but you might need an adult size for a larger breed. There are size charts available online as well as instructions for how to measure the dog for the best clothing fit.



Images courtesy of JDS Industries

All pets need to eat, right? I'm pretty sure they'll feel extra special with a personalized bowl created just for them! There are all kinds of pet bowls on the market to choose from, stainless steel, ceramic, powder-coated, and even collapsible bowls that are great for travel or hiking. It's up to you and



your decorating capabilities how many options you want to offer. Ceramic bowls are perfect for full-color personalization with sublimation. Powder-coated stainless steel can be laser-engraved or UV printed for full-color personalization. Bowls are typically available in a variety of sizes colors.

If you look at what you're already selling, you'll find products you can market to pet owners, or to pet supply stores, veterinary clinics, or groomers. Keychains, bag tags, bags, photo panels, mugs or picture frames, and ornaments can all be personalized with a favorite photo of a pet or business information, and they all make great gifts or promotional items. The substrate options for any of these items are vast and of varied price points, so there's something to fit every budget.

Pets add so much enrichment to our lives, but as much as we hate to say goodbye, the time inevitably does come when our loyal, loving friends leave us. Create a memorial to the years of happy memories they leave you with a personalized picture frame holding a cherished photo, or a shadow box that holds their collar, tags, photo, or even a favorite toy. Any of the items we've talked about can be meaningful memorial gifts for someone who's lost a much-loved pet. A garden spot can be a tribute in the yard with a personalized stone or garden stake marking the memorial. Beautiful urns are also available that can be customized with a photo or engraved name and the dates they lived.

People love their pets through all stages of life and will spend a lot to care for and spoil them. Add a few of these items to your website or showroom and show customers what you have to offer; be their one-stop shop and let them spend with you! You likely already have what you need to personalize these products in your shop, and even many of the products, and they lend themselves well to either online or brick-and-mortar shops. Adding pet products is a great way to expand what you offer and grow your business without having to make a large upfront investment. **GP**



Cheryl Loban is the communications specialist at JDS Industries. She joined JDS in March of 2001 as a customer service rep and worked in various roles in that capacity over the past 20-plus years. Cheryl moved into her position in the marketing department in February 2019.

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Customizing tech products

By Doug Jakobitz

As technology continues to evolve and more gadgets hit the market, businesses have more options than ever before to showcase their brand. While traditional products like branded apparel, drinkware, and tote bags remain staples, the demand for tech-focused promotional items is growing rapidly. From Bluetooth speakers to wireless chargers and other tools, tech gifts are capturing attention for both their practicality and their "wow" factor.

In my experience, navigating the world of tech promo products compared to more conventional items comes with unique opportunities and challenges. Here's what you need to know.

Why tech is trending

People spend an average of seven hours a day on their devices. With that kind of screen time, tech accessories like headphones, wireless chargers, power banks, and Bluetooth speakers have naturally become high-value, high-use items. Corporate clients, especially, are turning to tech gifts for employee onboarding and appreciation, as well as gifting for their own clients. A useful, high-quality tech product doesn't just make a good impression — it becomes a part of someone's daily life.

Customization challenges & decoration methods

Customizing tech items requires a different approach compared to traditional promo products. Many tech devices have limited imprint areas due to their compact sizes, or they have unique shapes or materials to work with. For example, you can't really brand an actual AirPod earbud because it would be very small, and the grill (mesh) on a Bluetooth speaker can be a challenging surface to customize.

This is where I believe the use of virtual samples is vital in the customization of tech products. Creating a mockup of what a company's logo would look like on these different devices and gadgets helps clients to visualize and choose the products that will best fit their needs and have the most impact. Presenting virtual proofs, your clients will be able to see how small their logo would be on an actual AirPod earbud, but how clear it would look on the charging case instead.

Most tech promotional items use similar imprint methods to traditional products, such as pad printing or laser engraving. The main difference is adapting to smaller imprint areas. Choosing the right method is critical for ensuring a logo maintains its clarity and impact.



Images credit Fully Promoted & courtesy of Fully Promoted Urbandale



Production timelines

Timelines for tech items typically mirror those of traditional promotional products, usually around two to three weeks. However, I usually will build in an extra week to accommodate approvals and any unexpected pivots. Virtual proofs are more vital with tech, and customers often appreciate having a little extra time to make adjustments.

Minimum order quantities are fairly common for tech products, but they vary widely. Always start by asking your client about their budget and timeframe, which can help narrow down choices in the early sales process.

Quality & compliance

Choosing trusted vendors is critical when it comes to tech items. While I haven't run into many compliance issues personally, it's important to partner with suppliers who prioritize product safety and performance, especially for items with batteries.

I encourage clients to think about tech products the same way they think about T-shirts: Do you want something people will love and use often, or something they'll toss aside? Investing a little more in higher-quality tech pays off in brand visibility and reputation.

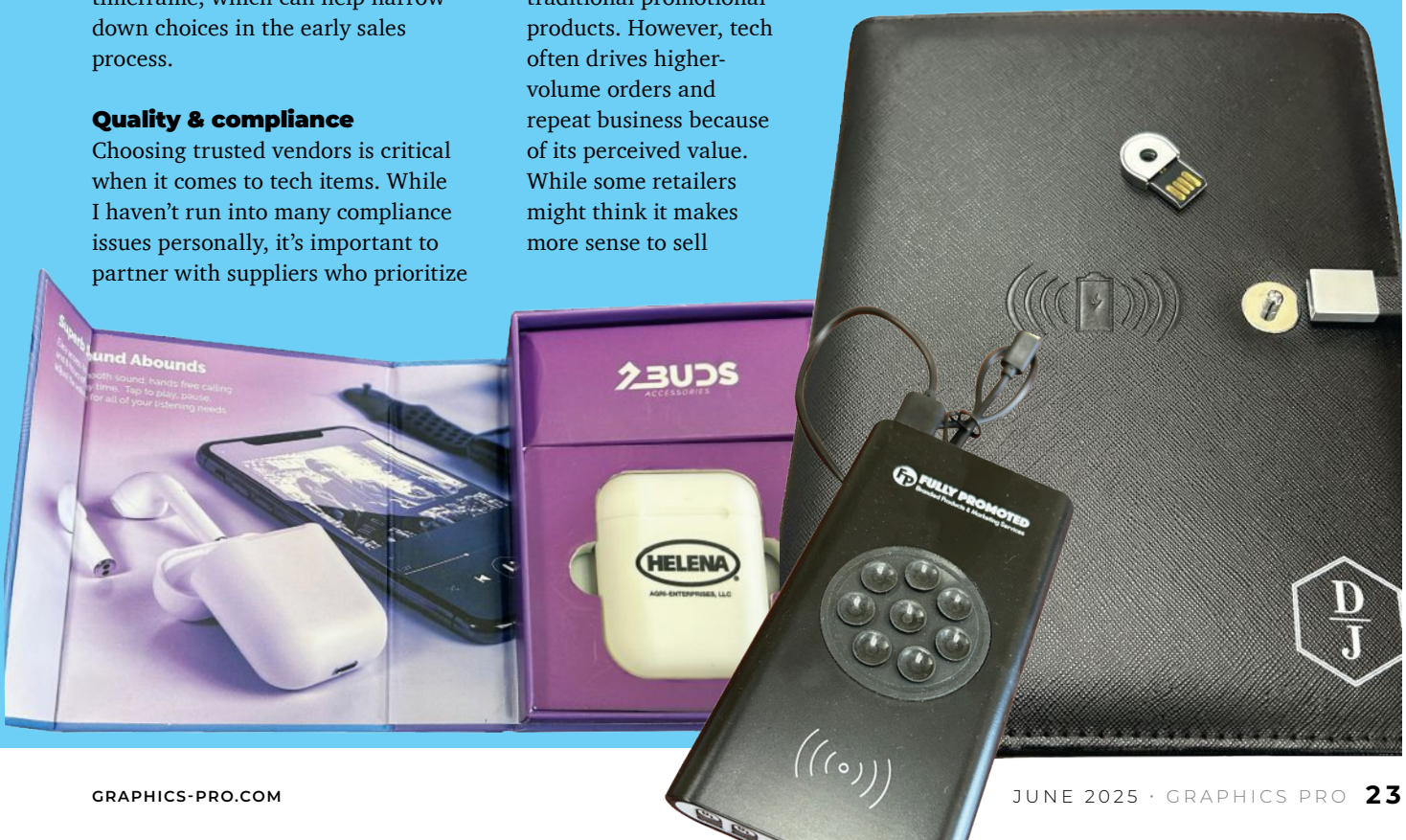
Cost structure & margins

Margins for tech items, particularly premium, name-brand products like Apple, are generally lower than traditional promotional products. However, tech often drives higher-volume orders and repeat business because of its perceived value. While some retailers might think it makes more sense to sell something that's less expensive to improve their margins, to me, it's a delicate balancing act because I want to sell something that my customers are going to use and want to buy again.

When to recommend tech products

Tech items are especially effective for employee onboarding and appreciation, client gifting, and high-value conference giveaways.

Sectors like IT and other tech-focused industries are natural fits,





but honestly, tech resonates across almost every market because it is so integrated into our daily lives. Whether it's a wireless charger for a travel kit or a Bluetooth speaker for a summer event, tech products offer versatility and excitement.

Consultative selling tips

When introducing tech options to a client who is used to traditional products, take a consultative approach. Curate a few strategic options based on their goals rather than overwhelming them with a massive catalog.

I like to categorize options — such as high-tech packages, traveler packages, drinkware bundles, etc. — and let clients select based on their audience's needs. For example, in the traveler package, we had a tri-fold charging station where it would unfold from a compact 3" X 3" square, plug into a USB, and charge a phone, Apple Watch, and AirPods all at the same time, with the client's logo right there. It's a thoughtful and utilitarian product that someone who travels often will really value and use.

Additionally, I believe in the power of demonstration. I keep tech samples charged and ready, so when clients come in, I can show them real products in action, whether it's a magnetic portable speaker that can stick to their fridge or the roof of a golf cart, or a smart mousepad and wireless charger that can be a functional part of their workspace.

Final thoughts

Tech products present an incredible opportunity to align your clients' brand with innovation, practicality, and daily relevance. However, it's critical to choose the right products, vendors, and imprint methods. Make sure you know exactly what you're getting before you place the order, and whenever possible, hand-deliver finished products to ensure satisfaction and strengthen client relationships.

At the end of the day, if you're putting your name on it, make sure it's something you're proud of — and something your clients will genuinely use and appreciate. **GP**





Doug Jakobitz is the owner of Fully Promoted in Urbandale, Iowa. He helps clients create powerful brand connections through high-quality promotional products, apparel, and corporate gifts.

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Picking the perfect tote bag

Features & customization options to consider

By Shawn Teli

When it comes to promotional products, tote bags are a timeless favorite. Their versatility, durability, and wide range of styles make them ideal for promotion. However, with so many different materials, colors, and style options, it can be challenging to pick the right tote bag that reflects its identity and objectives. This extensive guide will give the inside scoop on how you can help brands pick the perfect tote to fit their needs.

Focus on fabric

When picking a fabric, a brand should not only focus on durability, but also if the fabric will leave a lasting impression on its target audience. Cotton canvas is durable, fashionable, and eco-friendly, perfect for a brand that wants sustainability and style. Nonwoven polypropylene is a lightweight, non-woven, budget-friendly choice fit for events and giveaways. Recycled material is perfect for brands that are committed to making the world a greener place and align with eco-conscious values.



Size & shape

The size and shape of the tote should be thoughtfully aligned with its intended purpose, ensuring it reflects both functionality and style in a way that resonates with the brand's message to the consumer. For example, small tote bags are incredibly versatile for those on the go, perfect for running quick errands, grabbing coffee, or serving as a trendy accessory.

On the other hand, medium totes strike an excellent balance between size and versatility. They're the ultimate choice for everyday use, from commuting to work or school to handling casual weekend activities. Medium totes are also a popular selection for promotional events, as their moderate size allows for easy customization and branding.

If a brand is looking for a bag that











can accommodate larger items, the large tote bag is an excellent pick. With its spacious interior, it's perfect for light grocery shopping, a day at the beach, or hauling extra items for a weekend getaway. For those who need maximum storage capacity, gusseted bags take things to the next level. With expandable sides, they offer increased depth at the bottom, allowing a consumer to carry more items without sacrificing comfort or ease of use. Their added space and durability make them a top choice for anyone who needs to haul larger, bulkier items while maintaining an organized and accessible bag.

Handle types

The choice of handle is often an overlooked detail — yet it plays a crucial role in both comfort and functionality. The handle type influences not only how a tote feels but also how consumers use it in their daily lives. Self-fabric handles, crafted from the same material as the bag itself, offer exceptional durability and a seamless, stylish look — blending strength with aesthetics. In contrast, reinforced handles provide extra support, making them ideal for heavier loads and ensuring long-lasting reliability, even with daily use.

Another key decision brands face is choosing between long and short handles. The right option depends on the bag's intended purpose. Long handles are perfect for shoulder carrying, making them ideal for toting books, groceries, water bottles, or sports gear. Short handles, on the other hand, are great for hand-carrying essentials that require quick access, such as a wallet, keys, or phone. By carefully selecting the right handle type and length, brands can enhance both the practicality and appeal of their totes, ensuring they meet a brand's needs effortlessly.

Color choices

When looking at a product, the first thing a consumer usually notices is the color. This is why ensuring a promotional product aligns with the brand's colors is one of the more key considerations when designing the perfect tote. Neutral colors are an outstanding choice for brands that want their designs to lean toward a more classic, sleek, and sophisticated look. This includes colors such as black, navy, and natural. If a brand wants its design/logo to create a bold visual statement and to stand out, vibrant shades may be the right choice. This can include shades such as hot pink, royal blue, and lime green. These colors are perfect for any occasion a brand wants its logo or design to stand out, such as promotional events.



Customization methods

Personalization makes a promotional tote stand out and drive brand recall. Screen printing is ideal for clean, simple designs and higher-volume orders, including logos. If a brand is designing something a bit posher and more upscale, embroidery adds a premium, polished touch that will be sure to stand out. If a brand is looking for something vibrant with full-color, heat transfers are the perfect choice.

Having the knowledge of what kind of aspects to look for when pitching the perfect tote can help marketers, event promoters, and distributors select a bag style that serves both functional and promotional purposes. These guidelines help ensure that a bag will not only meet the brand's needs but its audience as well. GP



Shawn Teli serves as the marketing director at Q-Tees. He can be reached via email at shawn@qtees.com



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Working with glass & crystal

Technical tips for engraving these delicate products

By John Morman

Working with glass and crystal can be one of the more delicate things you may be asked to do as an engraver. There are a myriad of things that can go wrong, from the easily fixed to disastrous failures. As the old saying goes, one makes mistakes due to a lack of experience, and one gains experience by making mistakes. This will happen with glass and crystal, possibly more than any other material you will work with, and my goal here is to help you avoid making as many mistakes as possible — particularly expensive ones.

Camera-ready artwork is always best if it is in a format that your graphics software can work with. You may find it necessary to redraw the graphic, breaking it down into individual pieces, and bringing the components together when you're done. Working with glass, you should start off by avoiding a graphic that requires shading. As you gain experience, you may be able to figure out how to produce limited amounts of shading, but that can take some time.



Images courtesy of John Morman

It may be necessary for you to decide to use a completely solid monotone or a completely clear silhouette. In this case, double-check with the customer first, naturally. Hopefully, the customer will arrive with artwork, which could be text and/or graphics, and will hopefully know which font is being used. Your graphics software will probably come with a library of fonts, but if you know the name of the font, you will be able to download it from any of the free font websites available online. Different font providers can make subtle differences in their versions of fonts, so be sure the version you use matches that requested by the customer — or is at least as close as possible.

As always, all the advice provided here is what I found to work for me. Working with glass really isn't all that different from working with wood, for example. The biggest potential problem





occurs when customers bring in their own pieces. They won't bring a spare award blank for you to play with. Bigger companies often go toward the high-end pieces for their awards, so getting it right is important. You don't want to ruin a $300 award, which you must replace.

For flat pieces, it's relatively simple. After positioning the text and graphics, position and focus your piece. I have found my customers prefer the engraving to be done on the back side of the piece, in which case you will need to invert the graphic so that it reads the right way round when you turn it over. If your machine comes with a materials database, or the manual comes with a library of settings, you can try running at the suggested settings. Keep in mind that different suppliers will often use different formulas for their glass and crystal, and different machines have their own idiosyncrasies, so the listed settings may need to be tweaked depending on your machine and the blankware. I am comfortable with a different setting than is suggested by the manufacturer and run at 100% power, between 36% and 40% for your speed, and between 360 to 380 PPI.



(You can work with pieces that consist of three or four individual segments mounted on the base. Just remember to adjust the focus relative to each segment, and make sure the distance between the first and last segment allows the engraving head to clear the piece.)

A curved piece is much the same but remember to adjust the focal point to allow for the difference between the lowest point and the highest. I usually opt for a spot somewhere around the middle of the two heights.

Things start to get a little more complex with round pieces. You will need a rotary adapter. (Some manufacturers can provide a "ramped" adapter, which allows you to adjust the gradient of the ramp so you get the taper level on a horizontal basis.)

The simplest piece is a plain round glass with no handles or other attachments to worry about.

1. Clean the optics.
2. Calculate the engraving page size — diameter x pi, or 3.142. Adjust the page size with your software by







Mug with handle. Note the handle rotated to set the graphic correctly.



adjusting the vertical height.

3 Remember to "tell" the machine it is engrave a round piece by selecting the setting for rotary and entering the diameter of the piece. If offered, it is helpful to add the thickness of the piece.

4 For a piece that requires a graphic "front and back," find the measurement for 1/4 and 3/4 of the page height. This is necessary to position the graphics so that they are in the correct position relative to each other. If a graphic is only needed on one side, you only need to find one of these two measurements. (For a one-sided engraving, I usually position the graphic on the centerline for simplicity's sake. Strictly speaking, with a round piece of blankware and one graphic, the graphic can be positioned anywhere within the boundaries of the page size.)

5 Mount the piece in the rotary adapter. Avoid overtightening the adapter — the combination of the heat and the pressure exerted by the adapter can easily break a piece. This gets increasingly possible as you work with thinner pieces.

6 Find the point at which the piece is located on the adapter. Put that measurement into your graphic so the graphic is positioned correctly for engraving.

7 Focus the engraving head.

8 I almost always use a piece of very thin paper, soaked with water, which I position over the spot where I'll be engraving. This does two things — it helps keep the piece cooler because the heat will be distributed over a greater area, and it can help make sure that no potentially harmful debris gets deposited on the optics. (I have found it possible to work without the wet paper, but prefer not to.) On a large order, I'd recommend cleaning the optics periodically.

9 Double-check everything!

You should then be able to engrave the piece safely and correctly.

It now starts to get a little more complicated. For a piece such as a mug, which has a handle attached, you'll need to rotate the piece so that the handle is positioned 90 degrees relative

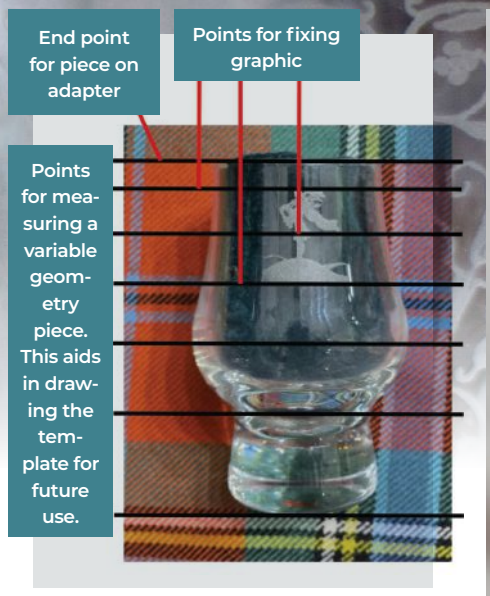
to the engraving point. This will center the graphic on the mug. Different machines turn the rotary clockwise or counterclockwise. Decide which face you want the engraving relative to the handle and position the graphic accordingly.

Next: a tapered piece such as a pint beer glass. You can follow the directions as described for a curved piece — find a focal point somewhere around the mean diameter of the graphic. Again, proceed as described above.

Now to the most complex: a round piece with variable geometry. Getting your graphic right is essential on a piece such as this. It needn't scare you — what you will do is measure at the critical points of the piece: the mouth, the waist, the major and minor diameters, and account for any tapered base. Proceed as above, basically, with one minor adjustment. Your graphic may need to be positioned over several different diameters. A fairly rectangular graphic will need a little adjustment to avoid distortion. A circular graphic will need to be drawn as an oval to manage the varying diameters.

Just to recap the more important points:

- Good measurements are very important, particularly on round and cylindrical pieces.
- When you have created a template for, say, a round glass, you can save it as a basis for other pieces using the same diameter and length. Only the graphic needs to change as required.
- Always save the template and give it a recognizable name. I have learned that saving it with the basic name with an added descriptor after the template name for pieces that will use different graphics makes the templates easier to find — "rocks glass coat of arms," as an example.
- You can use the same procedures for crystal as you can for glass. Remember that replacing a broken piece of crystal can get very expensive, so double- and triple-check everything.
- If you intend to offer these pieces as a regular item, you should experiment with different manufacturers to make sure you get blankware from a consistent supplier, one you are most comfortable using with your particular machine. **GP**







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



Getting started in *sandcarving*

What you'll need to launch your business

By Ruth Dobbins



What advice can I

offer to anyone wishing to get started in this line of business? I actually had to think about that for a while. First of all, if any of you know me, I am a stickler for details and proper nomenclature. Having said that, I, of course, still would not call it sandcarving, as none of us are using sand in this process of abrading the surface of glass. We are using either silicone carbide or aluminum oxide; therefore, I call it abrasive blasting. But, I am getting ahead of myself, because if you are contemplating getting into this line of work, you may not even know what I am talking about.

Needless to say, my viewpoint in this business is probably a bit different from many others, as I am, by now, looking back at a span of 50 years in the glass business. My husband and I started way back when glass began its renaissance in this country. Yes, back in "hippie times" with a lot of experimentation going on and freedom of expression.

Supplies were hard to come by, and we often had to improvise and create our own, including equipment. Training was nowhere to be had, and we often taught each other. Many changes have taken place since the early 1970s. Companies were interested in manufacturing supplies and equipment we needed, and glass companies began to take notice of a demand for small glass shapes, which could be used for awards and recognition pieces. New technologies, like photo resist, made it possible to create ever finer detailed images, and the best part, it could be used by people who were not necessarily artistically inclined to create artwork themselves.

The whole industry of abrasive blasting peaked in the late 1990s to mid-2000s and since has leveled off, for various reasons. I have seen many changes during all these years: We had booming economies and recessions and a market collapse, not to mention COVID-19. The small manufacturers we have "grown up with" have sold out to larger and larger companies, and manufacturing went offshore. Now, we are entering a whole new dimension with the current economic situation. So, you want to consider getting into this line of work? What should you do?



Images courtesy of Ruth Dobbins

Get started

First of all, you should do your homework. That begins with asking







yourself a few questions. Why do you want to do this? Is your business idea doing the blasting work exclusively, or are you thinking of adding this line of work to an already existing awards and recognition shop?

If you do this as a stand-alone business, you can plan the layout of your shop differently from someone adding this to an existing shop. This type of equipment and work will always produce a certain amount of dust and should be kept away from sensitive machinery that other processes may be using. How much space will you have available? The answer to this question is going to determine the size of the equipment you may consider buying. Do you want to do only small items like awards, giftware, and barware? Or do you want to include signage, cabinet doors, and tabletops? Again, the answers to these questions will point to the equipment size you may purchase.

Most often, I recommend starting small, with a limited number of products instead of using the "shotgun approach" (doing a little bit of everything), which usually means a longer learning curve to get good at this craft as all products have their own peculiarities to be discovered and to be mastered.

The good news is that today it is so much easier to get started with all of this. You now can use the full spectrum of the internet for your research, and there are a multitude of sources for all aspects of this work. Not to mention the magazine you're reading now. They have articles and information available, including a schedule of trade shows which offer you the opportunity to meet with manufacturers and suppliers in person and attend hands-on workshops. It doesn't get any easier than that. So then, what do you need to know to set your plan into action?

Plan for space

Again, you need to have a plan. Stand-alone business or add-on? How much space will you have available? What goes into the space? You will need room for a blasting set-up, which generally consists of a compressor, which is usually kept in a separate space due to noise levels. The blasting equipment consists of a cabinet



Image courtesy of IKONICS Imaging

(which comes in several sizes and configurations) with an attached vacuum/exhaust system and a blaster, which can be separate or, more often these days, will be attached to the blasting cabinet. You will need table space for prep work and a separate table surface for clean-up work. Access to running water for clean-up work is also helpful.

Another space is needed for the production of photo-resist stencils. This area needs to be a darkroom-like area with access to water and a tabletop for the exposure unit and drying chamber. A space for a computer and printer is also necessary. One should also not forget a storage cabinet to house materials for production and glass items to be worked on. All of this you can research online. It is best to align yourself with a one-stop supplier who can deliver all necessary components to you. These companies have trained staff who can help you with questions and problem-solving.

For your glass blanks, you may need to work with a company other than the one-stop suppliers mentioned above. They do have some selection of glass blanks, but not to the extent that companies that exclusively manufacture glass have to offer. There are literally thousands of shapes and sizes of glass awards. Here, it is also good to note that even though there are so many available, do not make the mistake of offering your customers the whole variety of selection: the more choices you offer, the harder it is for a client to make up their mind as to what they want.

Know your market

Very important: market research! Will you be the only one in your area offering this service? Where are the closest competitors? What about online shops? You need to investigate all these possibilities so that you can get a feel for where you may want to establish yourself in terms of pricing. Much of the price level will depend on the type of products you want to offer. Glassware is generally a lower-priced item than an award made from crystal glass. Who are going to be



Images courtesy of Ruth Dobbins





Image courtesy of Ruth Dobbins

your customers? Schools and clubs or corporations?

There is some uncertainty right now as we enter an unknown economic era with tariffs on products from other countries, and it is very difficult to get a firm grip on the cost of materials. I am getting notifications left and right about price increases and the inability to predict consistent pricing. This will make it a bit difficult to give quotes to your customers. I am in a situation right now where I have to request a price from my suppliers each time before being able to give a price to my customers, because they are constantly changing. It is a bit unnerving, but maybe it will work itself out. Until then, you must do your due diligence every time you prepare a quote. I do quite a few large projects like shower enclosures, etc., and the resist material I need to do those has gone up by 50% in some cases.

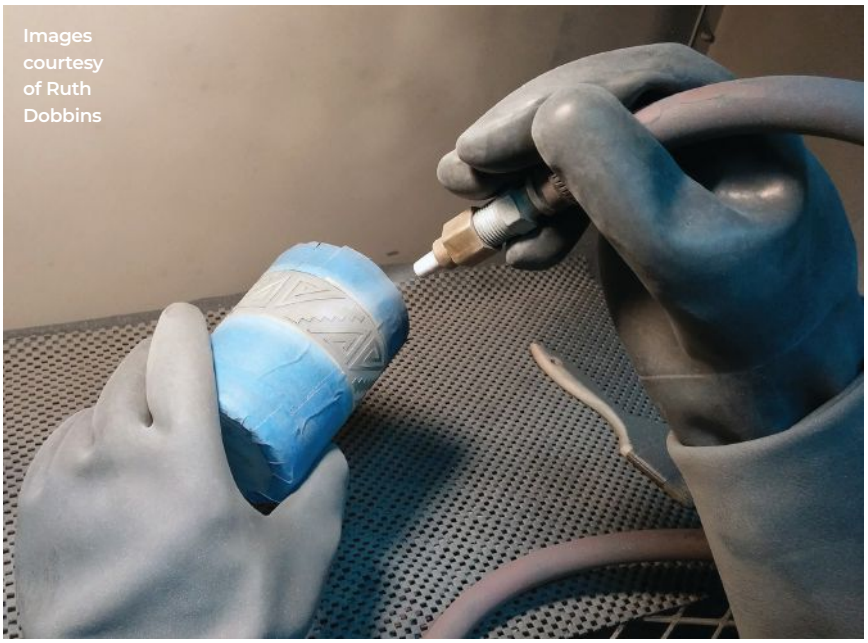
Another aspect that is affecting pricing with our work is shipping costs. Right now, it is almost at a point where heavy items, such as the abrasive we use, cost more to ship than the abrasive itself. Luckily, it is a material we get to use over and over again for quite a while. So, you see, there is quite a bit of homework to do before making the decision to go into this line of business.

Here is a list of the individual components you need to research, outside of your budget and space requirements:

- **Equipment:** Compressor, blasting cabinet including pressure blaster and exhaust system.
- **Consumables:** Items that need replacing from time to time, depending on how frequently used: blasting nozzles, abrasives, resist materials, tapes, and cleaning supplies.
- **Resist materials:** Photo resist, hand-cut resists, and laserable resists.
- **Glass blanks:** Suppliers for drinkware, award blanks, and plaques.
- **Gift items:** Paperweights, clocks, desk accessories, ornaments, and bar accessories.
- **Creating artwork:** Using programs like Adobe Illustrator or others to create your own, using clip art collections, or hiring a graphic artist to help you.
- **Copyright laws:** Educate yourself about the laws governing the right to use artwork that others have created.
- **Techniques of blasting:** There are




Images courtesy of Rayzist



Images courtesy of Ruth Dobbins



only three techniques: surface blasting, multistage carving, and multistage shading.

- **Pricing:** Where do you want to position yourself, and which clientele will you be serving? This will help you in marketing yourself to the right venues. How much of a deposit will you require to start the work, and when is the balance due? It is a good idea to quote a design fee and charge that because we know that clients can change their minds and not do a project, and you should not be left without pay if you spent time designing a project.
- **Policies:** Make sure you have written out clear policies explaining how you handle a job and how you expect to get paid. Do not start a job without having your client sign off on the details of the job. Spell out all the details, and then there is no room for disagreement.

Again, you can find articles on all these topics, which will give you all the details you need to know. By now, your head is probably spinning with lots of thoughts. Tackle these topics one at a time, and you'll be on your way. Good luck! **GP**



With over 40 years in the glass business, **Ruth Dobbins** offers experience in all glass-etching techniques as well as in fused and cast glass. Ruth holds a master's degree in art and has been a partner in an art glass wholesale supply and studio company in Europe, before joining forces with her late husband Norm.

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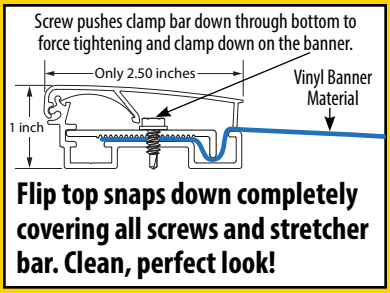
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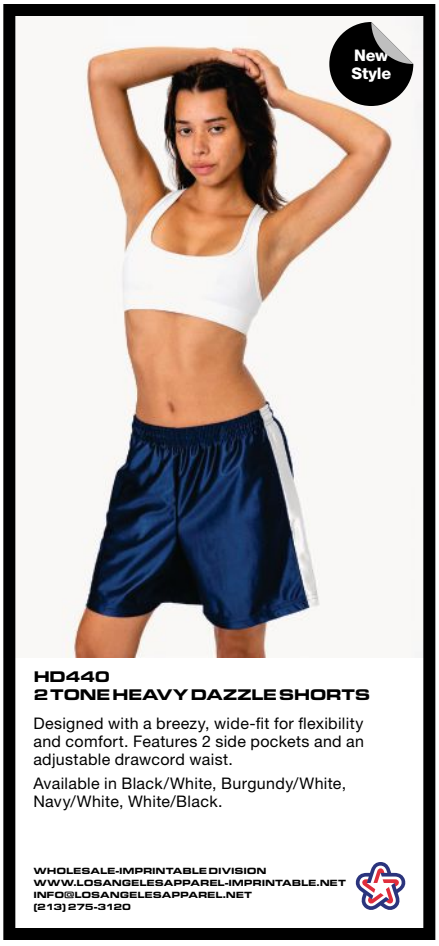
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Finishing equipment:



An investment in finishing touches

How cutters, trimmers, plotters & laminators make graphics truly sellable

By Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko

The graphics and promotional products industry is a leader in advanced technology. By and large, there is an innovative tool or snazzy equipment to craft any desired result for mass or niche production. While attention spans are often dazzled by versatile materials, sophisticated digital printers, and do-it-all laser engraving machines, graphics specialists would be hard-pressed to serve up a superior product without the finesse of finishing equipment.

"A car may have a transmission and motor, but without wheels or paint, it's really just in the works — not a finished product," said Sam Crosby, dealer manager at Graphic Finishing Partners. "Similarly, what comes off the printing press in its natural state usually doesn't do anything for the customer, but proper finishing equipment takes that same graphic or print and makes it truly sellable."



Image courtesy of MetWest

He points to wall graphics as a prime example. An image comes to life thanks to a wide-format printer, but then it must be trimmed to size, as well as laminated for protection and longevity.

"Finishing equipment takes everything to the next level — completing the process and protecting the investment in a way modern consumers expect," Crosby explained.

The potential, he said, is extensive. In recent years, the finishing machinery market size has expanded significantly. Valued at $88.23 billion in 2023, it is projected to reach $253.4 billion by 2031 — swelling at a compound annual growth rate of 11.58% during the forecast period 2024-2031.

Technological advancements in automation, Internet of Things integration, e-commerce, and print-on-demand, coupled with evolving manufacturing and eco-friendly methods, are complex layers of market growth — but so are consumer expectations and diverse demand.

"The growing popularity of customized goods calls for adaptable finishing equipment that can work with a range of materials and styles,"



Images courtesy of Graphic Finishing Partners

according to Verified Market Research, a global research and consulting firm.

In order for businesses to thrive in today's hypercompetitive marketplace, shop owners must invest in finishing equipment and techniques to keep pace with the modern consumer's voracious appetite. While the upfront costs vary, the advantages are shared. Proper finishing equipment increases efficiencies by automating tasks and optimizing workflows, thus halting excessive waste, creating consistency, as well as reducing operation and labor costs. In addition to raising the bar in product quality, the equipment lays a foundation for expansion in scope, output, and revenue — ultimately leading to increased profitability.

"Businesses can't afford to not invest," Crosby said.

Shopping options

The term finishing equipment broadly describes various machines and processes used to enhance the appearance, durability, and functionality of any printed material. Whether the machinery is hooked up in-line or offline, all finishing equipment works in tandem with a shop's printing system to perform value-added operations. Feature examples include smoothing surfaces; cutting and slitting; folding and binding; scoring and perforating; laminating and die-cutting; applying unique finishes like foil stamping, embossing, and coating; as well as collating, numbering labeling, and packaging.

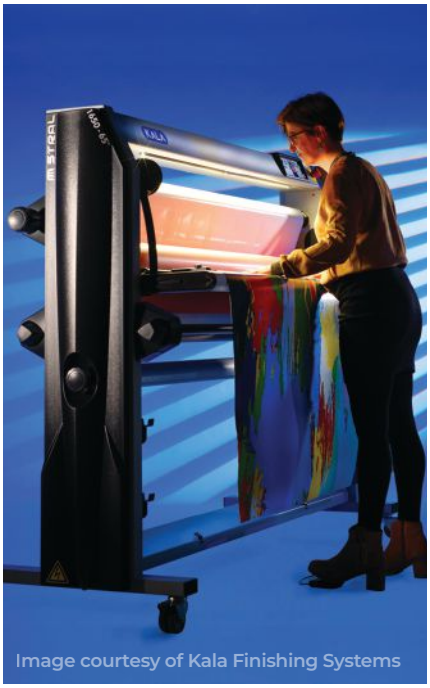


Image courtesy of Kala Finishing Systems

Business owners across the spectrum benefit from specialized equipment customized to their individual needs.

In the print industry, professionals rely on numerous finishing operations to transform ordinary materials into extraordinary results.

"Every print shop must finish something, somehow. Products need to be trimmed one way or another, whether manually or by machine — but a human risks error. If you're using a knife for each and every poster, then it can slip," said Chase Pender, business development, Supply55. "With labor costs on the rise, automation is key."

Cutting, trimming, and die-cutting machines are valuable assets, allowing staff to effortlessly construct specific — and, at times, complex — shapes and sizes in a variety of materials. Traditional vinyl cutters, for example, are reliable solutions for roll-fed media, while flatbed cutters are paired with flatbed UV-cure printers and serve as a top choice for rigid substrates.

Some cutting machines process a multitude of media, including direct-to-film transfers, paper, wallpaper, canvas, laminated substrates, banner material, polycarbonate, and other non-woven roll goods.

Ideal for extra-large prints, posters, banners, or architectural blueprints, plotters are a solid complement to other finishing equipment. Since they can handle a wide variety of media like paper, vinyl, canvas, and even fabric, plotters are considered a versatile investment in graphic design and printing. Many plotters — particularly flatbed models — also offer cutting capabilities.

Across other areas of the printing industry, binding machines easily convert pages into books, booklets, and bound documents, while complementary settings standardize and streamline multistep processes like brochures or flyers.

"No matter the job, the right finishing equipment offers peace of mind in accuracy and repeatability. In the end, that equates to better quality for the customer and a faster, more profitable turnaround for you," Pender added.

Lamination

In the realm of lamination, finishing equipment not only provides a durable UV layer against harsh outdoor elements but also a more professional-looking graphic.

"We're in the business of over-laminating a print with UV, chemical, and abrasion resistance that not only extends the life of the product, but also makes it easy to install and maintain," Crosby said.

While there are various options for business owners to consider, a few reign supreme. Roll laminators use heated rollers to melt glue on a film roll and apply it to the substrate with pressure rollers. Traditionally, they are ideal for larger, high-volume projects and, oftentimes, a method of choice among schools, print shops, and businesses alike. Unlike roll laminators, cold laminators rely on pressure-sensitive film and pressure rollers without heat, making them suitable for heat-sensitive materials like photographs, digital prints, and specialty inks.

Built off of cold laminators, some machines add top heat for better over-lamination, mounting, and board-coating results. With integrated rear rewind for roll-to-roll applications and a swing-up feed table, these machines are a popular choice to complete everything from signs, banners, displays, and point-of-purchase materials to floor, window, and vehicle graphics.

Last but not least: a wide-format machine is ideal for oversized paper, posters, and signage. Although some wide-format equipment can be used for hot, cold, and heat-assisted lamination, they are two distinct setups.

The vital importance of high-quality lamination equipment cannot be overstated, Crosby said. A wrap shop, for example, may have a great graphic — even a superior product — but without a reliable cutter and laminator, they are restricted to what can be done by hand.

"Without these capabilities, they're limited in professional scope, product, and installation," Crosby explained. "Just like you need the caboose of a train to safeguard and help navigate, a shop needs to invest in the whole process — not just part of it."

Choosing the right machine

While all finishing equipment adds

Talking tariffs



At the time of publication, tariffs continue to impact global trade dynamics, catching the international community off guard and causing a ripple effect of unknown implications.

Tariffs — taxes charged on goods bought from other countries — are typically a percentage of a product's value. The 10% tariff on goods from most nations, for example, means a $10 product incurs an additional $1 tax — taking the total cost to $11. Similarly, a 145% charge on some Chinese goods means a $10 product is now $24.50. In tariff scenarios, some or all of the increased cost may be passed on to consumers.

"Indifference creates chaos and chaos creates uncertainty," said Sam Crosby, dealer manager at Graphic Finishing Partners. "Our pricing from last year is in play until further notice, but that notice may be immediate. If overseas manufacturing is impacted, then we have to react."

He said manufacturers and distributors are going to be challenged to spread out the impact. Transportation, storage, marketing, installation, and training are key components in the overall price as well.

"It will likely be levied right down to the end consumer buying the finished product. Tariffs like this will run [their] course throughout the entire supply chain. It isn't something you can take and bury the burden," Crosby said. "Are we talking hundreds or thousands? Unfortunately, it depends on what you're making and what it costs today versus` what it costs in a month."

"There's a lot of volatility and a lot of unknowns right now," he continued.

Business owners who are on the cusp of needing new equipment have a few options to consider.

"Shops can repair what they have, but, depending on the age of the equipment, they may not be able to get their hands on parts — at least not easily. As a result, they could end up paying even more," Crosby said.

Likewise, some of the old timers who cut their teeth on handcrafted methods of the past may rely on these master skills in a pinch.

For those who do not want to take any chances, Crosby expects there to be a rush to purchase before full prices go into effect. He suspects those making larger, high-end capital equipment buys to be hit harder, simply based on the financial investment.

"If you're sitting on it, then act now," he said. "Even if we're living in an uncertain time, if you've got the need and wherewithal to make the buy, then do it now to avoid a big impact."

a level of functionality that a stand-alone printer lacks, not all machinery is created equal. Industry professionals stress the importance of partnering with professionals who understand marketplace nuances and specialize in matching customers with the best product and expert installation.

"Your finishing equipment will outlive the printer by a lifetime, so don't underestimate the value of the right manufacturer, the right build quality, and the right support," Pender said. "Talk to different manufacturers, weigh all options, and make sure the people you purchase from have your back in the long haul."

While budget is always important, he encourages decision makers to weigh the overall *value* instead of just the top-line expenditure cost. With the proper machinery, business owners can streamline stubborn inefficiencies and outperform current production, while providing enough breathing room to handle the next few notches of growth.

Pender put a pin in the misconception that a shop must pull the trigger on a top-of-the-line printer before investing in finishing equipment.

"A lot of people take the path of upgrading the printer first, but if you don't have a cutter to handle the output of the printer, you'll have a backup," he explained.

He recalled a customer who, armed with a roll-to-roll UV printer, was in a similar situation — experiencing year-over-year growth and considering a printer vs finishing equipment upgrade. Upon evaluation, the entrepreneur decided to purchase a trimmer to help automate banner production and never looked back. Since then, he has invested in a more sophisticated printer system and is printing banners all day long.

"It all started with the finishing equipment upgrade, and the customer still has more room to grow. He can add more printers, and that same finishing equipment will be there to support his business," Pender said.

As manufacturers continue to refine their product offerings, shop owners benefit from the power of choice. Machines will advance in speed, accuracy, and user-friendly features — gifting small businesses greater automation, efficiency, and output. Regardless of the investment, "take good care of the equipment, and it will take good care of you," Pender said. **GP**



Image courtesy of Kala Finishing Systems



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



How to develop a top notch performance culture

Define performance, train for success & never stop improving

By Bob Chapa



Images courtesy of Signarama Troy/Metro Detroit

Every business wants its employees to be high performers who turn in excellent results. Who wouldn't? But unless you deliberately make performance the foundation of your company's culture, you may never know how far your team can go. It begins at the top and filters down through managers and team members and is an integral part of the employee experience, from recruiting to hiring, training, and each day's work, and it must include goal setting with rewards for achievement. That's a lot of work, but you'll be rewarded with higher rates of productivity and customer satisfaction.

Whether it is intentional or not, every company has a unique culture: the norms, values, and behaviors that drive the business. Workplace experts have identified four basic styles, and the performance variety comes closest to market culture, which focuses on achieving measurable results and rewarding employees for achieving the results.

If your sign shop successfully adopts a performance culture, you'll have a team that embraces efficiency, precision, and customer satisfaction. It's what you get from a team that is hyperfocused on meeting production deadlines, ensuring perfect print quality, and executing flawless installations. A team like this will thrive in a workplace that encourages learning and improving and rewards them for their contributions.



Define performance

Training and development start at the top. The leadership team must first commit to building the culture and defining what results they want to get from their teams. These key performance indicators (KPIs) should be objective standards that are achievable and measurable.

First, decide whether you want to measure individual or team success — or both. A dual approach ensures that both individual excellence and teamwork are encouraged and rewarded. When each individual is singled out for what they bring to the team, it can't help but make them feel good and inspire them to repeat the success.

Have a manageable number of KPIs to track — 10 to 15 make for a list that's comprehensive but doesn't overwhelm employees with excessive reporting. Focus on meaningful KPIs that drive real improvements.





At Signarama, we track our KPIs daily across our four main departments: local projects, national clients, production, and installation.

Your indicators might include:

- **Customer satisfaction**: Besides inviting comments, ask customers to rate performance on a scale from one to 10 so you can measure objectively. Remember that people often feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback in person, so let them respond anonymously. Check Google reviews, too. If you respond, be courteous and thank the customer for their feedback.
- **Production efficiency**: How quickly and accurately are projects completed? List the expected and actual completion times and the number of corrections needed.
- **Installation success rate**: Track the number of error-free and on-time installations.
- **Sales conversion rate**: Evaluates how effectively leads turn into signed projects.

These are more than just numbers — they are tools that help identify strengths, uncover areas for improvement, and guide team discussions.

Be sure your KPIs are clear and align with your business objectives. And, of course, make sure the teams know what you're tracking and what standards they must meet, starting with hiring. Let applicants know your performance standards. Make this part of training and developoment of established team members.

Tailor your KPI expectations to an employee's role and tenure, ensuring fairness and relevance. Set the bar high but make it reachable. Create a short list of improvement areas and consistently focus on one to three of them each month.

Training for success

Every employee deserves a company-paid training program that sets clear standards; so do the customers who will feel the results in quality work.

Training isn't just about skill-building — it's about mindset. A well-trained employee is more confident, engaged, and productive. By making ongoing education a core value, you cultivate a team that doesn't just show up but shows up prepared and ready to perform at a high level.

Your training programs should include a performance-based incentive tied to your KPIs, which show the employee's direct impact on their department and the company as a whole. This reinforces the idea that performance matters and that effort is recognized and rewarded.

It's almost guaranteed that you'll encounter some challenges as you establish a performance culture if you haven't stressed this before. Lower-performing staff will probably resist accountability. They may push back against KPI tracking for fear it will be used as a punitive measure. This is understandable if you've never set objective standards. Be clear from day one that this is not a way to punish or "weed out" poor performance, but encourage good performance and help team members improve. Consider announcing the rewards they can earn with good performance, so they can better make this connection.

You may even find the poor performers welcome the new standards because they'll finally know how to succeed.

Never stop improving

A performance culture is not something you set up once and watch it go. It takes continuous monitoring and refinement, with regular checks to see if the plan itself is doing its job. Are you getting better results now that everyone knows your expectations? Or are you measuring the wrong things?

Push the leadership team and frontline employees to stay accountable to each other all year-round, not just during peak production times. Everyone should see that performance expectations don't only matter in busy times. By the same token, don't let anyone cut corners when things are hectic. "We don't have time to do a checklist" is never acceptable. You must create a culture where excellence is the norm, not the exception.

Make your performance standards clear, consistent, and achievable, and make performance a daily concern — not an occasional initiative. You'll foster a company culture where accountability, growth, and excellence become second nature. **GP**



Bob Chapa is the owner of Signarama Metro Detroit in Troy, Michigan. With over 85,000 square feet of showroom and manufacturing space at their headquarters, they are one of the largest sign companies in the Midwest. Chapa is also the founder and CEO of National Branding.

Understanding architectural signage

Helping brands create lasting impressions & foster loyalty

By Paul Ingle

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As I celebrate my 40th year in this industry, people often ask me why I've stayed in the sign and branding business for so long. There are many reasons I've been captivated by what we do each challenging hour. First and foremost: you never get bored. There is always something new and different to learn, mentor, or experience. Every day is unique, and where else can you design, sell, and/or fabricate something that the public can see for a long time?

You can specialize in a few hundred types of signage within each major category: architectural, commercial, regulatory, on- or off-premise, interior/exterior, vehicle graphics, digital/interactive, permanent and temporary, or all of them!

Types of signs

Designers and architects will suggest there are only three basic sign types: identification, informational, and regulatory, and that all are about wayfinding or instruction and navigating into, within, or out of a location. In my experience, I agree there are three types, but my old-school lists are: architectural, commercial, and custom designs. These groups may be more of a factor of fabrication, labor, and materials plus the target costs a client will allow. There is overlap in each category and often sign companies specialize in one (or maybe two) due to economies of scale, manufacturing expertise, and sales approach.



The largest sign ever permitted in San Diego County/City, showcasing cutting-edge design and engineering. Westfield Champions sign (next to ballad) - Dynamic wall displays create engaging visual experiences for visitors.

Images courtesy of Paul Ingle

Architectural signage refers to signs that are integrated into the aesthetic of a building. They are meant to be visually appealing and cohesive with the overall facility design intent. Often, these signs are made from aluminum, fiberglass, stainless steel, glass, stone, or other natural components. The degree of workmanship and finishing is usually high with concealed fasteners, minimal seams, and specialty paint. Target markets include firms where branding is paramount: healthcare, financial services, sports venues, corporate environments, etc.

Commercial signs generally are budget-friendly and can be mass-produced to identify businesses to foot or motorized traffic at a distance. Channel letters, building signs, thermoformed face cabinets, flexible face pylons/monuments, and banners are common. Usually less fancy than architectural signage, commercial signs





Clear exterior signage enhances the healthcare facility's branding, ensuring patients and visitors feel welcomed and guided.

are used by multi-unit retail, fast food, restaurant, petroleum, big-box retail, primary and secondary education, automotive, etc.

Custom signs are usually one-offs for in-line shopping center tenants, new small businesses, real estate agents, political candidates, or those where budget is a primary consideration. It is not uncommon to produce a custom sign for a commercial or architectural client through designer, architect, or general contractor collaboration. Many sign fabricators have talented artists and designers on their staff that can produce award-winning custom designs.

From environmental to experiential

In 2014, SEGD (originally the Society of Environmental Graphic Design) changed "Environmental" to "Experiential" and their not-for-profit became the Society for Experiential Graphic Design. These types of graphics provide a layered experience in which identity, imagery, and sense of place are enhanced through triggers and touchpoints all within a spatial experience. Which is a fancy way of delivering dynamic content through a collection of communication tools of typography, color, form, technology, and function.

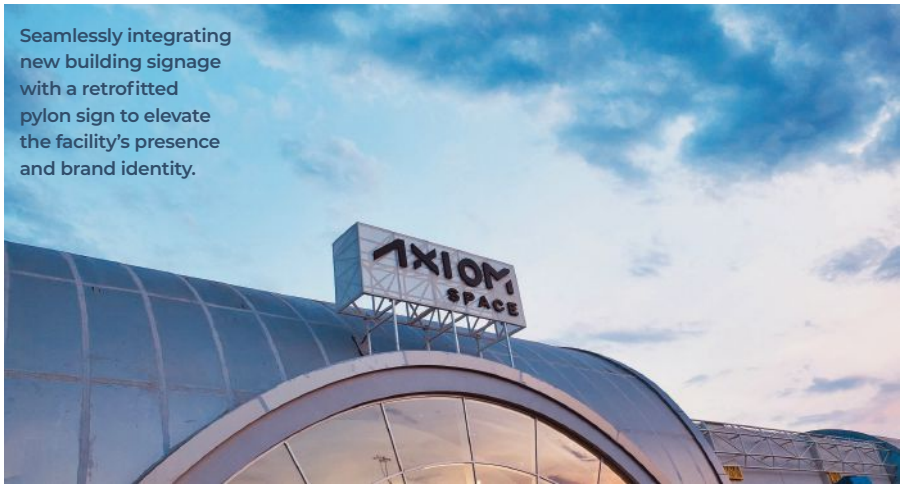
Experiential and architectural sign types are blurring the lines and share many of the same attributes even if they don't have the same lineage by a designer designation. In fact, almost all signs, whether interior or exterior, seem to be moving toward this type of look, feel, and purpose.

In the future, architectural (or experiential) signs will likely emphasize digital integration and interactive content which will include real-time information and personalized experiences. Sustainability with green features of natural and recyclable materials will reflect the growing emphasis on environmental responsibility. Lighting solutions will be energy-efficient to reduce environmental impact. Plus, there seems to be a greater emphasis on wayfinding systems to make it easier and less stressful for people to navigate complex spaces.

While commercial or custom signage is usually about bright colors and contrasting materials/fonts/design to stand out for identification or promotion, architectural signs will blend more harmoniously with the building's architecture with more subdued color palettes, lighting, and materials.

Who buys architectural signs? Contractors, construction companies, property management firms, property/homeowner associations, land developers, architects, sports/entertainment venues, hospitals/healthcare facilities, banks, corporate firms, airlines/airports, transportation companies, government agencies, educational institutions, hospitality, and retail businesses.

Architectural, commercial, and custom signage can provide site identity solutions. Each has its place, price point, and best application. But architectural signs are usually the best method for communicating the brand and wayfinding solution for the facility.



Seamlessly integrating new building signage with a retrofitted pylon sign to elevate the facility's presence and brand identity.



Interior signage that transforms spaces, elevating the environment.

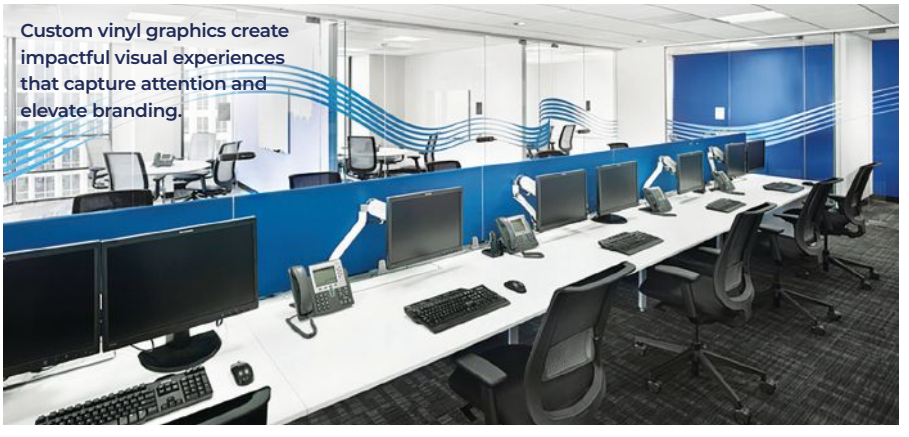
Commercial sign programs can have a family of similar signs in different sizes to meet zoning and municipal requirements for multi-unit clients. But architectural signs have identification and informational aspects plus integrated components of ADA, regulatory, donor, wayfinding, and interactive signs that seamlessly work together while complementing the building design. These are signs that are "on purpose" and not an afterthought.

Architectural signage enhances brand identity, improves customer experiences, and guides visitors effectively. The goals for well-designed architectural signs are to create a lasting positive impression and connect with the brand in a visually appealing way. When customers see the same design elements, colors, fonts, and messaging throughout a space, it reinforces the brand's values, identity, and recall.

So, how do you design an ideal architectural sign?

- **Define objectives:** Start by identifying the main goals of your signage plan. Do you need to guide visitors through a complex building? Are you aiming to reinforce your customer's brand identity? Perhaps you want to tell your client's story?
- **Understand the space:** Your signage must work within its physical environment. Consider factors like viewing distances, lighting conditions, and traffic flow. A sign that looks great in a bright, open lobby might be hard to read in a dimly-lit hallway. Take measurements and photos of the intended locations to help with your design choices.
- **Choose materials:** The right materials can make or break your signage. Choose appropriate materials depending on whether you want a classic, modern, contemporary, or some other more specific look.
- **Design elements:** Your signage should align with the brand's visual identity. Use consistent typography, color schemes, and imagery across all signs. If the brand uses a specific font in its logo, consider using the same or a complementary font in the signage. Color choices should match or harmonize with the brand colors and the surrounding environment.
- **Compliance & accessibility:** Ensure your signs meet ADA regulations and relevant building codes. This includes considerations like text size, contrast, and Grade II Braille for tactile signs. Apart from being a legal requirement, compliance shows that the brand values are inclusive.
- **Collaboration with experts:** Partnering with experienced vendors can streamline the design and implementation process. Collaborate with the designer, architect, or client on material selection, installation methods, and design techniques to maximize the impact of your signage.

Lastly, do not forget that experiential comes from the real world and from experience. Experiential things can be seen, touched, and verified. Effective architectural signs will create immersive, memorable experiences and engage the target audience. That seems a worthy endeavor and great reason for being in our industry after all. **GP**


Custom vinyl graphics create impactful visual experiences that capture attention and elevate branding.



Since 1973 **Paul Ingle**'s career has spanned sales, sales management, marketing, and business ownership. He is currently vice president of national sales for Stratus, the nation's largest branding implementation firm. Ingle is a past president of the Texas Sign Association and its regional chapter the Greater DFW Sign Association. Contact him at paul.ingle@onestratus.com.

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In-house versus outsourced graphics

Pros & cons of printing in-house or outsourcing vehicle wraps

By Charity Jackson



Images courtesy of Charity Jackson.

Vehicle wraps and fleet graphics make up about half of our business income. The other half is signs, graphics, banners, and engraving. Vehicle wraps require design services, printing graphics, and finishing services that require a laminator and often a cutter. Not to mention the production table and necessary supplies.

Since we also offer other signage, printing our wraps in-house makes sense for us. But does it make sense for your situation? There are pros and cons to printing your graphics in-house versus outsourcing these graphics. It's important to weigh your options as you venture into the sign industry or expand your current services into vehicle wraps.

In-house pros

If you already have a sign shop set up with equipment and software, and you're already trained on the equipment and programs, then printing your vehicle wraps in-house makes sense. Investing in a printer, laminator, application table or production table, design software, and RIP software are your highest upfront costs. If you've already made this investment, then printing wraps in-house is the way to go.

Printing your graphics in-house also means you have more control over color output and the quality of the printed graphics. We do printed color samples for most of our wraps prior to production. Being able to do this quickly in-house means we're more efficient.

You also have more control over the turnaround time on producing the graphics when you're handling the process in-house. This includes reprinting messed up or ill-fitting panels quickly. Having to wait for reprinted graphics halts your installation process and makes you reliant on the outside source.

By printing in-house, you're also saving on the cost per square footage for vinyl, ink, and lamination. When you're printing in-house, you can often maximize your square footage when setting up prints and you can also nest with other projects.

In-house cons

If you're printing in-house, you have that higher upfront investment in equipment and software, which we discussed. Besides this initial investment are the ongoing costs to maintain the equipment.

Running a digital printer, laminator, cutter, and other finishing equipment requires experienced staff members with proper training. If you don't have these skills yourself, then you'll have to rely on another person to run the equipment and software, which not only adds extra labor costs, but can also put you in a bind if they're out of the office.

Another consideration for producing graphics in-house is the need for sufficient space to house the equipment and produce and finish the graphics. When you're just installing the graphics, you primarily need an installation bay or you can install on-site. If you're also producing the graphics, you'll need a clean production area in your shop with enough square footage to hold the equipment and any media inventory.

Outsourcing pros

Outsourcing your wrap graphics has its appeal since you have lower up-front costs on equipment and software, and the subsequent training necessary to run it. The professionals you're purchasing your graphics from have made the investment into the equipment and training and have the specialized knowledge to produce your graphics.

Outsourcing means you also have less labor involved since you don't have to print, laminate, or finish your graphics. Once you have approval from the customer, you can upload your art files to your printer and move on to your next project or installation while you wait for the graphics to be shipped to you.

If the installation of graphics is your primary focus and that is where you've invested your time and energy into training, then outsourcing the graphics might be a logical option. Positioning yourself in your market as a reliable source for installing wraps you've sourced means your focus is on the workflow around installation. Streamlining your business around this service can mean you're more profitable because of your efficiency.

Outsourcing cons

The biggest con to outsourcing your graphics is having less control. Since you're not involved in the production process, you can't oversee

the colors as they're printing. You also have less control over the quality of the printing, and there is a higher potential for miscommunication.

For most wrap jobs, we do an initial color sample before starting production on the entire vehicle. While you can still request a color sample from your supplier, the time delay can cut into your efficiency. And if the colors aren't correct, you'll be going back and forth with the customer and the printer to match the customer's branding.

If you need to reprint a wrap panel during installation, it brings your installation to a halt, as you have to wait for the new graphic to be printed and shipped to you. Longer turnaround times because of outsourcing can slow your efficiency, which cuts into your overall profitability.

Another consideration is the cost per square foot of producing graphics in-house versus outsourcing. Even with the initial cost of equipment, software, and training, having to purchase your graphics from another source usually means your price per square foot is higher.

Considerations

So, as you decide which option is best for you, it's important to consider each factor that will affect your efficiency, overhead, and growth. And again, control over quality and turnaround times is a huge consideration.

Look at the volume of business you think you'll be doing and if you estimate a high enough volume of business, consider in-house printing. This means you need to figure out your initial investment in equipment and software, and then decide at what volume of production you'll start saving money on the price per square foot by producing in-house versus outsourcing the graphics.

Design & installation

If I were to draw a Venn diagram of in-house printing and outsourcing graphics, the relationship between the two would include at least three key items that you have to consider either way. Unless you plan to outsource design and installation, as well as the graphics, you'll need to manage both items in-house.



This full van wrap is part of a fleet we're installing. Since we're printing in-house, we have more control over the color management and replacement of any damaged panels.

Often customers will come to you with their branding already in place. They will provide you with digital copies of their logo and support graphics, and will often have a branding guide that spells out Pantone colors, fonts, and rules for how their artwork is to be used.

Many times, you'll receive a logo but nothing else, or sometimes you will need to design everything from scratch. Regardless of the situation, you need a designer on staff who knows how to incorporate existing artwork, understands vehicle advertising, and knows how to design graphics specifically to fit a vehicle — considering both design elements and ease of installation.

Whether you have an experienced vehicle wrap installer on staff or you hire installers as needed, consider this service if you're going to offer vehicle wraps. A good installer will install a vehicle wrap quickly and efficiently, and will also offer superb quality control that produces a vehicle wrap that will last long term. Poor installation compromises your entire wrap, even with great design and quality graphics.

Knowledge

The third item you have to consider is knowledge. Even if you outsource the design, graphics, and the installation and you're primarily just overseeing the wrap projects, you still have to possess knowledge about the wrap process.

Know which media and laminate is the best option for the vehicle, application, and environment. Research suppliers to find the best source. Knowledge of material costs, market research on competitive rates, and being informed on installation techniques and what makes a for a good installation are essential.

If you're planning to print in-house, then knowledge of equipment operation and service is necessary. Training on sign and design software is also imperative. In-house installation means that you need to know how to wrap a vehicle, what tools are necessary, and the best techniques for a properly installed wrap.

You also have to be knowledgeable about good wrap design, how to market and sell wraps, what information you need to gather from the customer, as well as post-wrap maintenance tips. There's no perfect answer as to in-house or outsourcing graphics, but you should start by educating yourself on the process. This information will help you make an informed decision and will guide you as you venture into vehicle wraps. **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 www.vhsigns.com.



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Training in the classroom offers attendees the opportunity to learn about trending topics, technologies, processes, equipment, and more, offered in two different skill levels by our exhibitors and select GRAPHICS PRO magazine expert contributors.

START HERE These classes are geared toward people who are brand new to a discipline or have some graphics experience but are looking to learn the fundamental techniques and/or add new profit centers in related markets.

PRO Considered "higher learning," these classes will take a deep dive into advanced techniques and/or the business aspect of running a graphics shop as it applies to the type of shop being run, i.e., apparel decoration, sign making, or personalized product production.

Classes are offered the day before the show starts, through Saturday, June 21, in all-day and 90-minute sessions.

Schedule Classroom Training

Please visit **g-p-x.com/in** for class descriptions.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18

10 a.m. — 4 p.m.

Hirsch Solutions LLC – Building a Successful Apparel Decorating Business

THURSDAY, JUNE 19

8 — 9:30 a.m.

Epilog Laser – Laser Mastery: Engraving Essentials for Beginners START HERE

Transfer Express – Apparel Printing Made Easy START HERE

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

JDS Industries – Troubleshooting Sublimation START HERE

Advertising Specialty Institute (ASI) – Profit with Promo: Expanding Your Business Through Promo Product Sales START HERE

TheMagicTouch USA – How to Maximize Your Profits Using the Crio Powderless DTF PLUS START HERE

1 — 2:30 p.m.

Trotec Laser Inc – Enhance Your Business with Laser Solutions START HERE

IT Supplies – Epson's Latest in DTF, DTG & Dye-Sublimation: Compare, Contrast & Choose with Confidence START HERE

4 — 5:30 p.m.

CorelTRAINER – CorelDRAW is Easy! Let's See Exactly How! START HERE

Restylers International – 1 + 1 = 20 - Two Simple Steps to Add 20% to Your Bottom Line PRO

GPX University – Beyond 6 Figures: Strategies to Scale Beyond the Blueprint, *with Stan Banks*

FRIDAY, JUNE 20

8 — 9:30 a.m.

Procolored Technology Inc – Dive into Color: Procolored Printer Quickstart START HERE

Inktavo – Maximizing Shop Efficiency and Sales for Apparel Decoration and Signage Businesses

Graphics Industry Executive Panel - Hear Directly From the Source

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

IKONICS Imaging – From Skills to Sales: Hands-On Sandcarving Strategies for High-Margin Markets START HERE

STAHLS' – Know Your Customer: How Client Preferences Shape Your Heat Printing Strategy

1 — 2:30 p.m.

GRAPHICS PRO – Lessons in Apparel Decoration: Your Guide to Screenprinting in 2025, Part 1, *with Lon Winters*

PDS Equipment – Current 2025 Business Development Strategies for Laser, UV Print, DTF, HTV, and Embroidery

4 — 5:30 p.m.

GPX University – Organic Growth Engine: The Local-First Digital Marketing System, *with Stan Banks*

SATURDAY, JUNE 21

8 — 9:30 a.m.

GRAPHICS PRO– AI Revisited: A Playbook for Transforming Your Business Operations, *with Marshall Atkinson*

GRAPHICS PRO – Marketing Better in 2025: Grow Profits with Clarity and Connection, *with Aaron Montgomery*

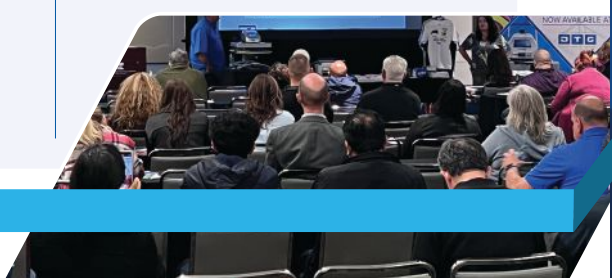
GRAPHICS PRO – Becoming an Engraving Expert: Top Tips for Beginners and Intermediates, *with Lori Champagne*

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

GRAPHICS PRO – From $500K to $1M: What You Need to Do to Take Your Shop to the Next Level in 2025, *with Marshall Atkinson*

GRAPHICS PRO – Lessons in Apparel Decoration: Your Guide to Screenprinting in 2025, Part 2, *with Lon Winters*

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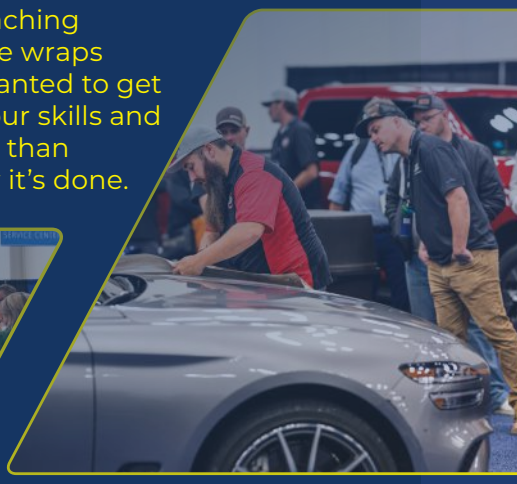
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The pet products boom

How to tap into a growing market

By Aaron Montgomery

The U.S. pet industry is anything but ruff right now. Sorry, dad jokes are part of what I do. But in all seriousness, overall spending in the U.S. topped $152 billion in 2024 and is projected to hit $157 billion in 2025, according to the American Pet Products Association. With 94 million households now claiming at least one furry, feathered, or scaly family member, there's no slowdown in sight. What's even more telling? Over three-fourths of U.S. pet owners say their spending habits aren't changing when it comes to their pets, regardless of the economy. This is a golden opportunity for decorators to jump in with custom products that meet the needs (and wants) of passionate pet lovers.

Why the pet market makes sense for decorators

As with all things that we do as an industry, we bring value by making everyday commodity products stand out. Pet owners love to personalize everything from bandannas and bowls to totes and T-shirts. They're not just buying for utility. They're buying for connection, and that emotional bond creates a unique opening for decorators of all kinds, whether you're doing direct-to-film transfers, sublimation, engraving, embroidery, UV printing, or a mix of everything. And unlike seasonal markets and holiday or gift niche markets, our love of pets is year-round.

If this is a market that sounds intriguing, keep reading for some practical ways to grab part of this amazing market.

Find your niche inside the pet world

Anyone who has read my columns in the past knows that I'm a huge proponent of niche marketing. I'm not saying to limit yourself to a certain niche only, but really focusing your outbound message on one pinpointed market so your message is clear. The same holds true with the pet market. Rather than trying to serve all pet owners, consider focusing on a specific slice. This helps clarify your branding, guide your product offerings, and make marketing way easier.



Viktoriia Boiko – stock.adobe.com

Years ago, I was teaching a class on niche marketing and had a young lady in the audience who was really struggling to get the concept. She could not let go of her thought that her target market was not all pet owners. Lucky for me, she had a stuffed animal sitting on the desk in front of her, which stood out in a business seminar as unique, and the animal was not one that I immediately recognized. So I asked her to tell me about the stuffed animal, and her eyes lit up. It was a hedgehog, and it was the mascot for the hedgehog rescue she headed up. The decorating business was really a way to fund the rescue.

And there it was, her niche was really supporting animal rescue groups, and could even be so targeted to be unique animals outside of the traditional dog and cat space. Now imagine her message and how connected she would be versus trying to stand out in the overall pet product world.

For you, think about the specifics of the niche area you might be most drawn to. Something that you can speak passionately about, or at least identify with the potential buyers, so your message will be clear to them.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Do I want to serve dog parents who love hiking with their pups?
- Am I drawn to cat lovers who appreciate humor and style?
- What about exotic pet owners who can't find anything unique?
- Could I focus on pet memorials for grieving families?
- Is there a lane in matching pet-parent gear?

It's not about those questions specifically, but questions like that that get to the deepest level of the specific niche. Start with what lights you up. Then dig into the community around it. That's where you'll find your product ideas.

Build relationships, not just products

When you have your niche identified and you are ready to go out and market, it is time to tackle this with an uncommon mindset. If you want to thrive in this space, don't treat it like a quick-print hustle. Most people who are trying to expand into deeply emotional markets like the pet market miss the fact that it is not transactional. If you try to make it transactional, once the low-hanging fruit is gone, your business will be too. Build real relationships with pet parents and the folks who serve them. Here are a few smart ways to do it:

Partner with local pet businesses: Connect with groomers, trainers, boarding facilities, and pet boutiques. You could offer exclusive co-branded products or create display samples that they can feature.

Sponsor or attend pet events: Adoption fairs, dog walks, rescue fundraisers, or breed-specific meetups are great spots to show off your work and build your list. Bonus points if you can personalize on the spot.

Feature customer pets in your marketing: Pet parents love to see their fur babies showcased. Start a "Pet of the Month" spotlight on your social channels or include customer-submitted photos in your newsletter.

Launch a sample gifting campaign: Identify a few local pet influencers or dog walkers with a solid following. Send them a free custom piece with their pet's name and ask for a shoutout or photo in return.

Pop up where the pets are: Set up a small booth at a pet-friendly brewery night, dog park, or weekend market. Display a few popular products, offer on-site customization, and bring your QR code to capture emails.

Collaborate with a photographer: Team up with a pet photographer to offer bundled packages: photo shoot + custom product. It's a win for both of you and a special experience for the customer.

This market is big, but the ones who stick around are the ones who listen to their customers and stay flexible. To stay relevant, make sure you are constantly communicating with your customers and ask for feedback regularly, and be willing to tweak. One of the fastest ways to maintain and increase your perceived value is to keep personalization front and center. And with that personalization, focus on storytelling. People want or need more stuff; they want stories and connection.

The numbers don't lie. This is a $150-plus billion market, and it's only growing. But more than the dollar signs, what really makes this space so powerful is the connection behind it. People aren't just spending more on their pets, they're choosing to make them a visible, joyful part of their identity. That's where decorators shine. Whether you're creating custom gear, keepsakes, or just helping people celebrate their four-legged (or feathered, or scaled) companions, your skills have a place here.

The pet market isn't a trend. It's a community. And when you approach it with a mindset focused on relationships, personalization, and a niche you can serve with care, you are becoming part of something bigger. If you've been looking for a fresh lane to grow your business, this could be your moment. Follow the tail wags, dig into your niche, and show up with intention. There's plenty of room at the dog park. **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.

Making images pop in Photoshop

Understand composition, contrast, clarity & more

By Stephen Romaniello



An image may be compelling in many respects, but in general, though, it doesn't quite cut the mustard. Is something off about the contrast? Are the colors luminous? Maybe the composition is a little unbalanced? Is the exposure too dark or light? Is it short on drama? For one or more of these reasons, it may just miss the mark.

These are common questions as to what makes an image a winner or not. This month's article looks at the key factors that contribute to making an image really "pop." It explores the difference between a run-of-the-mill snapshot and a gold medal winner. Furthermore, techniques are presented that heighten the impact of an image by fine-tuning its details.



Figure 1. A powerful image tells a story or suggests a larger narrative. *Claude Dettloff, Wait for Me Daddy, 1940*

The pop factor

When an image "pops," it grabs the viewer's attention. It feels vivid, dynamic, and visually engaging. There are several factors that contribute to the effect. These characteristics, individually or in concert, can endow an image with impact. They can determine the psychological effect an image has and how it imprints on the viewer's brain.

Subject matter

Let's start with perhaps the most universal factor: subject matter. Sometimes, what makes an image pop is *what it says* — the emotion it evokes or the story it tells. A powerful expression, gesture, or unexpected moment can make a photo unforgettable. Pictures tell a story. The emotion and movement of the story make the image more engaging. If the characters in the story are relevant and relatable, tangible emotions may be evoked. A powerful image tells a story or suggests a larger narrative. It makes you wonder what happened before or after the moment and usually evokes a reaction — joy, sadness, awe, tension, nostalgia, etc. — to which expressions, body language, and mood all contribute. Unusual perspectives, rare



Figure 2. The rule of thirds divides the image into a 3 X 3 grid. *August Sander, Bricklayer, 1928*



Figure 3. Leading lines use natural or structural lines to draw the viewer's eye toward the subject or deeper into the scene to add depth and direction. *Unknown Photographer, Coca Cola Introduced in France, 1950*

moments, or creative concepts make an image stand out. If it shows something you've never seen before or shows it in a new way, it will be compelling **(Fig. 1)**.

Composition

Strong composition is what transforms a good image into a great one. It's how everything in the frame is arranged. The key elements that make up strong composition work in unison to guide the viewer's eye movement and create balance and flow. Here are a few techniques that help produce a strong composition:

- **The rule of thirds** divides the image into a 3 X 3 grid. The grid creates a natural balance of elements. Key elements are placed at the intersections or along the lines to create tension and interest and help to avoid a static, centered look **(Fig. 2)**.
- **Leading lines** uses natural or structural lines (roads, fences, shadows, objects, etc.) to draw the viewer's eye toward the subject or deeper into the scene to add depth and direction **(Fig. 3)**.
- **Framing** uses elements in the scene such as windows, arches, branches, etc. to isolate the subject and add context or depth **(Fig. 4)**.
- **Balance** can be symmetrical for formality and stability or asymmetrical for dynamic, more energetic compositions.
- **Negative space** around the subject emphasizes the subject and gives the eye room to breathe **(Fig. 5)**.
- **Depth layering** of elements, like the foreground, middle ground, and background creates three-dimensionality. Techniques like atmospheric perspective, overlapping, and scale can help.
- **Point of view (POV)** The angle you shoot from, high, low, eye level, behind something, changes the mood and message. Experiment with unusual perspectives to make the composition stand out **(Fig. 6)**.
- **Visual flow** is how the eye moves through the image. A good composition guides the viewer in a deliberate way, from the subject to supporting elements.

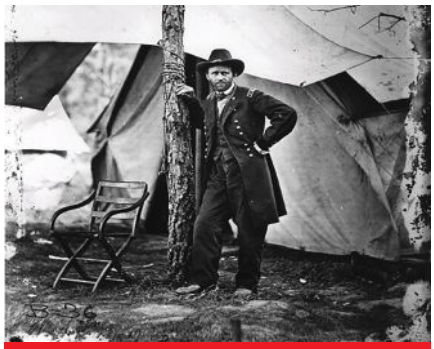


Figure 4. Framing uses elements in the scene (windows, arches, and branches) to isolate the subject and add context or depth. *Mathew Bradey, General Grant Outside Headquarters, Cold Harbor Virginia, 1864*

Lighting

Lighting plays a huge role in photography and art and is one of the most important elements. Lighting sets the tone of the image. Dramatic shadows, soft glows, or harsh contrasts can all evoke emotion. Natural light can create authenticity, while artificial lighting can add control and mood. Light determines how bright or dark the photo is. An overexposed image has too much light, while an underexposed image doesn't have enough.

Exposure can be controlled and balanced with image editing software



Figure 5. The empty or "quiet" areas around the subject emphasizes the subject and give the eye room to breathe. *Raymond Depardon, Nadia Comaneci on Beam, Montreal Olympics, 1975*



Figure 6. The angle you shoot from — high, low, eye level, behind something, etc. — changes the point of view, mood, and message. *Willian Jonkers, Street Photography Project, 2015*

such as Photoshop with Adjustment layers **(Fig. 7)**. Balanced exposure can greatly improve the image's tonal quality ensuring that details are visible, and the subject is clearly defined.

Lighting also affects the mood and emotion of an image. Soft, warm light creates a calm, romantic, or nostalgic feel. Harsh, cold light — such as midday sun or fluorescent lights — can feel sterile. Shadows and highlights influence how intense or relaxed an image feels.

Lighting determines how texture and detail are portrayed. Directional lighting, such as side lighting, can emphasize texture, giving depth to a surface for portraits or product photography. Dramatic lighting, such as sidelighting or backlighting, adds depth and mood. Natural light with shadows or directional light can make subjects pop.

Lighting affects the depth and dimension of a picture. Shadows created by the absence of light add dimension, making the image more dramatic, even with everyday objects **(Fig. 8)**. The absence of shadows produces flatness, even in a well-exposed image.

Light can be used to guide the viewer's eye to the subject. Bright areas naturally draw attention, while shadows recede into the background.

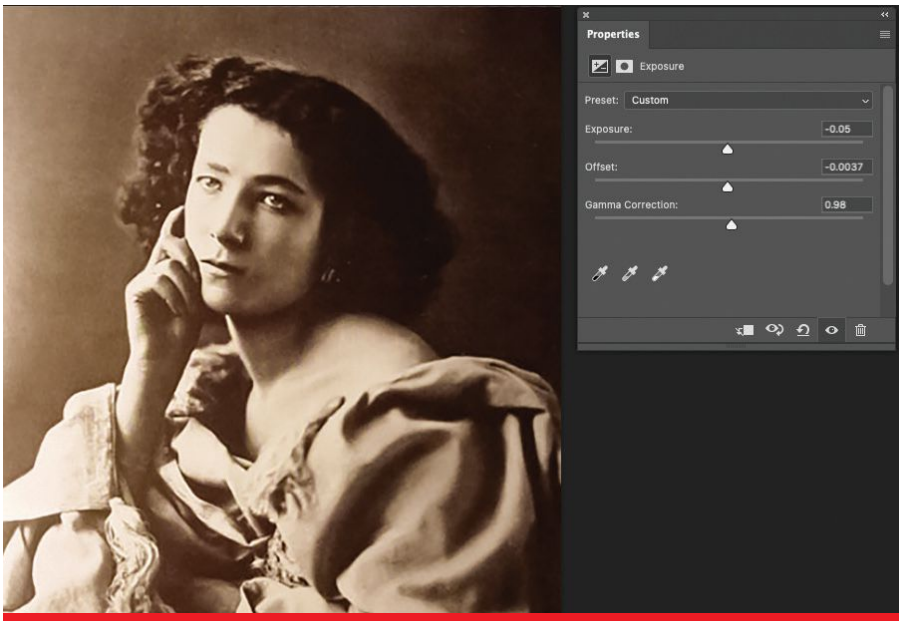


Figure 7. Exposure can be controlled and balanced to greatly improve the image's overall quality, ensuring that the details are visible and the subject is clearly defined. *Gaspard Félix Tournachon Nadar,* **Sarah Bernhardt**, *1859*

Contrast

Contrast control is one of the factors that separates a good image from a forgettable one. Intensifying contrast between light and dark areas makes elements recede or emerge in the picture plane. Contrast is a major player when it comes to the impact and emotional punch of an image. It affects how an image feels, how easy it is to read, and where your eyes go first.

High contrast, a strong difference between light and dark, creates bold, dramatic images. Low contrast with more subtle differences produces a soft, dreamy, or flat look. A high-contrast image often feels more intense, while a low-contrast one feels more gentle or muted. Contrast helps separate the subject from the background. For example: a person in a white shirt against a dark wall is an instant attention grabber. It helps guide the viewer's eye to the most important parts of the photo.

Photoshop has several standard adjustments that control contrast, for example, Brightness and Contrast, Levels, and Curves. These features, whether applied in large doses or tweaks, can greatly improve the impact of an image.

Color contrast

When I talk about contrast, I'm not only referring to darks and lights. Color contrast matters too. The placement of complementary colors like blue and orange or red and green next to each other create dynamic color relationships. Color contrast can produce energy, tension, or harmony depending on how it's used. These colors interact with each other and



Figure 8. Shadows add dimension, adding interest and drama to everyday objects. *Andre Kertész, The Fork, 1928*



Figure 9. Color relationships create beauty and impact. *Unknown Photographer, Bather Budapest, 1939*

vibrate and intensify each other's presence. Used properly, these color relationships create interest and beauty **(Fig. 9)**.

Speaking of color — vivid, saturated colors draw attention to regions of the image, while a limited color palette with one or two accent colors helps direct the eye. Warm colors — red, orange, and yellow — tend to "advance" or pop forward, while cool colors — blue, green, and purple — recede.

Detail & clarity

Sharpening affects how well-defined image elements appear. With the right amount of sharpening, textures and edges stand out. Too much sharpening, though, can produce undesirable grainy surfaces. There are several sharpening filters available in Photoshop. I usually prefer the *Unsharp Mask* filter. The secret is to apply just the right amount of sharpening using the *Amount* and *Radius* sliders and then mitigate the effect with the *Threshold* slider to reduce the effect on the interior areas. I usually apply the filter as a *Smart Filter* so that I can mask or mitigate the effect in other regions of the image **(Fig. 10)**.

Applying the *Unsharp Mask* filter is usually the last step in the editing process and may very well be the factor that pops the image into extraordinary clarity, enhancing fine detail in focal areas and smoothing elsewhere to guide the viewer's eye.

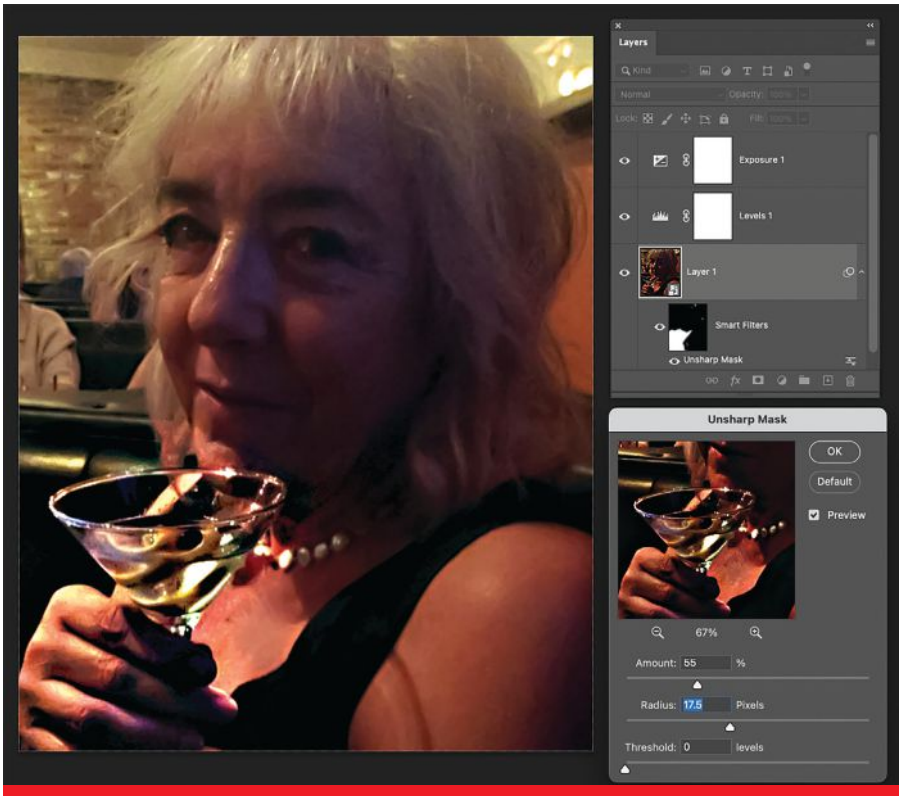


Figure 10. Applying the Unsharp Mask filter is usually the last step in the editing process and may very well be the factor that pops the image into extraordinary clarity, enhancing fine detail in focal areas and smoothing elsewhere to guide the viewer's eye. *Stephen Romaniello, Muriel, 2016*

Impact

The goal, of course, is to publish the most compelling image that communicates the message and impresses the viewer. As we've seen, there are numerous factors that contribute to the impact of a picture. In the professional graphics world, where we are constantly competing for the viewer's attention, it's helpful to have a checklist of the characteristics that make an image compelling. The subject matter, the exposure, the composition, the lighting, the contrast, the color, and the sharpening are all factors that individually or together contribute to the dynamics of a picture. To create images that have impact, bear these factors in mind when creating or preparing images for publication. **GP**



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



Cross-training

The secret to a stronger, smarter shop ■ By Marshall Atkinson

Today is the day. It's 7:08 a.m., and it's the day that Fred didn't show up for his shift.

The production team is already at work, with the presses warming up. Today's orders are staged, screens are burned, inventory is pulled, and ink is mixed. It's like the start of a NASCAR race right before the flag drops.

But Fred, your screen room guy, is nowhere to be found.

Your shop manager, Luis, checks his phone for the fifth time in 10 minutes. No call. No text.

Screens are ready for today, but not for tomorrow. Or the next day. Here's the kicker: Fred is the only one who knows the entire screen room process. Coating. Burning. Reclaiming. Staging. He's been your guy for three and a half years now. Which is great. Until it's not.

Sound familiar?

A business term you may not be familiar with that describes this challenge is called a "single point of failure." And in the decorated apparel industry, where timing is tight, staffing is lean, and deadlines don't move, having a single point of failure is not just risky, it's expensive.

This is where a sound cross-training program comes in, not as a "nice to have," but as a solid core business strategy. It's how you protect your shop from chaos, boost team performance, and, let's be honest, give yourself a little peace of mind when employees like Fred ghost you unexpectedly.

Why cross-training matters

Let's talk about Fred for a second. In our scenario, he got in a car accident on the way to work. Fred's a good guy, but he'll be out for a few days while he is on the mend.

By the way, Fred is not just the screen room guy, he's your emulsion whisperer, mesh master, and dehaze ninja. But here's the problem: When Fred goes on vacation, catches the flu, or gets in a car accident and is in the hospital for a few days, you're stuck.

In a small shop like yours, every role is critical to your daily success. When one person holds all the knowledge, you're gambling every day on perfect attendance. That's not a business plan. That's denial.

The multiplier effect

Fred is a very underutilized asset to your company. Not because he's working hard, but because his know-how is bottled up. What if Fred could train others? What if his role multiplied into three or four others who could step in when needed or when things got backed up?

Cross-training unlocks that potential. You're not just building backups, you're amplifying the strengths that are already in the building.


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Empathy in action

One concept to learn is what I like to call the "Rule of Three." For every core task for your business, ideally, you need at least three people trained to do it well. This means that Fred should be training at least two other people to handle his workload. There cannot be a drop-off just because he's out today.

Remember, the best team players are humble, hungry, and people-smart. Cross-training develops curiosity. Employees who thrive on being cross-trained in other departments demonstrate initiative and a team mindset. These are the ones who get promoted. As an added benefit, when you cross-train staff, it also builds respect for other employees and their contributions. Walking a mile in someone's shoes helps with that. People learn firsthand what it is like to do someone else's job. This is empathy in action.

Right people, right seats

I know you probably have tried to find the right people and put them in the right seats in your business. But with cross-training, here's what you're really unlocking: Sometimes people grow into new seats.

Over the years, I've seen plenty of people start in one department and find their true calling doing something completely different in another. Remember, your No. 1 job as a leader is to elevate the people around you and make them better.

Cross-training gives you options for staffing shifts, handling volume surges, and scaling if your company is growing. And here's the thing, right now hiring is tough. Would you rather scramble around with an untested new hire or elevate a rockstar already on your team? I know who I'm choosing.

What cross-training looks like

Let's make this real. You don't need a fancy HR program or a corporate development team to start cross-training. You just need a little visibility and a plan. That's where something like a skills inventory spreadsheet comes in.

Scan for a skills inventory spreadsheet

The skills inventory spreadsheet tracks your staff's knowledge on what's critical. They are either trained or untrained.

Fred has some skills in other departments, but his main focus is in the screen room. This isn't theoretical, it's real shop visibility. Now you know exactly where to plug gaps, train smart, and stay ready for the unexpected.

Here's the kicker. Using this tool:

- Your press assistant (puller), Steve, learns how to reclaim screens. Now, if Fred is out, there's one thing someone can do to help lessen the burden.
- Your customer service representative, Maria, learns how to pack boxes and print


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labels. Now, when shipping is overloaded during the holiday season, you have someone who can pitch in and is ready to go.
- Your embroidery tech, Anna, learns how to use the heat press. Now, when that last-minute print-on-demand order jumps in, you can move someone to bang it out in a few minutes instead of waiting.

The goal

One person trains another. And then another. The team gains coverage, confidence, and collaboration. Cross-training isn't about pushing people to do everything. It's about giving them the tools and trust to do something more, especially when it counts.

Stronger shops start with shared knowledge

Let's circle back to Fred.

Fred's still great. But now Joe can coat and expose screens, too. Maria can handle basic reclaim. You've even got a new hire learning taping and staging for jobs.

And here's the beautiful part: Fred doesn't feel threatened. He feels valued because you trusted him to train the next round of shop talent. That's how cross-training works when it's done right.

By the way, since Fred has now gained experience training people, he's a candidate for manager training to run the shop. Get his checklist started today! **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.

5 best practices for building a cross-training culture

So, you've seen the gaps in your skills matrix. Fred's still your screen room guy, but you're starting to think, "What if Bill could step in, too?" That's where the real work begins — building a cross-trained culture that sticks.

Here are five best practices that will help you create a program that works in the real world, not just on paper.

1 Start with a skill inventory

What do people know how to do? You can't fix what you can't see. Logging what people know or don't know will be the foundational element of your program. That skill inventory spreadsheet? It's not just data, it's a blueprint.

Pro tip: Ask your crew directly: "If you could learn one thing outside your current role, what would it be?"

2 Train with intent, not osmosis

"Just shadow Fred for a few hours" isn't a training plan. You need a real outcome. Define what a successful skill transfer looks like. Maybe it's burning 10 perfect screens, running the reclaim booth solo, or shipping 25 orders correctly without supervision. Give them the why, show them what success looks like, and give them the chance to practice. Make training part of the schedule, not something squeezed in between rush orders.

Pro tip: Nobody learned to drive a car by watching a video, reading a book, or sitting next to someone observing. The only way to learn to drive a car is to get behind the wheel and go. Tasks in your shop are the same way.

3 It's OK to suck

Nobody was born with the skill to build simulated process seps, run payroll, or ship to Canada. Everything has a learning curve. Cross-training requires psychological safety. Your crew needs to understand that it's okay (and even expected) that mistakes will be made when learning. Nobody nails it on day one. Fred might be the king of the screen room, but if he's a grump when someone is learning, they'll back off. Culture matters here. Support for everyone learning is just as important as learning the skill. Encourage curiosity. Reward effort. Back up your learners.

4 Document, document, document

Standard operating procedures don't need to be in a leather-bound notebook with golden edges. Use your phone to record Fred doing the screen reclaim process with narration. Have Maria explain how to build a quote with a Loom video. Create a shared Google Drive folder to store templates, documents, and videos. These mini-process videos are easy to make, quick to access, and live long after someone leaves.

5 Celebrate skill growth like you celebrate sales

Let's face it. Your business is only as good as your people.

When someone learns a new skill, shout it out.
- Throw a "Badge Unlocked" on your skills matrix.
- Highlight them in your Monday meeting.
- Hand them a gift card, coffee, or even a funny trophy.

People repeat what gets recognized. If you want a cross-trained shop, you've got to build a culture that rewards stepping up.



Fluid Color RF84 HG flatbed printer

The RF84 HG flatbed printer from **Fluid Color** features 20" vertical print height, an 8' X 4' flatbed, and Ricoh Gen6 printheads. The RF84 HG is engineered for businesses that demand top-tier quality and flexibility. The flatbed is designed to handle printing on wood, acrylic, foam, or bulky 3D objects. **fluidcolor.com**

Avery Dennison Encore automotive window films



The new Encore, Encore Supreme, and Encore Supreme IR films from **Avery Dennison** are designed cater to every preference, as a "good, better, best" offering. Each film is engineered with dye-free, advanced nanotechnology to allow the new films to resist fading or turning purple. Replacing Avery Dennison's previous window film offerings (NR Nano Ceramic, NR Pro, NR, and HP Pro), the new Encore portfolio is a virtually clear automotive window film Shield IR developed with a metal-free construction the new Encore portfolio enhances compatibility with electric vehicle technology and other modern electronics. Additionally, they are said to block over 99% of UV rays, and have been recommended by The Skin Cancer Foundation.
graphics.averydennison.com/awf



Color-Logic Touch7 plugins

Color-Logic has announced that Touch7's, Touch7 Photo Neon and Touch7 Photo ECG plugins are now fully compatible with Adobe UXP, bringing new enhancements and streamlined user experiences for designers and print professionals. The latest updates to Touch7 Photo plugins include: a new streamlined user interface, press configuration settings, enhanced SCR functionality, a new Boost feature, and updated ECG algorithms. A new training video and user manual are now available on the Touch7 website. The Touch7 plugin upgrades are free to all existing users. **touch7.co**



Q-Tees S800 sustainable tote bag

The S800 sustainable tote bag from **Q-Tees** is designed to be a durable, eco-conscious, and stylish alternative to single-use plastic bags. Made from a blend of recycled cotton and polyester, the S800 tote gives new life to fabric that would otherwise end up in landfills. The reusable tote is a practical way for businesses and consumers alike to support sustainability in everyday life. The S800 is constructed from 12-ounce, 100% recycled cotton/polyester blend featuring 20" self-fabric with a 9" drop and reinforced stress points for longer-lasting use. Available in a variety of shades, this bag is designed for screen printing, embroidery, heat transfer, and DTG printing. Q-Tees products are available through 17 Sportsman Cap & Bag distributor locations. **qtees.com**



GCC LaserPro Spirit

GCC's LaserPro's Spirit PRO Series and S400 are premium laser engravers featuring CO_2, fiber, or dual-source options—ideal for engraving and cutting a wide range of non-metallic and metal materials. Built for both customization and mass production, they include a material database and optional CCD or AAS modules engineered for precise output. Designed with intuitive controls, patented technology, and advanced safety features, GCC LaserPro ensures performance and reliability — empowering creators and businesses to enhance productivity, expand possibilities, and boost profits.
gccworld.com



Roland DGA TrueVIS XP-640

Roland DGA has added a next-generation XP-640 – a Pro-level 64" eco-solvent inkjet printer. The XP-640's newly designed dual staggered printheads eject finer ink droplets at higher densities said to produce incredibly vibrant, detailed graphics with fewer passes. New high-speed data control functionality further enhances the performance of the printheads, enabling the XP-640 to print at speeds of up to 818 square feet per hour. New TH eco-solvent inks are specially formulated to bring out the best in the XP-640. Improved profiling reduces ink usage as well, designed to allow for maximum high-volume production profitability. The XP-640 also comes bundled with VersaWorks 6 RIP software. **rolanddga.com**

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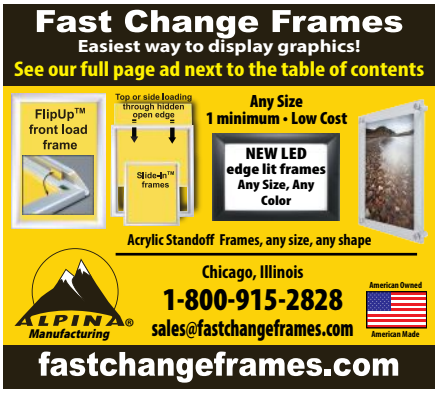


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