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(Image courtesy of S&S Activewear)

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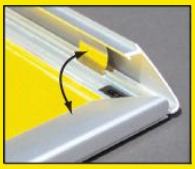
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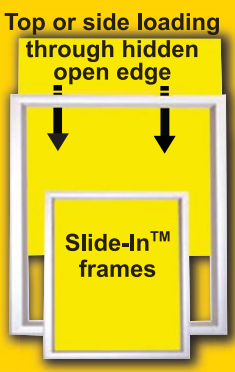
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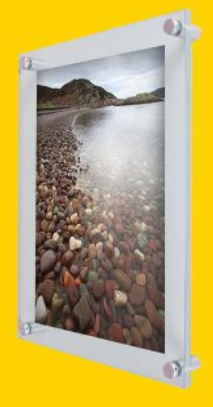




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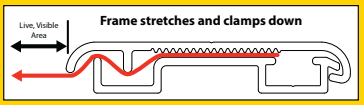
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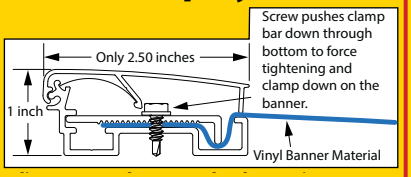






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New year outlook

If the past few years have taught us anything, it's to be ready for anything. We've weathered instability in the form of supply chain disruptions, inconsistent tariff agreements, inflation, high interest rates, and ever-shifting consumer expectations, all while trying to figure out how artificial intelligence can change our lives for the better. It has been a lot, to say the least, and those new desk calendars we opened Jan. 1 didn't magically make things easier.

There is hope, however. In Phillip Perry's 2026 economic outlook on page 44, you'll see there is potential for relief on the horizon. This year should bring a combination of declining interest rates and clarity around global trade that bodes well for stability and even growth for well-positioned companies. With supply chains normalized, there's hope for more predictable blank availability, fewer substitutes, and consistent pricing. Lead times for major equipment purchases should shorten, allowing for more realistic planning.

While more predictability in these outside forces doesn't solve everything, it gives shops room to plan and improve. If you're assessing your company's productivity and profitability coming into the new year, I encourage you to read Cole Lundstrom's article on page 40. There you'll learn how to focus on pricing at your shop and build a system through "Real math, real margins, and real-world practicality." He has built out a pricing calculator for you to help discover just what it takes to meet revenue goals at your business.

Our cover story this month is an in-depth look at T-shirt blanks. For our readers in apparel decorating, Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko's article on page 9 is an excellent examination of fibers, fashion, and fit that can help guide your inventory orders in the new year.

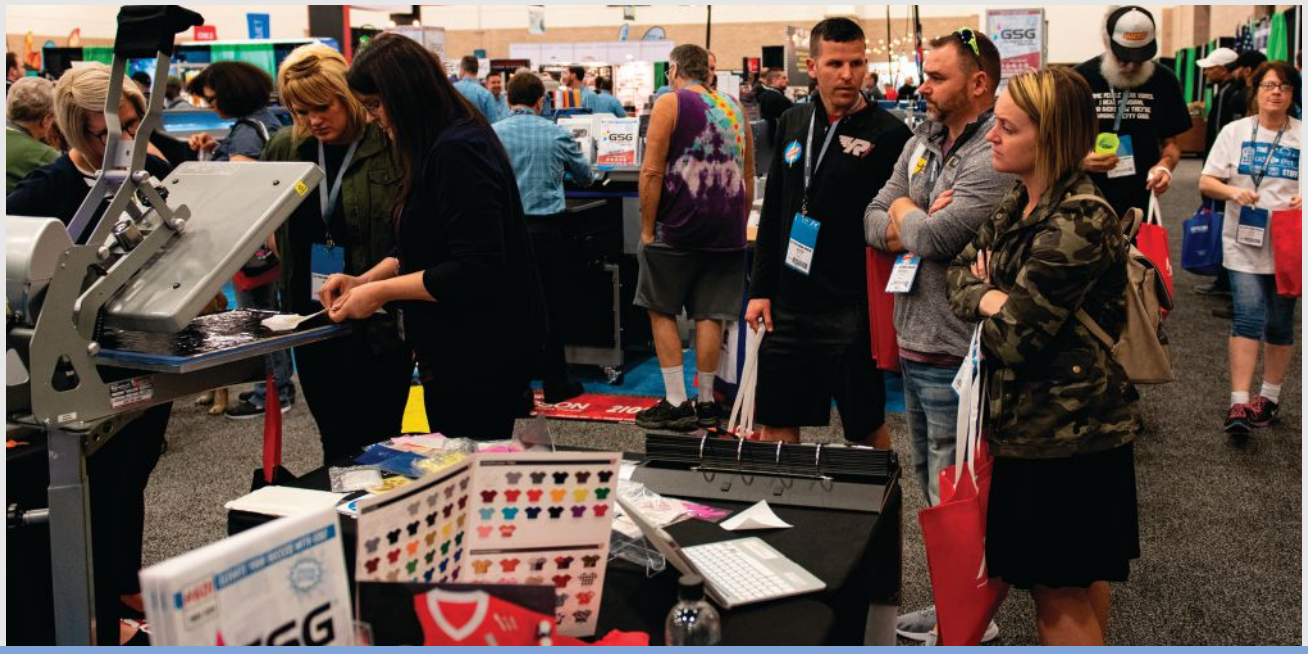
On page 18 in this issue, Lauren Stern walks us through a custom signage project her company completed at a multifamily housing unit in Maryland. Don't pass up the opportunity to see her thoughtful, intentional, vintage-inspired approach to a complete interior and exterior signage package.

For those in the awards and customization markets, don't miss Fawn Giese's introduction to blazering article on page 28. Learn how this combination of laser engraving and sandcarving can help elevate your shop from the competition.

As always, there's much more inside. We thank you for reading and wish you a peaceful and profitable new year.



James Anderson
Editor-in-Chief



2026 EVENTS

FEB

Decorated Apparel Expo
Feb. 20-21
Kansas City, MO
daxshow.com

APA Expo
Feb. 24-27
Las Vegas, NV
personalizationpros.org

MAR

ASI Show
March 9-11
Fort Worth, TX
asishow.com

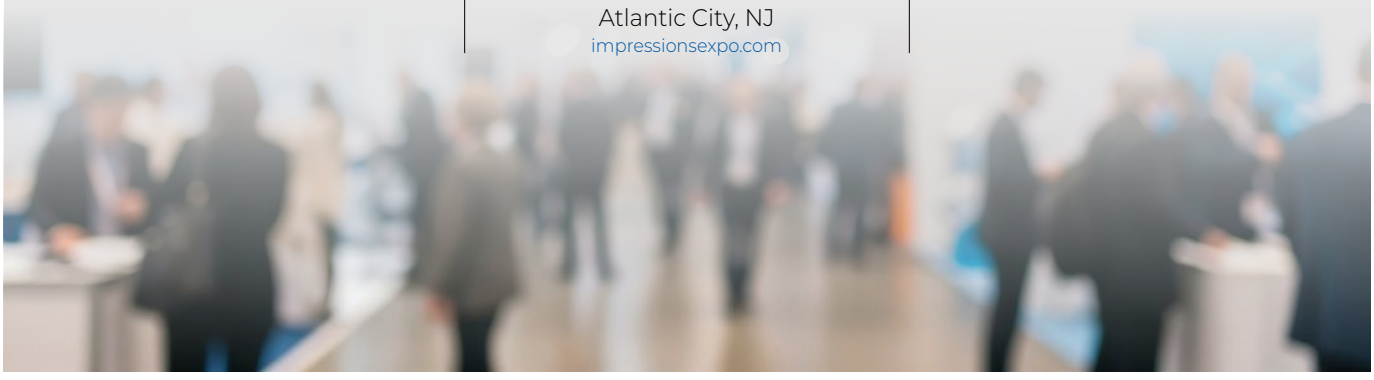
GRAPHICS PRO EXPO
March 12-14
Irving, TX
graphics-pro-expo.com

Impressions Expo
March 25-28
Atlantic City, NJ
impressionsexpo.com

APR

ISA Sign Expo
April 8-10
Orlando, FL
signexpo.org

Decorated Apparel Expo
April 24-25
Dayton, OH
daxshow.com



Alexe – stock.adobe.com

GIVING BACK

For the third consecutive year, **Infinity Her** donated 5% of proceeds from select pink caps during October to the **National Breast Cancer Foundation**.

Infinity Product Group strengthened its commitment to community care by pledging to match every $10 monthly employee donation to the SnackPack Program Fund at the **Samaritan Community Center** in Northwest Arkansas.

UPDATES

Alliance Franchise Brands unveiled its new training facility in Hanover, Maryland, with a hands-on educational program led by 3M Graphics Authorized Trainers.

Vantage Apparel expanded its direct-to-film decoration services, tripling capacity with a new 1,800-square-foot studio in Avenel, New Jersey.

MADE Laboratory launched Print Hustlers On-Demand, a digital platform offering the full content experience from Print Hustlers 2025.

World Emblem launched **Custom Genie** to combine its companies into one unified brand. As part of the restructuring, World Emblem has reshored all Custom Genie positions to its Norcross, Georgia, plant.

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

Electronics For Imaging has signed an agreement for **Fiery** to acquire all interests in **Inèdit Software**, a RIP and color management software company.

Gildan Activewear has officially completed its acquisition of **HanesBrands**.

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Seth Soltow
Gemini

Seth Soltow has joined the **Gemini** leadership team as chief operating officer (COO). As COO, Soltow will lead operational strategy and execution across all manufacturing sites and business units. Based in the Dallas area, he will spend significant time across Gemini's plant locations, engaging directly with teams and operations. Soltow brings over two decades of global leadership experience in both public and private sectors.



Andrew Downs
Berger Textiles USA

Berger Textiles USA appointed **Andrew Downs** the new general manager for Berger USA. After more than two years of service, **Nick Coulsen** stepped down from the role due to personal reasons. Downs, a long-standing and valued member of the Berger team, has been key in expanding its presence across the Midwest and in developing our product portfolio and intellectual property.



Mike Miserany
General Formulations

General Formulations added **Mike Miserany** as Canada sales manager, overseeing the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Quebec. With more than 28 years of experience in the paper, printing, and wide-format graphics industries, Miserany is said to bring a wealth of knowledge, strong customer relationships, and a passion for supporting the print community across Canada.



Robert Davis
Sharp Imaging and Information Company of America

Robert Davis has joined **Sharp's** professional display business as vice president of services and solutions. In his new role, Davis will work across the professional display organization to drive Sharp's commitment to delivering the best customer experience for end users and dealers.

INDUSTRY UPDATES

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS

Jeff Beja & Robert Wantland
Royal Apparel
Royal Apparel expanded its sales team with the appointments of **Jeff Beja** and **Robert Wantland** as account executives. Beja brings a strong track record in the apparel industry, most recently serving as an account executive at S&S Activewear. Prior to that, he held a regional sales role at Delta Apparel, where he honed his skills in building customer relationships and expanding market share. Wantland joins from Manhead Merchandise, where he built a reputation for strong networking, client-relationship development, and an entrepreneurial approach to sales throughout the music and entertainment industry.

PARTNERSHIPS

STAHLS' announced a new partnership with **Siser**, a manufacturer of heat transfer vinyl and cutting machines, officially becoming a Siser North American distributor.

L2 Brands and **Stetson** teamed up with the **Collegiate Licensing Company** to develop a custom-designed hat collection for seven Division I universities.

AS Colour will return as the official merchandise partner for **South by Southwest** 2026.

Imperial Headwear is an official "Inspired Partner" sponsor of **First Tee** through its philanthropic arm, the Imperial Foundation.

SRG announced an exclusive partnership with **All American Writing Instruments** (AAWI), naming SRG the sole North American supplier for AAWI's complete line of pens, pencils, and markers.

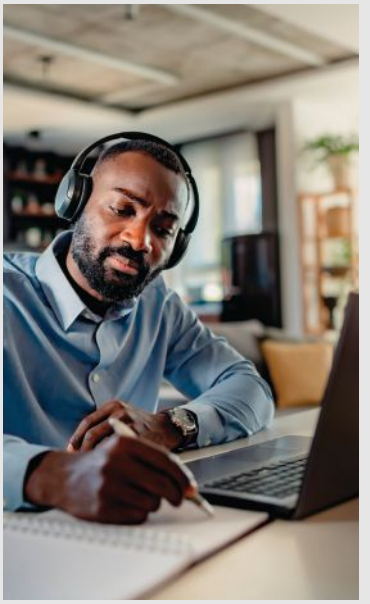
FDC Graphic Films entered into a strategic distribution partnership with the **POLI-TAPE Group**, a part of the **Fedrigoni Group**.

STAHLS' Fulfill Engine has partnered with **Spoke Custom**, bringing access to customizable products from brands like **CamelBak, Welly, Klean Kanteen, Arctic Zone**, and more.

Konica Minolta is now a certified reseller of **Color-Logic Solutions**.

Mimeo expanded its wide-format print division, powered by **Canon's** Arizona platform and the **Colex** Sharpcut finishing system.

WEBINARS



Xante
February 26

STAHLS'
April 30

Xante
May 28

Gemini
August 6

Xante
August 27

STAHLS'
October 22

Xante
November 19

All times 12 p.m. CST
Register at **gpro.link/webinars**

ANNIVERSARIES



Kati Headwear, the house brand of **Kati Sportcap & Bag**, celebrated its 40th anniversary.

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



Image courtesy of S&S Activewear

A blank space of possibility:

An in-depth look at apparel blanks, from materials & cuts to decorating & trends

By Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko

A well-made basic tee is the little black dress of the modern wardrobe. Versatile and timeless, the garment is a personal billboard of expression, a staple piece in countless outfits, and proof that true style often lies in simplicity and quality craftsmanship.

According to industry professionals, investing in premium fabric and a flawless fit is far from indulgence – it is a practical choice in comfort, durability, and a look that consistently outperforms fast-fashion wear.

"T-shirt blanks have come a really long way. The quality has evolved from carded open-end cotton to combed ring-spun cotton, which feels softer and prints better. The whole category is more refined in fabric, fit, and overall style," said Jacquelyn Bachner, content marketing specialist at S&S Activewear.

Nowadays, decorators are saddled with various consumer considerations when purchasing blank T-shirts, from intended use, material, and cut to equipment preference and cost effectiveness.

"First and foremost, it's really important to know the target audience before buying blanks. You need to understand what the shirts are being used for and what customers *actually want* because there are so many different types of T-shirts to choose from," Bachner said.

A one-size-fits-all approach is like a trap door leading to disappointment – and fashion faux pas. Since different demographics vary in their preferences, intended use guides fabric and fit choices.

"Choosing the right blank starts with knowing the right purpose. The use case drives material choice, budget, and print compatibility," said Brett Bjorkman, chief executive officer at Next Level Apparel

For example, a heavyweight tee lacks proper moisture-wicking and ultraviolet protection factor, making it unsuitable for someone who works in the outdoor heat all day; however, that same garment is ideal for embroidery or multi-technique decoration.

Similarly, a form-fitting cut may be best at a professional event, while a relaxed fit is preferred for casual, everyday use.

Know thy customer.

From fiber to fashion

Modern decorators reach for fabrics with a smooth surface and versatile application. According to Bjorkman, hand-feel is the first sensory test: softness, weight, and texture determine perceived quality before the tee is even tried on for size.

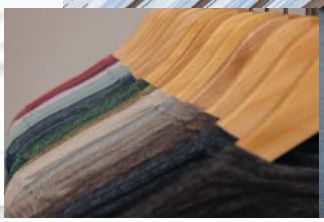
"Heavyweights are trending because they immediately feel substantial and premium," he noted.

As such, classic 100% cotton continues to be a top textile choice, especially in streetwear, lifestyle, creator merchandise, and fashion basics. The feel, breathability, and perceived high-end quality make it a perennial favorite.

"What truly allows us to deliver the best decoration results starts at the cotton seed itself. We work with









Images courtesy of Next Level Apparel

only the finest cotton, engineered for a smoother, cleaner surface that enhances both print and embroidery," said Jerome Thuillier, head of marketing, U.S., at Stanley/Stella.

Consumers gravitate to the natural texture, plus it pairs well with popular decoration methods like direct-to-film (DTF) and direct-to-garment (DTG) printing – the latter of which provides a soft but vibrant print.

In addition to 100% cotton, decorators appreciate synthetic blends for their stretch, performance, and longevity, especially in the activewear, workwear, and outdoor segments.

Chief Value Cotton (CVC), which is typically comprised of 60% cotton and 40% polyester, is growing in popularity as well. Admired for its versatility and affordability, CVC is comfortable, durable, as well as shrink and wrinkle resistant.

"Quality should always be the starting point because the blank is the foundation of the final product," Thuillier said. "Style and fit are just as important, since consumers now expect modern silhouettes that feel relevant and comfortable."

Fabulous fit

Today, men's tees are overwhelmingly synonymous with the term unisex, a popular choice that is easy to stock but tends to have a straighter fit.

"Men's cuts usually have a little more room through the shoulders and body, while women's styles are more fitted and have shorter sleeves or a tapered waist," Bachner explained, noting fit is impacted by how a shirt is sewn as well.

For example, a side seam creates a more retail-ready shape, while shirts without side seams look tubular and provide a boxier fit.

Youth apparel is its own unique consideration. Since it is often purchased online without being tried on, Bjorkman said visual appeal, standout design details, and clear e-commerce presentation are even more important.

"Fit matters, but aesthetics often drive the purchase," Bjorkman stated, advising decorators to stay abreast of current trends but remain true to brand identity and customer expectations.

Given various nuances in fit and sizing, it is common for decorators to stick with a brand and style that consistently hits the mark in quality, comfort, and value.

"If you have to mix brands, however, the next best move is to compare the size specs and measurements to find the closest match. Pay close attention to details like fabric content and fit descriptions, which can help you get as close as possible to the same [shirt]," Bachner said.

Once decorators define their preferred standard fit, then suppliers can provide complete size-run samples.

"[Remember] different garments can have different intended fits – as long as you merchandise and communicate this clearly," Bjorkman added. "If uniformity is critical, relabeling is a viable solution. A size is ultimately a designation. If one supplier's medium aligns more closely with your standard large, reclassify it to maintain consistency."

"The goal is to protect your brand DNA and ensure customers have a predictable experience," he continued.

The right tool for the job

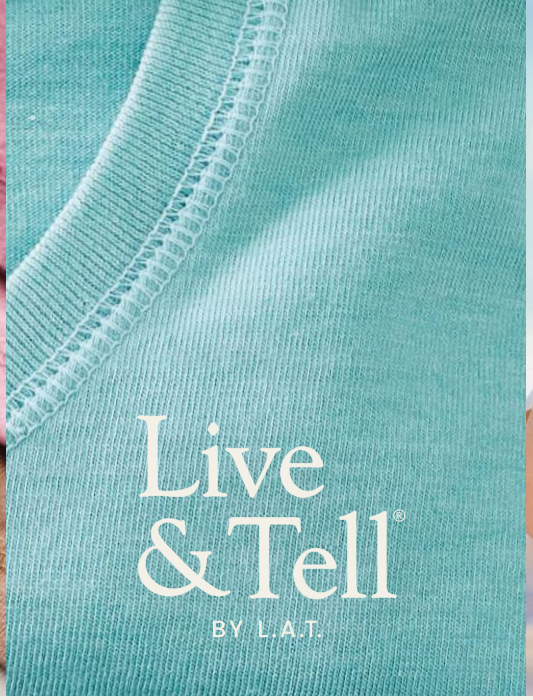
With no shortage of options on the market, decorators should keep fabric content, weave, and finish top of mind when choosing blank T-shirts. Marrying a textile with the right equipment ensures quality control and achieves the desired aesthetic.

The end result: a stamp of approval on the finished product and happy customers who are willing to share their positive experience with others.

"Be a yardstick of quality across all audiences," Thuillier said. "Offer the right fits and the right colors to the right people. Add your creativity in terms of print and color to the mix – and make sure they want to come back for more."

- **Screen printing & DTG:** Fine yarns and smooth surfaces work best. The 3600 (100% cotton) is ideal because it prints cleanly and requires less ink.
- **Screen printing:** CVC Blends/6210







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Images courtesy of LAT Apparel







are a "bulletproof" option – poly content provides stability, minimizes shrinkage, and resists torquing.
- **DTF:** Works well with most smooth cotton or CVC fabrics.
- **Sublimation:** Ideal for 100% polyester or fabrics with a high poly content, where the ink bonds directly to the fibers.
- **UV printing:** Benefits from stable, flat surfaces and fabrics with minimal texture.

There are a few innovative breakthroughs leaving an imprint on the category at large. According to Bjorkman, DTF is "revolutionizing the creator economy" by empowering designers to launch unlimited designs with essentially zero risk.

In addition, faster, more color-accurate DTG machines, plus hybrid digital squeegee technology, are both elevating print quality to mass-production levels. The latter is a hybrid approach using a DTG base layer with a screen-printed top layer.

"It blends the detail of digital printing with the vibrancy and durability of screen printing, enabling large-scale production with a premium look," Bjorkman said.

He also sees more shops blending techniques like puff inks, metallic overlays, and gradient DTG/DTF combinations to create texture, visual depth, and artwork differentiation.

Color depth and dye consistency are particularly important for e-commerce brands requiring photogenic, repeatable visuals.

"E-commerce has fundamentally reshaped the blank apparel space by democratizing creation. Combined with DTF and DTG technology, it enables creators, designers, and brands to produce premium-looking products with an MOQ of just one. This means anyone – from emerging artists to large enterprises – can test unlimited designs instantly, without financial risk or inventory constraints," Bjorkman stated.

"The result is a massively accelerated creative cycle, lower barriers to entry, and an explosion of niche products and micro-collections. In short: unlimited creativity, delivered at the pace of culture," he continued.

Looking ahead

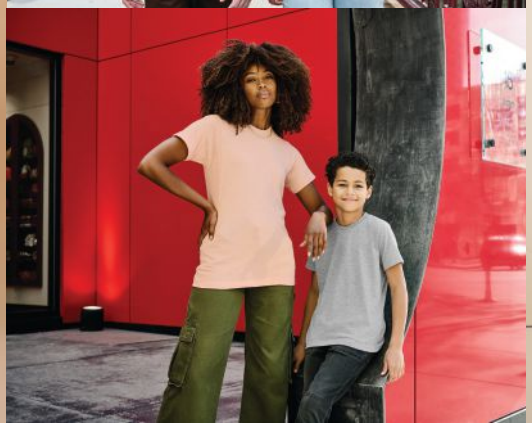
The upcoming year looks promising, led by diversification in fabrications, elevated quality, fashion-forward silhouettes, as well as curated color palettes. Suppliers are prioritizing focusing on premium materials, durability, consistent sizing, and customization capabilities.

From boxy and cropped to elongated and relaxed, silhouettes are becoming brand-defining features. Oversize and boxy options continue to dominate the market, but classic fits remain tried-and-true in the promo and uniform segments.

In addition, Bachner expects blank









Images courtesy of S&S Activewear

T-shirt trends to stay rooted in comfort and quality – but with greater texture and personality. More suppliers are offering 250 to 300 grams per square meter garments that mimic high-end streetwear. Retro sport designs are making a comeback as well, with ringer tees, stripes, and collegiate lettering.

"Most [people] still want something soft, but that thicker, more structured feel is back in a big way," she said.

As the market leans into premium basics, data suggests heavyweight tees and performance styles that offer moisture-wicking and antimicrobial features will lead the way in demand. In fact, performance-enhanced blanks featuring UV protection, odor control, and sweat-management technologies are estimated to grow 15% to 20% by 2026, largely driven by the activewear and outdoor segments.

"Color range is another big factor. Brands want palettes that are consistent, curated, and aligned with what they see in retail," Thuillier said.

Color trends currently lean "soft and wearable," with earthy neutrals like sand, stone, driftwood, faded olive, and coastal blues in high demand, alongside pastels and pops of coral, yellow, and lavender. Camo remains popular but is showing up in softer, washed-out tones.

In 2026, expect more pigment dyes, mineral washes, and garment-dyed palettes that give blanks a retail-ready aesthetic without decoration.

Sustainability continues to be front and center as well, with greater emphasis on eco-friendly fabrics, responsible manufacturing, and traceability. Innovations like low-water dyeing, closed-loop cotton recycling, recycled poly-blends, and biodegradable additives are critical components in company sustainability initiatives.

"At S&S, we are watching these shifts closely, so we can keep offering styles that blend comfort, performance, and everyday versatility — all the things customers are really looking for in their go-to tee," Bachner said.

Business building

Reputable suppliers and distributors play an integral role in the entire process, providing consistency, confidence, and peace of mind in daily business operations.

"Your brand, your name, is the signature on the finished product. You want that signature to be associated with the best-quality blanks, supported by a brand behind your brand that is reliable, offers outstanding decoration results, and consistently delivers," Thuillier said. "You also want a partner that knows how to add that little extra each season in terms of colors and styles – staying close to what is happening in the streets and aligned with emerging trends."

While the basic value proposition of a great distributor is high-quality inventory — available anywhere at any time — the partnership extends beyond filling orders. A distributor with "staying power" integrates itself as part of the brand's foundation, supporting long-term growth initiatives and ensuring that, as the business scales up, the product selection remains dependable and authentic at its core. As a result of partnership stability, creators and brands can focus on *growing* their business instead of managing supply headaches.

For Bjorkman, growth exists where new communities are forming. He encourages decorators to explore new events, niche markets, and online microcultures.

"The modern market isn't dominated by one massive customer base — it's shaped by countless small and midsize communities, each with its own identity and aesthetic," he said. "In the digital age, growth comes from discovering and serving these pockets of culture, not waiting for them to find you." **GP**



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

Printing paradise from the water

T-shirt design fit for a beach

By Lon Winters

You've probably heard us say before that we get over 300 days of sunshine a year in Colorado. The state, however, isn't exactly known for its beaches. Some decades back, we stumbled across a local treasure that defies geography. The Island is a sand volleyball complex, restaurant, and bar tucked into an industrial area of Denver proper. The building's massive floor is covered in sand, there are acres of outdoor courts, nets stretching in every direction, and a full bar sitting like an oasis in the middle of it all. Funny, we should say "oasis," because they have another property north of Denver called The Oasis. For one night in the fall, after it starts cooling off each year, The Island transforms into The Island Bash, a volleyball beach party.

We've been printing for this event for so long that we can practically call the art before we ever get direction from the client. We are charged with printing a full tropical experience, so to speak. This year, though, they changed things up — not in difficulty, but in perspective. Instead of the typical layout, The Island wanted something different. A scene *from* the water looking inward. The same elements, palm trees, net across the sand, some tropical drinks, and a sunset, but a viewpoint from the water. It was a twist and a refreshing creative challenge. We had to take that idea and translate it.

The foundation was a loose pencil sketch, enough to guide our layout. After we inked it, we scanned the keyline into Adobe Illustrator. We started with the horizon line, the ocean foreground, and a sandbar or two using the Pen Tool. Palm trees came next, the volleyball net and the ball to follow. We have a library full of these shapes to draw from and simply reshaped them to fit our illustration here. We've learned, though, that the owner has a favorite ball. And then there were the tropical drinks. What says island beverage better than a hollowed-out coconut and pineapple? We created an illustrative version of each with simple traces including, of course, the umbrellas. You can't have tropical drinks without umbrelas and straws.

The sky is always the heart of these compositions and, like any sunset, we would use reds blending orange into gold and fading into softer cream tones. For halftone friendly transitions, we built it manually in layers with the Blend Tool. We stacked them



Photos courtesy of Lon Winters.



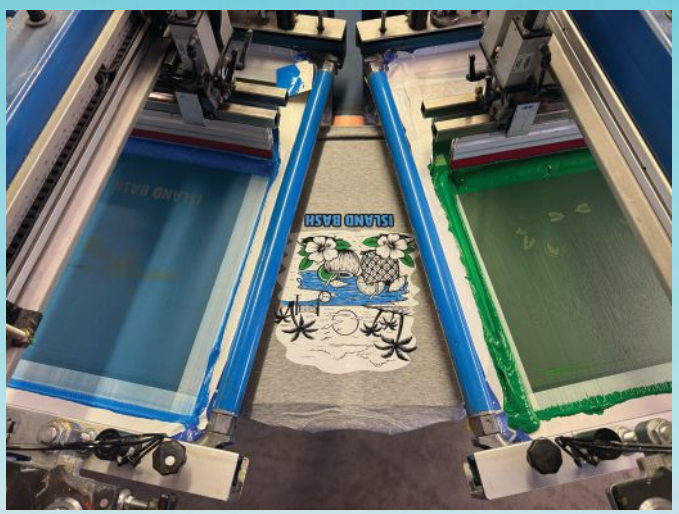
in the background, midground, and foreground — almost using the darkest to lightest rule.

After the proof was approved by the client, an internal debate began: how to separate. The file was vector, so it made sense to keep it in spot colors. But we have seen sunsets fall apart with banding, which led us in a simulated separation direction, especially because this had way more colors than intended. We went back and forth on the idea of running spot versus sim process. The number of colors and the transitions were a concern, but we wanted that vector clean imagery in the black outlines. To maintain this crisp detail, and since it was built in vector, we removed the black outline, flattened the rest of it, and reopened the file in Photoshop. We would separate the colors in channels using the RGB and CMYK channels as masks. Then, once those separations were complete, we reintroduced the black line detail in vector over the sim process channels for output. This gave us the best of both worlds. Smooth halftone transitions, building secondary colors, and clean, sharp vector black lines, locking the composition together. Other than laying in type and logos, it was a trick we don't often use.



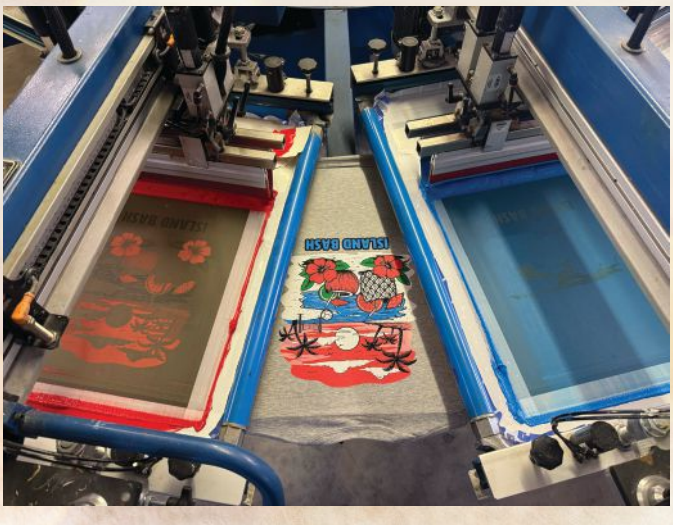






With the channels finalized and the vector black added back on top, we sent the file to computer to screen (CTS) for output. Because of the illustrative nature, we opted for 45 lines per inch at our standard 22.5-degree angle to avoid more interference with our screen mesh. As we made screens, we prepared for what was one of the more demanding Island Bash designs. The image had more screens than usual and when you add the whites, multiple flashes, cool stations, and smoothing screens, set up became a bit dicey.

We started the sequence with Teflon smoothing screen and a roller to flatten the fabric. The first print screen was the black line detail on an N-228 TPI (threads per inch) mesh followed by the white printer or base plate on a N-166. Then a flash and a heated iron in the









cooling station to lock down potential peaking fibers. The remaining colored screens all on N-272s, green, blue, and red printed wet on wet. Another flash and another smoothing station, followed by the gold on the same mesh with the final flash and smoothing screen and finally the cream acting as a highlight white. All screens were work hardened at 45 N/cm^2.

If there was a theme to the print, it was the surface. We used more smoothing screens than usual. The second heated iron after the white printer was critical and helped control potential fiber show through, giving us the smooth surface for the other colors to sit on. The final smoothing screen had craft paper on the bottom which matted the print, knocking back the gloss that Teflon can introduce.

When the first sample came off the dryer, we were good to go. Aided by our post-vector insertion approach, the transitions were smooth and the outlines were crisp. Not sure we got the "view from the water" correct, but 1,000 T-shirts later, we brought another Island Bash to life. Though landlocked, The Island is all about a tropical fantasy. Our job, each year, is to take printed Island Bash apparel straight to the beach. A beach Colorado didn't even know it had. 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.



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Why custom signage matters: An intentional approach

How Studio 618 designed custom signage for The Devon

By Lauren Stern

My consultancy, Studio 618, a story-driven signage and wayfinding studio based in Charlotte, North Carolina, was brought on to create a custom interior and exterior signage package for Hines' new multifamily property, The Devon, in Hyattsville, Maryland. For this project, we set out to design something distinctive that fit the building's vintage-inspired aesthetic, organic architectural details, and the warm, welcoming feel of its interior design.

Back where it all started

I went to graduate school at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C., where I earned my M.A. in exhibition design. After that, I stayed in the DMV area for over 10 years, working at various signage and design-related companies. My consultancy works on projects all over the country, but this one felt especially meaningful because it brought me back to Hyattsville, where I used to live. It was incredible to see how much the neighborhood has grown and changed, and to help create a custom signage family that captures the energy of The Devon.

An intentional approach

At Studio 618, intention guides everything we do. Whether it's a simple monument sign, a complex fiber art wall, multilevel garage graphics, or a full signage family for a multifamily project like this one, every design choice has a reason behind it. "Because I like it" is never enough. We want every piece of signage, big or small, to feel purposeful and fully connected to the project. Inspiration is how we make sure our designs are thoughtful, intentional, and truly fit the space.

Inspiration guides the way

Inspiration for signage can come from many places, such as color palettes, furniture, architectural details, lighting, and tile work. For this project, a lot of the inspiration came from the interior design, specifically, the lighting fixtures. The organic shapes in the lighting fixtures and the rich, layered color palette played a big role in guiding the signage design. Deep blues and warm tones from the finishes influenced the color palette of the signage, while open-frame elements in architectural features, like room dividers, helped shape the overall look and feel of the signs.





One unique aspect of this project was that the unit signs were treated differently from the rest. Warm brown tones were chosen for the unit corridors to complement the hallways, while most other interior signs used a mix of blue tones. Exterior signs also used brown to tie in with the architectural details.

The blade sign and canopy sign were kept simple so they wouldn't compete with the vibrant mural on the building exterior, which was designed by others. Every decision was made to ensure the signage felt cohesive and fully integrated with the property's design.

It starts with the unit sign

The first thing Studio 618 designs is the unit sign. In our experience, the unit sign is the most important sign to tackle first. It makes up most of the signage family since it's at the entry to every apartment. For this project, that meant more than 300 unit signs.

Because the unit sign is so visible and appears in such high numbers, we make sure it uses the nicest materials and has extra detail. For this project, that meant creating sign panels with organic shapes and open, delicate frames that show the wall behind and echo the interior design details found throughout the property. Other





Photos credit
Megan Morales



front-facing signs, like amenity signs, restroom signs, and wayfinding directionals, follow the same tone. When the budget allows, back-of-house signs do too. For this project, the unit signs, amenity signs, wayfinding directionals, and restroom signs were all designed with more complexity than the rest of the signage.

The remaining signs kept the same overall shape and color as the front-facing signs but left out the open frame detail, making them simpler while still being connected to the overall design.

The value of custom signage

Whether you're developing a new building or upgrading an existing one, investing in custom signage is always a smart move. Thoughtful, intentional signage can elevate your property and help it stand out from the competition.

- **Plan from the start:** Creating a beautiful multifamily community like The Devon involves many moving parts, including architects, interior designers, and engineers, so signage can easily get overlooked or feel like an afterthought. The projects that succeed most are the ones where signage is planned from the beginning. That means making sure it reflects the property's branding, using the same typeface (if it's ADA compliant), taking cues from patterns and design details, and making it feel like it was designed in tandem with the rest of the property. Early planning also lets you coordinate where more prominent signs should go for best visibility, like wayfinding directionals right off the elevator, so they are easy to see and not pushed aside by other things, such as art.
- **Stand out from the rest:** A unique, well-designed signage package makes a property feel special. A cookie-cutter system might be easier, but it would not reflect the vintage character and the unique forms in the lighting, or tie into the rich color palette of the building as this signage family did. New properties that incorporate intentional and custom signage tell a story that is unique to them, and generic signage cannot

do that. Every Studio 618 project is different. From moody bronze and wood in a luxury condo, to nautical-themed signs at a waterfront property, to the organic, warm signs at The Devon, each package is designed to complement the property it lives in.

Final thoughts

With so many new multifamily buildings going up, it's easy for properties to start blending together. Custom signage is one of the simplest ways to make your building memorable. First impressions matter. A good signage system makes people feel welcome and encourages them to stick around.

I spent over 15 years renting, and I can tell you that I saw so many cookie-cutter apartments with no personality. Those were the places that I hesitated to call home. When a building doesn't invest in creating a unique, inviting experience, it shows.

High-end, intentional signage, like what we did for The Devon, changes that. It makes a property stand out, creates a better experience for residents, and elevates the building above the competition. I've walked into luxury apartments with stunning finishes and layouts, only to see signage that completely missed the mark. That disconnect can take away from the whole vibe of the property.

When you start budgeting for your next project, don't overlook the power of custom signage. It's a small investment with a big payoff, and one you'll be happy you made. **GP**



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



Green signs, greener future

How sustainable signage is shaping business

By A.J. Titus

Sustainability used to be almost an afterthought in many business sectors. But as concerns about the environment have grown, technology has evolved to give us tools to make a difference in the planet's future by using lower-impact materials and manufacturing processes. We can now offer solutions to the many clients for whom sustainability is no longer a "nice to have" but has become a standard expectation across nearly every industry.

Good stewardship can mean good business

Sustainable materials and processes can have real benefits to the earth. LED lighting and displays are more energy-efficient than LCD and incandescent counterparts, and digital signage saves trees and uses far less water and electricity than paper.

But offering fabrications that reduce a client's impact on the earth can also be good for your bottom line. Analysts expect 15% to 20% annual growth in demand for solar-powered and augmented reality signs through 2026, according to Accio, a global B2B e-commerce network. Eco-friendly and sustainable signage solutions, including energy-efficient lighting, recyclable materials, and solar-powered displays, are gaining importance as businesses work to meet environmental norms, reported Business Research Insights. And companies are increasingly working with recycled plastics, biodegradable materials like bamboo, and sustainable metals such as recycled aluminum.

Health care organizations, schools, and municipalities are leading the charge, often driven by environmental policies or community commitments. Retail and hospitality brands are right behind them, wanting signage that reflects their corporate responsibility goals. The demand is both top-down from large corporations and bottom-up from community-conscious consumers.



Lower impact, higher demand & lower cost

Five years ago, conversations about sustainability often focused on cost, with options seen as more expensive; perhaps they were, with so much less demand.

That's changing quickly. Today, the conversation is about impact and alignment with brand values. Clients want to know how their signage choices contribute to a greener footprint. They're asking smart questions about materials, production methods, and end-of-life recyclability. Sign shops have had to adapt quickly and smartly, offering solutions that meet those needs without compromising performance.

As more suppliers adopt eco-friendly materials, the costs have become much more competitive. Plus, businesses are recognizing the return on investment: lower maintenance, longer lifespan, and positive brand perception. When a company demonstrates environmental responsibility, it often strengthens customer loyalty and brand trust. So, while the upfront cost may vary, the long-term benefits are significant.

Material matters

The cost-effectiveness can be rendered insignificant without the right balance of eco-friendliness and durability. To get it right, look for materials that offer long life cycles and are easy to recycle at the end of use. For example, aluminum is both lightweight and infinitely recyclable, which makes it a great long-term investment. Work closely with clients to choose finishes and coatings that extend the life of the sign without adding environmental burden. The goal should always be to create something that lasts and looks great while doing good.

Options like aluminum composite





Images courtesy of Signarama



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UV-cured inks are also gaining popularity because they offer vibrant colors with minimal waste. What's great is that these materials don't just meet sustainability goals; they also deliver the professional, long-lasting quality that customers rely on.

The industry has come a long way; sustainability no longer means sacrificing quality. One of my favorite examples is a project that a Signarama location completed for a coastal community park. They used reclaimed wood, recycled aluminum panels, and UV-printed graphics to create wayfinding and educational signs. The result was beautiful, durable, and completely aligned with the park's mission to protect natural habitats. It's a great example of how creativity and sustainability can go hand in hand to make a lasting impact.

An eco-friendly future

The future of sustainable signage is incredibly bright. We're seeing ongoing innovation in bio-based materials and energy-efficient production methods. LED lighting has already revolutionized illuminated signage by cutting energy use dramatically, and new recycling programs are helping close the loop on material life cycles.

The most exciting part of the shift toward sustainability is how it brings out the best in everyone. Franchisees, suppliers, and customers can all work together to find smarter, cleaner, and more efficient solutions. Sustainability isn't a trend; it's a movement to create a new future for us and the planet. I'm proud to say our industry is helping to shape that future, one sign at a time. **GP**



A.J. Titus is president of Signarama USA, a sign and graphics franchise that's also the largest brand at United Franchise Group.

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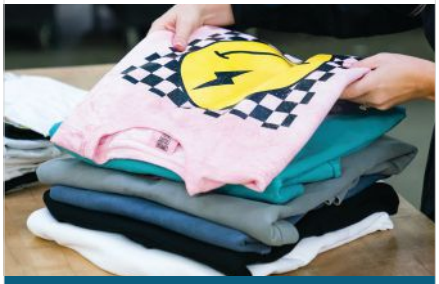
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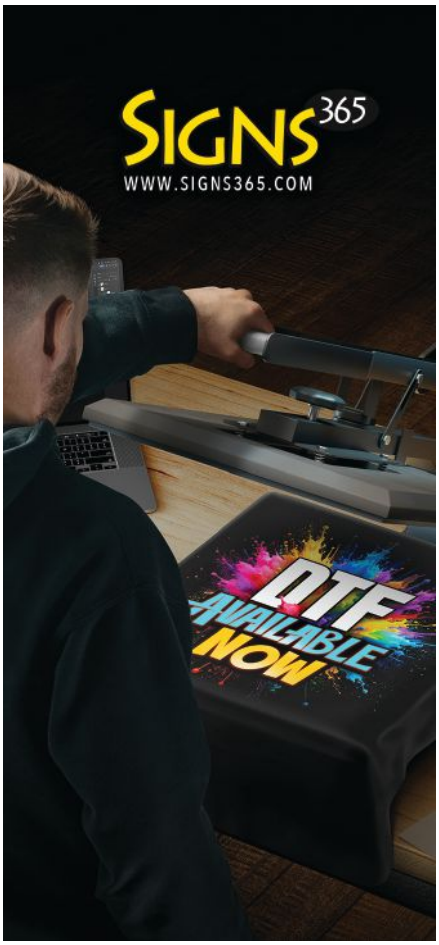
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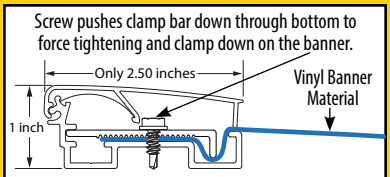
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Utility meets *sentiment*

How engraving elevates custom gifts & promotional products

By Sara Thompson



Images courtesy of JDS Industries



Personalization has moved beyond novelty and firmly established itself as a cultural expectation. Consumers are no longer satisfied with mass-produced goods that lack individuality. Instead, they are seeking items that reflect their personalities, commemorate milestones, and serve as meaningful gifts. Laser engraving has become the perfect medium for this transformation, turning everyday blanks into treasures that blend practicality with emotional resonance.

The appeal of personalization lies in its dual nature. On one hand, people want utility in products they can use daily, whether it's a bag, a board, or a set of glasses. On the other hand, they crave sentimentality, making those items uniquely theirs, infused with memory and meaning. This combination is driving a surge in demand for engraved goods that are both functional and deeply personal.

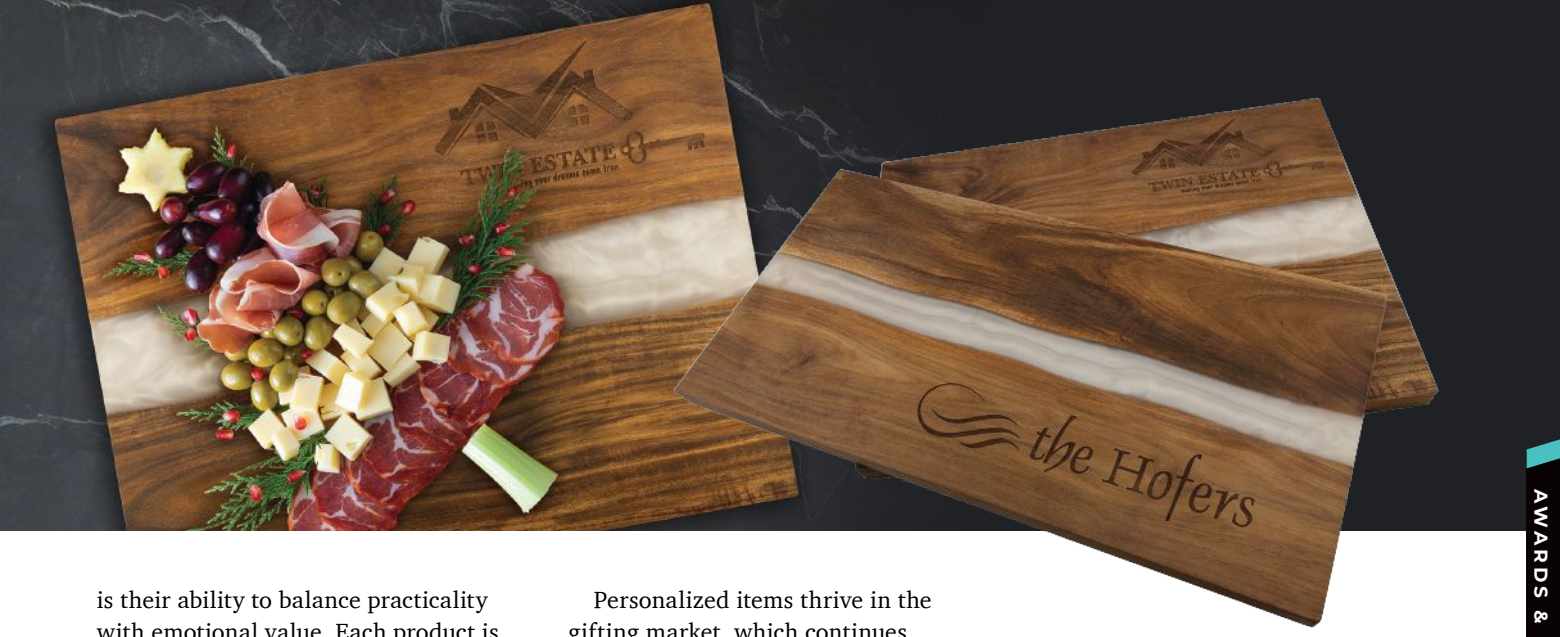


Fashion provides one of the clearest examples of this trend. Crossbody bags, already a staple for their versatility and convenience, are being elevated through personalization. A simple bag becomes a statement piece when engraved with initials, names, or small motifs. An everyday useful item blended with a fashion statement. These bags are especially popular as gifts for graduations, birthdays, and travel — moments when individuality matters most.

The same principle applies to home entertainment, where glassware has become a canvas for personalization. Wineglasses, beer mugs, and rocks glasses can quickly bring people together to enjoy conversation, laughter, or milestones. A set of four engraved with initials, dates, or custom designs offers sophistication and sentiment in equal measure. Engraved glassware is easily perceived as premium for consumers. For sellers, the margins are impressive, and fabrication can be a very quick turnaround. Bundling glasses with decanters or bar accessories further enhances the perceived value, creating opportunities for upselling.

Serving boards represent another category where utility and sentimentality meet. Once considered simple kitchen tools, they are now centerpieces for gatherings. Engraving monograms, family names, or special dates transforms them into heirlooms that embody the spirit of home and hospitality. New homeowners and newlywed couples are particularly drawn to these boards, which serve both as functional gifts and decorative pieces. Larger boards, especially when paired with artisan packaging, command higher prices and resonate with consumers who want gifts that feel substantial and lasting.

What makes these niches so powerful



is their ability to balance practicality with emotional value. Each product is useful, but engraving elevates it into something more. For makers, finding the right blanks that are high quality and durable yet have an affordable wholesale price is important to be able to leverage the high margins that personalization allows. A blank crossbody bag or serving board that can stand on its own and make you a profit without any marking is going to be a great option.

Personalized items thrive in the gifting market, which continues to expand globally, as people seek presents that feel thoughtful and unique. Makers who embrace this blend of utility and sentiment will find themselves not only selling goods but creating memories. The future of personalization is clear: it is about turning everyday objects into timeless keepsakes, conversation starters, or maybe that piece of functional fashion that turns heads in the streets. **GP**



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





Blazering 101

Laser engraving & sandcarving combine to elevate glassware & awards

By Fawn Giese

Images courtesy of IKONICS Imaging.

Shops that excel with a laser often reach a ceiling when customers ask for richer depth, smoother finishes, or flawless marks on difficult surfaces (such as crystal). That is where blazering comes in. Blazering is a hybrid workflow that combines the convenience of laser engraving with the depth and surface quality of sandcarving. The laser handles precision artwork and rapid mask creation, while the sandcarver smooths the edges and creates depth, producing premium results that stand out in the awards and personalization market.

Blazering gives you the speed and control of a laser along with the tactile depth and smooth finish that customers associate with high-end glassware and crystal. It also unlocks materials that can be frustrating for lasers alone, including thick glass, powder coated metals, stone, brick, and hard ceramic glazes. For shops looking to raise average order value and expand capabilities without reinventing their process, blazering is a practical next step.

What is blazering & how does it work?

Laser engraving marks or fractures the surface of glass, which can look frosty but often reveals micro chipping and inconsistent shine. Sandcarving uses pressurized abrasive media to erode the surface to a controlled depth. First, you create the design with the laser by cutting through a blastable mask, then you move to a sandcarving cabinet and blast through the open areas. This transforms the surface mark into a smooth, uniform carve. Edges remain crisp, halftones look intentional, and large fill areas appear even. The final product has a professional weight that is easy to see and easy to feel.

Blazering also creates a logical upsell path. You can price a basic laser engraved piece at one level and offer a sandcarved version with deeper etch and optional color fill at a premium. The production steps are straightforward, which means you can scale from single gifts to short runs for corporate recognition programs, tasting room glassware, and event commemoratives.

Where blazering shines

- **Glass & crystal awards:** Deep carved logos and typography catch light and read clearly across a room. Background textures, bevels, and multidepth effects add dimension.
- **Drinkware:** Stemware, decanters, pint glasses, and insulated tumblers all benefit from a smooth carve. Blazering turns an average frosted mark into a refined finish that feels intentional.
- **Difficult coatings & surfaces:** Powder coated stainless, hard ceramic glazes, textured glass, river rock, brick, and unglazed stone respond well when the right laser mask is paired with the right media and air pressure.
- **Curved & compound shapes:** Flexible masks and proper burnishing let you carry fine detail around curves that are challenging in a laser-only workflow.
- **Adding color:** After you laser engrave and sandcarve your piece, you can easily add color to your design before you remove the mask.







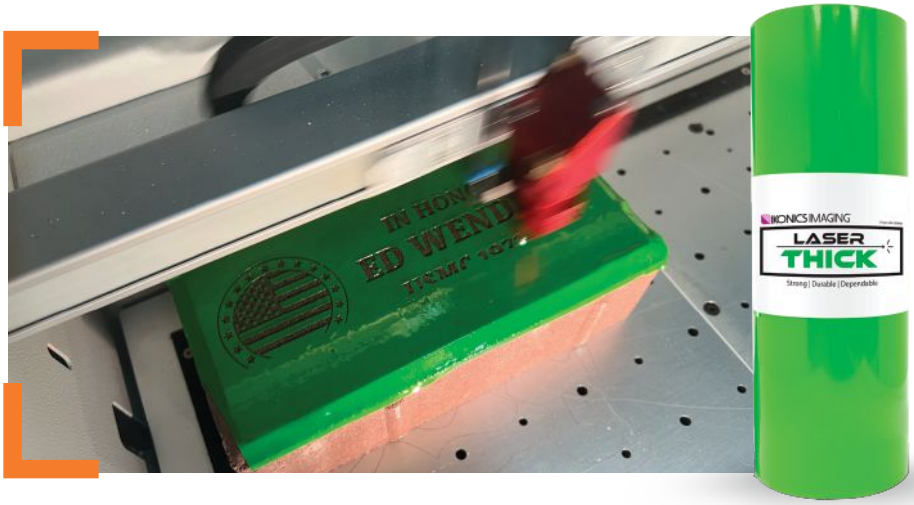
The blazering workflow: start to finish

1. **Prepare the artwork.** Vector artwork with clean paths reduces time at the laser and speeds blasting. Convert small text to outlines and thicken hairlines if needed. Mirror the design if you plan to blast the reverse side of glass.
2. **Mask the substrate.** Apply a blastable laser mask to a clean, dry surface. A flexible mask, like Blazer Orange, suits glass and curved drinkware. A higher tack or thicker mask, like Laser THICK, resists lift on powder coat, ceramic, stone, and textured glass. Burnish firmly, with emphasis on corners and fine details.
3. **Laser the stencil.** Kiss-cut to the mask adhesive without cutting into the substrate. Start with conservative speed and power, then adjust until your entire design is lasered away. Leave the rest of the mask intact.
4. **Set up the cabinet and media.** Silicon carbide in the 180 to 220 mesh range is a good starting point for glass and fine detail. Silicon carbide tends to cut faster and last longer than aluminum oxide. Verify nozzle condition. A worn nozzle will slow your carve and degrade edge quality.
5. **Blast technique.** Begin with a perpendicular angle for speed and even depth. Move the nozzle in overlapping passes and avoid dwelling in one spot. For edge finesse, introduce a slight angle as you approach corners and thin lines. Depth should build consistently, not in gouges.
6. **Clean and inspect.** Rinse or dust off your piece to check depth and consistency. If color fill is planned, make sure edges are sealed and surfaces are free of residual media.
7. **Finishing touches.** Apply paint fill if desired, then peel the mask. Perform a final clean and dry. Package to protect the freshly carved surfaces.

Settings that keep you moving

Although every cabinet, compressor, and abrasive mix varies, here are a few guidelines to help new users get predictable results.

- **Media selection:** Use 220 mesh for micro detail and 180 mesh for faster depth on larger fills. Keep a labeled container for each mesh to avoid cross contamination.
- **Air pressure:** Work within your cabinet manufacturer's recommended range. Too little pressure leads to long cycle times and rounded edges. Too much can undercut the mask or cause chipping on sharp corners.
- **Nozzle distance:** Maintain a consistent standoff. Too close can cause hotspots. Too far wastes energy and reduces control.
- **Mask choice:** Flexible, clean release masks excel on glass and curves. Higher tack or thicker masks reduce undercut on tough coatings or textured surfaces.
- **Surface prep:** Clean, dry substrates help mask adhesion and prevent edge lift. A few seconds spent on prep can save minutes in rework.

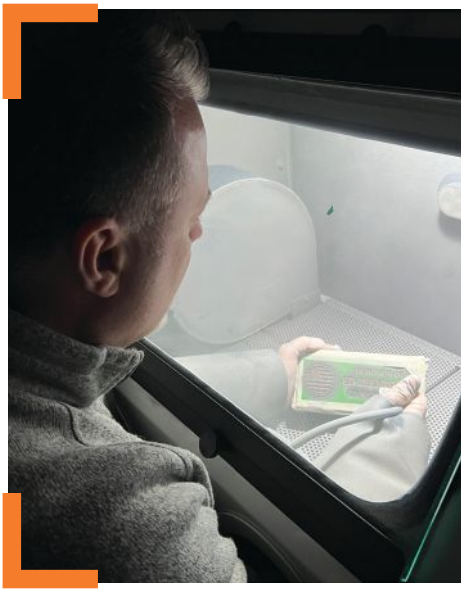


Halftones, multidepth & color

Blazering makes advanced techniques look approachable. Halftone patterns are possible with proper mask imaging and light, even passes that reduce depth in dot areas. Multidepth designs can be staged by peeling off different sections of your design and blasting in stages. Color fill is easier after blasting than after straight laser marking because the sandcarved surface accepts paint cleanly and hides minor brush strokes. Water soak removal masks are popular for color workflows, while clean peel masks speed production when no fill is needed.

Common pitfalls & how to avoid them

- **Undercutting at edges:** Usually a







mask adhesion or media angle issue. Increase burnishing pressure, choose a stronger mask, or adjust to a more perpendicular blasting angle.

- **Inconsistent texture:** Often caused by a worn nozzle or uneven motion. Replace nozzles proactively and train operators to keep a steady, overlapping pattern.
- **Slow cycle times:** Check media condition, air pressure, and nozzle wear. Verify you are not trying to achieve unnecessary depth for the design.
- **Residue or haze:** Clean more thoroughly after blasting, and make sure no abrasive remains trapped under the mask before removal.

For glass, a final polish with a clean microfiber towel can make a visible difference.

Safety & shop readiness

Blasting media and dust require proper containment, ventilation, and personal protective equipment. Follow your cabinet manufacturer's recommendations for dust collection and wear eye and respiratory protection during maintenance. Keep the blasting area tidy, store media in sealed containers, and replace worn components on schedule. A small checklist posted near the cabinet keeps the team consistent and reduces training time for new operators.



Business impact & pricing

Blazering opens a clear premium tier. The difference in look and feel is obvious to customers and simple to explain. Position a basic laser mark as an entry option. Present blazered pieces as the signature upgrade with a deeper carve, smoother finish, and optional color fill. Offer sample sets that allow clients to compare finishes side by side. For production planning, estimate blast time honestly, then optimize artwork and media choice to hit target margins.

Getting started with blazering

If you already own a laser, you have the front half of the workflow. Add a sandcarver, choose a blastable laser mask compatible with your substrate, and start with a few simple glass projects to learn standoff and patterning. Dial in a go-to media and a baseline pressure, then expand into multidepth effects, color fill, and tougher substrates like powder coat and stone. Within a short time, most shops see faster approvals, higher perceived value, and fewer customer touchbacks because the finish quality speaks for itself.

Blazering is not a gimmick. It is a practical hybrid process that uses the laser for what it does best and the sandcarver for what only a sandcarver can deliver. The result is high-end glassware and awards that command attention and justify a premium. If you are ready to push beyond surface marks and into premium finishes with depth, this is the next step. **GP**



Fawn Giese is the digital content strategist for IKONICS, parent company of IKONICS Imaging. With 20-plus years in the industry, she creates effective marketing materials across IKONICS divisions. She develops educational digital content for web, email, and social, translating technical processes into clear, engaging resources, ensuring consistent brand messaging.



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- **Ideas for interactive sessions, roundtable discussions, or hands-on demos** that you want to share with your colleagues

Why local matters

In this industry, we know that sometimes the best learning opportunities come from right down the street. We want to make those connections easy and actionable, so you can come away with lessons you can implement the Monday following the show. GP

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Irving, Texas
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Long Beach, California
with WRAPSCON
Aug. 13-15

Cleveland, Ohio
Sept. 10-11

Charlotte, North Carolina
Nov. 13-14

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Image courtesy of Albatross USA



Image courtesy of PROSERIES

Tools of the trade

Go-to shop tools for wrapping & apparel decoration

By Paula Aven Gladych

Sign and graphics

shops are more than the sum of their parts. Yes, printing equipment and heat presses are important, but to be really successful in printing, apparel decoration, and car wraps, it is important to stock up on these essential tools.

Tools for car wrap installation

PROSERIES in Jacksonville, Florida, has made a name for itself in the car wrap industry by creating a line of essential tools, everything an installer would need to start wrapping cars, minus the vinyl, said Austin Smith, CEO of PROSERIES. It also offers training classes for installers.

The company's main line of tools includes gloves, which are "not only a way to maintain your hands as far as getting cut or dirty throughout the process, but most importantly, pushing air out from the vinyl," he said.

A 4" squeegee can be used to smooth out the material while the installer uses their hand to push with their palm or work it into tighter spaces with a finger. Gloves allow nonfriction contact to the plastic or paint protection film (PPF) base, he added. They "allow you to seamlessly slide down the side of a car, from the top of the pinkie to the bottom of the palms as they push down the channel. They allow you to touch the sticky side of the vinyl, grab the edge, and pull it tight to get it on the car."

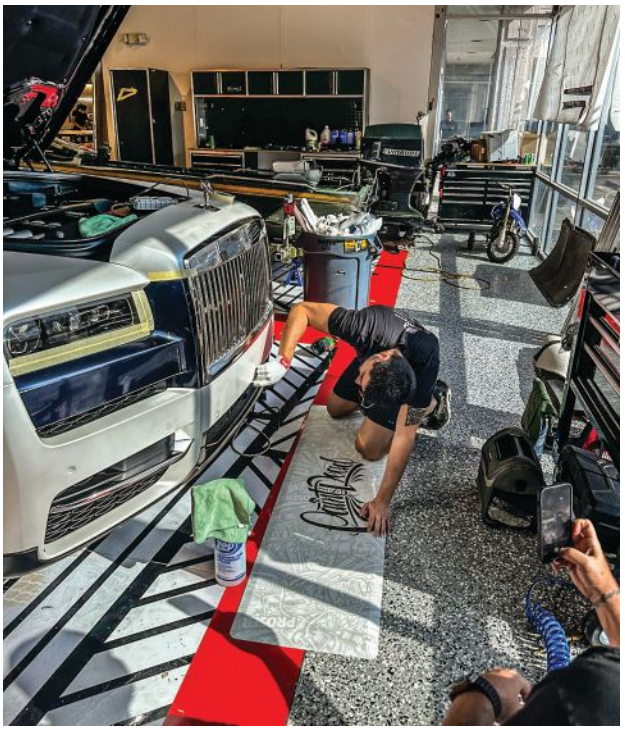
Without the gloves, the vinyl would adhere to the installer's fingers.

Buffers are a popular tool. These thin adhesive-backed felt pieces are mounted to squeegees and serve the same purpose as gloves. The wet and dry buffers allow installers to use a squeegee to work the material into different areas on the car or apply graphics to substrate boards or other surfaces being mounted with vinyl. Firmer buffers can be used on any dimensional object, including vehicles. Softer buffers work well for applying graphics without damaging the print. Buffers are an inexpensive option to lengthen the life of car wrap squeegees.

Knives and blades are important for cutting wrap material with surgical precision. Installers don't want to use dull knives that will drag along the material rather than cut, Smith said. That's why his company offers a 45-degree snappable blade. Tuck tools are also a must. They allow installers to work material into tight places.

Nonessential tools include thick foam mats, so installers don't have to kneel down or lie on cold concrete floors while working on car wrap installation. Another nice-to-have is a U-shaped tool


Image courtesy of PROSERIES









that vinyl is draped around to help workers install it around car antennas or mirrors.

PROSERIES also makes an arm sleeve, which is made out of the same material as its gloves, to help protect an installer's arms when reaching around doors. It also protects arms from the sticky adhesive on the back of the wrap material.

Albatross USA, maker of AlbaChem products, offers several liquid adhesives, lubricants, and cleaners that can help shops apply vinyl lettering to signage or ease the application of car wraps. Application fluids for cut vinyl can go on signage and cars. It is sprayed onto substrates, allowing the installer to float the graphic into position.

In the past, installers would use soap and water, which does work, said Barry Bravman, VP of sales and marketing for Albatross USA, but using an application fluid helps the adhesive bond better to the substrate.

Adhesive remover can be used to remove adhesive that is left over from prior vinyl applications. Shops that want to remove old graphics and install new ones will use a liquid removal tool to get the job done.



Images courtesy of PROSERIES







Tools for decorated apparel

When you think of tools, it calls to mind things that are tangible, that you can see and hold in your hands, but one of the most important shop tools is chemical solutions that aid in applying graphics or removing them. Solutions are also used for cleaning screens or spot cleaning apparel when rogue ink splotches or grease spots appear where they shouldn't.

In screen printing, several basic chemicals are a must, from cleaning agents to degreasers. Screen printing shops typically have a lot of ink floating around, and many times, unwanted ink will get where it isn't supposed to be, Bravman said.

"A printer may have ink on their hands while printing shirts and all of a sudden get smudge marks where they held the shirt," he said. Another common occurrence is a pinhole in the screen being used to stencil a graphic onto apparel. If no one notices the extra dab of ink, several shirts could be contaminated.

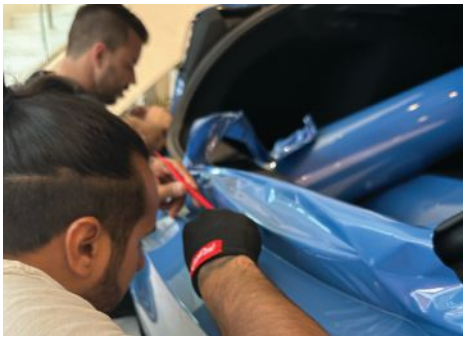
Spot cleaning guns will push cleaning fluid onto the spot at high pressure, which pushes the ink through the fabric to clean the shirt, he said. "It is used on cured ink, not uncured ink. It works better after it goes through the dryer; otherwise, it will hit the ink and bleed."

Commercial embroidery shops often need to remove oil stains that come from workers over lubricating their equipment. Spot cleaning guns or aerosol products can also be used to remove oil stains.

Once Albatross got into heat transfer vinyl, it came out with a vinyl remover for fabrics. Individuals who cut vinyl sometimes make mistakes that need to be removed and replaced. This remover is designed to attack the binder that allows a direct-to-film (DTF) graphic image to be peeled or scraped away. This solution is designed to be washed out. It needs to sit on the fabric for a longer period of time, making it easier to remove the adhesive residue after the graphic is taken away.

The value of these tools is not only to save the cost of the garment, whether it be a T-shirt, hoodie, or hat, he said, but the most important benefit is allowing decorated apparel producers to fill orders on time because "a lot of time these businesses don't have a









Images courtesy of Albatross USA

warehouse full of blanks to pull from to pull another shirt should they make a mistake."

He added that "whether to save a garment or spend time and money to clean a garment is really in the eye of the beholder. They have to make a judgment call."

It could take 15 minutes to clean up adhesive, ink, or oil stains, but in an industry such as screen printing where a little bit of ink can travel outside of the design, it is imperative to have spot-cleaning tools on hand. Those stains have to be cleaned quickly, and these tools help a shop do that.

"From a production standpoint, it makes a lot of sense," Bravman said.

Albatross also manufactures screen cleaning products, screen openers, and screen washes. A screen opener can be used on the press when a clog stops the ink from moving through the screen. Shops will spray this liquid onto the screen and wipe it off, which opens it up to continue printing. The fluid is also used to clean screens between color changes so shops don't have to change the registration, he said.

Platen adhesives are used to keep T-shirts from shifting as they are being printed.

Emulsion is used to coat screens so that they are photo-sensitive. Shops then take a film positive and put it on the screen before exposing it to UV light. The screen is then washed out with water.

"Everywhere the image was will wash away. That leaves where the ink is going to go through the screen onto your shirt," said Taylor Landesman, VP at Lawson Workhorse Products in St. Louis. "You do that for every color."

There are three standard screen sizes, 20" X 24", 20" X 28", and 23" X 31". The two larger sizes are used for automatic screen-printing equipment. The 20" X 24" screens are for manual presses. As DTF printing rises in popularity, so has the industry's move to embrace automatic screen-printing equipment.

"People that were printing manually tend to go DTF now," said Landesman. "Not to say that no one is doing manual printing, but more people are doing DTF now than manual."

DTF printing uses PET film instead of vinyl. To get into DTF, shops need a printer, adhesive powder, and a heat press. Commercial shops typically invest in an automatic powder shaker to make the printing process go more smoothly, he said.

For direct-to-garment (DTG) printing, shops need a printer, a heat press, and a liquid pretreatment that is sprayed onto the garment to allow the print to remain on top of the fabric. Pretreatment can be done by hand, or shops can purchase a dedicated pretreat machine. DTG is more limited than DTF or screen printing when it comes to the types of fabrics it can be applied to. DTG only works on 50%-100% cotton garments.

"DTG was really popular when it came out 10 years ago. It is much less popular now that DTF is around," Landesman said. "DTF is definitely more popular than DTG printing because of its ease of use; it goes on anything."

Other accessories for DTF that are nice to have but not essential include automatic cutters that cut out printed heat transfers and machines that will heat press and apply the transfers. **GP**



Paula Aven Gladych is a freelance writer based in Denver, Colorado. She can be reached at pgladych@gmail.com.

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You can't boss like you used to

Tips for facilitating a culture of trust among your team.

By Megan Griffith



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There's an old-school mindset that says leaders have to be feared to be respected. That the "bad guy" boss gets results. Maybe that worked once, but today's workforce sees right through it. Employees don't want a boss to fear. They want a leader they can trust.

I think it's easy for bosses to commiserate with other bosses about how "no one wants to work these days" while ignoring the very heart of the matter, which is why that saying exists. Almost every trade show I go to, I've had someone asking me how I get my employees to be sold out for our shop and take ownership, or how I hire the right staff for the job, and I'm telling you now, more often than not, we are having to force our team to not work more hours than they're scheduled for, to not show up at live events just to hang out and help their team, to not spend countless hours of their time thinking about how to improve this place. I am so grateful to have that problem instead of the inverse, but I often kind of shrug and think we're just lucky, instead of giving it actual thought. In actuality, there's a lot that goes into creating a trusting work environment where your staff wants to come to work and do well at their job.

When the pandemic hit, we saw a rapid shift in work-life dynamics that is continuing to evolve. The pandemic provided proof that a lot of jobs could be done from home and virtually, that employees had value and rights and power that were undermined before then. A lot of workers realized they didn't want to live to work, but rather they wanted their work to be a fulfilling and enriching part of their lives that supported the rest of their lives. I believe pretty strongly that whether you think that's a good thing or a bad thing dictates how you manage your staff.

This new employee-driven workforce challenges bosses to take a critical look at how they speak to and treat their staff. At a symposium we recently attended, I heard the term "psychological safety" in regard to being the No. 1 reason employees felt happy at work. Psychological safety means the worker feels safe and comfortable bringing new ideas and concerns to you, talking about personal issues that may be affecting their work, and



Images courtesy of Megan Griffith





trusting that you have their well-being in mind when you make decisions for the company. We do a lot of work perks like meals and potlucks, we celebrate sales goals with things like massages during stressful quarters, and last year we even brought in a bunch of puppies from the local rescue, one of which came home with one of my team. But this alone is not a flex on psychological safety because that's not it. Those things are great bonding moments, but if I do that and then the rest of the time I'm a tyrant that everyone recoils from when I walk into the room, those things don't mean much.

So, how do we facilitate trust among our team? The easiest and most difficult answer is to be genuinely trustworthy. Because people can see if you're faking it. If a worker's dog needs to go to the vet and they're all distraught about it, genuinely care about what they care about, and provide flexibility to let them take care of what they care about. If someone's kid is sick, let them work from home if possible until the kid is better. If someone looks upset, lend a listening ear. These things will be disruptions, they will be inconvenient, they will cause you to be vulnerable, and they will take a lot of your time, but they prove you care more about them than the T-shirt. It proves they are worth investing in, financially, but also with your time and energy. At three months and six months after hiring, your employee is not at their full potential. This is when you're investing the most in your employee and won't really start to see returns on that investment until after that. So, if you're not treating them well and building psychological safety, then you're just starting that investment cycle over every time an employee leaves.

Facilitating trust also means trusting them back. I could not value micromanaging less if I tried. I am all about giving projects to other people,

> If the employee feels safe, trusted, respected, and valued, they're going to behave with integrity and trust. They're going to produce a quality product and create a level of service that is trustworthy.

hearing their ideas and insights on different things that could make our company better, and believing my management team can handle big conversations or run the shop without me. It takes a huge load off our shoulders to trust the staff we believed was capable of the job from the moment we hired them, and feeling worthy of trust is a big value most people don't realize they have for themselves.

This is sometimes a hurdle we have to overcome from staff who've had bad-guy bosses in the past: the idea that you are given certain things, or not given certain things, because we don't trust you. Or that you will be yelled at if you make a mistake. I want my business filled with people who have different backgrounds, perspectives, opinions, and ideas than me. I've found that when I'm frustrated at a client or trying to skimp a bit on quality to get the job out, I can really depend on my team to hold the line and make sure the standards are clear, even when my feelings are substandard. Also, I'm human, and I don't know everything; if there's a better way to do things, I want to know so we can get better.

When considering how to trust people back, a big mind shift I had to overcome was considering neurodivergence a weakness when it's really a strength. A lot of our staff have ADHD or are on the autism spectrum, and I felt like I was struggling to manage all the typical behaviors associated with my "neurospicies." But I hate micromanaging and did some studying on how to manage ADHD in the workplace. And the info was revolutionary: Understand how a neurodivergent brain works, and you unlock all the creativity and passion for their work. Instead of trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, we started training differently, adding "quiet times" for focus, finding projects and clients that really appealed specifically to the person. We added some nonverbal communications to let people know about availability, added opportunities for lots of one-on-one conversations, and even the way we communicated in those conversations to make sure it was absorbed correctly. I'd be lying if I said I did this all myself, too — most of this came from my team voicing ways they learned, listened, or worked best, and we responded. As we focused on the person and what their specific brain can do for the job instead of forcing them to do the job the way it had already been done, we saw a major increase in productivity and idea creation.



P&M Apparel staff playing with puppies from the local humane society.

The environment has to be safe and trustworthy as well. We take a lot of steps to make sure our staff feel like our shop is a safe space where they can be themselves without fear. This looks tiny, like menstrual products in gender-inclusive bathrooms, or big, like breaking up with clients that want to create offensive products or say offensive things to our team members. We are not going to bring someone on board if some of our team think it's a really bad idea. It also looks silly and nerdy like hosting Dungeons & Dragons on Sunday afternoons or going to bingo raves together.

The great thing about a culture of trust, of hiring people who are interested in growing your business the same way you are, of paying your employees so they feel valued and part of the reason for your success, is that it extends into the client sphere. If the employee feels safe, trusted, respected, and valued, they'll behave with integrity and trust. They'll produce a quality product with a high level of service. They'll create loyalty with the client and represent your company honorably and respectfully. And that's the big secret that's not a secret. If you genuinely prioritize your people over profits, they'll turn around and make you profits. **GP**



Megan Griffith co-owns P&M Apparel in Polk City, Iowa, with her brother Ryan Toney. 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 Screen Printing Magazine Rising Star Award winner.



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Are you making money, or are you making yourself busy & broke?

A guide to profitability for apparel decorators

By Cole Lundstrom

It can feel like a trap. Your employees, your friends, and your parents all think you have it figured it out. You are a successful business owner with a building and a team you support. You print tens of thousands of T-shirts every month. Of course you are getting filthy rich, right? There is no way you have been running your business just to pay your bills and break even all this time — right?

The No. 1 reason I see busy, talented shops struggling to clear a healthy profit is their pricing. Pricing is hard, you feel like you have to be cheap to not lose the "big client" and, honestly, who knows what a printed T-shirt is really worth. Some guys sell them for $4 printed so you can't possibly be too expensive — right?

Let's break down how to build a pricing system that actually makes you make money. Real math, real margins, and real-world practicality. And if you want a tool to help you build your own print-only price sheets, you can use the free calculator at the QR code or visit merchtroop.com/price-sheet-creator,

Scan to use the pricing calculator

which we built specifically for this article. Play around with it and see what it takes to reach your profit goals in cold, hard numbers.

How did I get here?

Here's the truth: most printers don't know their numbers. They know how to print a perfect shirt, but they don't know how to measure production hours, margin per print, or average job size. So they price based on fear that they'll lose a customer.

But cheap doesn't win. Cheap only guarantees you stay busy and broke. Sure, some contract shops are "cheap," it's true. You can run a profitable business making 70 cents a hit. But you



better know your numbers down to the penny. This is not about encouraging you to raise all your prices — this is about knowing you aren't working yourself to the bone for free.

A good shop owner understands that pricing has nothing to do with being the cheapest, and everything to do with being sustainable. You want a pricing system that:

- Covers overhead
- Pays you a real salary
- Allows for growth
- Works for retail and contract clients
- Adjusts easily when blank prices change
- Stays consistent across every employee

Let's be honest — there will always be a shop in your area willing to undercut you by $1, $2, or even $5 per shirt. That's fine. Let them be busy and broke. You need to be profitable or not do the work.

Customers don't choose printers based on pennies. They choose based on confidence. And the ones who shop purely on price? Those are the customers who cause the most headaches. I took an order today for 389 sweatshirts for a bakery chain in California, using a one-color front and six-color back. I emailed the client a quote for $8,100 and she just paid it. The customer has worked with me for seven years. She isn't shopping around every order. She knows we get it done right and that is all she cares about.

So your pricing should reflect the value of working with you — not the desperation of shops that are racing to the bottom.

Retail versus contract

Retail clients and contract clients are not the same. They don't behave the same, they don't require the same level of service, and they shouldn't pay the same. Retail clients often require a great deal of hand holding. They do not have print-ready artwork or, worse, have no artwork at all. Contract clients, on the other hand, give you consistent orders in an organized system.

If you try to have one unified price sheet, you'll either price retail too low or contract clients too high. Neither works long term. Separate the systems. Keep it simple. Your stress level will drop instantly.

Many shops are truly not ready for contract work and that is OK. I have seen so many shops with one automatic press go and beg for big contract accounts like Live Nation, only to be given a chance and discover that they spent three full days running 7,000 pieces a job and only made 90 cents per unit. And in the meantime, they have made all their smaller clients angry by




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destroying the calendar to accept the big order. If you want to do contract printing, learn the true demands and be prepared for a huge amount of units to go in and out of the building.

Screen printing versus DTF: Two different cost structures

Screen printing and direct-to-film (DTF) printing shouldn't be priced the same because the work isn't the same.

Screen printing has a great deal of up-front labor before the screens ever get clamped into your press. You need to be accounting for setup time per color, screen burning, ink mixing, screen cleaning, and artwork preparation. Sure, you could do 13 T-shirts with an eight-color print but are you pricing it high enough to account for the fact that in a one auto shop you may have lost two hours doing them? This means you want to encourage and seek out print runs that make screen printing "worth it." Scale your pricing based on the number of colors, give volume price breaks and make sure setup is included in your pricing, whether you make it visible to the client or average it into the total.

DTF, on the other hand, is a different business altogether. The machines are your labor and now you aren't hiring skilled printers, you are getting people to load and unload a heat press. This pricing should account for the cost per square inch, something often ignored in screen printing. I charge my customers .06/square inch plus 1.50 for the pressing, but your numbers will vary greatly. DTF is predictable. The bigger the print, the higher the cost. A 3" X 3" pocket hit and a 12" X 18" back print are not remotely the same job, so the pricing should clearly reflect that.

So how in the world do I do the actual pricing?

Every shop needs to figure out this number: *required margin per printed unit*. This is the amount each print must contribute toward all of your overhead (payroll, rent, and insurance), plus the owner's fixed salary and your profit target. And yes, you have to give yourself a fixed salary — you are an employee, not the person who just gets whatever is left.

You also need to create a profit target. The profit target is key because your goal is not just to pay your bills, it is to have a profitable business that one day you could sell or pass down to family. When you are gone, the business should be built to live without you. And the only way anyone will want the business is if it covers all expenses, including your labor, and still makes a profit.

Let's say that your shop is a one-auto, three-person team. You run 160 production hours.

- When you average out all the setups and teardowns, you are printing 60 units per hour.
- You have $22,000 of fixed overhead and actually pay the owner.
- And your new goal is $8k profit goal.
- Capacity = 160 × 60 = 9,600 units



- Total margin needed = $30,000
- Margin per printed unit = $3.12
- That means every print — screen printing, DTF, anything — must generate at least $3.12 of margin to keep the shop healthy.

A small shop with that example capacity might need:

- 20 orders averaging 100 units to break-even
- 10 more orders to hit their profit target

Once you calculate this, your whole business becomes predictable. You know how many jobs you need, whether your average order size is too small, and whether your labor efficiency and output needs improvement.

The pricing calculator

So, I made you a tool to create a pricing calculator for your business. It is completely free and you can use it all you like at the QR code or here: merchtroop.com/price-sheet-creator

Scan to use the pricing calculator

It is really eye opening to play with it and see what it takes for you to hit the goals you have for your business. It has variables for hourly output, production hours, and more, so you can use it with any size shop. Then when you get a result you like, simply copy and paste the tables into a spreadsheet or your print shop management software.

The big finish

Most printers undercharge because they've never been shown how to build a real pricing system. Once you anchor everything to your actual monthly output and your required margin per unit, the guesswork disappears. Your prices stop being random. Your shop stops being chaotic. And you finally start earning the money your experience, skill, and effort actually deserve.

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Cole Lundstrom is the founder of MerchTroop.com, specializing in live event apparel activations for brands and experiential marketing. With 16 years in the print industry, he's now launching PrintShopCRM.com, a workflow and automation platform built specifically for print shops to scale smarter and operate more profitably.



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Rising costs, sluggish consumers

By Phillip M. Perry

As the economy enters a new year, businesses can expect a bracing but generally supportive operating environment. "The U.S. economy is holding up admirably well despite a major trade shock caused by tariffs," said Bernard Yaros Jr., lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. "We look for an acceleration in growth in 2026 as stimulus from the One Big Beautiful Bill gets underway."

Oxford Economics expects real GDP to grow by 2% in 2026, up a bit from the 1.7% expected when 2025 numbers are finally tallied. Both years, among the most sluggish growth environments of the past decade, are underperforming the 2.8% increase of 2024.

Higher profits

The nation's economic growth depends largely on the launch of new business initiatives. Unfortunately, companies are holding back for a number of reasons. Interest rates, while declining, are still at the highest levels since 2022. Costs for materials and supplies are increasing. There is uncertainty about the nation's future trade policy. Lower and middle income consumers, nervous about inflation, are tapped out and closing their wallets. Against such headwinds, a host of otherwise attractive projects can look less promising.

One might also expect business profitability to suffer. Yet Oxford Economics expects it to follow the same general pattern as the GDP. "We look for corporate profits to rise by 4.9% in 2026," said Yaros. "That's up substantially from the 0.5% expected when 2025 numbers are finalized." Even so, the 2026 pace remains slower than the 7.9% clocked in 2024.

The expected 2026 rebound in profitability stems from a belief that stimulus from Washington will lift all boats. "We believe the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill, with its tax cuts for businesses and households, should help the economy regather some steam in early 2026," said Anirban Basu, chairman & CEO of Sage Policy Group. The legislation's 100% bonus depreciation should help fuel business investment, while large tax refunds



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should invigorate consumer spending. Both activities are important drivers of the nation's economy.

This stimulus from Washington is arriving at the same time companies are getting a more solid footing on the nation's shifting trade policy. "There has been a bit of a shock to the system in and around tariffs over the past year, and it is taking some time for many operators to understand their impact," noted Andrew Petryk, head of industrials at Brown Gibbons Lang & Company, an investment banker.

Specifically, importers have responded to China tariffs by sourcing from other countries — a move which has also lent succor to the nation's recent supply chain ills. "Lead times have diminished as companies have found alternative or additional suppliers," said Petryk. "Those that relied on one or two vendors now have three, four, or five."

Companies should also benefit from a decline in the cost of money over the coming months, as the Federal Reserve shifts its focus from fighting inflation to bolstering employment. "We look for inflation to peak at just above 3% when 2025 numbers are finalized, and for the Fed to cut interest rates into 2026 until the federal funds rate falls to about 3%," said Yaros. That rate, while much higher than the rates of early 2022, is a considerable improvement over the 4.3% of mid-2025.

Declining interest rates, which encourage businesses to launch new initiatives, are also a reflection of looser pockets on the part of the nation's lenders. "Credit conditions have improved significantly for businesses," Basu said. "Companies with strong balance sheets will find bankers very willing to supply debt. We also know that equity investors, including private equity, remain quite aggressive in supplying capital."

Housing doldrums

Speaking of lower interest rates, they can't come soon enough for a major driver of the nation's economic health: the housing sector. "Housing is in a funk," said Yaros. "Single-family homebuilders are contending with a growing supply of unsold, completed new homes, as well as greater competition from the resale market and falling home prices in a rising number of regions."

The high cost of money is not helping matters. "A significant increase in interest rates since the summer of 2022 has increased the monthly payments required from buyers of new or existing homes," Petryk said. "They have also led to a significant market shortage because families who bought homes


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three to five-plus years ago are loath to surrender their sub-3% mortgages."

Mortgage rates have an important impact on the consumer attitudes that are vital drivers of the economy. While lower short-term rates may be coming from the Federal Reserve, it's unclear how much effect they will have on the longer-term ones that apply to the funding of new homes. "I do not forecast mortgage rates coming down enough to make a big difference in single-family construction," said Bill Conerly, principal of his own consulting firm in Lake Oswego, Oregon.

Wary builders. Reluctant sellers. Sluggish buyers. It's all having an effect on the housing market. Oxford Economics expects starts to fall by 4.3% in 2025 and decline by another 2.3% in 2026 after dropping by 3.5% in 2024. Prices for existing homes are expected to increase only 1.5% in 2025 and 2.3% in 2026 after rising by 4.4% in 2024.

Concerned about the rising cost of living, consumers are cutting back on spending of all kinds. Their hesitancy affects the retail sector, which is an important driver and bellwether of the economy. "Our forecast for year-over-year retail sales growth is 3.8% for 2026, down from the 4.5% of 2025," said Scott Hoyt, senior director of consumer economics for Moody's Analytics. Much of the increase in both years is due to inflation. "High prices are a bit of a mixed bag," said Hoyt. "They undermine consumer purchasing power and confidence, but they also support nominal sales by lifting the prices of the goods retailers are selling."

Construction woes

Outside of the single-family home market, contractors are having problems of their own. Multifamily builders, working through a backlog of units under construction, are hesitant to break ground on new ones. "I think we'll see less multifamily construction in 2026," said Conerly. "Vacancy rates are going up and rents have been coming down at the rate of about one percent a year."

Meanwhile, contractors attached to the commercial, office, and hotel markets are feeling the sting of a slowing economy, high interest rates, and an environment rife with uncertainty. "Many areas of non-residential are trending flat or edging down," Conerly said. "Even the chip fabs, while still strong, are tapering down."

The one bright construction sector: data centers. They show no signs of diminishing and are big customers for electricians, plumbers, and suppliers of scaffolding and manufactured products of all kinds. "When I look at the detail and the economic statistics of what kind of capital equipment is being bought, I am seeing a lot of data center-related equipment in there," said

Conerly. "Data centers also require a lot of garden variety wiring, connectors, and plumbing for cooling."

Every sector of the construction industry shares a common challenge: labor availability. Oxford Economics forecasts an unemployment rate of 4.4% and 4.3% at the end of 2025 and 2026, respectively. That's not much higher than the 4.1% clocked at the end of 2024. Low unemployment, largely due to slowing growth in the nation's working age population and aggressive immigration policies, can result in rising labor costs.



Business confidence

For all business sectors, money and labor are not the only production factors on the rise. "The real problem is the world has become much more expensive in the last few years," noted Basu. "Construction materials are more expensive. And, of course, there are tariffs on items like steel, aluminum, and copper."

Little wonder the high cost of doing business is top of mind for many. "As we head into 2026, the area of most concern for companies is profit margin," said Basu. "Many operators are simultaneously experiencing an increase in costs of delivering services while demand fades."

Given the variety of business concerns, it's little wonder many projects are being put on hold. "It's hard to engage in cost savings when both materials and labor are becoming more expensive," Basu added. "Too often, the pro formas don't pencil out. Many companies are responding by not expanding their operations and trying to trim expenditures at the margins. They are focusing more on cash flow, preservation by slowing hiring, and being less aggressive in leasing and purchasing equipment, particularly equipment impacted by tariff pricing."

This generalized business hesitation is evidenced in the numbers. "We look for business investment to increase by only 1.6% in 2026, after rising by 3% in 2025 3.6% in 2024," said Yaros.

Looking ahead

As we enter the early months of 2026, economists suggest watching these key economic indicators for an idea of how the year will turn out:

- **Employment**: "I would pay close attention to the unemployment rate," said Yaros. An unexpected decline in employment would spur faster interest rate cuts as the Fed seeks to reinforce economic expansion.
- **Consumer spending**: "How is the consumer faring?" poses Basu. "Bear in mind that many low and middle income people are exhausted financially. Indebtedness and delinquencies are up for credit cards, mortgages, and loans."
- **Inflation:** "If we get stubbornly high inflation, that will prevent further progress on interest rates," said Basu.

Oxford Economics still expects the nation to avoid a recession, and the expected 2% GDP growth is right around the level economists peg as the nation's "natural growth rate" — one that supports business activity, maintains full employment, and avoids triggering inflation.

Perhaps of even greater importance, though, is a little heralded threat to productivity. "One thing that sort of permeates the whole economic picture right now is the nation's low population growth rate," said Conerly. "Immigration is down, due to Trump administration policy. The next generation entering their working years is about the same size as the retiring boomers, so there will be no net growth in the labor force."

Responding to this trend, companies will look for ways to maximize their return on labor by increasing output per worker, noted Conerly. "The focus of businesses in 2026 will be increasing productivity — not by pushing people harder, but by providing them with better tools, better training, and better first-level managers." **GP**



Award-winning business journalist **Phillip M. Perry** publishes widely in the fields of management, workplace psychology, and employment law. He can be reached at phil@pmpperry.com.

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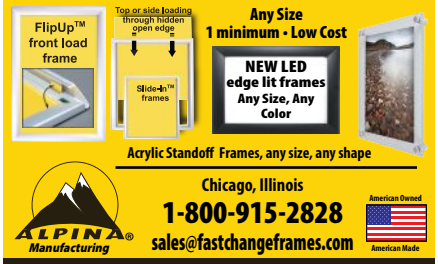
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