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Kyle Robinson, co-founder/CEO, and Nathan Reynolds, art director of Print My Threads. (Image courtesy of Print My Threads)

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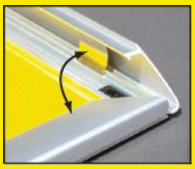
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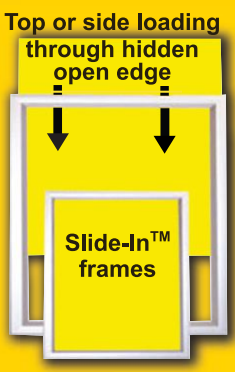
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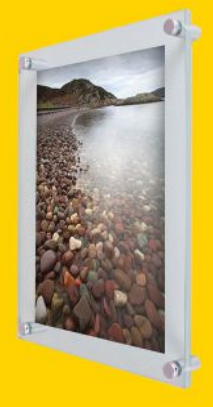




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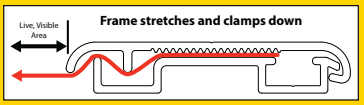
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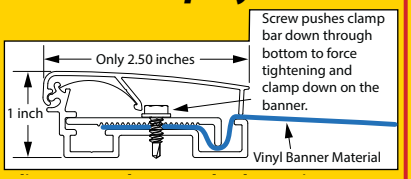






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James Anderson
is the editor-in-chief of GRAPHICS PRO magazine. He can be reached at janderson@cahabamedia.com.

Looking ahead to the holiday season

By the time this issue reaches readers' mailboxes, we'll be well into autumn. Here in Minnesota, the leaves are starting to turn as I write this in mid-September. Sure, it's cliché to say the year has flown by, but it really does feel like we were just getting started on 2025. In no time we'll publish our December Supplier Spotlight issue and be on our way to a holiday break.

Speaking of holidays, if you don't already have your shop fine-tuned for holiday sales, there's still time … but you've got some catching up to do if you want to stay ahead of your competition. On page 60, Marshall Atkinson shares tips for selling for the busy season earlier in the year.

While holiday sales are top of mind for many shops right now, this issue has much more to offer. If your business includes wide-format printing and wraps, be sure to check out Managing Editor Marie Fennema's Q&A with Just Fab Graphics on page 10 to see how they wrapped a client's Jetstream boat.

This issue also includes an in-depth look at CNC routers, something a sign shop reader asked us about recently. On page 12, Paula Aven Gladych examines machine sizes and tools for those looking to get into hobby CNC work or expand their current production capabilities.

Our cover story this month features Kyle Robinson and Nathan Reynolds of Print My Threads in Flatwoods, Kentucky, as contributing writer Adrienne Palmer explores the rise of apparel decorating shops operating hybrid DTF setups. See the article on page 38, which includes the seven top reasons why screen printers are moving to in-house or hybrid production. Along that theme, also check out Megan Griffith's article on page 50, where she explains the importance of diversifying your decorated apparel business.

If that diversification includes embroidery, be sure to read Jennifer Cox's article on page 46, which provides a thorough guide to machine embroidery stitches. You'll learn when to use certain stitches and what to watch for when you do.

There's so much more in this issue and our hope is that you find something that strengthens your business. Like the reader who asked about CNC content, please reach out if you're looking for any particular industry information. It's our goal to provide what you're looking for.

Thanks for reading!



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INDUSTRY UPDATES

GP UPDATE



Kaitlyn Everts joins GRAPHICS PRO team

GRAPHICS PRO has welcomed Kaitlyn Everts as its newest account executive. In the role, Everts will cover print magazine and digital media sales for clients in the Western U.S. Everts previously worked at American Income Life, first as a sales manager and later as an executive administrative assistant. Everts graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire with a degree in business management.

"I'm excited to welcome Kaitlyn to the GRAPHICS PRO team! She comes to us with a strong background in insurance sales, where she developed a proven ability to build relationships, listen to client needs, and deliver results," said Stacy Marshall director of sales at Cahaba Media Group, parent company of GRAPHICS PRO. "Having lived on the West Coast (her new territory), she brings local insight and a fresh perspective to the team."

Reach Kaitlyn at keverts@cahabamedia.com.

GPX SPOTLIGHT



2025 WRAPSCON Wrap Olympics winners

At GRAPHICS PRO EXPO in Long Beach, California, WRAPSCON hosted its 2025 Wrap Olympics, a one-of-a-kind wraps event designed to test the skills and mental toughness of 50 two-person teams as they battle through a grueling elimination competition.

Below are the winning teams:

$15,00 First place: Team WrapOn
- Scott Decker of WrapOn
- Josh Lambert of WrapOn

$3,000 Second place: Team TCHE WRAP
- Calebe San Martins of Genesis Wrap
- Damian Ruben Cordero of Cordero Plotter SA

$1,000 Third place: Team GSD
- Jim Miller of Miller Decals
- Dallas Fowler of Digital EFX

This year's WRAP Olympics judges included: Jen Carney of Carbon Wraps, Steve Carney of Carbon Wraps, Kevin Kempf of PG NOLA, Starla Miller of Miller Decals, Luis Tirado of WBC Graphics, and Jamison Traw of Wrapix Academy.



UPDATES

Lindenmeyr Munroe expanded operations in the Michigan market with a Detroit-based distribution facility.

World Emblem announced it is building a 100,000-square-foot facility in the Tamboril Free Trade Zone in Santiago, Dominican Republic.

Ninja Transfers launched its own mobile application, now available for both Apple and Android devices.

BELLA+CANVAS released its inaugural impact report, outlining 2024 performance metrics and goals across its three sustainability pillars: people, planet, and product.

STAHLS' unveiled the STAHLS' Fulfill ONE, a new fulfillment center located in Chesterfield, Michigan.

UPCOMING EVENTS

GPX Charlotte
November 6-8
Charlotte, North Carolina
g-p-x.com/nc

WEBINARS

Xante
October 2

IT Supplies
October 16

OMTech Laser
November 4

ColDesi
November 13

AP Lazer
December 4

All times 12 p.m. CST
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AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

Michelle Kreft, owner of **Minuteman Press in Burlington**, **Wisconsin**, joined the Minuteman Press International President's Club for achieving over $1 million in gross sales for the year ending 2024.

Minuteman Press in Rancho Cucamonga, **California,** broke its own record for monthly sales volume across the Minuteman Press franchise system.

Crystal D has been named one of PPAI's Greatest Companies to Work For in 2025, the second year in a row it has earned the designation.

PARTNERSHIPS

Roland DG collaborated with **Roland Corporation**, a manufacturer and distributor of electronic musical instruments, in the production of a one-of-a-kind digital grand piano wrapped in artwork by Paralym Art artist **Michiru Kanki**.

Richardson Sports will serve as the official headwear sponsor of the 2025 **Fly Fishing Film Tour**, celebrating a shared passion for adventure and the great outdoors.

Imperial Headwear has partnered with **Pittsburgh Brewing Company** and will offer an exclusive line of headwear celebrating the heritage and spirit of Iron City.

Vantage Apparel announced that **Cutter & Buck**, a Seattle-based performance lifestyle brand, is now fully integrated with Vantage, including the Vantage Webstore platform.

Cotton Heritage and **Apliiq Inc.** entered into a strategic partnership to enable rapid, U.S.–based print-on-demand fulfillment for apparel brands.

GPX SPOTLIGHT





GPX Long Beach Buyer Bucks winners

Thursday: James D. of Fast Wraps and Signs
Friday: Annalisa G. of Baraticoya
Saturday: Cliff G. of Print 710
GPX University: April T. of CopyDogs Print & Marketing

NEW HIRES & PROMOS



Matt Hansen

Nazdar Ink Technologies

Nazdar Ink Technologies added **Matt Hansen** to its product marketing team. Hansen brings expertise in UV-LED technology from previous industry experience. In the role, Hansen will help execute product strategies and assist the OEM Group.



Raymond McHale

True Install

True Install recently expanded into Northern Virginia, offering professional sign and graphic installation services. The new business is owned and operated by Virginia resident, entrepreneur, and operations professional **Raymond McHale**. McHale brings a strong background in operations and a proven ability to lead high-performing teams. With years of consulting and management experience, which includes time at corporations such as Starbucks and Ratner Companies, he's eager to apply his leadership knowledge and commitment to excellence to serve the Northern Virginia community.



Merrie Matson

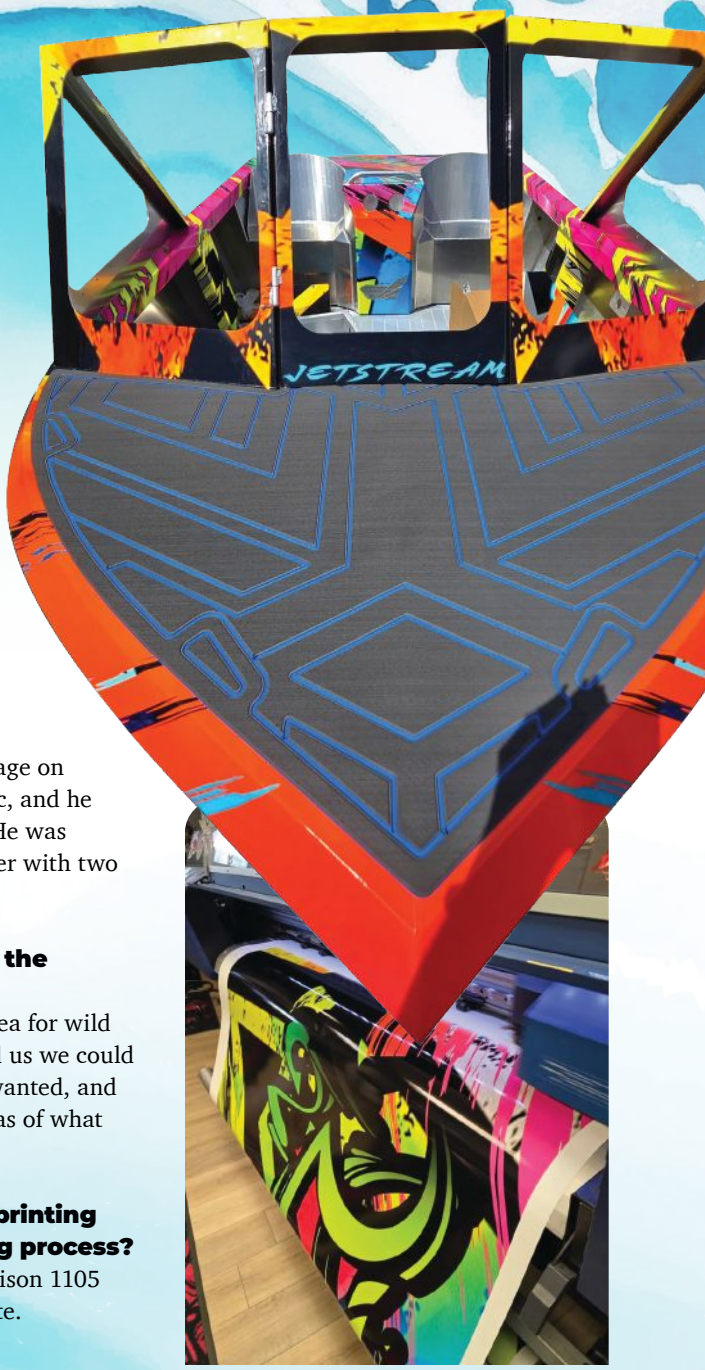
DPI Laboratory

DPI Laboratory appointed **Merrie Matson** as senior sales consultant. In her role, Matson will focus on building client partnerships and uncovering new avenues for growth. Known for her consultative approach and customer-first mindset, Matson helps clients unlock the potential of UV printing to elevate their products, expand revenue streams, and streamline operations. Her commitment to both innovation and client success will play a pivotal role in expanding DPI's reach. Backed by technical sales expertise and a deep understanding of diverse industries, she will lead DPI's efforts to deliver tailored solutions that address real-world challenges for clients.

Jetstream: Wrapped to wow

Just Fab Graphics' eye-catching Jetstream boat wrap

By Marie Fennema



Just Fab Graphics in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, created these vibrant graphics for client Eric Morrow's Jetstream boat. They designed the wrap for the roughly 12' boat in-house. The wrap was printed on their Roland DG TrueVIS VG3-540 54" wide-format eco-solvent printer/cutter, using its ink gamut to add splashes of color — creating a blend of speed and style.

We chatted with Lindsay Theisen, owner/senior graphic designer at Just Fab Graphics, about the project.

Q: How did this project come about?

A: A new customer stopped into the shop because he saw our page on Instagram. His name is Eric, and he lives about an hour away. He was actually a state police officer with two dogs in his car.

Q: Walk us through the design process.

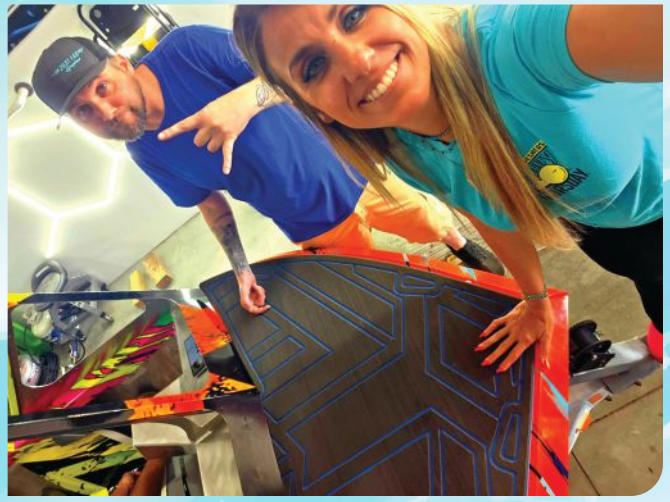
A: The customer had an idea for wild and crazy graphics. He told us we could basically do whatever we wanted, and [he] showed [us] a few ideas of what he liked.

Q: What about the printing and/or laminating process?

A: We used an Avery Dennison 1105 film with 1360 overlaminate.



Images courtesy of Just Fab Graphics





Q: Walk us through the installation process.

A: The installation process was pretty simple. Each side panel was printed with the back wrap and wrapped around the back corners to the swim platform.

Q: What was the timetable, and what did it take to complete the wrap?

A: After a handful of design proofs, I'd say probably 5-10 hours to nail down the design. It was a hard decision at first, as [the client] initially chose a blue and yellow design. But then his friends had an impact on him, and he switched it to the full color [design].

Q: What were some of the major challenges?

A: I wouldn't say there were any major challenges. One minor challenge was making sure [the] color came out correctly on the printer when everything [was] printed. For example, [making sure that] the pink came out pink and not red.

Q: Were there any aspects of the project you found particularly unique?

A: It was such a wild and crazy design that it made it very forgiving. You didn't have to make sure everything lined up and matched exactly because it was so sporadic.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like our readers to know about this project?

A: We love doing wild and crazy colors. Custom work like this really sets us apart sometimes. Especially when we do a lot of fleet and commercial graphics. It's fun to be able to go all out at times and have a lot of fun with it! **GP**



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



From small-scale to industrial:

The range of CNC

Dive into CNC sizes & the tools that make these machines powerhouses of the sign industry

By Paula Aven Gladych

CNC machines have been the workhorses of the sign industry for years. They were developed to help the industry become more efficient. This popular cutting tool has continued to evolve from compact hobby machines to large industrial behemoths. As the sizes and speeds of these machines have increased, so have the types of tools crafted for them.

Hobbyists typically start with desktop models that range in size from 2' X 2' to 4' X 4'. The most popular sizes are 4' X 8' and 5' X 10', but industrial shops might invest in even larger machines, depending on what they are cutting and the volume of work they are tasked with.

"Everyone wants a little more speed and accuracy, and the cost of router tables has come down from years ago," said Carl Ondracek, president of Computerized Cutters Inc. of Plano, Texas, which manufactures routers and channel letter bending machines. "Every sign company, if they are doing signs and not just doing wraps, they have to have a router table, more so than a channel letter bending machine. A router can do so much more: push-through letters, cut-through, 3D signs, [and] monument signs."

Small CNC routers

Phantom CNC Systems in North Carolina was founded by a retired law enforcement officer who had a



Image courtesy of Computerized Cutters



Images courtesy of Phantom CNC

side hustle producing signs. Most beginner CNC machines are not sturdy. The owner of Phantom decided he wanted to build smaller machines that were rigid, like their commercial counterparts, but were more affordable so small sign shops or backyard hobbyists could also benefit from a well-constructed device.

"The premise was to break down the pricing barriers created by bigger corporations between regular old guys and this CNC machine to make his life so much easier," said Mike Pilgreen, director of operations for Phantom CNC Systems.

"Phantoms are all built on a rigid structure because the foundation of CNC work relies on how solid the platform is [that] it is cutting on," he said. "If it has a platform that is moving, you know any movement to a small degree can create a huge problem on top of a piece of wood you are cutting, or plastic. Everything is built with steel welded frames. Rigidity is something we stand on hard. Keeping machines solid keeps everything running better."

There are tabletop CNC machines that are 2' X 2'.

"There's a place in the market for all of these. Those small machines teach them how to do big work. They are doing the same work and using the same software on a 2' X 2' as a 20' X 20' table. It uses the same language, the same everything, other than the size of the bed you are actually cutting on. Educationally, those tabletop units are amazing," he added.

Phantom felt there was a void in the CNC market between the tabletop routers and the larger commercial and industrial machines. Its first foray into the marketplace was a 4' X 4' with an automatic tool changer. The company learned very quickly — within 30 days of the 4' X 4' machine's launch — that the machine was very popular and there was a big demand for the same machine in 4' X 8' and 5' X 10' sizes.

Phantom recently released a tangential oscillating knife machine that can cut foam, fabric, Coroplast, and HDPE plastic sheets. It can find the registration points on the substrate to die cut decals or whatever is printed on the material.

The smallest router Computerized Cutters manufactures is a 4' X 8' machine.

"Standard tables come with a router head for doing standard routing cutting," said Ondracek. Shops that want to get into more intricate cutting can upgrade their spindles and add on tangential or oscillating knife systems or a camera system.

The company offers its customers training videos to help them learn how





Images courtesy of Phantom CNC





to operate their routers. Most shops can get their machines up and running immediately. CNC routers are very easy to use, he said. The software is user-friendly, so the only thing most operators need to consider is the material they are cutting, how thick it is, how many passes they need to make to achieve the desired result, and how fast the machine can run.

Material that is 1" can be cut in three passes, while 1.2" material can be cut in two passes, Ondracek explained. It is also important to keep track of the speeds at which the machine is cutting.

He added that the cost difference between his company's 4' X 8' and 5' X 10' machines is negligible, and most customers end up with the larger router. It comes down to space. Smaller sign shops may not have room for the larger CNC routers.



Commercial CNCs

Phantom CNC Systems offers larger commercial CNC routers and is venturing into the industrial side with a 12,000-pound, 11' machine.

"In our country, labor is hard to come by, especially manual labor. We feel like the market is poised to the industrial manufacturing side of things moving forward, versus the backyard guy. We are still focused on the backyard guy but moving into a space that is new to us in the big industrial manufacturing segment," said Pilgreen.

Phantom will custom-build any of its machines. It recently built a 20-foot-long table with dual routers so that the customer could run two projects on the same table at once.

The tools

X-Edge Products got its start making tools for CNC routers because its founders had material they couldn't cut. They tasked themselves with creating a tool to meet their needs. Their first tool was a 3-flute helix chip breaker that can cut Sintra Board and PVC foam at 1,200 inches per minute, said Leslie Venlet, director of sales and marketing for X-Edge.

"Most feeds and speeds are built off chip load calculators. Their only goal is to increase tool life or get the maximum amount of tool life. We don't want to do just that. We want to make people's workflow and shops as efficient as possible," Venlet said. "We don't base our recommendations on a chip load calculator. All is done on real-world testing. We put [our tools] through

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Image courtesy of Computerized Cutters

the wringer and come up with feeds and speeds no one is able to do in the industry."

Many router operators come from the milled products industry, and because of that, they think that routers must function in the same way.

"One of our biggest challenges is breaking old thinking into new technology," she said.

There are CNC tools designed for every type of substrate. X-Edge's niche has been signs, especially HDU sign foam, acrylics, aluminum composite material, or ACM, which is a sandwiched material with an outer shell of aluminum and a plastic composite core.

ACM requires a single flute aluminum-coated tool that can groove the aluminum, making it easier to fold and bend letters and signs. Acrylic material is another popular substrate in the sign industry, but many shops have difficulty getting clear edges. The company's ¼" upspiral single flute is able to get a very clear edge, eliminating the need for polishing, flaming, or sanding.

Other popular tools include a tapered carbon tool for 3D relief carving in sign foams and wood.

"People want routers to be more versatile, do foam boards and thinner materials," Ondracek said. The company offers a camera vision system for those customers that do print to cut. The camera finds the registration marks and cuts the parts out. Vision systems have been available on printers for years, but the concept is fairly new for CNC routers, he said.

The software used in routers has also advanced over the years. "They take artwork and can create more elaborate cut files than they could years ago," he said. **GP**



Paula Aven Gladych is a freelance writer based in Denver. Reach her at pgladych@gmail.com.



Images courtesy of X-Edge

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Held in Charlotte, North Carolina, Nov. 5-8, GPX brings together three full days of learning opportunities with over 40 industry exhibitors from across the country, 20-plus in-class workshops, two full-day workshops, and more!

GPX University

Whether you're just getting started or you are years into the industry and looking to upskill or upgrade the tools you use on a daily basis, GPXU is the perfect place to test out new equipment offerings from industry leaders, ask questions, and troubleshoot common issues.



Stan Banks of T-Shirt Side Hustle will be at GPXU Charlotte to share his knowledge and expertise. After starting multiple hustles growing up, Stan found his place in 2011 when he pursued apparel decoration full time. On Jan. 3, 2017, he set out to teach people skills he had picked up in the last six years, and T-Shirt Side Hustle was born. Stan is now one of the top influencers in the T-shirt, apparel decorating, and customization market in the U.S.



Jennifer Cox leads the National Network of Embroidery Professionals (NNEP), a national association for commercial embroidery business owners and apparel decoration business owners. Jennifer's goal is to increase the profitability of NNEP members through the ongoing development of member programs, benefits, and services to create and host the best events within the industry of commercial embroidery and decorated apparel.

Our sponsors at GPXU Charlotte include Epilog, Ranar Screenprinting Equipment, American Print and Supply, Happy Japan provided by Texmac, Ikonics Imaging, The Magic Touch, and NABCO.

STAHLS' Pro Day

Make sure to join us Wednesday, Nov. 5, for a full-day seminar at STAHLS' Pro Day and the opportunity to take your decorating skills to the next level. Learn how to tackle the most challenging and constantly changing markets successfully through four different sections:

- Trending apparel showcase: Get a firsthand look at the latest trends in apparel from wholesalers
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- Business development tools: Learn how to sell your decorated products and develop your business further using essential tools tailored to each market vertical, including web stores, accurate quotes, samples, and more
- Profitability analysis: Gain valuable insights into the profitability of each decorated piece and how to communicate this to your customers

This is the first time STAHLS' has teamed up with GPX to host their Pro Day event — don't miss the full day workshop for your growing business!

Classroom training

While you're at the show, take some time to learn with our sponsors and industry experts in our classroom sessions. Here is just a selection of what you can expect at GPX Charlotte (visit graphics-pro-expo.com to get the full classroom training schedule and register for the show):

- How to Start & Scale a Profitable Business, an all-day direct-to-garment seminar on Wednesday, Nov. 5
- Laser Mastery: Engraving Essentials for Beginners
- Maximizing Shop Efficiency & Sales for Apparel Decor and Signage
- Building a Rock Star Team: How to Hire, Train & Lead for Growth
- AI Revisited: A Playbook for Transforming Your Business Operations
- From Skills to Sales: Sandcarving Strategies for High-Margin Markets
- Current 2025 Business Development Strategies for Laser, UV Print, DTF, HTV & Embroidery
- Lessons in Apparel Decor, Parts 1 & 2: Your Guide to Screenprinting in 2025
- And much more! GP



GRAPHICS PRO EXPO returns to Charlotte on November 6.
The Charlotte Convention Center will bustle with a full slate of exhibitors featuring the latest products and technologies in the awards and personalization, apparel decorating, and sign and digital graphics markets.

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K.I.S.S. your client

Keep event banners & signage simple for maximum impact

By Thatcher Brinton

Images courtesy of Signarama Timonium



If there's ever a time

to lean in and K.I.S.S. — aka keep it super simple, as the kinder version of the acronym says — it's when you're creating event banners and signs. Event signage is not like a print ad that the audience can take their time digesting. Often, it's a functional wayfinder or a sign calling out an area of activation, and it's usually posted in a crowded environment where people don't even slow down as they pass by. The message must be as direct as possible, to be read and understood on the move, while still allowing for some design creativity that attracts attention with visual appeal. But the design creative must always be secondary to the audience message.

That's not always easy. The client or the shop's design team can get hung up on pretty colors, all-caps text, or some other element that has no impact on attendees and only obscures the message. So, it's important to stress that the message is the prime concern and the design creative should serve to support and reinforce it.

Simple ideas, smart results

The KISS rule should apply to every aspect of the job, from signage concepting to production and logistics. Be prepared for last-minute changes and delays and have a process in place to meet a project's evolving needs without sacrificing quality. No single element or sign should negatively impact the vibe or look of the event you're working on. No one should think you've taken any shortcuts, and with a solid process in place, you won't have to take any.







The production process

Begin with an event kickoff meeting, which should take place several months before the event week. Participants should identify the current known "Statement of Work," which will be used to build a preliminary production and installation schedule. Follow this with an initial site walk-through to identify locations and placement.

The most essential action in this planning phase is giving the client firm timelines and deadlines for approving all print files — and making sure they follow them. Having the client adhere to these deadlines is vital in keeping to your production and installation schedules. Plan to remind the client of approaching dates to ensure everything is on track and that you can compensate for delays.

Build in time for last-minute changes, which are always expected. Sites rapidly evolve or change during the run-up to the actual event. Changes mean new signage needs are constantly being identified, often on the day before or the day of the event.

Materials

Choosing materials for signs is a constant juggling act, but those used in events have some unique considerations.

Event signage is often temporary; even in events that repeat year to year or otherwise, sponsors and activation areas can change. Knowing this and knowing you will be replacing a lot of signage year after year, it's best to use materials that are both cost-effective and able to withstand the elements.

There is a push for eco-friendly materials within the festival and event space. These often come with an elevated price point, so it's understandable if the client goes with lower cost over sustainability.

More often than not, our material of choice for larger event signage is Coroplast, blow-through mesh, and lighter-weight banner material. These are the most economical options for events with a shorter run or show time.

For those events or activations that demand or require a more sophisticated aesthetic or are planning to repurpose signage over the course of multiple years, we tend to look at an aluminum composite.

I've found that location is more of a determining factor in materials choice. For example, signage used for stage backdrops typically requires that we use a blow-through. This material allows wind to pass through, reducing stress on the structure. The same goes for larger runs of fence banner.

Logistics

Having the site ready for the installation team on event day one is a must. (Yes, this should go without saying, but unfortunately, it does need saying.) Stay on top of the schedule and be ready to shift focus instead of stopping the whole project while the delay is resolved; you'll more likely be set to go.

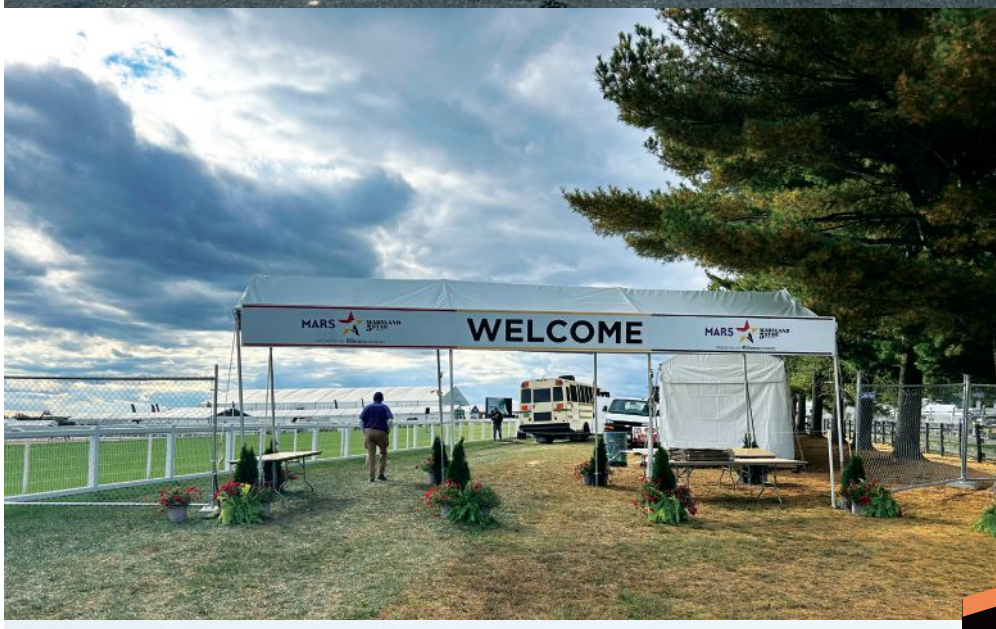
A common event-signage mistake is improper placement — installing signs and banners in a way or an area that doesn't have the desired impact. Perhaps it's in a low-traffic area, or it's not in the attendees' line of sight. This is why it's critical to have that initial site walk-through when planning the project.

No one likes to be installing signage at 3 a.m. for an event opening at 8 a.m., but if you haven't worked out the logistics, that's exactly what you'll be doing.

Embrace the energy

Events can be a slog. They require a lot of logistics, planning, and coordination behind the scenes, and you have to move fast. It can be too much for some, but others thrive on it. The rewards for an event well done more than outweigh the stress. There's a lot of satisfaction in knowing you've checked off every single box and hit every benchmark for the client with nothing overlooked or missed. Considering the total attendance and sponsorships at events, a job executed effectively, in











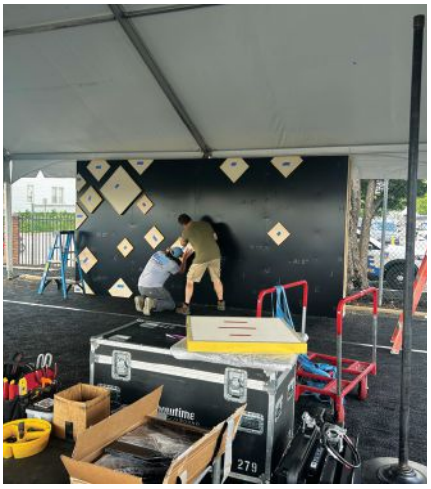




both timeliness and visual appeal, can result in numerous future referrals and partnerships with new clients, which is the ultimate goal when growing any business. **GP**



Thatcher Brinton is the president and co-owner of Signarama Timonium in Maryland, which he operates with his wife, Melita. A Towson University graduate, Brinton brings more than 30 years of experience in the sign industry, working in production, installation, sales, and operations. Since opening the Timonium location in 2023, Brinton earned Signarama's Rookie of the Year Award in 2024.



5 questions *with...* David Hanes



David Hanes has been a driving force in the decorative apparel industry since 2006, specializing in overcoming artwork bottlenecks for screen printing, embroidery, and direct-to-film transfer businesses. As Managing Partner of CorelTRAINER and co-creator of SimpleDESIGNER, he empowers designers with innovative tools and training to streamline workflows and boost creativity. Passionate about education, David travels extensively to share expertise through workshops and industry events like Graphics Pro Expo. Known for developing cutting-edge solutions, Hanes is dedicated to advancing the industry with user-friendly design technologies and hands-on training, helping professionals create stunning, production-ready graphics with ease.

1 How long have you been with CorelTRAINER and how did you get your start in this industry?

I have been deep in CorelTRAINER since 2019. I initially had my start with this industry back in 2006 working with a company that sold clipart books at trade shows and on the phone. It has been quite the journey!

2 What services does CorelTRAINER offer?

CorelTRAINER offers industry training inside CorelDRAW as you go paired with support based in the U.S. We also have produced a plugin system that automates product mockups, design approvals, job approvals, instant halftones, distressed layers, instant color consolidation, instant color pallet conversions, and watermarks. We give you thousands of production-ready vector graphics with the digital images for all kinds of processes.

3 How does adequate knowledge of a graphic design program such as CorelDRAW help shop owners?

This is a great question! Art is generally the hard part of the job. When clients send you their logo or artwork, it is rarely production-ready. The knowledge of how to make it production-ready in a timely manner or make those tweaks in a timely manner is critical because, let's be honest, clients never want to pay art fees.

4 What do you see as the biggest issues facing the design industry today?

The biggest challenge I see is artist retention as well as artists being overqualified. In this industry, shop owners cannot pay artists for hours of custom design work for jobs, so the artists' "true talent" is never fully explored in my opinion.

5 What do you wish more people knew about graphic design?

I wish more people knew what was needed for this industry. We might use 40% of CorelDRAW or Adobe for what we all do. Most people starting think you either need to hire an artist or have a graphic design degree and you absolutely do not. Knowing that 40% is all you need! For CorelDRAW users, CorelTRAINER makes it super easy to learn as you go for you or your employees. **GP**

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Email gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com.



GPX AND GPX UNIVERSITY

SHOW PREVIEW

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Exhibit hall is open 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., on Thursday, November 6 and Friday, November 7, and 10 a.m. – 3 p.m., Saturday, November 8.

Go to **g-p-x.com/nc** or scan code to register:

Exhibiting Companies

Exhibitor list and class schedule as of September 2025. Please visit g-p-x.com/nc for the most up-to-date list.

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Classroom Training

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, November 8, in all-day and 90-minute sessions.

Schedule Classroom Training

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

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2025

10 a.m. — 4 p.m.

Digital Technology Group Inc – Print Money: How to Start & Scale a Profitable Print Business START HERE

STAHLS' – STAHLS' Pro Day

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2025

8 — 9:30 a.m.

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

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

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

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

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

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

1 — 2:30 p.m.

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

JDS Industries – Troubleshooting Sublimation START HERE

AIM Smarter, LLC – Hidden Revenue: Finding Profit in the Business You Already Have START HERE

4 — 5:30 p.m.

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

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

Barker Leadership Institute – Building a Rock Star Team: How to Hire, Train & Lead for Growth

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2025

8 — 9:30 a.m.

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

DyeCraft Direct / Sawgrass – Your Gonna Flip Over Sublimation & Versiflex with DyeCraft Direct & SawGrass Technologie START HERE

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

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

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

1 — 2:30 p.m.

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

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

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2025

8 — 9:30 a.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 – Becoming an Engraving Expert: Top Tips for Beginners and Intermediates, *with Lori Champagne*

11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

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



Go to **g-p-x.com/nc** or scan code to register.



GPX UNIVERSITY

What is GPX University?

GPX University (GPXU) is the hands-on learning center at GRAPHICS PRO EXPO. Launched in 2024, it was created to help attendees learn directly from industry experts through interactive experiences.

At GPXU, you can:

– Take part in live demos and training
– Work with real equipment and materials
– Learn in small-group sessions with pros
– Explore a full mock shop setup right on the show floor

Whether you're just getting started or looking to sharpen your skills, GPX University is where learning comes to life.







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LEVEL UP LABS

'Christmas in July' event provides holiday inspiration

By Ginny Mumm

The holidays are right around the corner, and planning what to produce and how to produce it in time can be a challenging task, especially for new entrepreneurs and small business owners.

There are a host of reasons to explore ways to capitalize on the growth in the global personalized gifts market: Valued at $30.84 billion in 2024, this market is expected to grow to $63.28 billion in 2032, yielding a compound annual growth rate of 9.4%. The holidays can be the perfect time to see what's popular with your audience.

To ease some of the holiday production planning stress, in July, Roland DGA invited seven social media influencers who own small print businesses to participate in a "Level Up Labs" workshop where they could research and develop new products and try new production methods ahead of the holiday season.

Set up for success

The Level Up Labs event had a "Christmas in July" theme that carried through from the minute the creators reached Roland DGA headquarters



Images courtesy of Ginny Mumm

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in Irvine, California. In addition to providing each attendee with a custom-printed tote bag filled with holiday inspired swag, Roland DGA had decked out its production room with seasonal graphics and had a variety of blank samples available for the creators to use throughout the day.

Creators were asked to bring their graphics files and were able to try their hand at several different production techniques, printing or engraving their graphics on products that they might be interested in offering. Roland DGA made available a series of machines from its VersaSTUDIO line of professional-grade desktop devices that are intended specifically for small businesses and startups.



Neyro_jm_st–stock.adobe.com

Reasons to try out new products at the holidays

In planning for holiday production, many of these small business owners were considering the benefits of expanding their product range. Here are several reasons why adding select new products to an existing lineup as the holidays approach might make sense:

1. **Increased demand for personalized gifts**
   Holidays are when customers actively seek out unique, custom products — everything from personalized ornaments to custom keychains and apparel. Offering additional products lets you capitalize on seasonal demand.
2. **Higher sales potential**
   The holiday season is a peak revenue period for small print businesses. Adding new products gives you more ways to upsell to existing clients and attract new ones while boosting overall profitability and growing your customer base.
3. **Differentiation & marketing opportunities**
   Your business will stand out from the crowd with creative, new, holiday-specific items like UV-printed decor, custom packaging, or personalized gift bundles. Seasonal products are also highly shareable on social media and perfect for themed promotions. In addition, fresh products give you a reason to reach out to customers with email campaigns and holiday specials.
4. **Testing future product lines**
   Holiday expansions can serve as a trial run for new product categories. If something sells well, you might add it to your regular product lineup. These trials can help you diversify your revenue streams and extend your brand's reach.



T-shirt Pond – stock.adobe.com

In short, for the holidays especially, more customized products equals more possibilities. Here are some of the customization techniques and projects the creators tried out at the Level Up Labs event.

Easy apparel customization

Customized apparel is always a hit at the holidays. At the workshop, creators were given the opportunity to produce their designs on Roland DG's VersaSTUDIO BY-20 desktop direct-to-film (DTF) printer, then heat press them onto crewneck sweatshirt blanks and even onto tiny tees for teddy bears. DTF prints are known for their vibrancy and durability as well as for their ability to transfer to a wide range of materials, including darker fabrics.

Direct-printing opportunities

Personalized ornaments and keepsakes are another popular holiday product option. Creators printed their designs







on wooden and acrylic ornament blanks, LEGO bricks, jewelry boxes, and acrylic bookmarks using Roland DG's BD series of desktop UV printers. They also printed directly on colorful plastic motel keychains.

Attendees especially enjoyed customizing phone cases with their designs on the VersaSTUDIO BD series desktop UV printers, adding special effects such as spot color and simulated embossing. Enhancements like these, made with UV ink, can also add to the perceived value of customized products.

Engraved jewelry & keepsakes

Customized jewelry is always a welcome gift at the holidays, and engraving allows you to quickly create one-of-a-kind or one-of-a-series items. Creators were offered blank charms and bracelet chains to engrave using Roland DG's MPX-90S compact metal engraver, which provides photo-quality detail for names, graphics, text or pictures. Engraved charms are perfect for incorporating in jewelry or adding to keychains or backpacks.

Sticker production simplified

Many of the creators already offered stickers of their designs printed on crafting devices or by outside vendors. During the event, they had the opportunity to produce them using Roland DG's 20" BN2-20A and 30" BN2-30 desktop printer/cutters. On the BN2 series devices, they were able to print sheets of full-color stickers with or without die-cutting. These machines can also be used to produce posters, gallery canvases, and heat transfer vinyl graphics for apparel.

UV/DTF graphic applications

Creators also printed their designs using Roland DG's Graphic Transfer System to produce UV-DTF decals that can be applied to a wide variety of items and surfaces. UV-DTF is recommended for shiny surfaces like glass and mirrors as well as for large or irregularly shaped objects that are difficult to print on directly. These stickers are scratch resistant, with a layer of gloss ink on top of UV graphics.

After printing them on Roland DG's BD series desktop UV printers, creators transferred their UV-DTF stickers to the curved surfaces of shot glasses and mini tumblers. UV-DTF graphics offer durable, vibrant color options for customization.

Personalized packaging

Packaging prototyping was another area the creators focused on. As small business owners and customers have recognized, custom packaging is an easy way to differentiate a brand and elevate brand perception. Creators produced their graphics and logo on cardstock or directly on plastic or acrylic containers using the BD series UV printers.

Wrapping up

The time and expense of researching new products and new production techniques in preparation for the holidays can be daunting, especially for small businesses, however for many brands there's no better time to trial new products.

The Christmas in July event allowed creator/entrepreneurs a chance to experience Roland DG's VersaSTUDIO line of compact and powerful digital printing and engraving equipment firsthand. After a full day of discovery and experimentation, they found that in-house production with digital devices is easier, more cost effective, and even more fun than they'd originally imagined. **GP**



Ginny Mumm is a freelance consultant for digital inkjet printer/cutter provider Roland DGA.

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Sports & recreation: When every season is promo season

By Garrick Jacobi

Let's be honest: The branded products space is a crowded one, and the choices are pretty much the same at every distributor. But not every product will work for every client, and knowing what works for yours is what will make the difference.

Branded sports and outdoor equipment are a perfect example. Americans love the great outdoors, whether they're playing their favorite sport, enjoying an afternoon in the park, or tailgating before the big game. Tying your recommendations to a specific sports season or the most popular times for various recreational activities makes it easier to find what works. So does knowing whether your clients only want gifts for their customers or also to recognize and reward their employees — an increasingly popular choice that can give your company a steady stream of new projects.

Take pickleball, for example. Distributors who stay on top of trends know this paddle sport has become extremely popular due to its accessibility to people of almost every age and physical condition. According to USA Pickleball, the sport's national governing body, 4,000 new locations were added in 2024, bringing the total to 15,910 places to play. Pickleball.com reports that by 2024, about 19.8 million Americans were actively playing, making it the fastest-growing sport in the country.

We're seeing a skyrocketing demand for jobs involving pickleball gear for employee retention gifts and team activities. We recently created branded equipment for a builder putting pickleball courts in residential communities and giving the items to new homeowners as gifts. Custom pickleball sets have become highly sought-after corporate gifts; companies are opting for branded paddles, balls, and accessories, often packaged as memorable, personalized gift sets that employees can use well beyond a single event.

As with anything else, seasonality affects what people purchase in the





recreation category. Early spring brings a spike in demand for golf-related swag because so many businesses sponsor or organize charity and community tournaments. We are seeing an uptick in branded coolers used as giveaways; the recipients will use these for camping trips, vacations, or parties. Cooler bags, camp chairs, hammocks, and hydration gear are hugely popular here in Idaho. Hiking, camping, fishing, and climbing are integral to our culture and a significant reason people come to Idaho.

Other states have their own unique recreation communities, some of them surprising: According to Snowsports Industries America, Florida has the second-highest number of skiers, and they don't mean water skiers. More winter skiers live in the Sunshine State than in California, Texas, and Colorado, outnumbered only by New York.

For branded apparel, the different buying generations – Gen Z, millennials, and boomers – play a critical role in the clothing to which you add your client's brand. It's crucial to be well-versed in all of those trends, because they greatly dictate the buying decisions.

Creating solutions

There's more to identifying needs than knowing the season and what clients' customers are interested in. Your client's values matter, too. We use a discovery sheet that helps us learn their core values and what makes them tick, ultimately enabling us to figure out a solution to their unique situation.

- **Practicality:** This should be near the top of your list when selecting the items you distribute. For a client's work-from-anywhere employee, you need to consider their work environment and how to make them feel like they are part of the team even when they're not physically with the team. It becomes a challenge to build that camaraderie when the individual is a remote worker.
- **Durability & uniqueness:** These are always popular. We found a vendor who could print the texture of a golf ball, basketball, soccer ball, or similar equipment on the outside of their drinking bottles, which had the features of a YETI. For certain businesses, that stand-out quality will be what pushes them to purchase once they realize the value of an item like that.
- **Environmental concerns:** Sustainability is a key value for many companies, but don't assume it's a priority for everyone. It entirely depends on the company's core values. If they think it's essential that their products be eco-friendly and sustainable, those values will play a role. If not, they won't seek out those features.

All about value

As distributors, we need to sell value, not product, and make the client feel like we are an extension of their marketing team.

Take the time to understand what makes them, them. Make it easy for them to do business with you because they don't have to come up with the ideas; you're the expert here.

Distributors who invest in their client relationships will have no issues growing. If they don't, they won't last — they are no different than any other large distributor or an online vendor.

If we just push product, we are missing the point. Clients will choose to buy from the distributor offering creative solutions unique to them and provided by a real person, not a website. **GP**

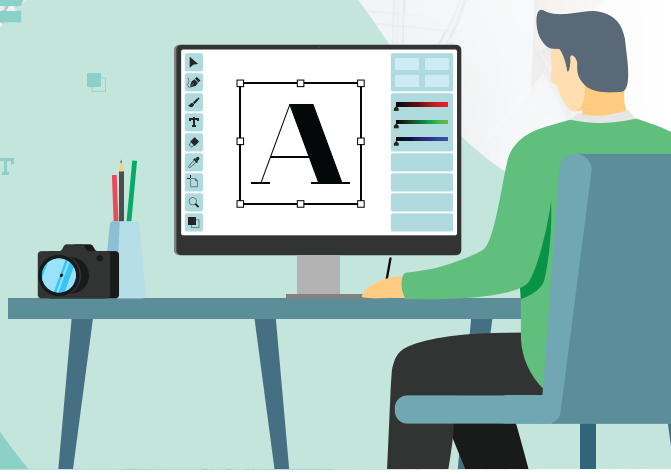


Garrick Jacobi is the owner of Fully Promoted Idaho. Located in Boise, Idaho, it is a one-stop shop for comprehensive branding and marketing solutions, specializing in custom-branded apparel and promotional products.

Working with text

From font libraries to tracing handwriting

By John Morman



Bearing in mind that this series of articles is aimed primarily at new users, working with text could well seem like a very mundane topic, but experienced users may find some beneficial information here as well. Some of this information will also depend on a couple of factors. First is your operating system. Not all fonts are automatically available on both Windows and Mac platforms. Second, as always, different machine manufacturers don't all operate in the same fashion. So, in working with text, if you're creating your own text design, you have the luxury of using whichever font you want to use.

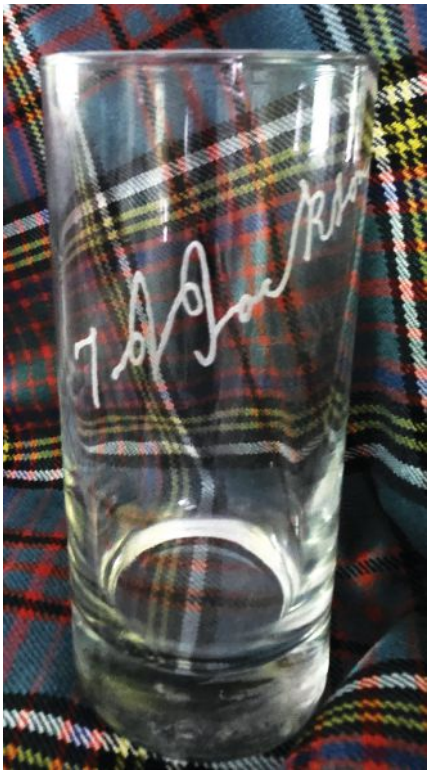
The most obvious use for text is going to be in the personalization and awards markets. Let's start with a few comments about various fonts. Your computer (I use a Windows platform) probably came with a preloaded word processing utility. This utility most likely has its own font library. This may be useful for regular document creation, but it may be limited if you are designing a text component for a graphic. You may be asked to reproduce text from a customer-supplied template.



This being the case, ask the customer for an editable graphic, ideally in the graphics software you are employing. At the same time, ask the customer to identify the font used in their template. That makes everything comparatively simple, until you discover that the font is not supported in your text software. Don't worry — there are several online libraries of fonts which are available to download free of charge, although sometimes attribution may be required.

Another word of caution: Just because the title is the same as the one you are looking for doesn't mean it will match the font you need. There are often differences between font titles in different font libraries, and on occasion, it can take some time to find a precise match. If you find yourself unable to find a font that you're happy with, you can obviously contact the customer and ask if they'll be happy with an alternative. Of course, they may say no.

That leaves you with the only option







being to trace the text. This can be a lengthy process, but one tip to save time is to duplicate letters and drop the copy into the appropriate place in the required text. As you complete the text, be sure that the text fits the material you're working with. Some customers don't always consider that when designing the complete graphic. If you have to reduce or enlarge the text to fit your boundaries, think about doing the same with the graphic portion so that everything stays in proportion.

There are occasions when you may need to reproduce handwritten text, such as signatures. Naturally, this will require tracing — people just aren't considerate enough to use established fonts! While we should do our best to get as close as we can to the text provided, one saving grace is that people tend not to sign their names exactly the same way every time.

I would suggest that if you are being asked to reproduce anything of length, try and convince the customer, if you can, to use a standard font. Again, there are a lot of fonts available online that look like old-fashioned writing. Tracing is possible, particularly if you use the copy and paste approach, but a lengthy piece can prove too time-consuming to be economically practical for you. (Always remember your time is worth money.)

So, being comfortable with using text gives you another string for your bow. Practice using established fonts or copying ones you can't find. Giving your customer options is always an opportunity to make money! **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.

PRODUCT PICKS

Each month, the GRAPHICS PRO team receives hundreds of product press releases. Here are a few that recently caught our attention.



X-Edge XCT Tapered Ball Nose Bit

The XCT Tapered Carving Ball Nose CNC router bit from X-Edge is engineered to provide a uniquely long cutting edge that combines reach with finesse, letting users sculpt intricate details where conventional small-diameter bits fall short. The X-Edge XCT Tapered 3D carving bit is designed to deliver both efficiency and elegance, with sizes ranging from 1/32" to 1/4" tip diameters. **xedgetools.com**



FUJIFILM Frontier DX400W Compact Inkjet Printer

The latest addition to Fujifilm's Frontier printer lineup, the Frontier DX400W compact inkjet printer, boasts improvements in printing output, including the addition of two new ink colors, as well as faster image processing/printing times and a smaller overall footprint. Features include a 250ML high-capacity 6-ink system consisting of C (cyan), M (magenta), Y (yellow), K (black), SB (sky blue) and P (pink), engineered to enable more faithful reproduction of skin textures and subtle color changes. A new structural design has been developed to increase the durability of the printer body, reducing the need for frequent hardware replacements and minimizing maintenance efforts. As a result of this design improvement, the printer can print a total of up to 400,000 sheets over the lifetime of the product. Ink capacity has been increased from 200ML in the prior model to 250ML in the DX400W. Additionally, the DX400W uses pouch-style ink supply units instead of traditional cartridge-based systems. **fujifilm.com**



Epson SureColor F1070 Business Edition

Designed for creators ready to launch or grow their business, the all-in-one SureColor F1070 from Epson includes the hybrid direct-to-film and direct-to-garment printer with a compact size designed to fit into small shops, garages, or maker spaces. Transparent viewing panels are engineered to enhance and display the professional printing process. Featuring a PrecisionCore Micro TFP printhead with Nozzle Verification Technology coupled with UltraChrome DG2 ink with CMYK+Wh, the SureColor F1070 is designed to deliver vibrant colors and detail with clarity. Inks are certified by OEKO-TEX ECO PASSPORT1 and CPSIA-compliant, making them safe for apparel worn by adults, kids, and babies. **epson.com**

Ninja custom silicone patches



Ninja Patches, a division of Ninja Transfers, has unveiled new custom silicone patches designed to give apparel, accessories, and promotional items a modern, tactile edge. With both 3D molded and 2D printed options, these patches are engineered to show raised detailing, vibrant color, and durability. Silicone patches are crafted from flexible, high-quality polymers designed to resist fading, cracking, and peeling — making them ideal for frequent use in industries ranging from outdoor gear to sportswear, corporate branding, and fashion. Each order includes a free roll of thermal tape for application. **ninjapatches.com**

M&R ORBITER DTF system



M&R Printing Equipment has introduced ORBITER automatic direct-to-film (DTF) application system as part of the M&R QUATRO product line. ORBITER is designed to support optimal DTF transfer application with a full-color touchscreen HMI, adjustable place and peel settings, and reinforced construction. The ORBITER's rotary indexing base splits the application time over multiple heat press platens to produce more than 360 transfers per hour under optimal conditions. The ability to automatically load and unload transfers removes repetitive tasks associated with DTF transfer pressing, so that the ORBITER supports one piece flow and just-in-time manufacturing models. The ORBITER can be used independently from a QUATRO as a standalone heat press solution or integrated into the QUATRO ecosystem. **mrprint.com**



APC and Polyprint's Filmjet Production DTF Printer

Distributor American Print Consultants (APC) has introduced the Polyprint Filmjet production direct-to-film printing system. Engineered for high-volume production at peak performance, the Filmjet boasts advanced features such as constant film tension, vacuum powder recycling, and air knife powder removal, designed for seamless operation and superior output. The Filmjet's Smart System Controls are engineered to automate every process from printing to curing. Production-friendly features of the Smart System are designed to eliminate common issues such as preventing media shift during printing, mitigating static, and delivering tight wound, evenly distributed rolls with no telescoping. Equipped with ink agitation, white ink-circulation system, and automated powder application and recycling, the Filmjet is said to reduce overall operating costs while enhancing print quality and speed. **apcink.com**

ORAFOL paint protection films



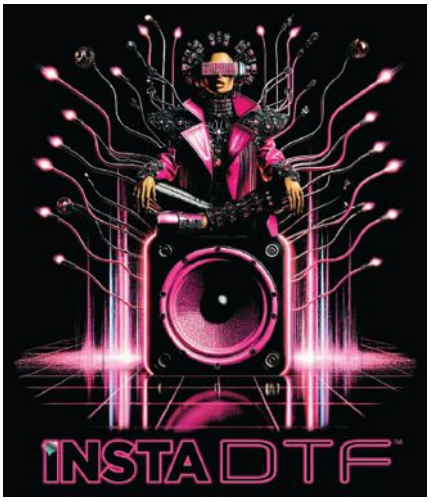
ORAGUARD, made by ORAFOL, has introduced the 2815+ Advanced Paint Protection Film. This new range is manufactured entirely in the U.S., exclusively at ORAFOL from start to finish. The 2815+ range offers three new products, two in gloss and one in matte. ORAGUARD 2815GF+ and 2815MF+ feature a cutting-edge "lotus effect" hydrophobic topcoat designed to provide exceptional chemical resistance and dirt-repellent properties. ORAGUARD 2815GF delivers the same level of protection and resistances without the additional hydrophobic properties. ORAGUARD 2815+ upgrades typical PPF installation, engineered to provide conformability and improved resistance to lift lines. ORAFOL's product is compatible with most conventional plotters and cutting software. **orafol.com**



Nazdar 775 Series UV-LED inkjet inks for Kyocera KJ4A printheads

The Nazdar 775 Series Inks are specifically formulated for use in general graphics applications. The inks are designed to work with heated medium viscosity printheads. The 775 inks are engineered to cure using lower energy output UV and LED curing lamps, meaning they can be effectively cured with less energy consumption. Suitable for printing on reinforced vinyl banners, PVC, window cling, foamboard, roll polycarbonate, and more. **nazdar.com**

PRODUCT PICKS



Insta DTF from Insta Graphic Systems

Insta DTF is a universal direct-to-film heat transfer engineered for both short and long production runs. Insta DTF is developed to deliver photorealistic, full-color transfers with unlimited color potential and exceptional detail — ideal for fine lines, halftones, and intricate graphics. Features include semi-transparent film for accurate placement, and nonphthalate / non-PVC formulations compatible with cotton and cotton blends, polyester/cotton blends, and nonsublimated polyester. **instagraphic.com**



Nekoosa NextBond High-Bond Opaque film

NextBond High-Bond Opaque is a wide-format printable film designed to adhere securely to challenging application surfaces, deliver full block-out coverage without gray adhesive, and withstand extreme environmental conditions, including cold-weather installation as low as -10 F. NextBond High-Bond Opaque features a double layer of Nekoosa's exclusive NextBond UV-cured adhesive, engineered to form a strong, long-lasting bond to rough, porous, and low surface energy materials like concrete, brick, plywood, and plastics. **nekoosa.com**

The rise of the hybrid print shop

Why 76% of shops now run in-house or hybrid DTF

By Adrienne Palmer



Apparel decorating is experiencing a dramatic shift toward vertical integration, driven by the rapid adoption of direct-to-film (DTF) printing. Vertical integration means a print shop controls multiple stages of the production process in-house rather than outsourcing them. This move has given rise to the hybrid print shop: a model where decorators not only produce transfers in-house for their own apparel orders, but also sell those transfers to other businesses, expanding revenue streams while maintaining control over quality and turnaround.

In the 2025 DTF State of the Industry Survey presented by Keypoint Intelligence and sponsored by Roland DGA, 76% of respondents operate in-house or hybrid DTF setups, making vertical integration the dominant model. This includes 46% running in-house DTF production and 30% operating hybrid businesses. In-house operations produce DTF transfers exclusively for their own garment



Kyle Robinson, co-founder/CEO, and Nathan Reynolds, art director of Print My Threads.

Images courtesy of Print My Threads



orders, while hybrid shops not only use transfers internally but also sell them to other decorators, turning production capacity into an additional revenue stream. Only 19% of businesses rely solely on purchasing outsourced transfers and heat pressing in-house.

Kyle Robinson, co-founder and CEO of Print My Threads in Flatwoods, Kentucky, decided to bring DTF in-house after addressing a few key clients that were a good fit. "We needed the ability to print full-color designs in smaller quantities, but we also needed the ability to hit specific colors, so it made the most sense to invest in our own equipment and bring it in-house," he said. "We then had several customers gravitate toward DTF because they no longer felt limited by the number of colors they could use in their designs."

Print My Threads' client base includes retail, hospital/medical, corporate business, nonprofits, and schools They're starting to take on jobs from team sports because DTF allows for more customization and flexibility than heat-press vinyl. "We can offer a better product and produce it in-house," Robinson said. "We recently did some warmup tops and bottoms that had a super smooth gradient fade in both the front artwork and the custom name and numbers on the back. Historically, this would have been a job we would have passed on and recommended they find someone offering cut-and-sew sublimation."

For certain projects and hard-to-print fabrics (or locations), Robinson and his team of 10 employees will now gravitate to DTF as the preferred print method. "Because of DTF, we can go into those jobs with confidence knowing the final result is better than what we could have achieved with screen printing or embroidery." He said communicating the strengths and weaknesses of the DTF decoration process to his customers is key.

Print My Threads has also completed a few jobs that have combined DTF and screen printing. "We had some nice retail hoodies that required a smooth gradient fade in addition to a high-color, high-detail graphic with super tight registration," Robinson said. "We ended up screen printing the gradient fade and then heat pressing the transfers just above. The screen-printed fade in the water had no feel and contrasted with the polar bear head just above, which was slightly raised from the DTF transfer. You could feel the variance of the open areas in the design and the transfer, giving the final print an elevated, dimensional feel that was interesting and seemed high-end."

Print My Threads also sells transfers to local customers and through Stream, a platform developed by DecoFlo to connect customers with local and nationwide small businesses offering DTF transfer services. Customers can upload their designs, receive real-time feedback on resolution and quality, select the desired quantity, and place their orders. The platform prioritizes local shops, promoting community businesses and ensuring quick turnaround times.

"We're currently not set up to be profitable doing high-volume contract DTF transfer printing, but we've had success selling through the Stream platform and for a few local and



regional clients who we've vetted," Robinson said. "DTF printers work best when being run daily, so it's nice to supplement our own work by printing for other people."

7 reasons screen printers are moving to an in-house or hybrid setup

1 Faster turnaround

- The 2025 DTF State of the Industry Survey shows that a quick turnaround is the top customer priority (66%).
- In-house or hybrid DTF eliminates shipping delays from outsourcing, allowing same-day or next-day production.

2 Greater control over quality

- Print quality was ranked the No. 2 priority (64%).
- Shops can monitor color consistency, adhesion, and durability directly, instead of relying on outside vendors.

3 Higher margins

- Producing transfers internally removes vendor markup.
- Hybrid shops can sell excess transfer capacity to other decorators, creating an extra revenue stream.
- On average, 42% of total shop revenue from those surveyed now comes from DTF products/services.
- For 8% of those surveyed, DTF makes up more than 90% of revenue.

4 Flexibility & customization

- Customization options are increasingly in demand, especially unique finishes, precise color matching, and variable sizes.
- In-house DTF lets shops experiment with specialty substrates and finishes without vendor minimums.

5 Reduced outsourcing challenges

- Decorators that rely on outsourcing transfers reported long turnaround times (14%), inconsistent quality (36%), and limited customization (21%) as pain points.
- Moving in-house or hybrid addresses those bottlenecks.

6 Volume growth & demand

- 42% of shop revenue on average now comes from DTF, making it worth the equipment investment.
- Apparel personalization and short-run orders require the speed and flexibility DTF offers.

7 Vertical integration trend

- Controlling more of the production workflow is a broader trend across print. It reduces dependency on outside vendors, safeguards against supply chain issues, and strengthens brand reliability.

Challenges to consider

DTF printing does come with operational challenges like:

- **Equipment maintenance:** 63% of those surveyed list this as a main challenge

- **Color consistency:** 57% cite this as a pain point
- **Ink costs:** 55% say this is a major issue

Robinson said his team at Print My Threads works really hard to maintain color accuracy, but as the inks, films, and powders improve, change, or go out of stock, they often have to make changes on the fly in order to get the best possible result.

"Color profiling is a moving target and something we're constantly working on," he said. "With screen printing, if you need to tweak a color, you tweak it and maybe change your mesh count, which is pretty straightforward. With DTF, the final color you achieve has to do with the machine you're printing on, the firmware running your machine, the software you're using to RIP your artwork, and the types of ink, film, and powder you use. If you change any one of these variables, your colors will change."

Technology & growth outlook

- 73% of providers plan to expand capacity in the next one to two years
- 72% are exploring new technologies and inks
- 61% are interested in hybrid printing technology; 71% in new ink formulations

"As the films, inks, and adhesives continue to improve, and with the artwork set up properly, we're able to achieve some pretty impressive results," said Robinson. "I don't think screen printing or embroidery is going anywhere, but there's currently so much R&D being invested into transfers and heat press automation that I think DTF will continue to grow and become much more commonplace over the next several years."





To better understand the companies surveyed in the 2025 DTF State of the Industry Survey, here's a breakdown:

- 54% of businesses have one to five employees; 31% have six to 20
- The majority (54%) of shops have been in business for 10+ years, proving these are established shops adopting DTF, not just startups
- 95% serve the apparel market
- 70% serve promotional goods, and 68% serve sportswear, showing overlap between apparel and specialty printing **GP**



Adrienne Palmer has 13 years of experience in editorial leadership, branded content, and print and digital media. Through her consulting company, AP Media Group, she helps apparel decoration and wide-format digital print brands elevate their message and engage audiences through high-impact content and strategy. She is currently the VP of Fabric, an executive coaching program for progressive print shop owners.

Lighting up the darkness

How to achieve a neon look in screen printing

By Lon Winters



Images courtesy of Lon Winters

There's something unmistakable about neon in the way it glows bright and grabs your attention. It's a technology that speaks in color and hums nostalgia. It's Las Vegas in the 1960s. It's the watering hole's flickering OPEN sign glowing defiantly in the black of night. It sends a clear message, does it not? Neon isn't just illumination, it's an attitude. It's personality in bent glass. For this project, we weren't shaping glass tubing, but we were trying to capture that same high-contrast intensity on apparel. The client wanted something bold and bright, a design that looked like it could buzz to life. They asked us to replicate the look and feel of a real neon sign. Obviously, it had to go on a black shirt, too. Duh!

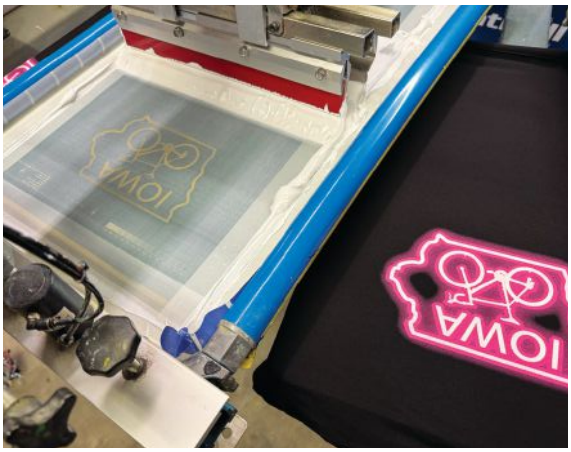
We began in Adobe Photoshop. You might think Illustrator was the natural fit for clean vector lines, but we needed to simulate the subtlety of light emission. We wanted this graphic to pulse and radiate. The lines would need depth and diffusion that we could only get through a bitmap rendering in Photoshop. We started with our 16" X 20" artboard at 300 DPI in RGB mode.

The base design mimicked old-school neon with clean tubing letters and simple geometric shapes. We created each letterform using the Pen Tool on its own layer with stroke simulation, maintaining clean masks within the layers. These were essentially digital tubes. For the glow, each stroke was duplicated and blurred behind itself



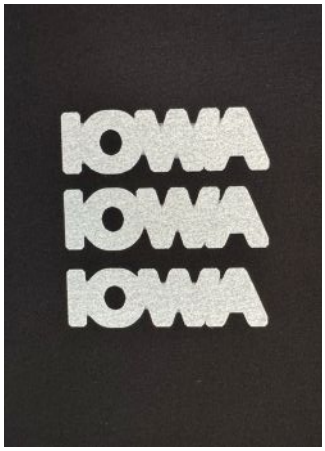
to simulate inner glow and dispersion of colored light. We used the Gaussian Blur tool with a radius between 3–12 pixels depending on the "wattage" or size we wanted. Color intensity dropped incrementally on each layer down the stack. The top or innermost layer and brightest area was solid stroke at 100% opacity. The mid color layer and bright color glow was at 40% to 60% opacity, set to Linear Dodge, and finally, the bottom or dark faded wider area glow was a heavier blur, dialed way back to 5% to 15% opacity, also using Linear Dodge. We masked the glow layers into shadow shapes and transition sections with soft brushes to control falloff to nearly zero.

The key was depth. The center line would look hot white, while the glow fades naturally and gradually into the black of night, or in this case, the shirt.









Black was our canvas, and we painted light onto it. Color wise, we leaned into realistic neon tubes.

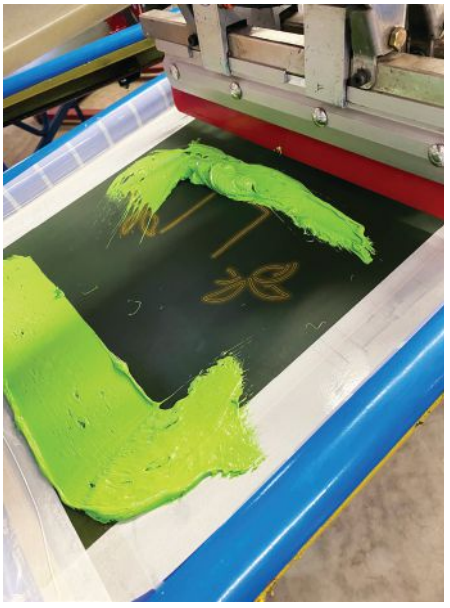
These weren't primaries. Real neon pink has a slight warmth to it, electric blue trends toward cyan, while neon green has yellow undertones. We referenced actual photos of lit signage to color match.

Of course, the pretty picture on the monitor would need to be color separated for screen printing. We would utilize our layers and convert to channels, a trusted method for simulated process prints. Using Color Range, we isolated each color, hot pink, electric blue, green, orange, yellow, and a highlight white and pasted them into individual alpha channels. Each channel was then adjusted with Levels to enhance contrast, clean up midtones and to manage any anticipated dot gain or loss. Our glow zones were particularly sensitive. We pushed highlight end points carefully, adjusted and prepped each channel for halftone output. We built a dedicated white printer or underbase channel using a combination of the highlight areas and strategically in some of the color areas. We choked this shape slightly to avoid halos and noise peeking out in the colored glow zones. This allowed the neon effect to pop transparently on top.

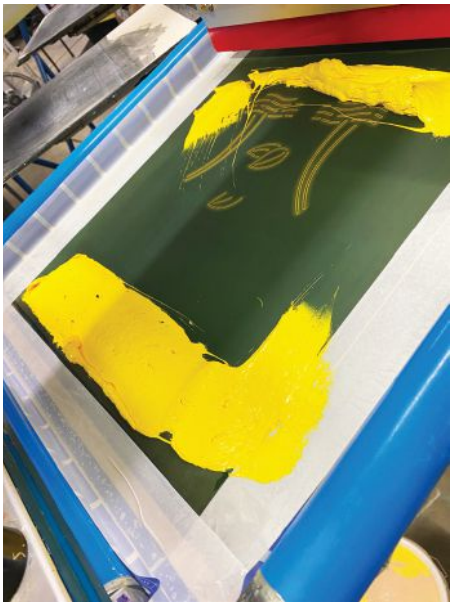
We output to CTS (computer to screen) at a default 55 LPI (lines per inch) round dot at a 22.5-degree angle. Screens were exposed on dual cure emulsion for its superior resolution. Mesh was 230 TPI (threads per inch) for the colors and the highlight white











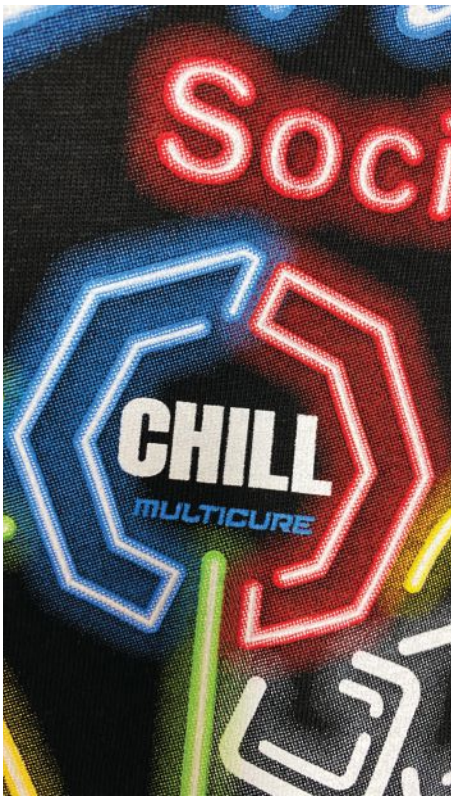


while a 156 TPI was used for the white printer. Every screen was dried, inspected, and tensions were set to 35 N/cm^2. We registered them on our auto with a preregistration system averaging a few minutes a screen with just a few fine micro adjustments needed. Everything had to fall into precise place. One misaligned glow, and the whole illusion would break.

For the inks, we were running some low cure tests and chose that series. We mixed custom blends to match our printed color samples. The white printer or underbase was our foundation — figuratively and physically. A single stroke with moderate pressure and speed using a triple-ply duel-durometer 65/90/65 squeegee. We flashed it just enough, at three seconds to reach about 220 F, gelling the surface without curing the ink.

Electric blue went down first, followed by green, red, hot pink, then yellow, and finally highlight white to pop the center of the tubes — all wet on wet. Since this was a low-cure ink, the dryer belt was set so we could reach ink temp at 280 F, and we monitored ink surface and temps with a temp gun and thermoprobe.

And when we pulled the first finished tees off the belt? They glowed not just





visually, but had a feeling. That same sense you get walking past a sign at 2 a.m. The lines looked lit. The shadows looked warm. The shirts felt alive. Hundreds more came off the press, each one a little beacon in the dark.

Neon has been around longer than most of us have, invented in 1910 and made famous in the Roaring '20s. It lit up cities and changed how we advertise. Neon became part of our cultural DNA. It was art, commerce, nightlife, and rebellion all rolled into one bent tube. This job reminded us that the glow isn't just in the ink, it's in the craft. And if we do it right, our prints won't need electricity to shine. These shirts weren't filled with gasses, but they hummed all the same. **GP**





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



A guide to machine embroidery stitches

By Jennifer Cox

Images courtesy of Jennifer Cox

Minakryn Ruslan – stock.adobe.com

When you first get started in machine embroidery, it feels like you are learning a whole new language. In reality, you are. Between bobbins, backing, hooping, sharps and ball points, wedge and titanium, digitizing, pique, waffle knit, performance fabric, and all the stitch types, it's easy to wonder: How on earth am I ever going to figure all this out? And how do I figure out which kinds of stitches to use where? If you have ever questioned why a design just looks "off" even though the machine stitched it just fine, it may be the result of how the design was created, not how it was sewn out.

Here's the secret: It's not just the design, the hooping, and the sewing that matters, it's the stitches themselves. Using the right stitch type can mean the difference between a logo that pops with professional polish and one that puckers, pulls, curls, or disappears into the fabric of the product. Think of the stitches in every design as the "brushstrokes" in your embroidery art — they add coverage, texture, and shine in different ways. Even if you are not creating your own digitized embroidery files, knowing the basics about the different types of stitches will help you create the best possible embroidered products.

In this article, we'll review the main stitch types you'll see in nearly every machine embroidery design. You'll learn what each one looks like, why digitizers choose them, and how you can use them to get better results, no matter what product is in your embroidery hoop.

The basics of machine embroidery stitches

At its core, machine embroidery is just thread and fabric coming together in different patterns. The creation of every stitch is like a pinkie promise from childhood, two threads looping around each other to form each half of the actual stitch. The "stitch type" is simply how the machine lays that thread down to create the look and feel of the design. Some types of stitches are meant to cover big areas. Others are for crisp edges, shiny highlights, crisp lettering, appliques, or fine details.

Most embroidery designs are a mix of several stitch types that are layered together like puzzle pieces. Additional puzzle pieces include the fabric the design is going on, how that fabric is stabilized, and how the fabric is hooped. Have you ever noticed that the same logo can look amazing on one sew-out and a little disappointing on another? That difference is caused by how the stitches interact with the fabric, the stabilizers, and each other.

Once you understand the basics: satin stitches, fill stitches, running stitches, and a few unique specialty stitches, you'll start to see how high-quality designs come together. You'll understand why letters are shiny and smooth, why big shapes look textured instead of flat, and why some designs stitch out cleanly while others fight you every step of the way, even winning occasionally (we all have a rejects pile, trust me!).

Satin stitches: Smooth, shiny superstar

If machine embroidery had a "superstar stitch," it would be the satin stitch, also called the column stitch. These long, smooth stitches lay side by side,



Satin stitches are often the most effective choice for creating crisp, legible lettering.

Notice how the satin stitches around the logo add a sharp, well-defined edge to the design, even on a coarsely woven cordura fabric.

creating a smooth, tight, glossy, and finished look. Satin stitches are what give small lettering its polished look, or what makes design outlines and borders crisp, adding that well-defined edge to the finished design.

Think of satin stitches like the piping on a cake; it's there to give definition and draw attention. Satin stitches are usually used for narrow design elements — text that's less than ½" tall, outlines around shapes, or decorative accents or highlights to add that bit of definition.

Why they're great:

- Clean, professional finish
- Reflect light beautifully (they "pop" against the fabric)
- Provide excellent coverage in small areas

What to watch out for:

Satin stitches can get tricky if they are too wide. Long stitches across too big of a space can snag, gap, or even pull at the fabric. They can also cause puckering if the design is too dense or if the fabric being sewn is lightweight and not stabilized correctly. The trick is to let satin stitches shine where they belong: on small to medium details that need a crisp, smooth look. For bigger spaces, the fill stitch really earns its keep.

Fill stitches: Coverage workhorse

Fill stitches, also called tatami stitches, are exactly what they sound like, they "fill" larger areas with rows of short, closely spaced stitches. Instead of long shiny columns like satin stitches, fill stitches create a flatter, consist look.

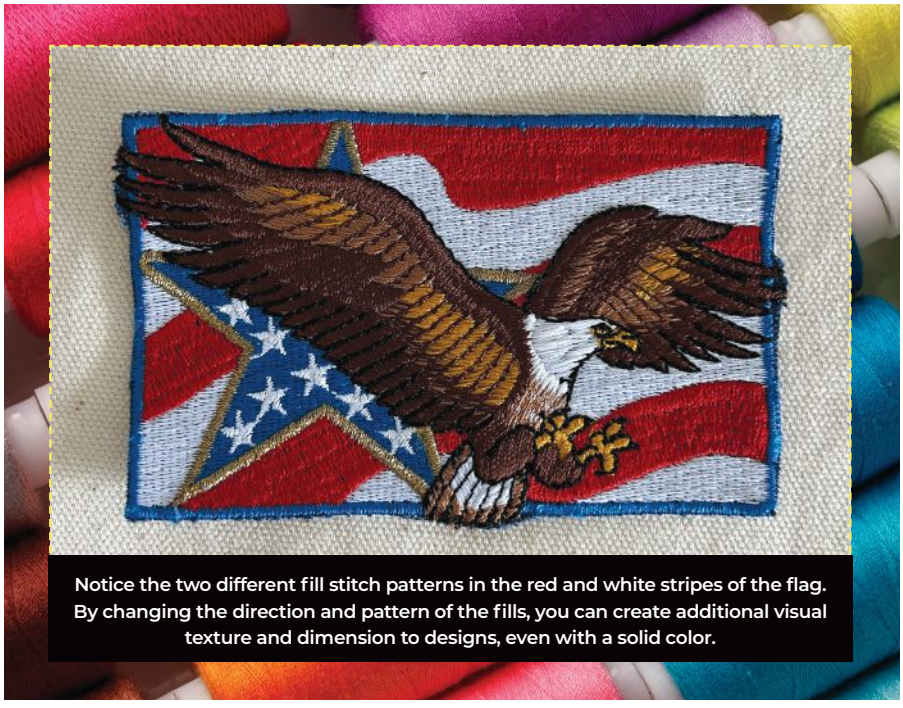
Use fill stitches for bigger elements. Create the background of a logo, a large shape, or any area where you need consistent coverage. Don't worry, consistent does not have to mean boring! Fill stitches can be laid down in different patterns, from simple diagonals to decorative motifs, adding depth, texture, and interest to otherwise plain areas.

Why they're great:

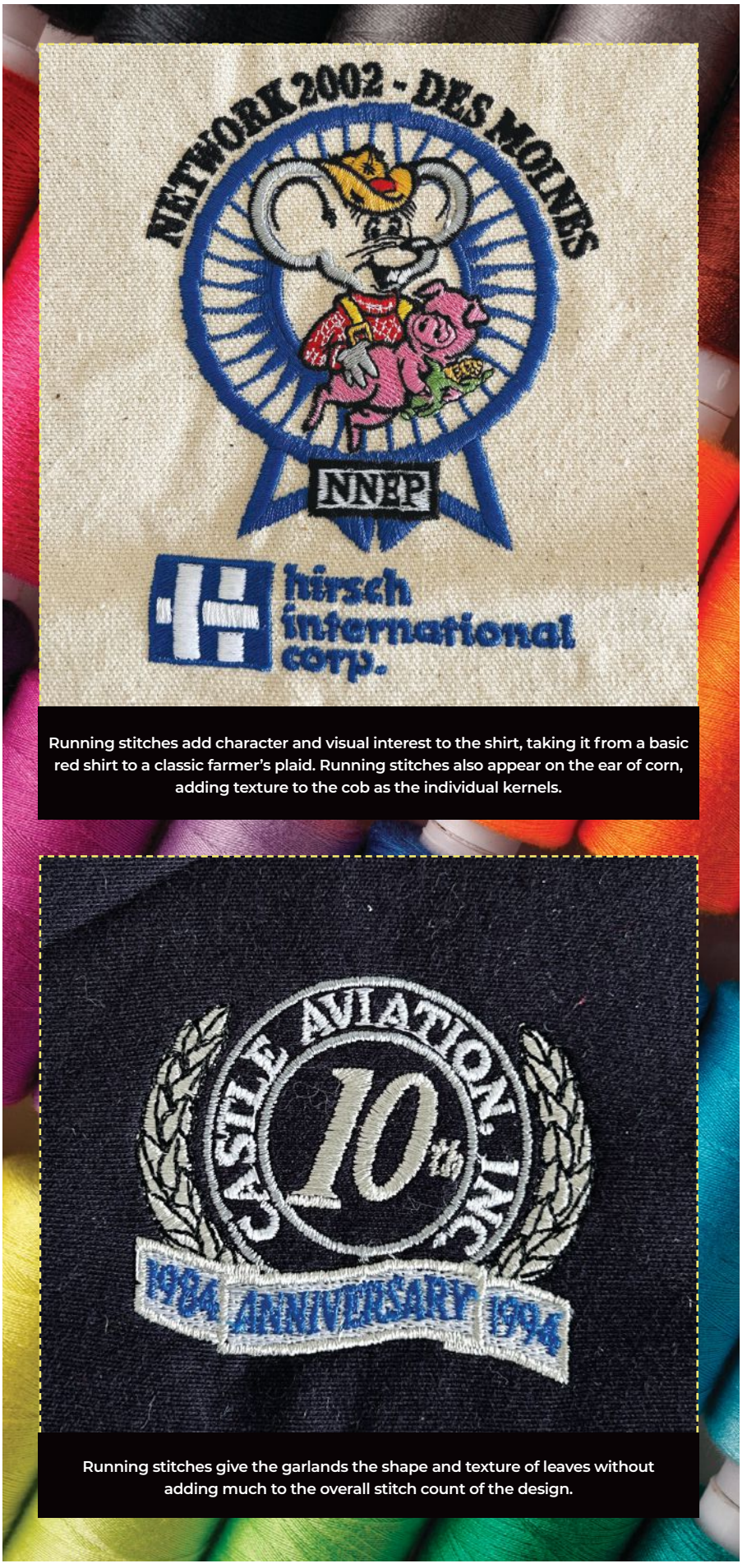
- Consistent coverage across large areas
- More stable than satin stitches (less likely to snag or gap)
- Endless pattern options to create different textures

What to watch out for:

Because fill stitches use a lot of thread, they can get heavy and stiff if digitized too densely. That's when a design starts to feel "bulletproof" instead of soft and wearable. Understanding design density and adding the correct underlay for the product and the design are key: lighter density makes the fabric more flexible, while higher density gives bold color but risks stiffness. If you've ever stitched a big design and ended up with a "bulletproof patch," you know the fill stitch is too dense.



Notice the two different fill stitch patterns in the red and white stripes of the flag. By changing the direction and pattern of the fills, you can create additional visual texture and dimension to designs, even with a solid color.



Running stitches add character and visual interest to the shirt, taking it from a basic red shirt to a classic farmer's plaid. Running stitches also appear on the ear of corn, adding texture to the cob as the individual kernels.

Running stitches give the garlands the shape and texture of leaves without adding much to the overall stitch count of the design.

Running stitches: Understated essential

Running stitches are the simplest stitch of all, a single line of thread, like a dashed line drawn across the fabric. They may look basic, but they do a lot of behind-the-scenes work in machine embroidery. Use running stitches for fine outlines, small details, shading effects, and even hidden "travel" stitches that move the thread from one part of the design to another. They're also often used as underlay, a foundation layer of stitches that stabilizes the fabric before the top stitches are embroidered.

Why they're great:

- Versatile
- Quick to stitch and low stitch count
- Perfect for subtle details or soft shading

What to watch out for:

Running stitches don't provide coverage, so they're easy to lose on busy fabrics or textured materials. If the stitch length is too short, they can also perforate delicate fabrics. On the flip side, if they're too long, they can snag.

Specialty stitches: Fun extras

Once you're comfortable with the basics, you'll start to notice a few specialty stitches that can add flair to your embroidery:

- **Bean stitch:** a triple stitch that runs back and forth, creating a bolder outline with a hand-done look.
- **Zigzag stitch:** a looser cousin of satin stitches, great for appliques, playful accents, or adding texture and dimension on decorative fills.
- **Motif stitches:** preset decorative patterns (like hearts, stars, or swirls) often used for borders or kids' designs.

These aren't everyday stitches, but they're fun to experiment with when you want to add character to a design.



Matching stitches to fabric & design

One of the biggest aha moments in embroidery comes when you realize that stitch choice isn't just about the design, it's also about the fabric of the product you're stitching on.

- Lightweight fabrics (like T-shirts) do better with fill stitches at a lighter density, to avoid puckering.
- Heavier fabrics (like denim) can handle dense satin stitches or bold fills.
- Stretchy performance fabrics need stabilization underneath and often benefit from fill stitches that spread tension more evenly.

Talented digitizers also layer stitch types to create stability. For example, laying down a running stitch underlay beneath satin stitches to help prevent puckering and keep the columns looking smooth. If you've run into embroidery headaches, chances are the stitch type (or its density) was part of the issue. Some common culprits:

- Satin stitches that are too wide cause threads to snag or leave gaps.
- Fill stitches that are too dense cause a stiff, heavy design that doesn't drape well.
- Running stitches that are too light allow fine details to disappear into the fabric.

When in doubt, adjust density, length, or underlay. Small tweaks can make a big difference in how a design looks and feels.

Like most things in embroidery, the best way to learn and create high quality embroidery is to test, test, test. Keep a stack of scrap fabric handy and run small test sew-outs, especially before you hoop to a customer's garment. Not only does this save mistakes, but it also builds your eye for how different stitches behave.

Don't be afraid of trial and error. Embroidery is as much an art as it is a science. The more you stitch, the more natural it becomes to look at a design and think, "That's not going to look good, or this big area needs a textured fill." Remember, there are resources everywhere: industry publications, software tutorials, embroidery and apparel decoration trade shows, and industry groups like the National Network of Embroidery Professionals, all designed to help you keep learning and growing as an apparel decoration professional.

Embroidery stitches are the building blocks of every design. Once you understand how satin, fill, running, and a few specialty stitches work, you'll be able to make smart choices that give your work a polished, professional edge. Think of it this way: stitches are tools in your creative toolbox. Knowing when to use each one, and how they interact with your fabric and the design, is what takes your work from "that's nice" to "wow, that looks amazing!" Go ahead, experiment and encourage your digitizer to take a bit of creative license with a design, while keeping it within reason. **GP**



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



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Diversifying in the decorated apparel industry

Do your research before jumping into new decoration methods

By Megan Griffith

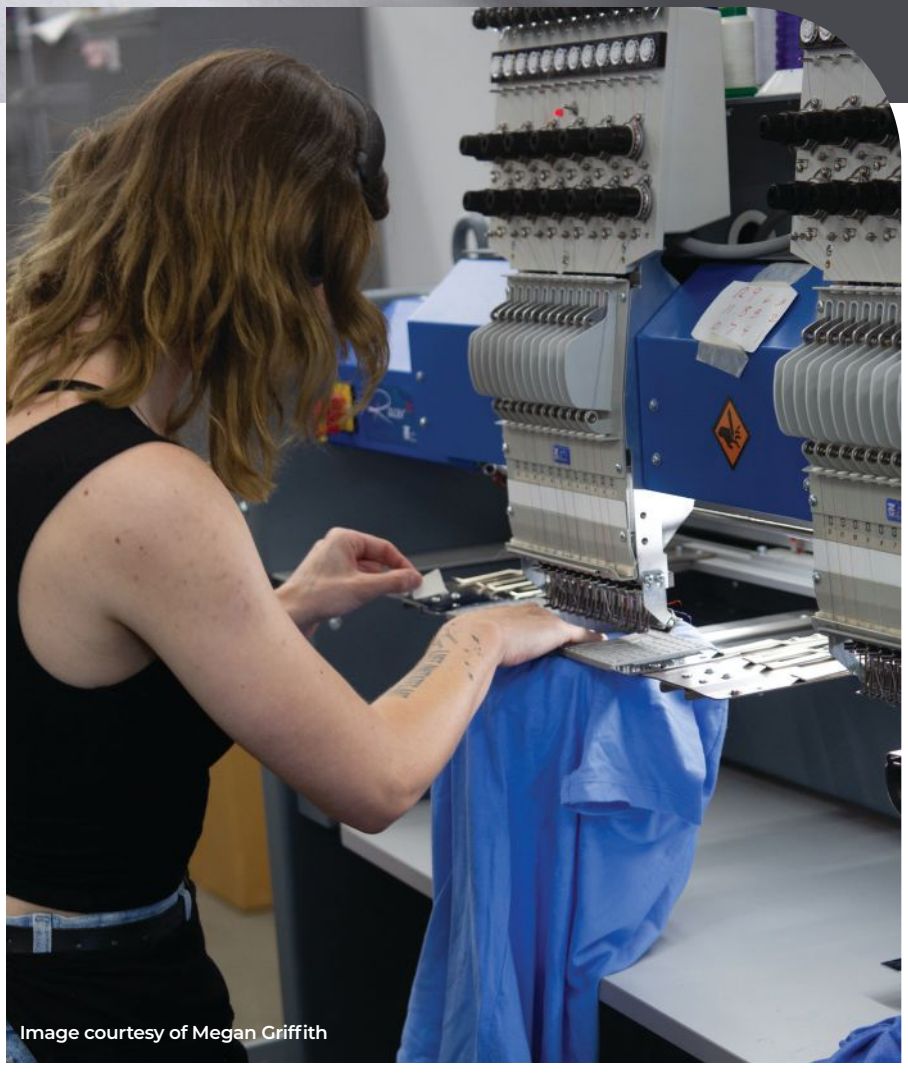


Image courtesy of Megan Griffith

In 2009, we went to a trade show and were absolutely convinced direct-to-garment (DTG) printing was the technology of the future. We already had screen printing and embroidery on deck, but a clever salesperson gave us all the examples of how easy DTG would be, how it would replace screen printing, and how it would be another source of income as a plug-and-play source for fulfilling client needs.

About a year after purchasing our DTG printer, it was thrown in the dumpster. The amount of time we spent fighting it, fixing it, and trying to get prints to look good, inevitably didn't make it worth it. Now, DTG has come a long way in 16 years and is a great resource for the decorated apparel industry. But it still never came back in-house with us.

The thing about diversifying your revenue sources is that there are a lot of positives that come with it, and a lot of salespeople who will try to convince you it's the right thing for your business. But the reality is, only you know what's right for your business,



Image courtesy of Megan Griffith

and the most important thing you can do before bringing a new product or service in-house is your homework.

Why diversify?

There's tons of potential with diversifying your business, not the least of which is that it mitigates your risk in a single market in the event of a market disruption. We saw this in 2020; the companies that didn't get creative with how and what they were selling fell apart, while the companies that switched angles and started making masks, fundraising for essential workers, and expanding what they were selling bounced back quicker.

Beyond protecting yourself in market fluctuations, diversifying opens your business to new revenue streams and a competitive advantage in your area. We started out only doing embroidery for more than a decade, until we finally opted to bring screen printing in-house with a six-head manual screen printer. It completely revolutionized our business and ultimately took us from a small mom and pop shop to being one of the bigger print shops in our area. It remains our biggest revenue stream, even with the trend of embroidery coming back in fashion.

The importance of doing your homework

While it could be argued that the technology was not where it needed to be with our DTG printer and the reason for its failure versus our success in screen printing, I would say a big contributing factor was our failure to research and weigh if this was best for our company. Oftentimes, a company choosing to diversify for the wrong reasons will see issues like a strain on their resources and staff, high initial costs, and risk of losing focus or brand identity. That's why the homework is so important: doing the research and deliberate thought will make more room for success than jumping into something blindly.

In the 1980s, pen manufacturer BIC decided to roll out disposable perfume and underwear. If you've never heard of this before, there's a reason: they were failures. When analyzing whether you should bring something new under your umbrella, ask what your company does better than the competitors, and if this new service would align with furthering that message to your customers. Ask what your customers most need from your business. For BIC, they are superb at making reliable and disposable pens. But perfume and underwear are intimate to a consumer, and so far off base from what their customers needed, that it failed.

Partner with other shops

Remember, you're not alone in this industry, and finding partnerships will help you do what you do best, while your partner can do what they do best. We use a lot of direct-to-film (DTF) services, but have yet to make the jump to bringing a DTF printer in-house. After talking to a lot of shops that do DTF, it was clear that with the amount we do and the quality we expect, we would need a full-time staff member maintaining machines, being an expert in color management, and monitoring



prints. For us, it just wasn't worth it. However, we partner with Limitless Transfers and have a great relationship, so we can focus on what we do best, and trust them to focus on what they do best. We have partnerships with promo vendors, patch vendors, and digitizers (so we can always say no to every digitizing spam call). They're all companies that do better than us in their area, so we can stay focused on our own business.

Consider partners that will further your brand identity. Disney partnering with McDonald's and Mattel is a wise move because it furthers the brand loyalty with Disney characters and the culture that Disney has developed through toys and branding. If your business almost exclusively sells to hardcore bands, it doesn't make sense to do contract work for a uniform company. That's spreading yourself too thin and not serving either industry well. But if you instead look to partner with a poster printer or an event venue, that could make a lot more sense in delivering something your brand already does successfully.

Careful consideration

The struggle with diversifying is usually that the company is faced with the decision in an atmosphere that's not conducive to thoughtful deliberation. So often, we are jumping with two feet in when we should be analyzing if it's water or lava. Whether it's at a conference or it's because of an economic downturn, the stress of making a fast and unthoughtful decision can really impact a business in the long run.

Spending time working out who you are as a brand and what values you stand for will ultimately be the best protection when opportunities to diversify come. If you already know exactly who you are and where you want to go, it will be easier to identify a yes or a no when it presents itself. We had several companies trying to convince us 10 years ago to create an online designer because "That's the way the whole industry is going," according to several salespeople.

Those can be great tools, but we knew our clients come to us for custom art and a custom experience, so when the opportunity arose, it was easy to recognize the no when it presented itself, because that's not who we are. And sure enough, we've had a lot of success in growing that identity of a custom experience for our clients from beginning to end, and the people who come to us are the ones looking for that. Knowing who you are, what your customers need, and what your company is great at is a sure-fire safety net when taking the leap to diversify your company. **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 was 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.

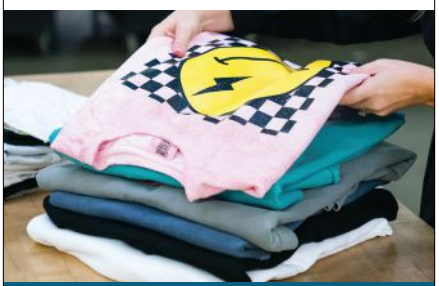
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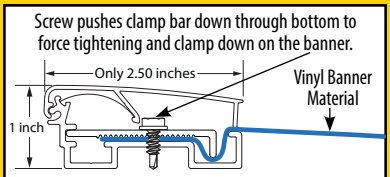
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Marketing foundation: Stop guessing, start growing

By Aaron Montgomery

Marketing can make even seasoned business owners throw up their hands. There are so many options, from social media, email, paid ads, networking, and AI tools, that it's easy to feel like you're just tossing darts in the dark. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, and often you're left second-guessing whether the effort was even worth it.

Here's the truth: marketing doesn't have to be complicated, and it definitely doesn't have to run you ragged. The businesses that grow the strongest aren't the ones doing all the things. They're the ones with a solid foundation built on knowing their audience, showing up consistently, and using systems that support growth without burning them out.

That foundation comes down to three things: clarity, connection, and consistency.

Clarity: Know who you're talking to

The No. 1 mistake most business owners make is trying to talk to everyone. When you try to be all things to everyone, you end up being nothing to no one. You blend into the noise. Clarity is about narrowing your focus and getting crystal clear on who your best customer is and what they need from you.

If you can answer these three questions, with as much clarity as possible, then you can make better decisions about how you will rise above the noise. "Who is my ideal customer?" "What is their biggest struggle or need I can fill right now?" and "How will they feel after working with me?"

Your answers become the foundation of every marketing message you create. Instead of "We sell shirts," it becomes, "We help schools create team spirit with high-quality custom apparel that makes athletes feel proud to wear their colors." See the difference? One is a product. The other is a solution tied to an emotion.

When you're clear about who you serve and the problem you solve, marketing shifts from chasing random strangers who don't care about what you do to attracting the people whom you can help and build a relationship with. It stops feeling like guesswork and starts feeling like confidence.

Connection: Marketing is about people, not posts

Once you know who you're serving, the next step is creating a genuine connection. People don't buy from businesses, brands, or logos that don't have a deep trust in; they buy from people. They want to see your story, your values, and your personality.

I thought for a long time that marketing was selling, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. If your marketing leads to a sale, great, but marketing is simply making the right people aware of what you do, so if they have a need or a problem to solve, they know who to go to. Too often, marketing gets boiled down to quick hacks and pressure tactics.



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But real connection comes from what I call the I³ Formula:

- **Be interesting**. Share stories, insights, and creative solutions that set you apart. There is a unique value that you bring to the table that makes you interesting, that you need to share in your marketing. Don't just show your product, show the problems it solves and the impact it has.
- **Be interested**. Pay attention to your customers. Ask questions, respond to comments, and show you actually care about their goals and challenges. A famous quote by Theodore Roosevelt says, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." One more "buy my product" shows very little interest in them.
- **Be inviting**. Don't leave people hanging. Make it easy for them to take the next step with a clear, friendly call-to-action. Think of it like a conversation at a trade show booth. You don't just shout at everyone walking by. You make eye contact, you listen, you share something meaningful, and then you invite them to learn more. Many people think a call to action is too "salesy." But the reality is, people need to feel invited to the next step, so a specific, clear call to action is how we can be inviting.

Consistency: Pick one lane & stay in it

Even the clearest, most engaging message won't work if you show up once in a blue moon. Consistency is what separates the dabblers from the growers. The trap many small businesses fall into is either trying to be everywhere at once or giving up too soon when results don't happen overnight. We have all been there: posting on five platforms, running ads, networking, emailing, and podcasting until we burn out or give up because we spent so much time and money for no results in two days.

Here's the antidote: pick one marketing strategy and commit to it for 90 days. If you love writing, focus on blogs or email newsletters. If you love talking, lean into video or podcasting. If you love teaching, host workshops or create tutorials. If you love face-to-face interactions, make networking your priority.

Choose the lane that plays to your strengths and where your ideal customer already hangs out. Then, stick with it long enough to build momentum. You'll be amazed at how much growth comes from simply showing up consistently in one place. I know because my podcast didn't become the industry's oldest and most listened to podcast overnight. Thirteen years later and 600-plus episodes, we are still going strong. We are not the best in audio quality, we don't have the most expensive edited content, and we just show up.

Systems that support you

The final piece of building a sustainable marketing foundation is putting systems in place so the work doesn't swallow you whole. That might mean scheduling content in batches, setting up automated email sequences, or using AI tools for brainstorming and admin tasks.

The key is to let systems handle the repetitive work while you focus on the human side, like relationships, creativity, and service. AI can generate ideas or automate scheduling, but it can't replace your voice, your humor, or your passion. Use it as a sidekick, not the superhero.

Stop guessing, start growing

When you are guessing, it seems that marketing is about being the loudest voice or jumping on every new platform. But with a foundation and the clarity of knowing who you serve, the growth of your business feels natural and doesn't need as much time or resources. With a foundation, you can quickly build connections, which build trust and relationships. And with a foundation and clarity, burnout is a thing of the past, and consistency is the norm because you love sharing your gifts with the world. You will be showing up regularly in a way that feels authentic to you.

When you focus on those three pillars, marketing stops feeling like a constant guessing game. It becomes a natural extension of the work you love. You'll attract better customers, save yourself from burnout, and set your business on a path of steady, sustainable growth.

So, take a breath. Write down your clarity statement. Pick your one marketing strategy for the next 90 days. And start building a foundation that helps your business grow without running you into the ground. 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.

Considering an equipment purchase?

Benefits of leasing versus a loan

By Shelley Widhalm

Most small business owners in the sign and graphics industry are shifting from leasing their equipment to taking out a loan, and not just for the tax benefits.

That's because the business owners own the equipment as soon as they start the loan, while a lease requires a balloon payment at the end of the loan or a return of the equipment. Business owners can also immediately start earning off their investment with new equipment or updated or upgraded purchases.

"In the sign and graphics industry, typically the customer is buying something that's going to make money for them right away," said Greg Bourdon, COO of ElmBlue Capital, a business banking service based in Stratham, New Hampshire, that provides capital to small and medium-sized businesses for equipment purchases. "Any piece of equipment that's producing something that the business then sells makes it much easier to justify buying that piece of equipment."



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Another difference in financing and leasing in the sign and graphics industry is the pace of technology, said Jeff Mansfield, vice-president of business development for Beacon Funding in Northbrook, Illinois, which provides equipment financing services to small to mid-size businesses.

"In industries like construction or manufacturing, a piece of equipment might remain cutting-edge for 15 to 20 years. But in the sign and graphics industry, printing presses, wide-format printers, and finishing equipment can be outdated within five years," Mansfield said. "Equipment usage varies greatly in this industry — some shops may need high-volume, industrial-grade printers running around the clock, while others operate with smaller-format machines. Financing solutions are designed with flexibility so that businesses of all sizes, from startups to established shops, can get the equipment they need."

Cash is one option for making those needed equipment purchases, since the purchases can be claimed as expenses the same year for tax write-offs, while also not requiring any kind of interest payment.

"It's obviously a very fast and easy process," said Troy Putnam, director of sales for Geneva Capital LLC, in Alexandria, Minnesota, which offers equipment financing and leasing solutions. "The customer is in control of their cash and is not waiting on anyone to expedite it."

Using cash, however, can put a strain on working capital, limiting a business's ability to have funds in place for future growth, Putnam said, adding that a loan or lease may end up being the better option.

For customers wanting to make the purchase through a loan or lease agreement, Bourdon starts with a credit application, either online or on the phone — he also works with vendors wanting to sell equipment to buyers needing financing services. The credit application asks for basic information about the business and type of ownership, plans for equipment usage, and budget and revenue forecasts.

Once credit is approved, Bourdon provides education around different financing options and payment plans and, if needed, how the business can improve its credit, particularly if the owner is just starting out and doesn't have established credit or a high enough credit score.

"Our goal is [to] be able to find the product that fits," Bourdon said. "The better your business credit and payment history is, the better access you will have to bigger and better financial products."

Loans

For loan products, Bourdon sets up agreements with monthly payments that are based on the total cost of the equipment, plus interest, while also working with customers to ensure they can bring in enough revenue to make all of their payments. The downside can be a larger down payment, as well as tying up credit capacity that can be used elsewhere, but then there isn't a reoccurring lease either.

"It's easier for us and the business



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owner to come up with a plan for an ROI that goes back to that monthly payment," Bourdon said. "Being able to finance that helps them generate more positive cash flow more quickly in the process."

A loan follows a fixed payment cycle throughout the term, and the customer owns the equipment from the first day of the agreement, owing the entity that takes out a lien on the equipment. One type of loan is an Equipment Finance Agreement that allows customers to pay off the loan earlier than its term, while a lease is difficult to end early.

"A bank loan could be an easy process if you have an established relationship with the bank or local lending source," Putnam said. "You can get low rates. And you could consolidate with other loans."

Working capital loan

A working capital loan is an income-based, short-term loan, typically for 6-18 months, with high payments and that's used to invest in immediate business needs. Cash backs the loan, unlike an equipment loan that's backed by the actual equipment that can be repossessed and resold.

"Working capital is a good solution for short-term funding, if you're looking to get quick cash — and looking to pay it off over a short period of time, typically six to 24 months," Putnam said. "The benefit of it is immediate cash. It's not tied or secured by any collateral. It's an unsecured debt obligation."

Startup financing is another funding option, but for newer businesses wanting to acquire equipment and small assets, freeing up their cash for other business activities, such as purchasing inventory and supplies or covering the costs of building enhancements.

"Some customers buy equipment on their line of credit, but the risk there is if you max it out, then if something comes up that's urgent, you've removed that buffer," Bourdon said.



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Small Business Administration loan

Another type of loan product, a Small Business Administration loan, requires a more intensive application process and can be difficult to acquire for equipment. It's more ideal for large asset purchases, such as buildings, and



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typically has a longer term of seven to 10 years.

"Whoever you choose for a lender, whether it's us or somebody else, they should be open and willing to discuss the variety of options available to you that meet your specific business needs," Bourdon said. "The other thing is [to] choose a lender that feels like a partnership. Your lender should be equally invested in the success of your business and want to be there for your next piece of equipment."

Leases

Alternatively, a lease is more like a long-term rental with flexible options at the end.

"At the end of the lease, (the customer) can often choose to purchase the equipment for a nominal amount, upgrade to new equipment, or simply return it," Mansfield said. "Leasing is especially useful in industries like sign and graphics where technology evolves quickly, and companies may not want to be locked into older models."

The customer also may need the equipment for a short amount of time or isn't sure about making a final purchase. They don't have to make a large down payment, and during the term of the lease, they're simply renting the equipment, though they may end up investing more in payments than with a loan. As with a loan, a lease generally can have a duration of 12 to 72 months, though oftentimes the term is shorter, especially with equipment that has a limited lifespan.

"You don't want to be on a lease beyond the equipment's useful life — or making payments if you're no longer using it," Bourdon said.

A lease protects against technological obsolescence, allowing customers to obtain a new piece of equipment with a new lease, Putnam said.

"If it's highly technology-driven, it might be obsolete in three to five years," Putnam said.

At the end of the lease, the customer can opt to return the equipment or pay a fair market value or residual balloon payment, but the amount is unpredictable and is based on the equipment's current value. If the customer decides to make the final payment, they own the equipment, which they can continue to use for operations or as a spare for additional capacity.

Previously, customers tended to opt for leasing due to the tax benefit of taking monthly deductions and claiming multiple tax-year write-offs as business expenses. Now, under the current administration's One Big Beautiful Bill, customers purchasing new and used equipment through cash or a loan can immediately deduct the full cost of the equipment without seeing the equipment depreciate.

However, understanding the intricacies of a standard appreciation schedule typically comes from a tax advisor, Bourdon said.

"People should work with an accountant or CPA to find the best option for them — and the tax benefits that are in place for 2025 and beyond, so they understand how they can help their business," Bourdon said. "They should know what's available and have an idea of what questions to ask." GP



Shelley Widhalm is a freelance writer and editor and founder of Shell's Ink Services, a writing and editing service based in Loveland, Colorado. She has more than 15 years of experience in communications and holds a master's degree in English from Colorado State University. She can be reached at shellsinkservices.com or shellsinkservices@gmail.com.



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Sell holidays while it's hot

By Marshall Atkinson

The shops that win the holiday season aren't winging it in Q4. They're already building their offers, reaching out to their best clients, locking in production schedules, and solving problems before they ever show up. That's what this article is about.

We're going to walk through how to start selling holiday work today. You'll get ideas on what to offer, how to market it, and ways to ensure your customers are also thinking ahead. It's not just about shirts. It's about giving your clients the kind of help that makes you their go-to partner all year.

You're the guide. Your customers need someone to lead them through the chaos. You already know what happens if they wait too long. Help them avoid that.

Let's get ahead of the season before the season gets ahead of you. Here's what usually happens: Somewhere in November, you realize it's almost Thanksgiving, panic, and blast out a quick *"Still time to order your holiday gear!"* post on your socials. You might get a few bites, but it's mostly chaos. Smaller orders, late approvals, backorders, last-minute art changes, rush fees, and *"Can we get these before Christmas Eve?"* questions the further you drift into December.

Sound familiar? That's not a holiday strategy. That's two lumps of coal in a dirty, tattered stocking.

Waiting until Q4 means you're reacting, not leading. And when you're reacting, your margins shrink, your quality drops, and your team gets burned out. Even worse? You miss the best work.

The better clients have already bought from someone else.

Tip: If you've ever said *"I wish this was better…"* that's your cue to fix it now.

Q4 started in Q3

The summer months aren't the off-season. They're the runway. If you want a strong Q4, treat the dog days of summer as your strategic planning window. This is when you fill your pipeline, prep your offers, and lock in the good stuff.

This is also when clients are open to conversations. They aren't in full holiday panic yet. They've still got budget left. They're looking for ways to thank employees, impress customers, and finish the year strong. Your job is to lead that conversation. Ask them:

- *"Have you thought about doing a branded gift for your team this year?"*
- *"Want to get ahead of the holiday chaos and reserve your production window now?"*
- *"Can I show you a few holiday merch ideas that are perfect for you?"*

That's how you guide them. Be the trusted advisor who shows up early and makes the holidays easier.

Tip: ROI doesn't mean return on investment. It means return on intent. Your calendar isn't just a scheduling tool. It's a selling tool. Block out your November and December production capacity now, and start filling it on purpose.

Contact your best customers first

If one thing is going to make the holiday season easier, it's knowing exactly who's locked in early. That means reaching out to your best clients first, getting them on the books, and giving them a reason to commit.

Make a short list of your top 20 or 30 customers. Reach out to them. *"We're prebooking holiday orders now. You always do something great this time of year, and I wanted to make sure you get first dibs on our schedule."*

That's it. You're not pitching. You're offering them an advantage. It's



exclusive, it's proactive, and it shows you're thinking ahead for them.

If you want to drive action, give them a reason to act. Offer a limited product run. Send them an idea book based on products known to have the best availability. Mock up some examples based on their previous orders in new styles or colorways.

Tip: Use language like *"limited production slots"* or *"VIP scheduling"* to create urgency without being pushy. People value what's scarce, especially when it saves them stress.

Build the offer now, not later

Customers can't say yes to something they don't know about. If you want holiday orders, you need something to show them.

Start by creating a few simple, clear offers. Don't wait until inspiration hits around Halloween. Don't overthink it. Think plug-and-play.

Here are a few examples that work great:

- **Branded gift kits for employees** with a cozy hoodie, a mug with hot chocolate packets, or a cozy blanket. Show how you can use variable data to embellish with their name somewhere.
- **Holiday merch bundles** for your customers, tailored to their brand guidelines. Demonstrate how long it takes to handle production and ship so their customers receive everything in early December, not in January.
- **Client thank-you boxes** with embroidered hats, branded snacks, or other custom promo items like Christmas tree ornaments.
- **Order early with trust** and help build confidence with guaranteed ship dates.

Package the idea with a name, a mockup, and a delivery window. Then put it in front of your best-fit customers and ask, *"Want me to reserve one of these for you?"*

Tip: You don't need 12 options. You need three good ones. Too much choice creates decision fatigue. Keep it simple. Narrow it down to what you think will work best for your top customers.

Lead with what matters to them

The goal isn't to sell shirts. The goal is to help your clients win the holidays.

Think about what they care about. They want:

- Less stress
- To look good in front of their team or boss
- A smooth gift-giving process
- Something unique that shows they care

This is where you shift the conversation. Ask what they're trying to **accomplish**, not just what they want to **buy**. You'll come across as a problem solver, not a vendor.

Tip: Use phrases like *"I thought this might make your life easier"* or *"A few of our clients did this last year and loved the response."* Make it feel helpful, not pushy.

Make it real with mockups & examples

Visuals sell. A mockup makes an idea real. So, show them something. Use last year's art and drop it on a new item. Create a version of your idea kit with their logo. Send a short video walk-through of a gift bundle. It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to help them imagine it.





Pair that with clear messaging:

- *"Book now, ship before Dec. 1."*
- *"Lock in your favorite items before inventory runs low."*
- *"Preapproved designs mean zero back-and-forth later."*

You're helping them cross something off their list before they even add it. Let them know that you also offer custom programs, too. *"Got something else in mind? Let's chat! Book a 30-minute call here and let's discuss!"*

Tip: Your offer is only as good as its clarity. Make it easy to say yes with a short message, one click, and done.

Don't let the Grinch steal your inventory

If you've been burned by out-of-stock items, you know the pain. One minute, your customer is excited about that cozy crewneck in forest green, and the next, it's gone until January. No fun for them. No margin for you.

This year, it's even trickier. Between tariffs, freight delays, and limited runs from suppliers, availability can shift fast. You don't control the supply chain. But you do control how you prepare for it.

Start by narrowing the options. Choose a few products with strong stock histories and broad color choices. Don't send your customers to browse the full catalog. That's a trap. Instead, offer a curated set of holiday-ready picks you've vetted in advance.

Tip: Pick items in multiple colors across sizes so that if one shade sells out, you'll have a fallback. You might even consider looking at different product manufacturers, so you have some options. Get some product bench strength prepped.

Offer substitutions before they are needed

Speaking of product outages, Plan B shouldn't happen after a backorder. It should already be in the pitch. When you send your idea kits or mockups, show two versions: your first choice and a solid backup. *"If supply gets weird, this alternate color or style still hits the mark."* That kind of prep builds trust. It shows you're looking out for them.

You're not just selling product. You're offering a smooth experience. That's what people remember.

Tip: Use the phrase *"availability approved"* when pitching product bundles. It adds confidence, and shows you're keeping an eye on stock levels.


Andrii Lysenko – stock.adobe.com

Create a sense of urgency without the panic

Your customers aren't trying to cause delays. They just don't realize how fast inventory can disappear.

That's where your role as the trusted guide comes in. Let them know you're watching the market, and offer clear scheduling windows. *"To guarantee delivery by Dec. 12, we need final approval by Oct. 17."* This isn't a scare tactic. It's a service. You're helping them protect their plans and avoid last-minute stress.

Tip: Include deadlines in your marketing materials. Add a little urgency, such as *"Limited slots remaining"* or *"Early booking ensures delivery."*

Lead gen like a holiday hero

If you want holiday orders in early, you can't wait until November to start talking about them. The shops that win are already planting seeds in August and September.

This is where your lead gen needs to kick in. Don't blast out a discount; instead, start conversations. Your goal is to warm up your audience with helpful ideas and early action.

Start simple. Send a short email that says:

"We're building out holiday projects now. Want to see a few ideas before inventory gets tight?"

That's it. No sales pitch. Just curiosity and help.

Tip: Call your campaign something fun. *"Christmas in August"* or *"The Early Elf Program"* or *"Santa's Priority List."* You'll get more opens if the subject line sounds playful, not promotional.

Build a lead magnet that works

A good lead magnet gives your customer a reason to raise their hand. Not everything has to be an order form. Try something more consultative:

- A downloadable holiday merch guide



- A top 10 gift ideas under $25 cheat sheet
- A branded gift checklist for corporate clients
- A holiday timeline planner to avoid rush fees

The point is to offer value before asking for a sale. Make it feel like a resource, not a brochure.

Tip: Add a call to action like *"Want help picking a few winners for your team?"* with a link to book a 15-minute chat.

Go where your customers are already paying attention

Email is great, but don't stop there. Turn your offers into quick social posts. Drop mockups into LinkedIn, Instagram, or Facebook with captions like: *"We're prebooking holiday production now. This kit was a big hit last year. Want something similar?"*

If you have a physical store or shop, build a small holiday preview wall with examples. Mention it to walk-ins or folks picking up their orders. Place a printed, branded flyer on the top of every box before you seal it up.

Keep the conversation going wherever you're already connecting with clients.

Tip: Every post, email, or conversation should point to a next step. That might be a link to book a call, a preorder form, or a page with more info. Don't just show the idea, guide them to act. People don't know where to go until you tell them.

Be the shop they can count on

Your customers don't just want a printer or embroiderer. Anyone can do that. They want someone who can take one more thing off their plate. They want a result.

That's your real opportunity this holiday season. Not just to sell more stuff, but to become the partner they trust to make it all easier. That happens when you lead early, offer smart solutions, and walk them through the process.



Don't assume they know what to do. Show them.

Put together a timeline. Recommend deadlines. Offer reminders. Help them plan their gifting or holiday promotions before they even realize it's time.

And don't forget to follow up. A simple, *"Hey, still want to lock in that gift kit before the 15th?"* can turn a maybe into a done deal.

People get busy. You staying on top of it makes you look like a pro.

Tip: Follow-up isn't pestering. It's service. You're helping them follow through on something they already wanted. Not all follow-ups have to be an email, either. If you are like me, you have over 100 unread emails waiting for you right now. Pick up the phone or text them.

Let's recap: What's on Santa's real wish list?

If you want to win the holiday season, do the work now.

- **Treat Q3 like your Q4 runway.** Start the planning, build your pipeline, and get conversations going.
- **Create simple offers and mockups.** Make it real, make it visual, and make it easy to say yes.
- **Vet your inventory early.** Curate products that are available, and prep a backup plan.
- **Market with lead gen, not discounts.** Start conversations, share helpful tools, and point to clear next steps. Don't give away your profit to book jobs.
- **Be the guide.** Show up early, lead the plan, and help your customers avoid the chaos.

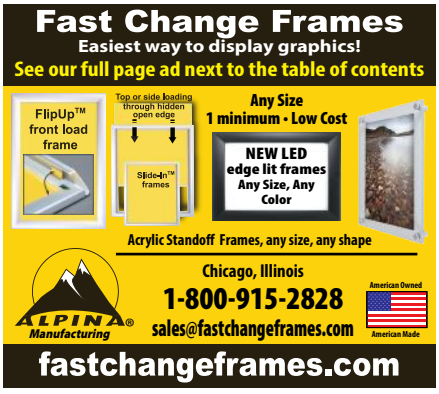
This isn't about pushing product. It's about being the shop they can count on. Start now, not in October. Santa's watching. Get on the nice list for a change. **GP**



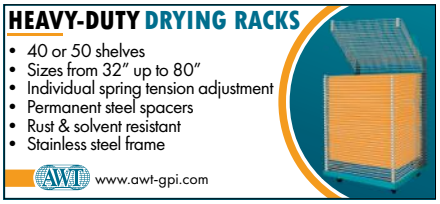
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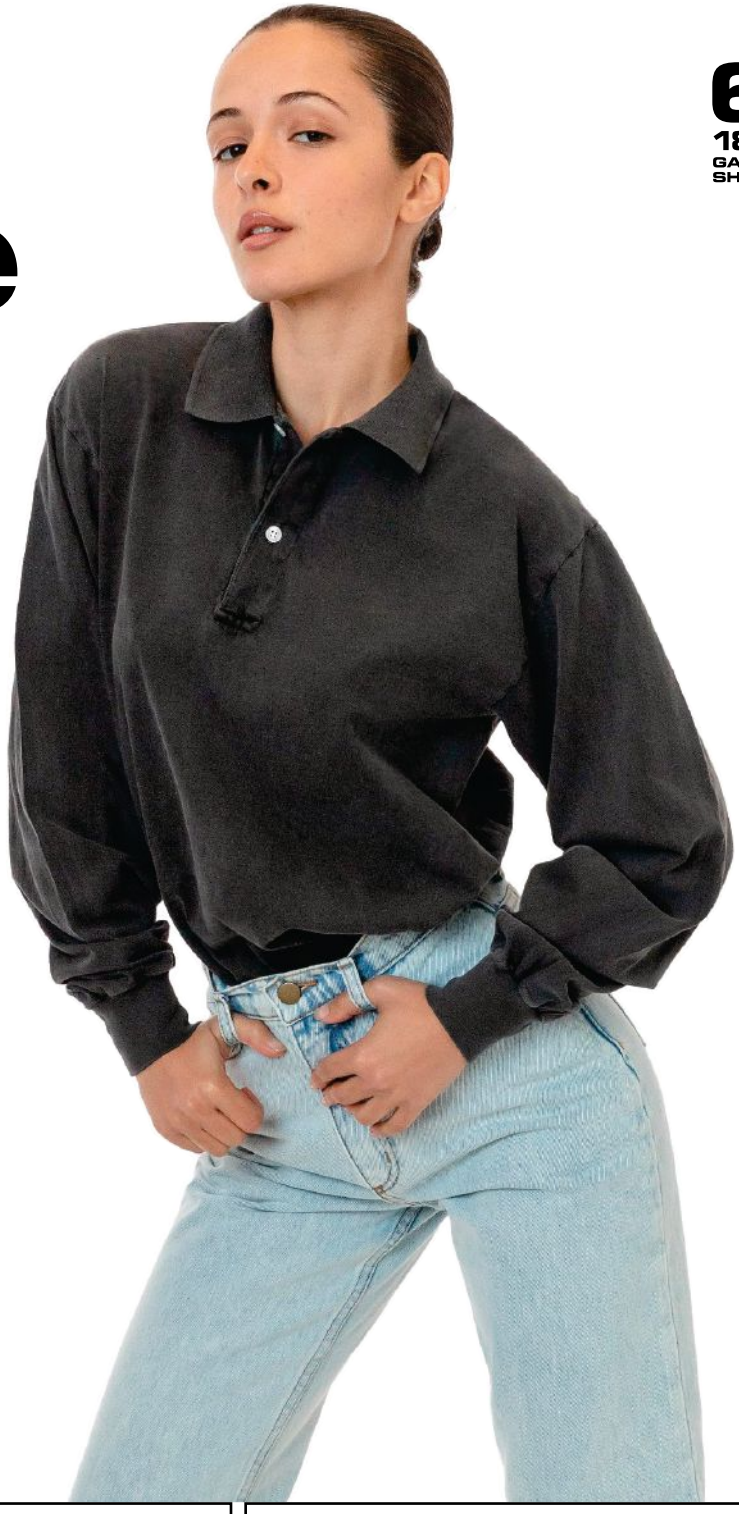
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