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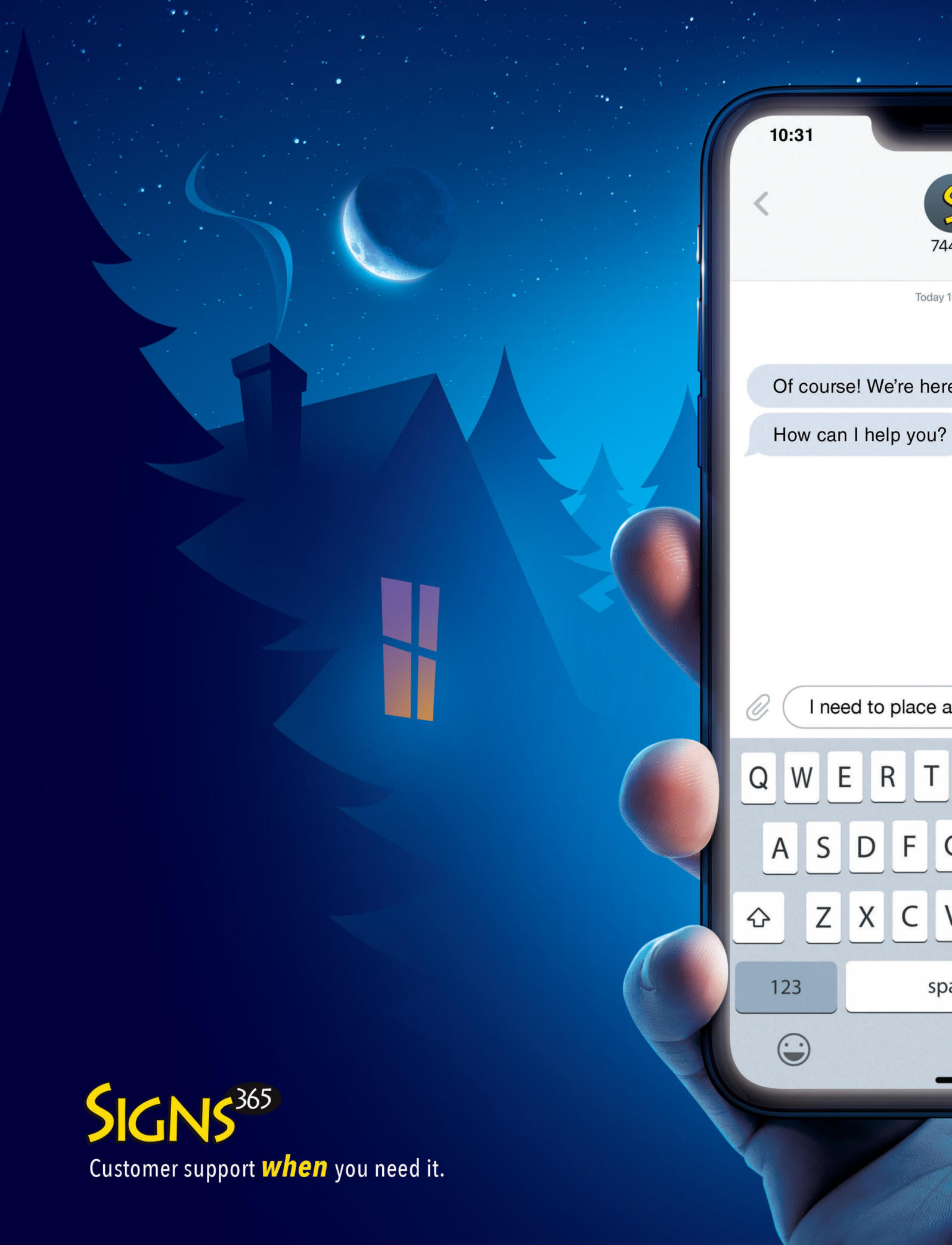
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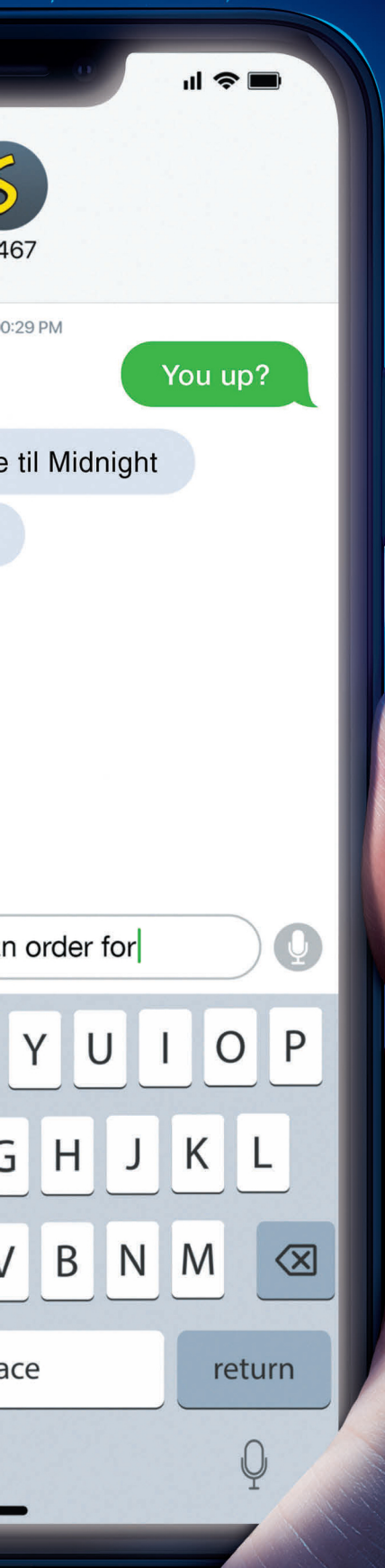
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ON THE COVER: The drinkware market has grown to become the second-largest market for custom decoration, page 52. Image courtesy JDS Industries. Bottom right: This month's GP+ section is all about team sports, page 33. Image courtesy Ty Wilson.

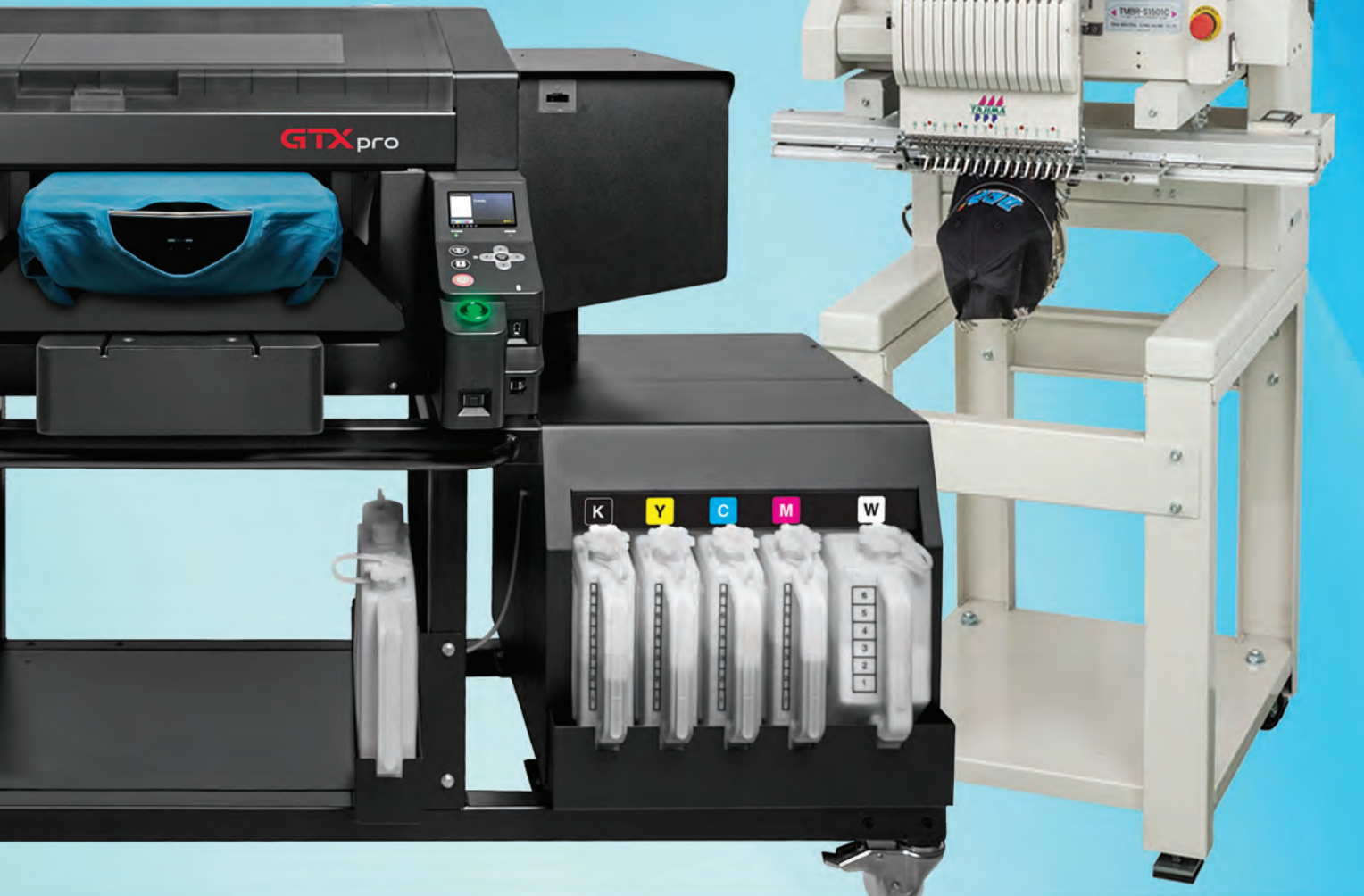
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More Than the Game



February is the month in which the biggest single sporting event in the world takes place, and by that of course I'm referring to the big championship matchup of The Pin Flamingos vs. I Can't Believe It's Not Gutter down at Gary's Bowl-a-Rama just off the highway near the old mall. A true clash of titans.

It's also perhaps time to remind everyone of one of my favorite sayings in regard to playing sports: "If you can't play good, at least look good." Pay no attention to the grammar because I only use that saying when I'm not on the editor clock.

Teams are back in fashion after a bit of a hiatus with social distancing, and this issue of GRAPHICS PRO has a nice assortment of articles in our GP+ special section dedicated to team sports to help you take advantage of the renewed interest in getting back out there with teammates and winning one for the Gipper.

Most people think sporting events when they hear the word "team," so it's important not to let that market slip away from you. From uniforms to accessories to personalized apparel, there are countless ways to get involved with the sporting world in your area. I'm sure you've all done your homework and hit up those new pickleball locations popping up around the country.

But sports are far from the only place where teams matter. Where there are groups of people, there are people who want to stand out, blend in, or just show off. From the workplace to the playground, there are team sales opportunities everywhere.

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Coverage Considerations

Wrap coverage to meet customer needs



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

It took us three and a half years to wrap our shop van, but who's counting? A combination of being absolutely slammed the last few years and being short-handed meant that our personal vehicle kept getting pushed back.

A recent slowdown right after Thanksgiving gave us some time, so we finalized the design and wrapped it. The budget wasn't a concern, but we still chose to do a partial wrap on our shop van. We wanted to use our vehicle as an example of our workmanship and showcase the coverage options and the different types of vinyl available for wraps.

Coverage

We get frequent calls and walk-ins from people requesting vehicle graphics estimates. More often than not, the person will refer to it as a "wrap" whether it's spot graphics or a full wrap they're interested in.

We explain to the customer their options; we can do spot graphics, partial wraps, and full wraps with various options in between,

including stripes and a partial wrap plus spot graphics. Many times a full wrap isn't necessary and we explain this to the customer. It doesn't have to be an all or nothing approach. A partial wrap plus spot graphics often gives you the best advertising for the budget.

In our lobby are TV monitors set up to scroll photos of our completed work — one TV has sign projects, while the other TV has just vehicles. Using these examples, we explain to the customer that spot graphics are a great option if they have a fleet of vehicles they're trying to letter within a budget. Usually, it's all about identification and professionalism so that when the company arrives at a job site, there is no questioning who they are. These spot graphics may be large in some cases and, combined, cover a lot of the vehicle, but they don't necessarily wrap an entire door, hood, or side.

A partial wrap encompasses everything from a tailgate wrap to a $\frac{3}{4}$ wrap. Most of the time, we'll combine a partial wrap with spot

Simple spot graphics can be effective in advertising services and reinforcing a company brand.





Scrolling samples of our work in the lobby help us point out coverage options.

graphics to help tie together the advertising on the whole vehicle. For example, if it's a half-wrap on the back end of the vehicle, we'll also put the company logo or contact info on the doors and maybe a logo on the hood to help tie it all together. Stripes are also effective in doing this.

A full wrap covers the entire vehicle, with or without the roof. We don't have a lot of high-rise buildings with people in them looking down on the cars below, so unless the vehicle is shorter or we're covering the existing color of the vehicle, we still consider it a full wrap, even if we don't wrap the roof. Since we specialize in commercial wraps, our full wraps are bumper-to-bumper and top-to-bottom but don't include the door jambs or other intricate areas that are typically covered on full-color wraps. We explain to the customer that they may see the vehicle's existing color in certain areas; our pricing reflects this difference too.

Budget

To determine the customer's coverage, we have to look at their budget, company



Partial wraps plus spot graphics are a simple way to create effective advertising while adding visual interest.



branding, and advertising expectations. These three items overlap in the conversation as we figure out the coverage and are an excellent opportunity to connect with the customer and build rapport.

Budget is an important part of the process because whether the customer knows what the specific number is or not, they generally want to keep the amount they spend within a specific range. Working through the process with them is how we determine what that amount is.

I like to ask them if they have a budget right from the beginning and then let them know that by having a number in mind, we can work backward to determine how much coverage they can get for that amount, keeping in mind design fees and installation costs.



We've wrapped a fleet of semi trucks for a local developer; the trucks come in all different colors, so a full wrap with a similar design ties together the fleet.



We must determine a range if they don't have a set number. I'll start by offering a few suggestions — if we wrap the tailgate and the back side windows, plus spot graphics on the doors, it will be this amount. On the other end of the spectrum, if we do a full wrap, then the price would be this amount. This is usually the fastest way to determine where their budget falls in that range.

Brand

Once we've narrowed down the coverage or square footage we're considering, we need to look at the company's existing branding. In the case of our shop van, we have an angled stripe design that we've also used on our lobby walls and some other advertising. We decided to incorporate this on our van, so the design and colors are mimicked in both spaces.

If the customer already has an effective logo and colors, then pull design elements from these items to determine how they can be applied to the vehicle wrap. In our case, the angled lines created an interesting stopping point for the partial wrap. Instead of just stopping the graphics at the door, we allowed them to fade off the top and bottom of the vehicle along the natural angle of the design.



We chose a partial wrap for our shop van to showcase coverage options, interesting ways to end the graphics, and ways to incorporate specialty films like perfl and reflective vinyl.





The full wraps for a local car dealership reinforce their brand across different vehicle types.





This full bus wrap was designed for maximum impact.



Unique company colors, design elements within the logo, or a particular font may be all you need to jump start a design idea. Sketching these ideas out quickly on paper or on a template of the vehicle helps the customer visualize the coverage you're quoting.

Expectations

What is your customer trying to accomplish with their advertising? This is an important question, because it really does play into the coverage they need. For example, I mentioned that we recommend spot graphics to customers that have a fleet that they simply want to letter for a professional look that identifies their vehicles on job sites.

If it's a temporary advertisement meant to push a product, service or event, like on the transit projects we do, then we look at both coverage and material options to hit the budget and expectations. Sometimes the ad wraps a smaller section and sometimes it's a larger wrap that may or may not include the windows.

For a customer that wants to reinforce their brand, but isn't necessarily pushing a product or service, then we consider



The partial wraps on this company's fleet keeps the cost down by skipping the cab. We also do simple spot graphics on certain vehicles to still carry over the logo, but without the extra wrap cost.



We utilized transit media and perforated view-through vinyl on the temporary graphics for this bus wrap to advertise an upcoming event.



The rustic full wrap on this limousine is all about carrying over the brand. We've done the same rusted wrap on other vehicles and signage.

their design elements and overall *feel* of the brand. If there is a fleet of vehicles that we'll be lettering or wrapping, then we want to make sure we're consistent across the fleet.

This means that if we're wrapping a car, a pickup truck, and a box truck for the same company, the overall design is carried across all the different shapes. The wraps we did for Modesto Toyota are all full wraps, including the roof, but they carry the same color scheme, water-marked repeating logos, and arch shape across the sides.

Most of the wraps we do are meant to be on the vehicle long term and incorporate both the company brand as well as advertising the services they offer. We want to make sure that who they are, what they do, and how to contact them are the three most important elements to the design. Anything beyond this on the vehicle should compliment the designs while not detracting from the effectiveness of the advertising.

Extras

Since our shop van is not only a source of advertising when we're out on installs, it's also a showcase of our capabilities, we incorporated 3M Scotchlite 780mC Print Wrap film into our design. It adds a bit of flair during the day when the sunlight hits the spot graphics, but it also adds a level of safety at night.

Our side logos, website, and a line of service across the bottom of the back are the only elements we did in reflective. We wanted to incorporate the premium wrap vinyl with the reflective vinyl to show how they can be used together.

Perforated view-through vinyl is another specialty film that is commonly used on wraps. We incorporated perf film across the passenger side window and the two back windows to continue the wrap design in a flawless way, while also increasing the visibility for those driving the van. **GP**

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GETTING INTO

Wall graphics printed on Arlon DPF 6700 and wrapped by Superior Sign & Graphics. (Image Courtesy of Superior Signs & Graphics and Arlon Graphics)

Wall Wraps

Suppliers offer advice and tips for entering and expanding into the wall graphics market

BY BILL SCHIFFNER



Bill Schiffner is a freelance writer/editor based in Holbrook, New York. He has reported on many evolving digital imaging technologies including wide-format printing and newer electronic digital signage. He was the editor for a number of imaging publications and websites. He can be reached at bschiffner@optonline.net.

Agrowing trend in retail stores, restaurants, offices and even in homes is the creative use of wall wraps and murals. For businesses, they're a great way to promote sales and other important information to customers. On the flip side, wall murals are increasingly being used as an innovative tool for interior design.

The adhesive used on wall graphics like these is strong enough to ensure they will stick well, but can be easily removed without causing any damage to the wall or leaving behind any glue residue. That makes wall graphics a great option for both long-term and short-term use. Businesses can install them to advertise a sale and remove them without fear of damaging walls when the sale is over. Or if you're using them to decorate a home, clients can decide if they'd like a different design from time to time without damaging walls as well.

Getting into this market requires an investment in some new equipment, some education



in wall prep, material, and application techniques, as well as asking the right questions.

Getting started

Joe Walton, senior application engineer for 3M Commercial Solutions Division, St. Paul, Minnesota, says that producing wall graphics and other wraps could require purchasing some new equipment such as a printer, laminator, and finishing tools.

“There are many options on the market, so it’s important to figure out which option makes the most sense for your shop based on the kinds of projects you will be working on,” Walton says. “For those who want to learn more about the industry and what’s available, trade shows are a great resource. These expos are intended for graphics manufacturers, installers, and sign makers — both small and large. Walking the floor at trade shows is a great way to learn about the capabilities of new printers, profiles, laminators, finishing tools, etc., for any budget.”

What skills do you need to master?

Walton says that technical colleges offer great desktop publishing and digital design classes. “Right now, there is



ISA tradeshow graphics printed on Avery Dennison MPI 2600 textured wall film. (Image courtesy of Avery Dennison)



(Above and below) Fullerton, California-based Gamut Media used its Roland arsenal on these wall wraps they designed/installed for the Los Angeles “compound” of famed rap music artist, Snoop Dogg. (Image courtesy of Roland DGA)





Wall graphics at Cal State Fullerton Titan Stadium printed on Arlon DPF 6700 and wrapped by Superior Sign & Graphics. (Image Courtesy of Superior Signs & Graphics and Arlon Graphics)



Wall graphics at Cal State Fullerton Titan Stadium printed on Arlon DPF 6700 and wrapped by Superior Sign & Graphics. (Image Courtesy of Superior Signs & Graphics and Arlon Graphics)



OneTen cycle image uses 3M Controltac Print Film 40C. (Image courtesy of 3M)

great demand in the industry for talented designers and installers. Anyone starting in this field should consider taking digital design courses, as well as installation classes. 3M offers installation training — both in class and hands-on. We provide a three-day advanced training course where someone with no previous experience can come to one of our five authorized facilities across the U.S. for expert hands-on instruction. To be successful in this industry, it's all about knowledge.”

Ryan Allen, regional technical specialist at Avery Dennison, Mentor, Ohio, explains that alignment is everything when you're installing film on walls. “The first panel needs to be perfect and straight for all other panels to align to. Included in the planning process are proficient math skills — calculating square footage correctly will ensure full coverage of the graphic or design. Your panels have to line up with a good seam usually around a half inch. A good overlap gives you room to manipulate the panels for proper alignment. Once you get to the application, clean cutting and consistent squeegee strokes are key. In terms of longevity, proper prep is the most helpful.”

What are some wall prep basics?

Walton reports that low VOC paints, meaning paints with low surface energy, have flooded the market. “In laymen's



National Hellenic Museum Mural of Dr. King wrapped in Avery Dennison MPI 2611 wall film by GMediaWraps. (Image courtesy of Avery Dennison)



Joe Walton of 3M says choosing the correct film depends on how long the customer wants the film to stay on. (Image courtesy of 3M)

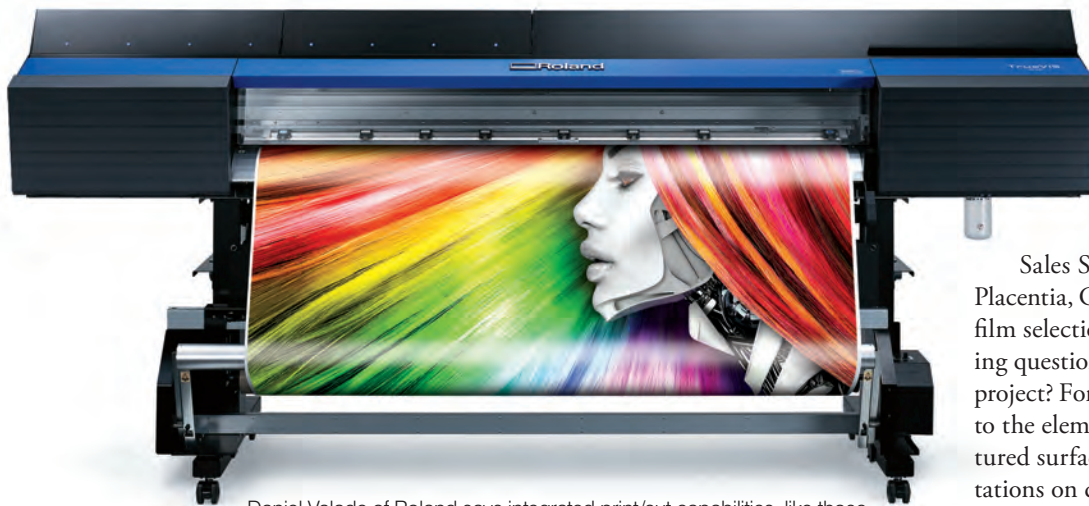
terms, it basically means you will have a tough time sticking graphics to walls that have these types paints on them. When working on a wall with low VOC paint, we recommend using the 3M 'enhanced cleaning method.' This process helps to build the adhesion levels so the graphic will stay on the wall better.

Allen says distilled water and a 70/30 mix of isopropyl alcohol are recommended for prep. "Once the entire wall is wiped down, take an extra piece of scrap vinyl and see how it adheres to the wall when applied. This adhesion test will show you how intensely you need to clean the wall. If the surface has been cleaned, but adhesion is poor, you may need to spray the wall to soak, dry, and spray again, this time wiping the wall thoroughly. This sweating process helps remove toxins and inconsistencies in the wall that may cause failures."

How do you choose the right film?

Daniel Valade, product manager, Color Products and Cutters at Roland DGA, Irvine, California, says when selecting the film to use for a specific job, be sure to

Building wrap created on Arlon DPF 8000 Ultra Tack. (Image courtesy of Arlon Graphics)



Daniel Valade of Roland says integrated print/cut capabilities, like those offered within Roland's TrueVIS series, offer greater versatility, allowing users to handle a wider variety of jobs. (Image courtesy of Roland DGA)



Joe Walton of 3M notes that floor graphics are another option. (Image courtesy of 3M)

evaluate the installation surface and take that into consideration before choosing the media. "You should also consider the type of adhesive used by the media manufacturer, as that will make a difference. In addition, it's key to consult the media manufacturer's guidelines regarding film and surface compatibility. You need to ensure that the media you select is appropriate for the job, and that it's compatible with the ink set you'll be using. In addition, be sure to 'pre-qualify' the customer to determine whether he or she is looking for matte or gloss finish. It's a good idea to have samples of each available to show the client before starting the job."

Louie Calma, Technical Sales Specialist for Arlon Graphics, Placentia, California, points out that with film selection you have to ask the following questions: "Is it an indoor or outdoor project? For outdoor, what is the exposure to the elements? Is it for a smooth or textured surface? What are customer expectations on durability? Removability?"

"These are all very important things to consider when choosing a film. Best rule of thumb is calendared for smooth surfaces (2D) and cast for textured (3D) application. Calendared has a shorter lifespan and is subject to shrink up 1/4" over the life of the film. Cast films have a much longer lifespan and shrink almost immeasurably over the life of the film. Adhesives paired to these films also vary depending on your needs as permanent and removable."

Walton says choosing the correct film depends on how long the customer wants the film to stay on. There are basically three types of films: changeable for short term (1-2 years); removable for long term (3-5 years) and permanent.

Allen notes that depending on what the customer wants, your film choice will change. "If they want a textured film, such as Avery Dennison MPI 2600, or a matte or gloss film, you will need to make a proper film selection. Also, a textured



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Mall mural wrap created on Arlon DPF 8000 Ultra Tack and wrapped by Jirout. (Image Courtesy of Spandex s.r.o and Arlon Graphics)



Wall graphics printed on Arlon DPF 6700 and wrapped by Superior Sign & Graphics. (Image Courtesy of Superior Signs & Graphics and Arlon Graphics)

wall will require a film that can adhere to a textured surface, like MPI 1405. This film rolls out over brick, cinderblock and other tough materials.”

What are some of the best applications to start with?

Matt Braswell, technical sales specialists for Arlon Graphics, says for beginners, smooth interior wall application is the best place to start. “Start with smaller pieces (spot and partial wall decals) and work your way onto larger pieces (full wrap) as you grow in experience and confidence.” He notes to use painter’s tape for registration marks and hinging.

“With full walls, one needs to pay special attention to overlap, bleed, and the key panel. Since the films today only have a maximum width of 60”, the graphic needs to be tiled vertically and overlaps set to ½” or 1”. Extra bleed on top and bottom of the graphic is necessary to compensate for walls, floors, and ceilings that are out of square; longer spans can have larger variances to overcome. Due to these variables, if they cannot be foreseen, it is best

to dry fit the first two or three panels by taping them up on the wall, making sure they are plumb, and make the necessary adjustments before proceeding with the application. Always evenly split the difference of the top and bottom bleed to make sure the graphic is vertically centered.”

“For someone just starting out in the industry, walls, windows and floors would be the most simple installs,” says Walton. “That being said, the introduction of low VOC paints has created some challenges with adhesion, so testing the walls and using an adhesion test kit is crucial for a successful installation, especially when you start getting into complex contours and deep recesses. It’s a great idea to get some training on how vinyl needs to be worked and what we call ‘reading the vinyl,’ as well as when to use heat and when not to.”

Calma adds that once smooth walls are mastered, textured walls are next.

“The same approach applies when it comes to alignment and setup,” he says. “However, on a textured wall it will be easier to remove larger portions of the liner due to the minimal points of contact. Instead of squeegeeing down with pressure, you’ll heat the film to zero tension and roll over with a foam roller to apply the film.”

Valade points out that interior wall wrap jobs are typically easier than exterior wall wrap assignments because the interior jobs rarely require lamination and are usually smaller and less labor intensive. “Interior wall wrap jobs also take place within indoor, controlled environments, so you won’t have worry as much the effects of the elements.” **GP**

Prepping a Wall for a Wrap

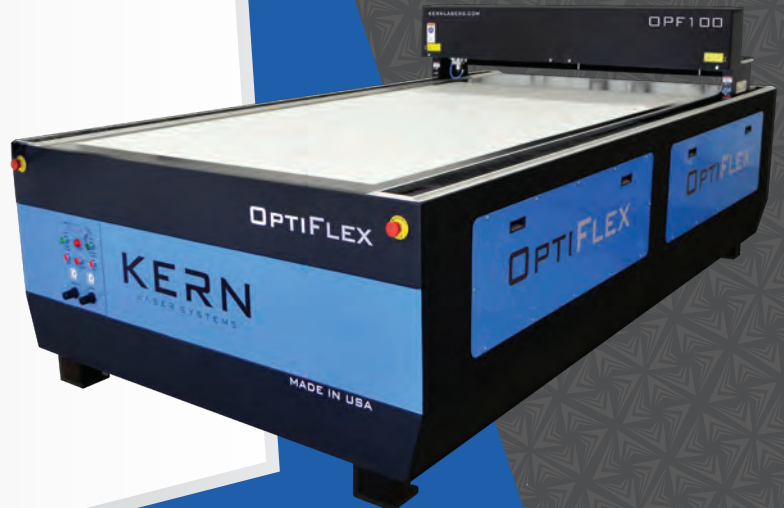
“Once the entire wall is wiped down, take an extra piece of scrap vinyl and see how it adheres to the wall when applied. This adhesion test will show you how intensely you need to clean the wall. If the surface has been cleaned, but adhesion is poor, you may need to spray the wall to soak, dry and spray again, this time wiping the wall thoroughly. This sweating process helps remove toxins and inconsistencies in the wall that may cause failures.”

— Joe Walton,
3M Commercial
Solutions Division



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A Logo Perfect for Any Occasion

Creating a piece that works for all marketing plans and applications



Matt Charboneau started his career in the sign industry in 1985 as Charboneau Signs, later changing it to Storm Mountain Signs. In 2017, he published the "Pre-Sale Sign Survey Field Guide," and he also provides sign design training at his site: LearnSignDesign.com. Contact him at matt@stormmountainsigns.com; LearnSignDesign.com; or 970-481-4151.

"We like our logo, it's just too hard to reproduce cost effectively."

"Our logo design is impossible to read on a sign — the colors all blend together."

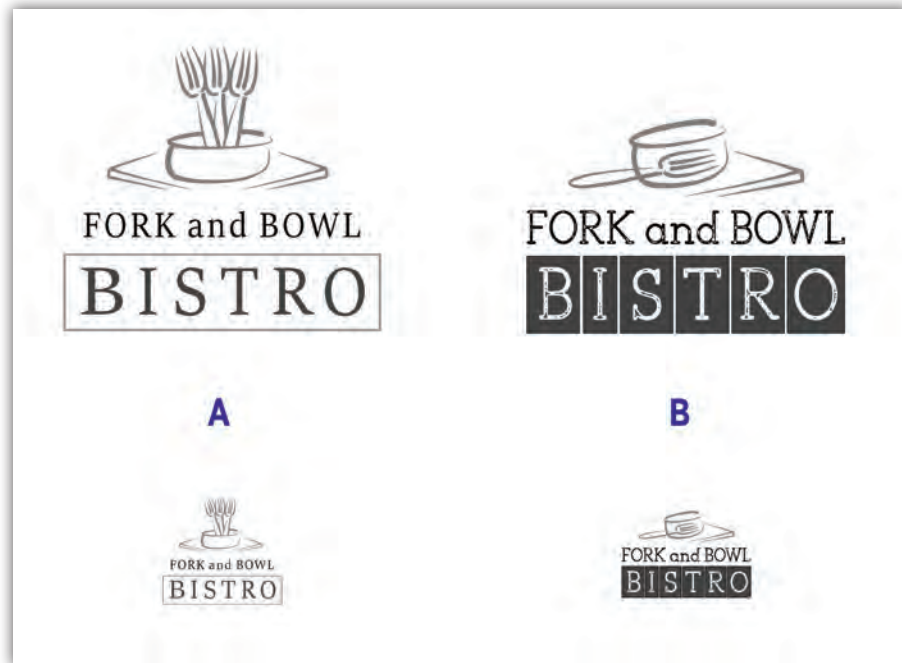
"The sign company couldn't build channel letters from our logo (too many fine details)."

So, it's one of those Mondays. You are the first one into the office; it's a bit chilly as the shop heaters haven't kicked on yet, so you head over to the break room and start the coffee. You pour yourself a cup and wander around the shop checking on the progress of your recent projects.

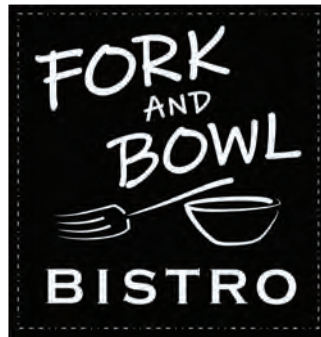
You finally make it back to your office, throw on the light, and there it is, waiting for you on the top of the stack on your

desk. Apparently, the design elves never came in over the weekend to finish the design for you. Now it's Monday and you must own it and come up with some great ideas for the client to consider.

Let's rewind to last week, when you had the 90-minute meeting with the client. They described for you the very limited marketing they do and so their logos from the past were not required to jump



Here were the first two options I presented to David Zimkowski, co-owner of the Fork and Bowl Bistro in San Antonio, Texas. I didn't add any colors; I kept the design options as shown in grayscale from the start. This helped David envision it in various applications — without the color aspect skewing how or where he could use it. I like to leave plenty of white space around the image, as well as show it below the image in a very small version. It's helpful for the client to see how it changes when it's shrunk down to fit on the side of a pencil. Sometimes important elements vanish, sometimes not. (Images courtesy Matt Charboneau)



Here is the last option I shared with David, and it ended up being the one that he chose. I have it shown in its completed state on the right, in black. In this case, I created such a strong selection of black and white logo options, David decided to just keep the logo black and white. Easy peasy, and no need to spend hours showing color options. Do it right in grayscale and you may just save yourself a bunch of time and save your client a boatload of money when it comes to reproducing it.

through a lot of hoops. However, now they plan on expanding and want to start using a more consistent-looking logo for all of their marketing.

And isn't that the challenge — creating a logo design that has to look right when it's used on everything from being reproduced on a laser pointer, a cup, a T-shirt front pocket, the front of a cap, the side of a semi-trailer, and potentially an outdoor electronic advertising display.

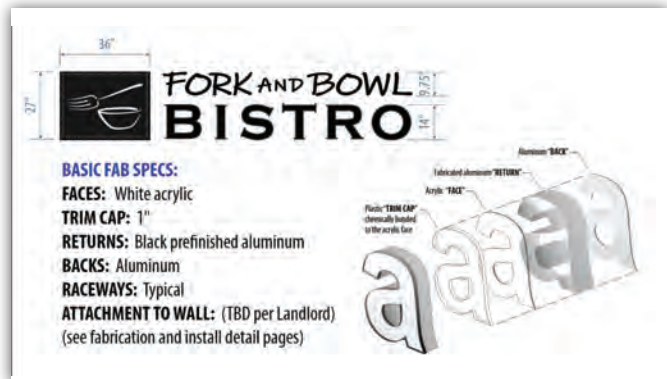
This client has not really thought much farther past the immediate need for a logo that they are working around. For them, it's always been a matter of making the old logo fit, and then hoping it's readable. Their new marketing opportunity is now forcing them to finally address the logo design process that they have been dragging their feet on for years.

Mind reading in 2023

One way to quickly narrow down the client's scope of design-expectation is to ask them to go to Google/Images and search for logos related to their industry. I tell them to select three or four that they like, and a few they absolutely don't like. Now, please remember the rules about copyright; if you are finding it online, it's owned by someone, so you can't use it as-is, or copy it, (and modifying it by any amount is also not permitted). Sorry, but you can only emulate the look, feel, and flow of the examples they will show you, and you must create from scratch, organically, the new design you propose that emulates the average look and feel of the examples provided.

Copyright infringement

Doing your due diligence to assure yourself and your client that you created an original design now takes a bit of time on your part to reasonably execute. Most likely there are thousands of new logos being designed daily around the world. If in doubt, hiring an attorney for an interstate trademark search will run you a small fortune, so be diligent in your searches to make sure you have covered your bases.



During the design process, I already knew I would be able to make his logo work horizontally, even though it was a square logo. Notice how I chose to use the font, how I kerned it, shaped it, and how I fattened up the strokes to accommodate channel letter fabrication. This layout also works well for his embroidery by enlarging the square icon just a bit. It also could work well for other horizontal uses of his logo.



"I created the horizontal layout to fit the space provided. This also became the layout for other logo options for use in other marketing areas"



Most importantly, when reducing the size of the logo, it's important to pay attention to minimal details that if enlarged, would take away from the impact of the logo. Just like in this example, I have removed the dashed line that got so fine and thin that it would be problematic to render.



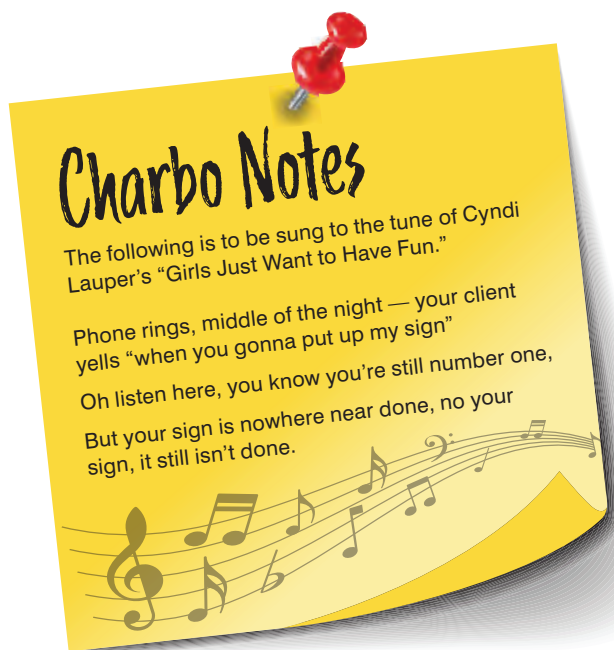
Let's not forget the reverse version of this logo. Sometimes you can be painfully surprised when you find out that the icon just won't reduce down to a small size without some help. In this case, the box becomes an issue at a very small size, when reversed (printed in a light color on a black or very dark background color). In this case, the fork and bowl graphic can hang out all by themselves as it helps the read on this version of the logo. The once-desired box is now a burden when it's reversed and very small in size. Flexibility is key, and planning ahead is the best way to assure your client they will get a logo that won't give them fits down the road.



Color can make or break everything we hold dear to our souls. Some colors pop and provide a sense of identification, some colors add warmth and gentleness, other colors simply make you want to scream “No” if you had to wear it to the jobsite! At least nobody would try to steal them if you took them off during your lunch hour.



And here is what the channel letters look like for this rendering of the logo. Note the raceways — a requirement of the landlord that actually reduces the labor cost for the installation and for the secondary repairs to the wall if he ever decides to move locations. You can see the previous tenants' attachment holes above the sign — apparently, they didn't get the “fix your holes” memo from the landlord.



What about the images they don't like on Google/Images?

In fact, you will learn more about your client's wishes from the images they select from the internet that they don't like. This is like design manna from heaven. It tells you exactly what to avoid.

But how do you start a logo design so that it's guaranteed to be usable in almost every medium?

For me, I look at their future marketing wishes, and what they are doing now. I then look at their opportunities, and decide if a round, square, or rectangular logo will work best.

Yes, I wear the hat of the design professional, and I unilaterally make the decision on the type of logo shape it will be. It may be text only, with a unique stylized font, or it may include a creative little icon or graphic that could be used as a trademark, or the logo may be the text and the icon together, and the arrangement and flow of the text and icon will create a whole new look for the client to consider. I also keep in mind the price I stated to the client (based on their interview, and the answers they provided). A \$250 logo leaves out a lot of research and options compared to a \$750 or \$1,250 logo design.

I then work to create design options that fall within that shape, keeping in mind how many words and or details are to be included, and of course, how it will fit on all of the client's marketing materials.

A great way to present design ideas

As you begin creating logo sketches or concept ideas, I want you to consider something that has worked very well for me over the last 40 years. I create all of my initial concepts for the logo in black and white (grayscale) so my initial presentations are all in grayscale with black and white contrasting elements. No colors — not yet anyway.

Why in grayscale?

In this way, the strengths of the logo's graphic impact and visual message is clear, and is guaranteed that if it's printed in only one color, the logo will stand alone without the need for multiple colors to create the contrast that it needs.

It also prevents a great logo design from being poo-poo'd by a prejudice of color. This is where a design is chosen or rejected simply because the designer used a color that was unpopular with the client.

Imagine this scenario: There is a popular color that is being used by a few tool manufacturers such as Craftsman, and that color is a screamingly bright Pepto Bismol pink.

Now, for the sake of this lesson, let's say you are not a fan of that pink color, so imagine someone grabbing your favorite, expensive hiking boots or dress shoes from your closet and painting them that same vibrant Pepto Bismol pink color.

Regardless of how comfortable you know they are, the color is now forcing you to have significant second thoughts about wearing them. Your dislike of that pink is swaying your decision to wear them. But even if your brain is telling you that they are the same comfortable shoes, your dislike of the color is changing how you feel about the shoes, and your willingness to wear them in public.

Ever wonder why your clients of the past sometimes rejected the best-looking logo you designed for them? For no apparent reason

*“I look at their **future marketing wishes**, and what they are doing now. I then look at their opportunities, and decide if a round, square, or rectangular logo will work best.”*

— at least not a reason they can convey to you verbally? This subliminal detail would have been something you needed to discover during the logo design interview process. There, you would have learned that “pea soup green” was a color they hated in all circumstances. Perhaps it was a color that represented a bad time in the client’s life. You would have never known this without asking a certain number of questions up front, such as: “Are there any colors you simply do not want to use, and which colors are your absolute favorite?”

In my honest opinion, be firm on this black and white grayscale process. The client may want you to include colors too early in the process, so don’t give in. Own the process, own the sale, and own the successful design.

Which questions should I ask before I start designing?

Knowing your client’s company history, the owner’s history, and what their marketing objectives are is important to coming up with ideas they will relate to. Here are some ways to prepare:

1) Research your client before you meet, and don’t ask any questions that aren’t already answered on their website. That question tells your customer, “You are too busy to do your pre-sale research of their company, which you are hoping to create a logo for.”

2) Determine if they are expanding outside of their market share, such as offering a new service or product. Those details may need to be reflected in the new logo!

3) Never interrogate your client, no matter how long you have known them. These questions must be asked in a conversational style, where you are having a fulfilling discussion with them, and your questions are being answered indirectly.

Interrogating the client is the fastest way to crash a worthwhile relationship of trust.

So, in closing, the key to designing a usable logo that will fit into 99% of your client’s marketing needs comes down to your planning it up front, and taking control of the design process. Pay close attention to the client’s current and future uses and the sizes that will be needed, and do your best to stay under three colors. Contrast and readability are the married couple of logo design, and just like the statue of the couple is at the center of the wedding cake, so must it be with the logo design. **GP**



Four Steps to Creating Creative Logos:
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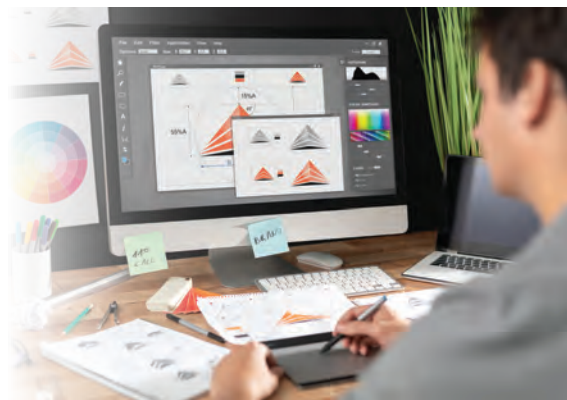


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Logo Parameters

Parameters to consider if the logo is going to be used for print, laser, screen, and specialty items

Print

A) The barely minimal readable font size, for a sans serif font, is 5 point.

B) A comfortable reading font size for printed materials (at arm's length) is 12 point.

C) Contrast of the logo design is affected by the size of the logo — pay attention to readability at a glance. Consider a light or dark background to help create the right mood and feeling for the logo design.

D) Logos that are small read better when they are designed horizontally.

E) Round and square logos usually require an alternate, matching elongated text logo version for better readability when rendered at only ¼" tall or smaller (pens, pointers, combs, clickers, fobs, chop sticks, etc.)

F) Business cards with a secondary detail copy should not be any smaller than 6 point.

Keep your clients logo text around 11 point when it's on the business card, and list their mailing or physical address in 9 point. (of course, paying attention to the font style is critical for an effective card layout)

Embroidery

A) The smallest font size that can be embroidered and still remain readable on a front pocket is 12 point. (In my opinion, some fonts can be embroidered at a smaller size and still maintain readability.) 12 point will assure you a readable embroidered logo.

B) A lot of the same considerations for print and screen apply to embroidery.

C) Colors cost — colors are counted one at a time with embroidery.

D) Threads can help add additional shimmer (visual interest) to contrasting colors.

Wraps, signage and delivery vehicle graphics

A) Readability, readability, readability. Did I also mention that the logo needs to be readable at a distance — while the vehicle is moving? Readability is king, and if the design is crowded or busy, it must have an alternative for use within these unique applications.

B) Avoid using colors in the logo that conflict with the other colors they prefer, such as with their delivery van, which is bright red — so naturally a blue logo will vibrate if placed on that red background. Limiting colors and using graphic design to make the logo stand-out on its own is the best way to create a logo that will be most easily converted to a vehicle graphic.

C) Channel letter fabrication is pretty much limited to a 6" tall sans serif, capital letter.

Letter sizes for channel letters are calculated using the size of a non-descending capital letter, such as an A, B, D, E, F, H, I, K, L, M, N, P, R, T, V, W, X, or Z.

D) Many times taglines must be rendered as non-internally illuminated flat cut out or cast letters. Most logos have tag lines that are created without consideration of how it would be rendered as a channel letter sign. Letters shorter than 6" in height can't easily be made into a channel letter.

E) Most logos have too much information to absorb. Minimizing and fine tuning the thought-count is always a good bet in every logo design situation. Logos should never have more than three thoughts in place. Ideally, two thoughts work best.

Billboards, semi-trailers and big graphic things

A) At this point, a logo with a lot of fine details is almost just as cumbersome to incorporate into outdoor advertising as it is for producing it at ¼" tall on the side of a chopstick.

Envision you're driving on any state or federal highway, and you are seeing the many 100' tall pylon signs advertising the restaurants and gas stations that are accessible by taking the next exit.

How many of those tall pylon signs have really busy messages or logos? Notice how the focus on one message for a quick two or three second read at 75 mph from 1,000 yards away or more. Remember that at extreme distances, the logo colors may be the only recognizable branding element. Think of Motel 6, McDonalds, or Texaco. Clean, contrasting logos with easy readability at all distances.

B) Get the Gemini letter height chart for determining how big a letter needs to be for readability at 100', 300', and 1,000 feet. This chart is pretty darn accurate. In a nutshell, for every 1" of letter height, you can read that letter up to 10 feet away. A 5" tall letter is comfortably readable at 50 feet (give or take a bit for a variety of factors). You can find the chart here: <https://gpro.link/heightchart>.

C) Remember the rule of contrast: "contrast rules" and it is the primary consideration of every sign or logo design.

D) The farther away from the image you get, the darker all colors will appear. Pantone 350 green will look much, much darker at a distance of 500 feet on a cloudy or overcast day.

It's a fact that occurs due to the sun's varying Kelvin (color) as it rises and sets. This typically does not occur with signs viewed indoors due to the consistent overhead lighting. **GP**

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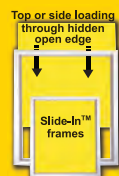


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NEW PRODUCTS

For more on the suppliers featured in this section, please see website and phone information following each product.

VIDEO SHOT CLOCK



Watchfire Signs introduces a new video shot clock. The company says this product doubles as a shot clock and a videoboard. It syncs with the game clock and can be zoned to display lineups, messages for teams and players, sponsor logos, and fan prompts. The 2' clock includes a perimeter light to indicate when the time has reached zero.

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OPAQUE ADVERTISING FILM

General Formulations offers the GF 209AE METROMARK, a conformable opaque film designed for short-term transit advertising. The removable adhesive is combined with an air-egress liner to install on smooth surfaces.

616-887-7387 • generalformulations.com



GLOSS CALENDERED VINYL

Roland DGA announces the addition of the new Gloss Calendered Vinyl PRO (ESM-GCPRO) to its selection of media offerings. It is a 3-mil calendered vinyl with gray removable adhesive supplied on an air-release liner, and the company says it is intended for indoor and outdoor applications for up to five years. It is available in 20" X 50", 30" X 150", and 54" X 150' rolls.

800-542-2307 • rolanddga.com



VINYL FILM

Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions and **Siser North America** announce the launch of the EasyPSV Starling, a pressure-sensitive vinyl film. It is meant for indoor

and outdoor use and can be applied to various surfaces. The product is available in 57 solid colors, is dishwasher safe for up to 80 washes, and has strong UV performance according to the company.

440-534-6000 • averydennison.com



SUSTAINABLE CAP

Atlantis Headwear offers the FRASER sustainable unstructured, six-panel cap. It has a slightly curved mid-visor and self-fabric strap with a flip buckle. The company says it is made of 100% certified organic cotton twill. It is available in 10 colors.

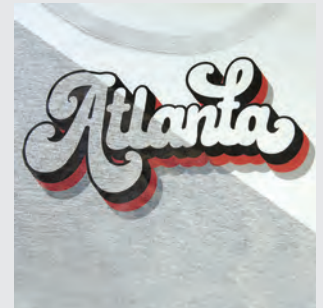
718-522-5575
atlantisheadwear.us



HEAT TRANSFER MATERIAL

JDS Industries Inc. offers the Kota Pro Clear Print Heat Transfer Material for application to light-colored cotton, polyester, and acrylic fabrics. It is mirror cut, printed on the adhesive side, and the company says it can be applied directly to the fabric.

800-843-8853
jdsignsupply.com



DIGITIZING SOFTWARE

ColDesi announces the release of DesignDeck, its digitizing software for embroidery, chenille, rhinestone, and spangles. The software has a range of customizable shapes, colors, and fonts to choose from.

It will be included in ColDesi's Advance and Highland Embroidery Machine bundles.

877-793-3278
coldesi.com



PRINT STITCH PATCHES



STAHL'S announces the launch of its Print Stitch Patches, an addition to the premium Emblems & Patches transfer offering. The product blends embroidery and sublimation, according to the company, which also says the product offers a full-color, photorealistic finish.

800-478-2457 • stahls.com

GP+

TEAM SPORTS

GP+ is a monthly section of GRAPHICS PRO dedicated to taking a deep dive into a specific graphics market. This month's section is all about the camaraderie and togetherness of team sports and how you can succeed in this market.

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Courtesy of Johnson Plastics Plus

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FASTSIGNS Arvada catches sports and athletic team customers with creative, responsive, and reliable service

By Stefanie Galeano-Zalutko

50 Top 5 Products and Services for Team Gear

Courtesy of STAHL'S

51 Team Sports Products

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There are thousands of items that can be personalized with laser engraving and marking, sublimation, toner heat transfer, vinyl application, and UV-LED printing that you can offer to customers and schools alike. Here are a few ways you can get into the “school spirit” to grow your business.

Local schools

One of the fastest and easiest ways to grow your business is by partnering with local school districts to offer “school spirit” items like drinkware and soft goods. With a little planning and budgeting, it can be great repeat business year after year.

There are countless schools across the country that offer school spirit items to their students and parents. From alumni mugs and tumblers to mascot-themed shirts and sports related items, schools offer these items to foster school pride and build a relationship with the community. Many of these schools purchase their items from large volume online sellers, and those sellers require minimum orders.

You have two big advantages as a local supplier of customized items. One is the ability to create short-run, almost on-demand orders, which allows schools to offer a wider range of products since they don't have to buy in bulk, so to speak. And two, you can offer an additional layer of personalization with those short-run orders. Adding a name to a sublimated mug or sports jersey number to toner heat transfer T-shirt is something you



can do that the bulk-order companies cannot.

One last way to work with the schools and help solidify your reputation in the community is to offer to split the profits with the school as a fundraiser. It's a win-win for both you and the schools!

Colleges and universities

Partnering with a university bookstore can lead to a unique revenue stream for your personalization business. For example, if the bookstore is offering leather notebooks or notepads with the school logo, you could offer to personalize them for their customers with laser engraver or UV-LED printing. The same could hold true for tumblers and other drinkware that you could personalize with a laser or with vinyl application.

To help you get started, be sure to check out our School Spirit Gift Guide at jplusplus.com/school-spirit with products you can personalize with sublimation, toner heat transfer, engraving, vinyl, UV-LED printing, and more! GP



THE RETURN OF TEAM SPORTS

Awards & Recognition



(Image courtesy of Marco Awards)

BY JULIA SCHROEDER

How the landscape has changed with the resurgence of sports and competitions

Julia Schroeder is a freelance writer based in Chicago, Illinois. Previously, she held the position of digital content editor for A&E magazine.

She can be reached at spooliaspirals@gmail.com.



With in-person sporting events and competitions back in full force, the awards market is part of the resurgence — striking up its role of recognizing the accomplishments of athletes, teams, coaches, and fans.

While people are excited to return to interactive events, some are looking for innovative ways to commemorate events that are non-traditional, says Daniel Moore of Simba.

“In many ways, it reminds me of the saying ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same,’” says Nicholas Wright, also with Simba.

Market demands for trophy components made a strong return in 2022, says Gregory Kolenut, Marco Awards Group. According to Kolenut, trophies and resin sculptures are a mainstay of the sports awards market, however crystal and assembled cups are making a new presence.

As many aspects have remained similar, Wright says one of the major landscape changes has been the mindfulness which people think about inventory, supply chain, and delivery dates.

A post-pandemic market

The demand for recognition products continues to increase as we exit the irregularities of canceling and postponing live events, Moore says. “There seems to have been a period of working through



(Image courtesy of JDS Industries)

existing pre-COVID-19 inventories, then, a tumultuous supply cycle,” he explains. “Now we are settling into a more ‘normal’ delivery cycle.” Customers also seem to be more willing to wait for custom products that are innovative and unique.

The JDS Industries sales team notes several changes in the market as well. Some customers are moving away from traditional trophies and into more usable award items, such as laser engraved tumblers. Others are looking for new and different awards than in the past. While customers have smaller budgets, in some cases, they are seeing a shift to lower priced awards, like medals.

With the challenging employment environment, Kolenut has noticed more demand for pre-assembled award options. “From pre-assembled trophies to cups, customers are looking for ways to reduce labor and still have many options to choose from,” Kolenut says. “We have pre-assembled trophies and cups that customers can just add a figure and the award is complete.” These options allow for multiple configurations but reduce the amount of work needed to put into the order.

“What I see different than years past is that crystal and glass awards are now being used as sports awards,” says Kolenut. “Additionally, European-style cups have returned to the market as strong as ever.” Kolenut points out, these two categories of awards have a high perceived value and offer many options.

Popular products

The current state of awards and recognition products offers an increase in customizable options. Here’s what’s trending, according to the sales team at JDS Industries:

1 Personalization

When you look at the types of products besides awards that distributors are offering, you can see the direction of the industry. More gifts and more personalized items are being offered. It’s not necessarily a trophy or a plaque anymore.



(Images courtesy Simba)





(Image courtesy of Marco Awards)



(Image courtesy Simba)



(Image courtesy of JDS Industries)

2 Trophies and medals

Traditional trophies and medals continue to be popular. While we've seen a resurgence in traditional trophies, we are also starting to see more customers using custom-cut acrylic for trophy toppers or awards. They are either lasering them, or UV printing. Some dealers are adding LED lights to make the acrylic pop and give even more of a "wow" factor.

For the dealers not doing trophies, products such as plaques, medals, acrylics, and rings are being used. Small trophies for the younger kids are always a hit.

3 Full-color

Full-color decoration like UV printing is trending. This allows dealers to customize more high-end items like crystal, glass, and acrylic as well as lower-cost options like medals and plaques. This helps dealers be able to satisfy customers that have had their budgets cut, which has been the case more recently.

Market trends

"What I have seen is that the popular sports, like soccer, dance, and baseball, where the participation is high at all levels, are typically more sensitive to price," Kolenut says. "Where newer organized sports, such as pickle ball or corn hole, are more concerned with what is new on the market."

Trends within the sports awards market varies on the sport and age range of the recipients. Different sports gravitate to different items. Such as rings for youth baseball tournaments, which Moore points out they are getting more requests for.

"We are finding the popularity of the 'sports chain' at retail, in stadiums, and arenas to be translating into youth sports, challenge events of all kinds, and even the corporate space," Moore says. "The 'sport chain' award is about to blow up in popularity," Wright agrees. "A few years ago, it was just the 'turnover chain,' a specific award for football defensive players. Now it's showing up in all sorts of places."

In the running space, it seems that creative medals with spinners, bottle openers, and component pieces are popular.



(Image courtesy of JDS Industries)



(Image courtesy Simba)



(Images courtesy of Marco Awards)

Plaques are an item that remain popular, but Moore points out the demand is being spread into lighter weight ‘award signs’ that achieve a different, less traditional look but are still customizable.

“There is history in sports and recognition events for specific types of awards for specific occasions,” Wright explains further. “One example: you’ll never see a championship belt given out at a firefighter’s retirement ceremony, but you might find one at their annual BBQ cook off or as an ‘Employee of the Month’ award.”

In each segment of the market, there is demand for value at all price points. “Spending on events is at an all-time high and participants are looking to get the most bang for their buck,” says Moore. “They want quality commemorative items that are durable, aesthetically pleasing, and creative.” Moore believes

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(Images courtesy Simba)



(Image courtesy of JDS Industries)

personalization is the biggest value-add component to awards in general.

Looking ahead

Most dealers are optimistic about 2023, according to the sentiments of the JDS sales team. Schools and sports programs are back in full swing, and people are excited to see things return to normal, they say. “Product availability continues to improve and that allows dealers to get what their customers want, when they need it.”

Based on orders that the Simba sales team received so far for the year ahead, early indicators are business as usual. “Some outdoor activities (golf and running, in particular) have seen an increase in participants over the COVID-19 period,” Moore says. Projections indicate that this will result in an increase in the number of participants, as well as an increase in the overall number of races and tournaments.

Kolenut adds, “from what I have read and experienced in the sports programs I am involved with, youth participation continues to grow.” While most COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, this may only be the second season some activities have run post-COVID-19. Kolenut believes the sports awards market will continue its strong sales performance in 2023. **GP**

THE FUTURE OF

Sports Awards

COURTESY OF THE JDS INDUSTRIES SALES TEAM

Q. Since the return of sports and competitions, how has the landscape changed in terms of what's being offered?

A. While we've seen a resurgence in traditional trophies, we are also starting to see more customers using custom-cut acrylic for trophy toppers or awards. They are either lasering them or UV printing them. Some dealers are adding LED lights to make the acrylic pop and give even more wow factor.

Q. What are your observations on how the products and demand for awards has changed?

A. We hear about and are seeing a lot of changes in the market. Some customers are moving away from traditional trophies and into more usable award items. Others are looking for new and different awards than in the past. We also are hearing about smaller budgets and seeing a shift to lower priced awards, like medals.

Q. What are the newest awards and recognition products?

A. When you look at the types of products besides awards that JDS and other distributors are offering you can see the direction of the industry. More gifts and more personalized items are being offered. So, it's not necessarily a trophy or a plaque anymore.

Q. What awards and products continue to be popular for sports and competitions?

A. Traditional trophies and medals continue to be popular. For the dealers not doing trophies plaques, medals, acrylics, and rings are being used. Small trophies for the younger kids are always a hit.

Q. What trends are you currently seeing within the team sport awards market? Is there any kind of trend toward more or less expensive awards? Do these trends differ depending on the type of sport?

A. Full color decoration like UV printing is trending. This allows dealers to customize more high-end items like crystal, glass, and acrylic as well as lower-cost options like medals and plaques. This helps dealers be able to satisfy customers who have had their budgets cut, which has been the case more recently.

Q. What are your predictions for the year to come in the sports segment of the awards market?

A. Most dealers are optimistic about 2023. Schools and sports programs are back in full swing, and people are excited to see things return to normal. Product availability continues to improve and that allows dealers to get what their customers want, when they need it.

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USING SUBLIMATION IN

Awards

COURTESY OF JOHNSON PLASTICS PLUS



It's hard to believe that the spring award and trophy season is right around the corner. Now is the time to start thinking about what products you can offer your customers that will help set you apart from your competition. A great, cost-effective way to do that is by offering full-color awards and plaques using sublimation.

The advantages of sublimation

Sublimation offers several advantages over the traditional base/column/topper trophy that dominates the space this time of year. The first, and most obvious, is the ability to use full color. School awards take on a whole new dimension when you add in a full-color school logo, mascot, or group photo.

PRO TIP: Add in a small sublimated "coaches award" with a team photo. It's a great way to build customer loyalty while also showing what's possible for the next season with sublimation.

Be efficient

Another advantage to using sublimation for awards is the ability to batch print those full-color awards. You can send multiple plaques or medals to the printer while you're pressing the first batch or working on another project. With a little planning, you'll find that sublimation can make you more efficient during the busy awards season.

PRO TIP: Set your sublimation printer to print landscape (length-wise) as opposed to the traditional portrait mode. Doing this will allow the print head to do more printing and less "traveling" (moving back and forth to reset the next print line). You can increase your print efficiency by up to 30% using this little trick!

Create truly custom awards

Did you know that with the wide range of sublimation substrates available, you can create customized shapes for awards? Even if a customer is ordering a base/column/topper trophy or "billboard" style award, you can cut sublimatable aluminum with a small table-top metal shear to fit any size. Adding a full-color element to a traditional trophy can and give you a great up-sell opportunity.

We often think of sublimation when it comes to customized gifts and keepsakes, but using sublimation during awards season can give you a unique selling proposition with your customers. Sublimatable awards have come a long way in the past decade, with many great-looking options available. Using sublimatable awards can also introduce the process to teams and coaches and open the door to future sublimation sales, such as key chains, mugs, and photo frames. **GP**

BECOMING AN ALL-STAR

Uniform Provider

BY SHANE WILSON

Build the relationships necessary to keep your business running smoothly and your customers happy

Shane Wilson owns a screen printing and embroidery shop in Nebraska that is also a retail sporting goods store, selling everything you need for your favorite sport. He has been in this industry for 29 years.



Uniforms are one of my favorite things to do in my shop. I love making uniforms. Besides the fact I was a college athlete, I just love sports, and when you are dealing with uniforms, then you are working with a coach. I enjoy that very much. However, uniforms are very tricky. You really need to follow a few simple rules, and then they can be very easy and enjoyable to produce.

Printing uniforms can be challenging depending on the materials you are working with. We have been printing them for a very long time. We even screen printed on Lycra wrestling singlets for many years. Of course, nobody does that anymore since sublimation does such a good job with Lycra.

We still print for many of the smaller YMCA leagues and on some basketball jerseys. We have some old-school coaches that like tackle twill, so we offer that as well. Heat transfers have come a long way, too. We heat transfer uniforms when only a few of them are needed.



The local 23-club baseball league is the first league that went to sublimated jerseys. (Image courtesy Ty Wilson)



Ty Wilson printing on the automatic screen printer. That is where we would have printed the league logo on the front. (Image courtesy Nathan Craig)



Sublimated uniforms

for the local youth softball league. The back of this jersey features the sponsors and numbers. (Images courtesy Ty Wilson)

Our shop has really changed over the last five years in regard to uniforms. We are the official supplier for most of the local youth baseball, softball, basketball, and soccer teams. Five years ago, we printed all the jerseys in-house. That entails printing a one- or two-color print with the league name on the front, putting a number below the front print, then a sponsor name on the upper back, and a number below that.

Keep in mind the baseball and softball teams have 15 uniforms per team. So, for every 15 shirts we were changing the sponsor name on the back. These jerseys took forever to print and were very labor intensive.

We would first print the front and then move them to a new machine. From there, we would print the front number below the design. On the same machine we would print the sponsor and the number on the back. We printed them this way for 25 years. Each year, we printed around 1,800 of them in that fashion.

In 2019 sublimation had come a long way and became much more affordable. So, we made it a priority to start moving some of these leagues to sublimation. The first year we only had one league that was willing to pony up the extra cash to order sublimation, and they were so happy with their uniforms. They went from a boring T-shirt to a fully sublimated shirt, creating a drastic difference. The parents and players noticed that right away and so did the other leagues. Of course, they were still wearing a cotton T-shirt. The next year we switched over two more leagues. The last league to bite was the local soccer league. This is the biggest league we work with. They have over 850 players, so adding \$7 or \$8 to the cost of each jersey is a huge investment. When all the kids asked why they didn't have cool uniforms like the baseball kids, they started to consider it. We did manage to move them over to sublimation in 2022, sublimating all 1,800 of those uniforms.

You may ask why this is so important. To me, it was a game changer. We do the



Ty Wilson printing on the number machine. (Image courtesy Nathan Craig)

graphics for the jerseys, we email the roster and sponsors to the factory, and nine days later the uniforms arrive complete. It frees up about two weeks of press time, which obviously means we are printing other jobs that hopefully are making money during those two weeks, not to mention the fatigued staff making all the color changes and sponsor and number changes. Let's just say my printers love me for making these changes.

The right fit

Now let's talk about how we go about finding the right companies to work with. We do not do any sublimation in-house. So, I have had to build good working relationship with companies I can trust. This is the most important thing, in my opinion.

Find a company with a great reputation. It is not that hard as there are not that many of them out there, at least ones that only work with decorators. There are many companies out there that will sell

direct to the end consumer. I do not deal with them. I struggle with those companies because the quality of work is just not what I expect. The problem is most of the end users have no idea what a good quality uniform is supposed to look like.

I have had a few customers bring in their jersey so we can add a name or a number to it, and I am floored by how bad the quality is. Make sure you work with a company that will make you look good.

My next suggestion is to make the sales rep your new best friend. This is no joke! I searched companies that had a good reputation, of course, but I will tell you that the company is only as good as its reps. What I mean by that is a lot of things happen during the course of an order being placed to showing up in the freight room. The best person to make that go smoothly is the rep.

I am so proud of the relationships I have built with my company reps. Many of them actually stay at my house when they come to see my company. I usually buy



Screen-printed jersey

for the local community college volleyball team. (Image courtesy Ty Wilson)

them dinner. They rarely have that happen, so it's a great way to let them know you appreciate them, and that you are dedicated to growing that brand.

I will give you an example of a potential nightmare that ended up making me a hero. The soccer league I mentioned previously placed their orders. Everything was entered and was approved. We had a ship date that put them in my hands two days before the first scheduled games. Everything seemed to be moving perfectly.

Then the league president called and says they are moving the start date back



The Cougars uniform is for the local community college softball team. This has applique on the front. The middle is a sublimated football jersey, and the Blaze uniform is a sublimated baseball jersey. (Image courtesy Ty Wilson)

Production Method	Quantity
Screen Printing	24 or more
Heat Transfer	1 or more
Sublimation	No minimum unless set by vendor



A sublimated wrestling singlet.

We used to screen print these, believe it or not, but moved to sublimation on this material. (Image courtesy Ty Wilson)

a week. This is perfect, because now we have breathing room. Then I realize I am yet to see a shipping notification. I called my rep and he looked into it, only to find out the order was so large, it put me over my credit limit, so they put my order on hold. All they needed to do was call and get payment. My rep was not very happy about this, of course. I then paid to get them moving again. At this point, my rep

is not 100% confident they can be delivered in time.

He then took it upon himself to send me 850 blank performance shirts in all the colors and sizes we ordered for the league. He did this just in case they did not get there in time. At least they would have something to wear for this first week. At the end of the day, 90% of the jerseys were delivered on Friday, and the rest arrived on Saturday morning. I was able to get them off the plane and deliver them to the soccer fields. This is a huge thing for me. He did not have to do any of those things. Many companies would have said, "Sorry, but you were over your credit limit — not our fault," but he took full responsibility and took very good care of me. I will say this again, you're only as good as your rep. Another suggestion I have is to build relationships with more than one company. We work with uniforms for athletes from Bidy Ball, all the way up to colleges. We do not use the same company for T-ball as we do for a college team.

Each company I use is based on how it fits the situation. Obviously, I cannot sell a T-ball team a \$75 jersey, but I have a company that makes a nice uniform for \$25. I cannot sell that jersey to the college baseball team. They will never hold up to the abuse, so make sure you find companies that are a great fit for the customer.

Lastly, I would like to talk about things you can do in addition to uniforms to really service your coaches. For many of the teams we work with, we provide them with everything they wear on and off the field.

For instance, our local community college baseball team wears all our gear, including hats, uniforms, pants, socks, beanies, etc. We also supply their team jackets, travel gear (hooded sweatshirts and joggers) and workout shirts and shorts as well as team bags. It is a great way to build loyalty all in one place.

Most coaches appreciate only having to go to one place to outfit their team. We also offer an online store for them. We mark the items up a few bucks, and then donate the profit back to the teams. The fans love this because it makes it an easy way to support them by buying fan wear. The coaches love this because they can put a few extra bucks into their budget to help out the players.

I am a stickler for service. You can do all the things mentioned above, but if you don't do it with top-notch customer service, then you will not succeed. I do my best to make every coach I work with a true friend. It's the only way I know how to do my job efficiently and successfully. **GP**

TIPS TO

Heat Press



EFFECTIVELY FOR TEAM SPORTS

COURTESY OF CHEMICA US

With the arrival of the new year, sports teams are right back at it with big games and championships around the corner.

As sports teams order their gear, it's on you to stay on your "A-game" and build amazing creations. Here are some tips you can use to get ahead with printing on popular materials for sports teams.



1 Pay attention to the heat! Sometimes you may have to lower temp, for some more heat-sensitive fabrics.

2 Printables like the 1798 Hotmark Print Revolution are great for printing team sports logos and artwork with vibrant and deep colors using solvent and eco-solvent printers.

3 Prepress the textile surface for five seconds to remove excess moisture for optimal quality.

4 Don't spend more time than necessary for weeding and peeling.

5 Use the right transfer tape for ease of transfer and to avoid accidentally damaging your creation



GP

THE POWER OF Teamwork



BY STEFANIE
GALEANO-ZALUTKO

FASTSIGNS Arvada catches sports and athletic team customers with creative, responsive, and reliable service

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.



Standing out in a crowded market is no small task — even for a business with a popular franchise name hanging above the door. At FASTSIGNS in Arvada, Colorado, owners Garret and Kim Gifford highlight familiar factors like scrupulous quality, consistency, and service as key to their business success, but stress that teamwork really does make the dream work.

“The best attribute about our store is the people working alongside us,” says Kim. “It’s taken us 20 years to assemble our talented dream team. Respectful, conscientious, and attentive to customer needs, they are the backbone of our business.”

Tucked into a tidy suburban shopping center just outside Denver, FASTSIGNS Arvada prides itself on being a one-stop-shop for customers seeking modern and creative graphic solutions, from custom artwork to full-scale brand development. The diverse product mix, combined with a twin focus on employee development and client satisfaction, is a winning strategy. The Giffords point to a healthy business model projected to quadruple in annual revenue compared to first-year sales, and a loyal customer base who values personalization over price point.

“What I’ve enjoyed — and where our business continues to grow — is initially talking to clients about basic signage and graphic requests such as banners or building, wayfinding and ADA compliance suite signs, then the conversations turning to [more comprehensive] branding, marketing and communication efforts like custom logo

development, target messaging, or window film graphics,” says Garret. “The ability to walk through that process with customers and grow *alongside* them long-term is very satisfying.”

This approach allows the Giffords to succeed in what, for many, can be tough market segments to crack. Education and team sports are hot targets in the custom signs and graphics industry. With impressive power-of-choice, however, low cost often rules as king.

The Giffords serve various competitive industries, each with unique priorities and design preferences, including construction, manufacturing, and property management. They say education and sports groups in particular require a special mix of connections, skill and patience, but serve as sustainable revenue streams once integral relationships are firmly established.

While many shops “get in at the ground level” with traditional offerings like banners, apparel or promotional products, the co-owners of FASTSIGNS Arvada know that situations arise to showcase your entire suite of products and services. When those opportunities come knocking — you must answer, they say.

Business building

Garret graduated from Kellogg School of Management in Chicago, Illinois, after which he put his educational training to the test at two separate Fortune 500 companies. Always tempted to explore entrepreneurship,



FASTSIGNS Arvada owners Garret and Kim Gifford.



FASTSIGNS storefront.

the Giffords took a leap of faith when a corporate restructure changed their personal circumstances.

“My goal was to eventually have the autonomy of owning a business and the freedom to be involved with my family, their education and their passions. Before, I was traveling a fair amount and didn’t have the flexibility to go to a school play or sporting event,” he says. “I wanted to build a business that was established — one that would provide for our retirement, but also grant freedom with family.”

In 2002, due diligence led the couple to a FASTSIGNS resale in Arvada, Colorado. At 1,600 square-feet with bare-bones startup equipment and three employees agreeing to stay on staff, the business was operational with a runway to flourish.

“When we acquired the business, it was like jumping on a moving freight train,” Garret remembers. “In the beginning, Kim was raising two small kids with one on the way, and I was heavily involved in the day-to-day operations: inventory, purchasing, production and sales. Like many small business owners, initially I was more intensive ‘in’ the business instead of ‘on’ the business.”

Greater opportunities unfolded when Kim later joined the FASTSIGNS staff. With a background in customer service, she quickly took the lead on vendor and customer relations. Before long, her devotion to the daily grind extended to managing inventory, overseeing graphic design and production, plus running the machines. Garret says his wife’s meaningful touch-points with vendors, staff and customers soon made her a fan favorite.

“To this day, we have vendors and customers who will only deal with her — not because there’s an issue, but because they genuinely enjoy working with her.”

Over the years, the co-owners leaned on the vast corporate resources of FASTSIGNS while making the business uniquely their own. The Giffords pointed to a framework of existing internal processes, procedures and systems as building blocks for success.

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“I think one of the greatest benefits is the technical services team evaluating and testing all equipment options so that when you make a purchase, you know that it’s been fully vetted by corporate — a benefit smaller, independent shops don’t have,” Garret says. “Plus, in my opinion, your relationship with that equipment vendor is a step above, too.”

Initially, FASTSIGNS Arvada did not even have an ink jet printer on-site. Relying on cut vinyl and a primitive thermal printer, the company focused on quick turnaround projects like banners, magnets, yard signs, and post and panel wood signs. As customer needs and requests expanded, however, so did staff, equipment, and office space.

In 2015, FASTSIGNS Arvada upgraded to a 4,600 square-foot workplace within the same shopping complex. The Giffords agreed a larger layout provided much-needed space and created efficiencies to better accommodate staff, production, and, ultimately, customers.

“As we’ve grown, we’ve been fortunate to have a solid team with tenure right alongside us — and because of that, we’ve been

able to delegate to and grow their skill sets,” Garret says.

The co-owners also continue to heavily invest in new equipment as a way to diversify their business portfolio. “We not only control the entire process, but also can generate everything in house. We can easily develop samples and review different options with clients,” Kim explains. “Likewise, if someone needs to ascertain something by a certain date, we’re not worried about a third party impacting production.”

Relationship ROI

FASTSIGNS Arvada is able to best serve its expanding customer base because of its sound investment in employee development and equipment. As a result, the owners noted the business can pivot on a dime, and therefore is able to pursue niche opportunities within more complex customer structures like academic and athletic organizations.

While the Giffords say a combination of web presence, SEO optimization, Pay-Per-Click, and social media all influence decision makers within education and

athletics, they believe word-of-mouth referrals continue to be the single most impactful form of self promotion. Garret affirms that one positive touchpoint with the school PTA, for example, can easily morph into introductions with the principal, athletic director or coaches.

He says scrim vinyl banners for gymnasium walls, baseball dugouts or fences remain popular requests among the school community. Upon meeting with customers, however, signage and graphics shops can promote upgraded retractable banners for general assembly areas or tent, awning, and billboard materials, which he says have evolved significantly past traditional canvas finishes.

“People today, they want it all and they want it now: quality, cost, and speed,” Garret says. “Back in 2002, banners that took 20-30 minutes in output can now be printed in minutes thanks to finishing equipment technology. To be able to produce 10-30 banners in hours as opposed to weeks is a huge benefit to our customers.”

While banners once constituted a far greater percentage of the Giffords’ product mix, Garret affirms they still serve a

We not only **control the entire process** but also can generate everything in house. We can easily develop samples and review different options with clients.

valuable purpose. Banners provide a foot in the door and are an effective launch pad for larger, more custom projects like dimensional logos in an athletic facility, custom locker tags for each athlete, or a weather-resistant outdoor display at the back of the dugout area.

In the future, the Giffords anticipate more creative solutions within the awards and recognition category, plus growth within digital projects.

“As school facilities are being physically upgraded, they are weighing modern options in décor and award displays,” Garret says. “These days, we can print on various materials and install them in a dimensional way that highlights the school, league championships, and All-Americans differently compared to years past.”

The owners also foresee more digital projects in the future. Recently, the duo completed two electronic scoreboard

projects for local schools. The technology, they say, is evolving in leaps and bounds, providing teams with the opportunity to play back highlights, promote sponsors and capture the audience.

“So, there are opportunities within opportunities,” Garret says. “Whenever we have sales representatives on campus, I tell them knock to the left and knock to the right. If you’re scheduled to meet with one coach, ask him or her to introduce you to another.”

The goal, he says, is to meet in person with the prospective customer. Then sales associates can have important situational conversations that a detached online solution does not offer, i.e., when a customer may or may not want to consider mesh for a project based on the amount of wind, proposed mounting, or harsh afternoon sunlight threatening to wash out the graphics.

While these relationships start on the business front, oftentimes they are cultivated in communal areas like volunteerism, charitable fundraising and sponsorship.

“We’ll entertain the latter as part of our own marketing strategy and growing foundational relationships,” Garret says. “But bottom line: it’s not an overnight kind of thing to get in the door and once you are, it’s genuine, meaningful relationship building that keeps the partnership active — even if that person should leave and go to another school or team.”

“That happens a lot within this community,” he continues. “So, if you’ve established a rapport with one athletic director, coach, or principal, then the hope is for them to take you along to the next professional venture while still referring you to their successor — that’s the goal.” GP

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TOP 5 PRODUCTS & SERVICES FOR

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For more on the suppliers featured in this section, please see website and phone information following each product.



HOT PEEL FILM

Insta Graphic Systems offers the Superflex HPF (Hot Peel Film), which can be used for athletic logos, tagless labels, athletic names and numbers, decorative graphics, as well as branded logos for non-apparel related items.

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GP



CHEERS TO

(Image courtesy
JDS Industries)

Drinkware

BY PAULA AVEN GLADYCH

Turning cups and mugs into a business staple



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

The drinkware market has grown to become the second-largest market for custom decoration after apparel, valued at \$4.35 billion in 2021, says Michael Barron, West Coast sales manager for Inkcups. The market is expected to expand at a CAGR of 3.61% by 2027 and reach \$5.39 billion.

Expansion is fueled by the incredible growth in e-commerce due to COVID-19. Because customers have changed the way they purchase things, demand has risen for shorter run sizes and lead times, high quality multicolor graphics and personalization, says Barron.

“As many customers sell their products on multiple websites, we have seen the demand for automation in the web-to-print space,” he says.

JDS Industries offers UV printing and engraving in-house at its facility in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It has three Trotec and four Epilog lasers and three direct printers, so the company produces up to 1,000 cups daily.

“I see the drinkware market not as oversaturated but starting to get people’s cupboards full,” says Sara Thompson, fabrication supervisor at JDS. “At JDS, we still stay ahead of it. We offer new colors, shapes and different ounce options, lid options. We are still trying to keep those unique. Obviously adding any personalization adds some uniqueness to it.”

The company provides blanks to other companies wanting to sell personalized products. The company then fabricates them and personalizes them.

Thompson says that the company's 20-oz mug is the most popular size, with 30-oz a close second, and while handled coffee mugs are still in demand, JDS' high endurance line is the most popular. It has a 20-oz tumbler that comes in 18 colors now. The company started with stainless steel and black.

"I was here when we were getting into it. I do a lot of new product testing. It is fun to see the new lines develop and new colors we come up with," she says.

JDS' UV print department is starting to grow but it hasn't reached the status of the company's laser printing.

Thompson says she believes her shop will need another UV printer in the future, the same way its lasering has grown to seven lasers, two of which have rotary attachments for doing cups.

JDS doesn't compete with its customers. It sells its cups at wholesale prices and its fabrication department charges low prices.

"Our customers turn around and upsell them and make a good margin. It is definitely a plus of the Polar Camel line being as affordable as wholesale," Thompson says.

Drinkware decoration

The top processes for decorating drinkware include digital UV, dye sublimation, laser engraving, and screen printing.



Dye sublimation is a great option for smaller companies just starting out as consumables are not too expensive and there are a wide variety of heat presses available. (Image courtesy InkCups)



(Images courtesy Make Your Mark Design)





(Image courtesy JDS Industries)



(Images courtesy Make Your Mark Design)



(Image courtesy InkCups)

Make Your Mark Design in Broomfield, Colorado, primarily handles print-on-demand fulfillment for individuals who sell personalized products on Etsy and Amazon. It uses sublimation, UV printing, and laser engraving to decorate its drinkware.

“Sublimation is our number one department for drinkware,” says Travis Ross, owner of Make Your Mark Design and cohost of the “Print on Demand Cast,” a podcast that relates to print-on-demand. “The beauty of it is you are sublimating. It is actually dyes going into a polyester-coated substrate.”

Heat and pressure are used to turn the sublimation inks from a solid into a gas, making drinkware microwave and dishwasher-safe. The downside to sublimation is it must be done on light-colored mugs or glasses because it doesn’t include white ink.

“You can’t dye anything white. You always have to start with a white or light substrate because of the injection of gases on top of that,” Ross says. For full-color designs, every part of the transfer must be covered in ink or dye. If customers want dark-colored drinkware, the company gets around that by offering UV printing direct-to-object. The downside of UV printing is that the ink is more susceptible to scratches and other damage.

Laser engraving offers another side to drinkware decoration and has become very popular when it comes to insulated mugs, water bottles, or tumblers. If the drinkware is powder coated, the laser can engrave anything into the colored coating, producing beautiful silver stainless steel designs. The downside to laser engraving is that it is not full color.

Thompson says that powder-coated Polar Camels are in big demand because they can be personalized with a laser or UV printer.

“That’s starting to pick up for sure for people, just to keep recreating a better product using the base of the cup and being able to add color to it has been big for us. That part of the industry is growing,” Thompson says.

When a shop laser engraves stainless that is not powder coated, it must apply a

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black coating that the laser can burn off. The downside of this process is that it can get damaged over time, says Ross.

Make Your Mark Design has a couple of Epilog laser engravers that use a rotary device to rotate drinkware during the process. If the drinkware has a handle on it, “Sometimes you need to put something in the drinkware to weight it down, so it won’t skip while moving,” he explains. “If nothing is in there it might not quite turn as well as it should.”

The company runs Mimaki UV printers with kebab attachments. Because of how they are designed, the machines can’t handle drinkware with handles.

With sublimation printers, it is imperative that a shop buy a mug press. They can be cured in a conveyor oven if the mug is wrapped in a silicone sleeve to provide pressure on the transfer, but Ross says it is much easier to just purchase a clam shell heat press.

Out of all the processes the Colorado shop uses to decorate drinkware, sublimation ends up being the most economical, Ross says. “You can get a kit to convert your existing inkjet printer and then you need a mug press that you can get for a few hundred bucks. You can do it in your house. It doesn’t take up a lot of room.”

Sublimation can be labor-intensive with multiple steps and supplies needed, says Inkcups’ Barron. “Additionally, there is a lot of waste with plastic and paper. That being says, dye sublimation is a great option for smaller companies just starting out as consumables are not too expensive and there are a wide variety of heat presses available,” he says. “Once a company grows, they may outgrow this process as it quickly becomes cumbersome.”

Sublimation also has the lowest learning curve. Other processes, such as UV and laser, require users to learn how to use either RIP software or a program such as Adobe Illustrator that offer line art or vectorizing.

UV machines can be cost-prohibitive because UV technology is more expensive, Ross says.

“Cylindrical UV printers can print up to 8.66” onto a vessel using CMYKWV on a

Gantry & Galvo Lasers



LS100



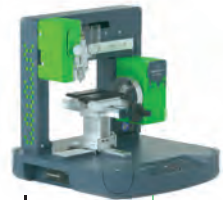
LS900



Welase Galvo Laser

CNC Rotary Engravers

ISx000 Range



M20 Jewel



IS400 Volume



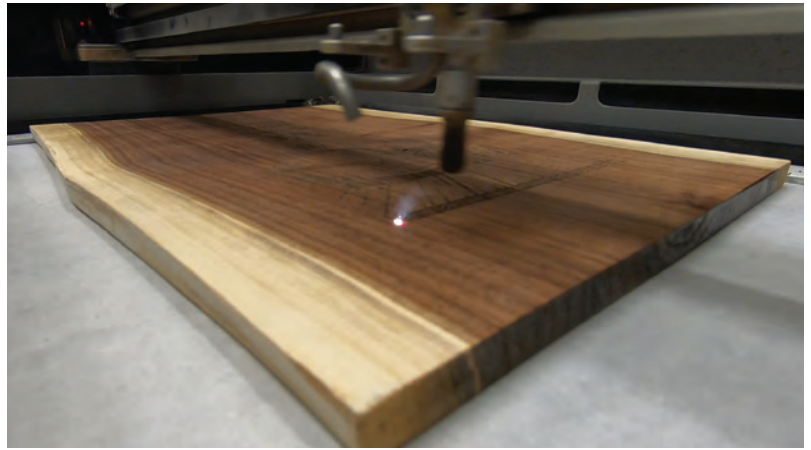
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Jewelry box engraving. (Image courtesy JDS Industries)



Wood block engraving. (Image courtesy JDS Industries)



(Image courtesy Make Your Mark Design)



(Image courtesy Make Your Mark Design)

wide variety of drinkware vessels. Most notably, these designs achieve 360-degree full wrap printing with a wide variety of custom effects,” Barron says. “Digital UV is quick, instantly cures due to UV LED lamps, eliminates set up steps and waste.”

UV printing also has a short learning curve, he added.

Screen printing is “best suited for printing simple graphics and one or two-color logos as registration becomes increasingly difficult with more colors. Long run size jobs are the best fit as there is a lengthy setup process compared to comparable methods, especially digital with multi-color vibrant artwork,” Barron says.

Screen printing offers limited printing effects and capabilities for short runs and usually requires a larger space to accommodate the press, he says. The process also has a longer learning curve to become proficient.

Bob Keller, president of ink manufacturer Marabu North America, says that the biggest reason customers will choose screen printing over digital is that they receive an order for more than 500 pieces. In screen printing, the cost per print goes



The LSINC printer, made for printing directly onto round drinkware. (Image courtesy Marabu)

Many companies that have never done screen printing are jumping right into digital. They don't want to deal with emulsions or screens. It is complicated stuff.

—Bob Keller, president of Marabu North America

down with the number of vessels printed.

Screen printing takes very little money to get started — between \$10,000 and \$20,000, compared to direct-to-object printers, which cost \$100,000 to \$200,000, he says.

Many companies that have never done screen printing are jumping right into digital, Keller says. “They don’t want to deal with emulsions or screens. It is complicated stuff.”

For ease of use, Barron says he prefers digitally decorating drinkware with cylindrical inkjet printers.

“The growth of digital printing is dominant as it offers the most flexibility for small and large runs (down to one-offs), the greatest amount of print options on multiple vessel types and promises easier and quicker set up compared to comparable methods,” he says. Digital also achieves “effects such as mirror print on clear glassware, tone on tone, as well as stunning metallic effects on metal vessels that dye sublimation and screen printing simply cannot recreate.”

The ink used is important, no matter which type of printing a shop decides to embrace, Keller says. Marabu offers a color manager that allows companies to enter a Pantone Matching System color or PMS, based on its two ink lines, to determine which colors to mix. When talking about UV ink specifically, most are not safe for food contact, he says.

Keller recommends that shops “make sure their ink supplier can stand behind their inks.”

It is important to know what is in certain inks to determine if they are food safe. If they are safe, printers don’t have to worry if their ink designs come in contact with a person’s mouth. If the inks are safe, a printer can print their designs right up to the lip of the vessel without worrying about users ingesting monomer, he says.

“We confirmed with our product that you don’t have to worry about it. We’ve done an FDA test and can print to the end if we want,” he says.

Inkjet printing technology has advanced considerably over the past five years, with companies such as Amica and Inkcups

producing faster and more efficient machines.

Marabu has partnered with a Huntsville, Alabama, company, LSINC, to distribute its PeriOne inkjet direct-to-object printer in North America.

LSINC first developed the PeriQ360, a printer that was built with four tunnels that can simultaneously print four objects at a time with an automated infeed and arms to grip.

“It is a game changer. We can do things now that we could never ever do with screen printing. We are doing embossing, imitation etch, and multiple colors,” Keller says. The PeriOne is an entry-level, single-spindle version of the PeriQ360 that can only print on one tapered or cylindrical object at a time. The output of this printer is dishwasher safe and more economical to produce.

He says that he has hundreds of screen printers looking for a digital solution and that is why he developed a partnership with LSINC to make a smaller version of its PeriQ360.

Marabu North America distributes inks made in Germany by its parent company for screen, pad, and digital printing.

“We do consultative work with our customers to make sure they get everything they can get. We will come onsite to make it work,” Keller says.

Most ink manufacturers will have their inks tested independently once a year. Keller recommends that companies get a copy of those documents for their files. When it comes to determining which type of printer to purchase, he says it is important to do the math and buy the machine that “makes the most sense for you as an end user.” GP



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WHERE TO START BUILDING YOUR

Engraving Company

BY JOHN MORMAN

Tips for newcomers to the engraving field



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



So, the tree and decorations have been put away, the turkey and ham have been eaten, and you're on your eighth day of leftovers. The champagne has been drunk to celebrate the New Year, and you're working on your resolutions. The diet isn't working yet, but you've also decided that you either want to start a laser engraving business from scratch or you want to add laser engraving to your existing repertoire. How do you start? If you're already in the personalization, signage, or awards business, much of this will likely be of little or no interest to you. I'd like to pass on some advice to newcomers based on my 20 years of experience working with low-power lasers.

The industry has changed exponentially in the past 20 years, and what I thought then doesn't reflect the state of play nowadays. Furthermore, if readers disagree with anything I say, that's perfectly fine with me. I don't claim to be an expert, and I'm constantly learning new techniques and processes.

1 Do your research

My first piece of advice: don't begin your journey the way I did. As a mechanical engineer, I was working with high-powered industrial lasers — the ones that come with their own liquid nitrogen plant. I was asked by a family member to prepare a report for him on a small laser to add to his thriving embroidery business, and he asked me to look at options.

Well, the long and the short of it was that by the time I had finished a review of the available machines as I saw it, he had decided not to go ahead with a laser, but by then, I had caught the bug. I was so intrigued that I bought my first machine. Since I had done a lot of research already, I followed my own recommendation and dived right in.

2 Do the math

Make sure you can afford to cover the expenses incurred with the new business (including an exhaust and filtration system). You aren't going to bring in a flock of new customers right away, and you may not secure recurring business from them. Don't forget inventory and blanks. None of that comes for free, but certain suppliers will send you sample packs (at a lower cost) for you to experiment with. In my case, I started in my garage, but if you're going to move into a storefront right away, make sure your landlord is happy with the potential power requirements, exhaust requirements, and noise. Don't forget insurance!

Make sure you can afford to cover the expenses incurred with the new business (including an exhaust and filtration system).

3 Find your customers

The third piece of advice is to find your customers. As a new vendor, you won't be the first thought for a customer, so go out to them.

We were already equipped to develop a Celtic Heritage and Heraldic theme, and we were friends with a couple of business owners serving that general market. I made up some pieces for them and asked them to consider a new product. (If they didn't want to carry the products, I told them they had early Christmas presents!) So, determine your starting point, and keep an open mind about what you think you might want to work on. Customers can come up with some great ideas. We've been able to grow from there.

4 Find the right machine

That takes us right to my fourth piece of advice: Consider all the materials you think you might want to work with and their dimensions. Decide on your first machine based on that (after doing your homework), then move one size up in power and work surface. Consider accessories like a cutting table and/or a rotary adaptor.

Machine choice is, of course, critical. In my case, I considered multiple factors, and this is what I recommend:

Find out where the machine is manufactured or where the nearest rep is located. It may be possible to pick the machine up and save shipping costs.

Training has to be included with the purchase. Follow that up by checking warranties, tech support, and spare parts availability. Even the simplest laser is a relatively complex piece of equipment, so make sure you understand what regular and routine maintenance is needed.

Safety. In my case, having experience with large, powerful machines, I had seen what could happen to an operator who was too slow to get body parts out of the way or to technicians who had bypassed safety devices. Even a low-powered machine can hurt you if you're careless about safety.

Depending on who your customers may be, investigate CO₂ machines, fiber

machines, or hybrids. These different machines produce different results on varied materials, so look at them all.

After considering all that, I selected a 30-watt machine. The rep was close, and the factory was an easy drive away. It was an enclosed frame with interlocks to prevent exposure to the beam or to the radiation generated. If you've ever looked at arc welding, staring at a laser beam can produce the same discomfort. For those reasons, I would never personally consider an open-frame device. I realize they're less expensive and appear to be more convenient — I just prefer the safety of an enclosed machine. Again, I'm not dismissing open-frame machines or disparaging their manufacturers. You must make the best decisions based on your own specific needs and preferences.

5 Be somewhat tech-savvy

You will need to be at least familiar with running a computer. Your laser will likely come with its own computer-controlled operating system, and the graphics program you choose will certainly require some familiarity with a computer.

When I started, there weren't a lot of choices for graphics, and most of what was

available required the purchase of the program. I chose Corel and have stuck with it. There are now several readily available programs on the market, both as available for purchase or "open source." As with your machine choice, consider the software carefully.

6 Pricing

Finally, pricing your finished product at the right price point is essential. First, most people forget to include a cost for their time. Your time has value. Remember wastage and/or test pieces with blanks. If you want to build a wholesale business as well as retail, remember to allow for a discount. Think of discount levels for bigger orders at the retail level. If you're starting a full-time business in a store, your costs will differ from someone operating from a garage as a hobby.

In closing, none of this is eye-opening information. Again, I don't claim to be an expert, but I have figured out how to do a lot of things the wrong way. I wish you the best of luck wherever your new venture takes you. **GP**



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Heat Transfer TRENDS FOR 2023

BY SHELLEY WIDHALM

DTF and promo-driven products will lead the way



Digital hybrid transfers to 100% polyester to demonstrate full-color capabilities in a single-step application. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)



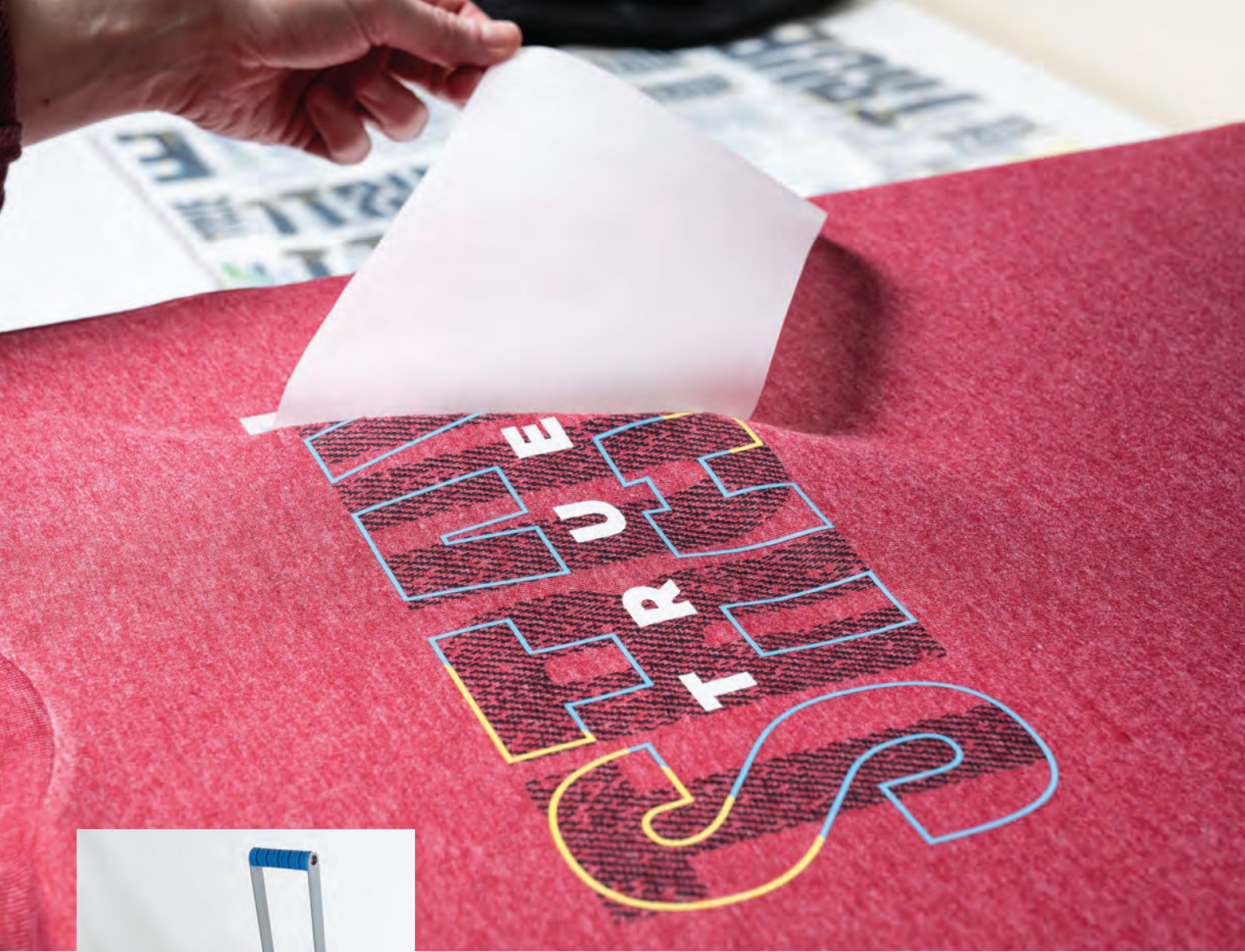
Shelley Widhalm is a freelance writer and editor and founder of Shell's Ink Services, a writing and editing service based in Loveland, Colorado.

Heat transfers saw a surge during the pandemic as decorators shifted their outsourced orders to in-house or started up new businesses during the e-commerce boom.

"You don't need setups or huge, expensive machines. You can have commercial decorating capabilities from a spare bedroom," says David Conner, digital marketing manager of STAHL'S Transfer Express, a Mentor, Ohio-based manufacturer of heat-applied, screen-printed transfers and digital transfers and a provider of blank apparel. "The cost is super low and is built on demand, not inventory."

Decorators, sign shops, and others setting up a small-scale apparel printing business only need a heat press and individual transfers and blanks for their printed apparel and promotional products. They don't need printers and a long list of other equipment that result in high overhead costs. Startup costs can be less than \$2,000 with commercial-quality results.

"We are seeing continued trends with DTF transfers. As films evolved and more options started coming out, it kind of changed the game as far as how decoration has been done," says Adam Yukish, director of business development of All American Print Supply, a supplier of DTF



Heat transfers only need a heat press application without expensive printers, inks, emulsions, screens, or dryers. The transfers allow decorators to easily print apparel by pressing and peeling. Pictured here is a Hotronix Auto Open Clamshell Press. (Image courtesy STAHL'S Transfer Express)

printers, film, and inks and other equipment with four locations in California, Texas, and Pennsylvania.

DTF film transfers take away the worry of pre-treatment like with DTG and of masking and weeding excess material like with print-and-cut vinyl, Yukish says. The transfers can use any type of ink, meaning the same ink, film, and powder can be applied to any fabric, and they don't require the changing of adhesives, he adds. Yukish also says the films evolved in the last six months to hot peels, which, unlike cool peels, do not require waiting between transfers and the first and second applications for cooling before the transfer can be peeled off.

"Heat transfers viewed from the printing industry were seen as an inferior method. That's far from the case now," Conner says. "They didn't know the possibilities with a heat press. ... It feels just



SiliconeX is a versatile, custom screen-printed heat transfer that uses silicone inks to provide stretch and dye-blocking capabilities. (Image courtesy Insta Graphic Systems)



Howard Custom Transfers, Inc., in Chicago, demonstrates applying digital hybrid transfers on a gang sheet to maximize cost-efficiency. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)

like screen printing; it essentially is without the mess.”

Heat transfers are digitally printed graphics applied with heat onto a substrate, like 100% cotton, polyester, spandex, a tri-blend, or a cotton-polyester blend.

“Heat transfer is similar to how you would direct screen print onto a garment. It’s the same technology,” says Jody Mazade, marketing director of Howard Custom Transfers, Inc., a Chicago-based manufacturer of heat transfer products.

The graphic is printed onto a carrier sheet like paper or polyester (PET) film using the same inks as screen printing, like plastisol, solvent-based, or water-based.

“We’re screen printing onto a carrier sheet. We’re gel-curing it through a conveyor dryer, then packaging it and shipping it off to our customers at wholesale pricing,” Mazade says. “It’s typically sports shops across the country or other apparel decorators or owners of a custom

clothing brand or Etsy shop. They finish the garment themselves by pressing it onto a shirt or tote bag with a heat press.”

Tote bags and other materials that can’t be printed using traditional printing processes, like DTG or screen printing, are being printed using heat presses. The materials vary from hats and nylon jackets to backpacks, fanny packs, cooler bags, coozies, small cases, towels, panel artwork, and even wood and home décor items, a trend that began in the last couple of years.

“More promo-driven products that can easily fit under a heat press are definitely what our customers are coming to us for,” Mazade says. “It’s really interesting to see what people are dreaming up to customize.”

Low temperatures have to be used with materials like nylon and polypropylene, which can melt if the temperature is too high; transfers are a good option for synthetic fibers as opposed to screen printing, Mazade says.



“Nylon and waterproof jackets are some of the bigger challenges our customers come to us with,” Mazade adds. “We’re able to help out with specific water-based products that can be applied at low temperatures.”

Heat transfer printing moving into 2023 is seeing a few trends, like the addition of more and more material options, as well as a desire for multiple colors, quick and efficient applications, and high-quality substrates.

“There’s definitely more DTF for heat transfers. We’ve seen a humongous explosion from commercial prints down to home-based creators,” Conner says. “It has the same benefits of DTG.”

DTF transfers are full-color, heat-applied transfers that are printed onto film and applied to a garment. They are pressed by a heat press, and then the transfer is peeled off, leaving the image.

“The manufacturers of the machines are creating a stir. They are printed on a special machine with an adhesive back,”



Digital hybrid transfers applied to promo items such as a T-shirt, Kraft paper gift bag, and corrugated box. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)



Insta Graphic Systems says High Density II is a 3D, CPSIA-compliant, custom screen-printed heat transfer that adds texture and loft to graphics.

(Left) Goof Proof screen-printed heat transfer gang sheets that can be filled with artwork from different customers. This example includes artwork for two shirts on three locations that can be fit on one sheet, maximizing the profit for the job. (Image courtesy STAHL'S' Transfer Express)

says Cris Saunders, director of sales and marketing for Insta Graphic Systems, a Cerritos, Calif.-based manufacturer of custom heat transfers and heat seal equipment. “It’s new in the industry, new and revolutionary.”

That’s because DTF heat transfers are versatile, not limited by color count, and applicable for photo realism, gradients, and fades, Conner says. They can be used for small quantity jobs of one or a few pieces and quick applications, such as hot peel transfers for wash and wear, he adds.

STAHL'S' Transfer Express, for example, sells plastisol-printed transfers called Goof Proof, ready-to-apply and purchased on demand, in bulk, and across different sizes. The customer submits a file and receives the transfers, which they can cut out and apply using a heat press. The same plastisol inks used in traditional screen printing are printed on a carrier or gang sheet, essentially a hot peel transfer paper printed with the plastisol, instead



UltraColor Max options. (Images courtesy STAHL'S Transfer Express)



Howard Custom Transfers, Inc., in Chicago, offers a glitter screen-printed heat transfer to give a textured, raised look. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)

of directly on the substrate. The inks are applied in four seconds, allowing for the printing of up to three shirts a minute.

"You can produce more with the same equipment without the hassles of ink, emulsion, and registering colors," Conner says, adding that unlike with screen printing, a screen room and cleanup isn't necessary. "It looks, feels, and washes and wears like a real screen-printed T-shirt."

Transfer Express offers screen-printed transfers, where the more that's printed on the full-center chest design, the larger the quantity discount, resulting in more profitability for the customer, Conner says.



Customers can buy the gang sheet, then set the quantity of items on the sheet, such as logos or custom labels, and split prints across projects, he adds. They also can use multiple colors, whereas before it had to be a single color.

“We sell our transfers by the page, so whatever artwork you can fit on it, it ships for the same cost,” Conner says.

An additional trend in heat presses is a look toward more expensive materials with a premium feel and style, such as textures, two-tones, and tri-blends, he continues.

“This helps certain decorators and small brands stand out in a very crowded [market],” Conner says, adding that the desire for quality is a trend he’s seen in the last six to eight months. “Customers see the value in the product and are able to pay a higher price point. ... It’s all about the perceived value of the brand and how they position their product.”

Mazade saw full-color transfers begin trending last year and expects that to continue in 2023, providing more options beyond the traditional spot or low-color transfers with simple artwork.

“I would expect DTF and digital hybrid full-color transfers to continue to take over the industry for a number of reasons,” Mazade says. “They offer decorators opportunities to print on nearly every fabric or substrate without restrictions on the artwork. That’s huge for decorators, eliminating the guesswork if they can accept a job from a customer. It streamlines the quoting and buying process.”

Like the name indicates, hybrid transfers are a two-step process, and they’re able to produce an exact image.

“The other thing we are seeing is high-definition transfers with lots of color and very fine detail,” Saunders says.



A universal hot-peel transfer for full-color, photo-realistic images, which is manufactured in California and is available in many colors. (Image courtesy Insta Graphic Systems)

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Headwear continues to trend with transfers providing an easy, cost-efficient solution. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)

UltraColor Max direct-to-film heat transfers for unique applications unachievable by other print methods, such as slippers, bags, and backpacks. The applications have limitless color and detail and can be ordered in any quantity. (Image courtesy STAHL'S Transfer Express)



Unique applications to sportswear items with high-stretch and nylon, materials previously difficult to decorate with transfers. (Image courtesy Howard Custom Transfers, Inc.)

Before, full-color had outlines and prohibited knockouts of the artwork into the shirt color.

“They typically steered away from very intricate designs, which now can be done with DTF and digital hybrids,” Mazade says. “They offer full color, gradients, shading, intricate designs — all kinds of looks we couldn’t get before.”

Another trend in 2022 was the comeback of puff transfers that add dimension or texture to the transferred graphic. Puff is a plastisol-based ink that, when applied, creates a retro, vintage look.

“We were concerned puff was going to be a trend that wouldn’t last,” Mazade says, adding that its introduction in the 1960s or ’70s fell away only to come back this year. “We’re going to see that continue to be popular throughout next year.”

Another type of ink that offers dimension or a raised surface is silicone, a new transfer option brought to market in 2022, fitting the desire for dimension as opposed to colors melting into the fabric, Mazade says.

“The silicone ink offers a way to layer the ink enough so it has a raised effect off the shirt or whatever garment you’re printing on,” Mazade adds.

Silicone is water-based, which is more sustainable than other materials like PVC, Saunders says.

“People want to see dimensions, not a flat transfer,” Saunders says. “Once it goes down with the heat and pressure, it creates a loft ... onto the actual artwork. Instead of flat, it might be a little bit raised off your garment.”

Two additional trends with transfers are the return of retro color-changing transfers that alter in appearance in light, and the customization and personalization of transfer orders, Saunders adds.

“It’s something new. People are always eager for something new and different,” Saunders says. **GP**

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GETTING VALUE FROM Heat Transfers

BY KRISTINE SHREVE

How to bring heat transfers from the realm of hobbyists to a successful business model

Kristine Shreve is the founder and CEO of Kristine Shreve Consulting, which offers writing, marketing, and business development services. The company can be found at KristineShreve.com. Kristine is also the creator and host of the Business + Women podcast and is also the director of marketing and outreach for Applique Getaway. Kristine was the director of marketing for Ensign Emblem and EnMart from 2006 to April 2020.



When some decorators talk about heat transfers, the tendency is to refer to them as if they are only good for hobbyists, or only suitable for one-offs. The theory, in some quarters anyway, seems to be that heat transfers aren't really a viable option for a legitimate shop, or that getting quality heat transfers is more often more effort than it's worth. There are also, it should be said, shops that use heat transfers on a regular basis, and may even have built a large part of their business around decorating with heat transfers, or even creating and selling the transfers themselves. So, which is it? Are transfers for hobbyists and people who just want to decorate and aren't concerned about quality, or are they

for, and from, people who run legitimate businesses? The answer is, and you may have already guessed it, a little bit of both.

The first thing to get out of the way is the concept that heat transfers are for hobbyists or people who aren't necessarily concerned about the quality or fastness of the finished product. Yes, there are transfers available that serve this market. Part of the heat transfer market is designed to serve those who just want to make a one-off shirt or a Christmas ornament. They're transfers made for fun, to allow someone to create a piece that's personal to them. The end goal is not to create a garment that will stand up to a lot of wear and tear, or a piece that meets certain standards of



(Image courtesy Scrappy Dappy Doo)



(Images courtesy 605 Customize)



(Images courtesy Fat Dad Custom Designs)

professional decoration. Transfers for this market are priced inexpensively and the quality is reflected in the price. They're not meant to be anything more than simple amusement. They are also not the only type of heat transfer out there.

For a professional shop, heat transfers offer a different option. These are professionally made transfers, which are created with quality and attention and care. The transfers are more expensive, but they're also designed to have greater washfastness and colorfastness and to convey a professional and expert appearance. The old saying "you get what you pay for" applies here. You will pay more for these types of transfers, but the quality is well worth the price.

So, if you're a decoration shop and looking to buy heat transfers, what sort of transfers might you be able to buy? Almost any decoration technique you can name has a heat transfer option. There are plastisol transfers for screen printing. Vinyl transfers can come in handy for sports jerseys when you need to add names and numbers. Heat transfer vinyl also has a lot of uses. Inkjet and laser transfers, or

sublimation transfers, can be useful when you don't have a printer in your shop. If you want to bring the bling, rhinestone transfers are an option for adding a little sparkle. Heat seal patches are another decoration option — one that allows you to bring printing or embroidery to your decorated items. Patches are not technically considered heat transfers, but they work on roughly the same principle. DTF transfers, full-color, are a more recent option in the heat transfer world.

The next question, I suppose, is why would a shop use transfers? There are several reasons. For some shops, transfers allow them to take smaller orders and get them done quickly, without interrupting the production flow they have set up to handle bigger orders. Heat transfers can also be a great way to test out the viability of a new market, and its size, before investing in equipment and supplies for that decoration technique. For those shops that are just starting out or have limited budgets, heat transfers can be a way to offer additional decoration techniques at a lesser expense than outfitting the shop with equipment. Transfers can



(Images courtesy Make Your Mark Design)



(Images courtesy 605 Customize)

also eliminate the need to train employees and to invest time in learning new decoration techniques. The company making the transfers already has expertise in the technique that creates the transfers, so your shop doesn't have to. Heat transfers can also be a terrific option when your shop is confronted with decorating something that isn't easy to decorate. Some items are simply too bulky or awkward for other methods, and a heat transfer can allow for decoration to be added in those cases. Finally, heat transfers can be the ideal option for repetitive jobs like putting names and numbers on sports jerseys. If the names and numbers will always be the same, heat pressing them onto the jersey would be much faster than creating the numbers and letters yourself from scratch.

Clearly there are a lot of reasons that

heat transfers can be a viable option for a shop, but using transfers has to require at least some equipment, right? Yes, there is equipment required: a heat press. As the name implies, heat transfers are sealed to the item to be decorated using heat. And professional heat transfers are not the type that can be sealed with an iron — iron-on transfers are an entirely different thing. So, you will need a professional press. Heat transfers generally come in two types: hot peel or cold peel. As the names imply, the difference is in when the transfer paper is peeled from the transfer after it is heat sealed to the item to be decorated. Hot peel transfers are peeled immediately after pressing. Cold peel transfers are peeled once the decorated item and the transfer have cooled. Both types of transfers, cold peel and hot peel, have their

Professional heat transfers are not the type that can be sealed with an iron — iron-on transfers are an entirely different thing.

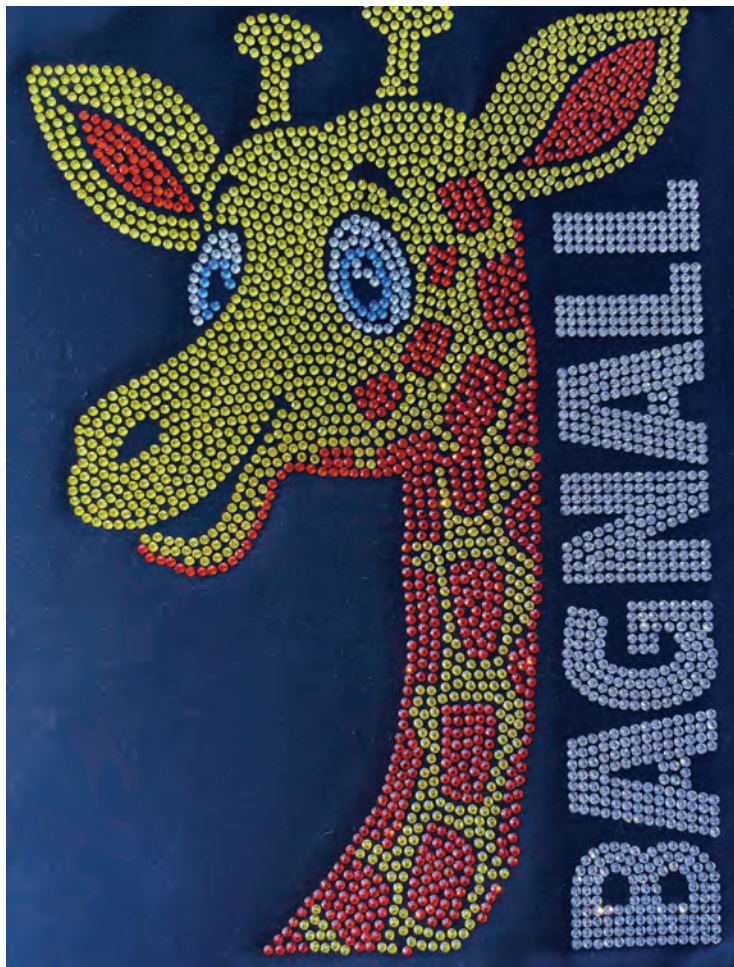


admirers, and one type is not better or more optimal than the other.

One of the marvelous things about the combination of a heat press and heat transfers is the variety of options that it offers to a decoration shop. Want to add printed designs to a dark shirt and don't have a DTG machine? Printable heat transfer vinyl and DTF transfers can help with that. Found a used mug press and want to try selling mugs at a local gift shop with artwork you created in house? Sublimation transfers where you send the art and receive a printed transfer in return can help you test out the marketplace and whether or not your designs will sell. Love the look of screen-printed band shirts, but can't afford to purchase a press or squeegees or plastisol ink? Order up some screen print transfers and make band shirts that



(Image courtesy Scrappy Dappy Doo)



(Image courtesy Sparkle Gear)



local bands will love. If adding some sparkle is on your shop's agenda, rhinestone transfers may be your answer. You can create custom transfers or buy stock transfers for a variety of common activities, holidays, or needs. Pretty much any decoration you can create yourself from scratch can also be offered in transfer form.

Once you've decided what sort of transfers you need, the next thing to consider is what type of heat press you want to buy. Heat presses range from small tabletop models that are mostly for light-duty or crafting work to huge dual-shuttle presses that can speed up production time. Here are a few things to think about when deciding which heat press will work best for you:

Consider the biggest thing you're going to want to press — It sounds a bit like this tip encourages you to buy a bigger press than you'll generally need, but in this case, bigger is the best option. Even if you only press large items irregularly, it's better to have a press that can meet that occasional need than to scramble because your press is too small. Granted, you can't know everything that you'll ever be asked to press, but as a general rule, it's a good idea to get the biggest press you can afford.

Even and accurate heat — You want a press with a platen that heats evenly. Having cold spots or overly warm spots on a press can cause an uneven seal or burning or melting that can ruin a transfer and a garment. The same applies to accurate heat. You want the press to heat to the temperature you set and to be able to maintain that heat steadily. As with an uneven heat, inaccurate heat or heat that



(Image courtesy Scrappy Dappy Doo)



(Image courtesy Scrappy Dappy Doo)



(Image courtesy Fat Dad Custom Designs)

fluctuates can result in bad presses and ruined garments and transfers.

Even pressure — Like heat, pressure that is uneven can result in a poor-quality finished product. Even pressure is generally the result of a properly constructed upper platen. This is where buying a heat press from an experienced heat press manufacturer is a good idea. Well-constructed presses may cost more, but they'll do the job better.

Ease of loading, opening, and closing — In a nutshell, is your proposed press friendly to those who will use it? Can you easily load items to be decorated, without risk of burning hands or arms? Is opening and closing the press difficult or fatiguing? Does it open and close reliably, or do you have to struggle with those features? Ease of loading can impact production time. Ease of opening and closing can also impact production time and operator fatigue. You don't want a press you have to fight and which leaves you exhausted after extended use. **GP**

Where to find heat transfers

Screen print transfers

STAHL'S Transfer Express — www.transferexpress.com

FM Expressions — www.fmexpressions.com

Versatrans — www.versatranz.com

613 Originals — www.613originals.com

Direct to film (DTF) transfers

605 Customize — 605customize.com

Fat Dad Custom Designs — www.fatdadcustomdesigns.com

Atlanta Vinyl — atlantavinylstore.com

Rhinestone heat transfers

Rhinestone Templates — www.rhinestonetemplates.com

Sparkle Gear — sparklegear.com

Heat Transfer Warehouse — www.heattransferwarehouse.com

Vinyl heat transfers

Niche Creative Studios — www.nichevinyl.com

Pro World Inc — www.proworldinc.com

Stahls — www.stahls.com/home

Sublimation transfers

The Sassy Subber — thesassysubber.com

Driven By Graphics Supply Company — dbgsupplyco.com

Heat Transfer Source — www.heattransfersource.com

Making Moves Using Direct to Film

Adjusting to add new production methods to the shop



Howard Potter has worked in the promotional industry for 17 years, from designing to building brands and a family-owned business. He is the co-owner and CEO of A&P Master Images LLC with his wife, Amanda. Their company offers graphic design, screen printing, embroidery, sublimation, vinyl graphics, and promotional items. Howard, his family, and the business reside in Utica, New York. For more information, please visit MasterYourImage.com.

Over the past 20 years, our company has always been on the lookout for the latest and greatest printing techniques and the newest equipment to not only make things easier for our crew, but to offer more options to our customers. Twenty years ago, sublimation was the very first process our company offered from our home, and many did not know what it was or how well it would last. All these years later, everyone is promoting it,



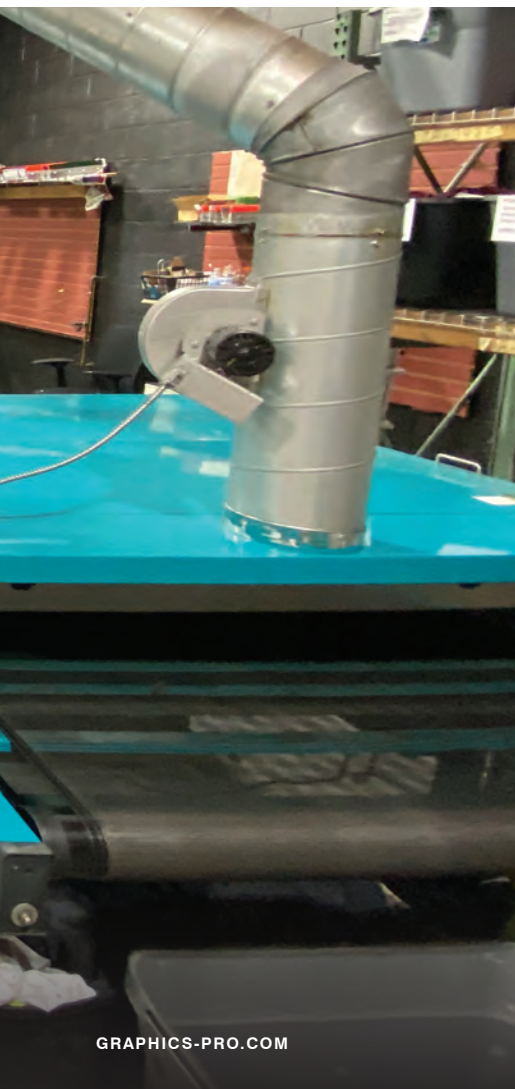
A DTF printer prints to a roll and then all you have to do is trim the transfers and heat press them onto the product, which is literally only a 15-second press. (Images courtesy of Howard Potter)

which is great to see! But what's next? You guessed it: direct to film (DTF).

I will be the first to admit that, when I heard about the process last year, I discounted it without doing any research. To me it sounded like another direct-to-garment knock-off, and I had studied that process for several years hoping it would advance. However, several months ago I was going through my emails and a



The ColDesi DTF 24H4 printer we recently added to the shop.



manufacturer was promoting their DTF printer. It caught my eye right away. I spent the next couple of hours doing some research on the process and the films, inks, and adhesive powders generally used. With any new process everyone always tells you what you want to hear, so I always try to dig deeper since we are the ones making the investment.

After some research, I found a company that sold DTF prints, so we had some made to test them. On top of that I reached out to ColDesi to order sample prints from their DTF machine to compare the print quality and see how well they would hold up. Both sets of prints were tested and both held up well in the wash, but the ColDesi prints had better-quality ink saturation and level of detail, with no lines or fuzziness on the print.

From there I did a Zoom call with Michael Angel, business development, from ColDesi to learn more details about their DTF equipment. I have worked with ColDesi for years — ever since we first searched for quality rhinestones — and they have always been about quality and customer service, which is another reason I trust them right out of the gate. Angel explained to me the mechanics of how the machine operated, what I needed to set the

equipment up, and more. After running the tests and having a great Zoom meeting, my wife and I made plans to fly down to the ColDesi facility right away for an in-person demo. Once we saw the DTF printer working in real life and talked to Angel and his team some more, it took us only 20 minutes to decide that this was the machine for us. We had already met with our bank for pre-approval for a loan, so we were able to get everything rolling to order the machine that day.

I know what you are thinking... Great, you invested in a new process, but why? What does this new process bring to the table?

Before I explain that, let's go over a few different printing options we offer to our customers for comparison:

Sublimation is a great process for full-color printing of small or large runs, but when it comes to apparel, it only works well on 100% polyester. The sublimation process is very clean, though, and takes up very little space. We offered this process in our online stores.

Apparel vinyl is a process we offered to be able to put full-color images on any fabric for our online stores, but it was not a perfect solution since it can be time-consuming to print, die-cut, weed, transfer,



Howard Potter
and Mike Angel
of ColDesi.



Apparel vinyl is a process we offered to be able to put full-color images on any fabric for our online stores, but it was not a perfect solution since it can be time consuming to print, die-cut, weed, transfer, and then heat press the product.

and then heat press the product. It is a good process overall to get you by, but not the most cost-effective one in the end, though it also takes up very little space.

Screen printing is one of the older printing processes on the market and still a top-quality option, but it can take up much more space and isn't very clean. You need space to print your positives and clean, spray out, and expose screens, plus a dark room/dryer room and space to print. Around 14 years ago, when we started in screen printing, our original print area was only 600 square feet. Today it is no more than 1,200 square feet. With screen printing you can print onto just about any fabric, but the issues are curing the ink and avoiding dye migration with some of the chemicals being used in the dyes of the fabrics. Another issue is how long it takes to train someone on the entire process of

screen printing and the attention to detail that it requires. Then you have the amount of space and supplies needed. Again, still a top-notch, quality process, hands down.

So again, why DTF? You have so many options already...

I thought the same thing until I completed my research. This was the one process that helped my entire company, starting with customer service. They no longer have to sell by number of colors or worry about PMS matches, and this goes on just about any fabric. And, it takes less time to train a new rep on how to sell DTF. With the other processes you have so much more to explain, like what they can or cannot go on, number of colors that can be printed, etc.

From a design perspective, the designers do not have to worry about color limitations with DTF. Most customers' logos

are two to four colors, which makes it difficult at times to reduce the colors down to one or two for other processes. DTF also means the designer no longer has to worry as much about how small the design is since it is a digital print, whereas with apparel vinyl you can only go so small and have to take the time to create cut files as well as print files. On the screen-printing side, there was even more to worry about with creating positives for the designs, which is time consuming. With DTF, the designers can put all of their energy into the customer and the designs.

Let's talk production. A DTF printer prints to a roll and then all you have to do is trim the transfers and heat press them onto the product, which is literally only a 15-second press. We have been able to press apparel at 270 degrees for as little as 10 seconds on some products. Why is this great news? You can now provide full-color prints on just about any fabric and avoid dye migration all together. You can also heat press a minimum of 40 to 100 full-color prints per hour depending on your placement and the item. Even 40 full-color prints per hour is huge. Think about it. With sublimation you can typically get around 24 per hour and can only offer white apparel that is only polyester. With screen printing you have to worry about dye migration much more often along with the length of training, and if you wanted a full-color print, using a six-color manual or auto would only get you 24 to 48 pieces printed per hour at most. It is much easier to simply teach someone how to operate a heat press, explain placements, and have them produce. Not to mention heat presses take up much less space than screen-printing presses.

DTF solves so many printing issues, but what's the best part of all? You can print as many prints as you would like while printing for any and all customer orders and the cost per square inch is the same, no matter the size of your shop. This is a must-have process for all shops. And, the DTF equipment comes in a few different sizes. Our company went with the largest one to start since we knew with our volume, we could use it. Here's to the future of printing. **GP**

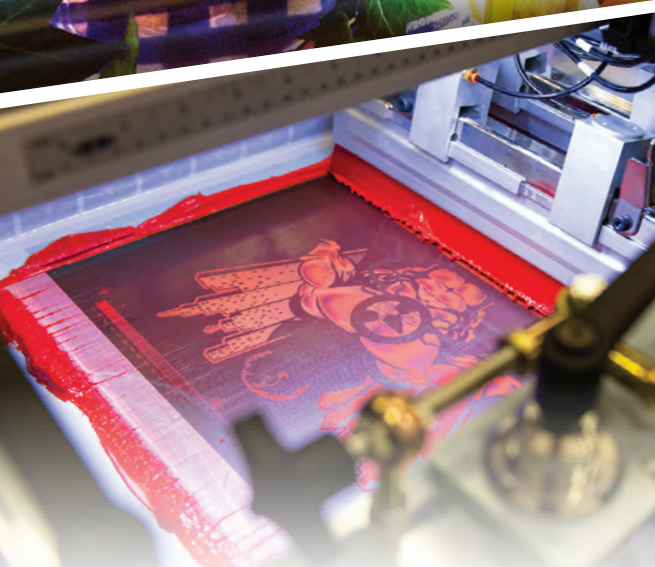
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What is Your Time Worth?

Your efforts are much more than just the time you spend during production



Jennifer Cox is one of the founders and serves as president of the National Network of Embroidery Professionals (NNEP), an organization that supports embroidery and apparel decoration professionals with programs and services designed to increase profitability and production. You can contact her at jennifer@nnepe.com.

Here we are at the beginning of the new year. 2023 stretches out before us, full of possibilities and, ideally, full of profits. This is an excellent time to pause so that you can evaluate 2022. Did you hit the profit goals you had set for your business? If you did, do you know why? If you did not, do you know why your numbers fell short? If you do not take a beat to look over what has been, it is challenging to make the necessary adjustments to your business to create a different outcome.

There is one thing that mystifies me about our industry. Whenever I talk with an embroidery and apparel decoration business owner about pricing or profits, the conversation seems to pivot around their cost per 1,000 stitches. There is a very old (as in from the early 1990s) pricing strategy that is still floating around, and actively being used as a pricing model: charging \$1 per 1,000 stitches.

I swear I break out in hives whenever a business owner says their pricing method is to charge \$1/1,000 stitches. First, because that's what I was told when I got into this industry in 1991. What can you purchase today at the same price that it was more than 30 years ago? I am pretty sure the

answer is nothing! Second, if you are basing your pricing on stitch count alone, I suspect that you have very little profits in the bank after any orders you complete. Third, not considering your time as a cost is hurting your business.

When I talk about time, I don't just mean the time the product is flopping around on the machine getting jabbed by needles. I am talking about every little detail that takes up your time for every order you handle.

Let's just think about the process for a single order. You have to:

- Interact with the customer in person, online, or via a mobile device.
- Once the customer determines what product they want and what design they want embroidered on that product, you have to create a price and provide that to the customer.
- Once the customer places the order, you have to find and order the blank inventory.
- Once the inventory arrives, you have to make sure that you received the correct quantities, colors, styles, and sizes of the products.
- You have to digitize the design, or get the design digitized.
- You have to sew out the design to make sure it runs as expected, and that the color sequence is set correctly.
- You may need to get approval of the sew out from the customer before you can run the products.
- You need to stabilize and hoop the products.
- You need to embroider the products.
- You need to tear away or trim the backing, snip any thread tails, and possibly remove any toppings.
- You need to fold, possibly label, and possibly bag the items before they are packed.
- You need to create an invoice for the customer.
- You need to let the customer know the order is complete and ready to be picked up or shipped.
- You need to get paid.
- The order has to be shipped, delivered or picked up.



These are the 15 steps to create a typical custom-embroidered order. If you put a 10,000-stitch design on that product, and you charged just \$10 for that embroidery, it is difficult to see where or how you made any profit. If each step above (other than actually running the design on the machine) took you only one minute, a mere 60 seconds, you would have invested 15 minutes in the order above and beyond the time it takes to actually embroider the product. If you ran your machine at 1,000 stitches/minute, you would also have 10 minutes in sewing time invested in this order.

To throw a monkey wrench in the works, let's be a bit more realistic about the amount of time each of the steps above takes.

- Meet with the customer — this can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, depending on the situation.

- Create a quote — a few minutes if it is just for one product with one design. Then there are those orders with many products with a variety of designs on them. Quoting those orders will take considerably longer.

- Order inventory — fingers crossed that you get lucky with the first supplier you try.

- Verify the inventory — more finger crossing here in the hopes that you received exactly what you ordered.

- Digitize the design — this definitely takes more than a minute, unless you work with an awesome digitizer and you just need to pop off an email to them with the properly prepared artwork.

- Sew out — a few minutes to load the correct thread colors and at least 10 minutes to sew the design.



If you are basing your pricing on stitch count alone, I suspect that you have very little profits in the bank after any orders you complete. Not considering your time as a cost is **hurting your business.**

- Sew out approval — hurry up and wait, and wait, and wait...

- Stabilize, hoop, and sew — 10 minutes per run at least, assuming you have no thread breads and no empty bobbins — like that ever happens.

- Finishing — tear, trim, fold, tag, and bag the products as necessary.

- Box the order — get it ready for pickup, delivery, or shipping.

- Invoicing — pull up the quote and add in the digitizing, shipping, and any other extra services fees, such as tagging or bagging.

- Contact the customer via phone or email once the order is complete.

- Post payment — make the bank run — oh happy day.

- Get the products into the hands of your customer.

Every single minute working with a customer needs to be accounted for and built into your process. If this process takes an hour or more from start to finish, that needs to be factored into your pricing. Because I know that so many apparel decoration professionals overlook the amount of time that goes into each order beyond the sewing time, I am sharing some ways to help you track and evaluate the time

that goes into each of your jobs:

- Track your time in five-minute increments. That will build in a bit of a buffer for you.

- Track your time in three major content buckets:

- Consultations: All customer-facing meetings or calls, including time spent creating materials and samples.

- Prep work: All emails, design creation, creating and updating order details, vendor communications, etc.

- Production: The time you spend running the order on your equipment and finishing the order, including packing.

- Use a time tracking app to make it easy. I love the time tracking feature inside of Honeybook, but Toggl is a good free option!

- Don't wait — start now! This is my biggest tip. Even if time tracking sounds overwhelming, I assure you that it will help you better understand if you are even pricing yourself for profit in the first place!

As we move ahead into 2023, understanding where your time is spent is going to be one of the most important parts of your business. And trust me, you will thank me later when your business is more profitable! **GP**

The Here and There of Westernwear

'I wanna be a cowboy. You can be my cowgirl...'



At 21 years old, Lon Winters was the production manager for Ocean Pacific and started his 30+ year career reclaiming screens. He's the president and founder of Colorado-based Graphic Elephants, an international consulting firm and apparel decoration studio specializing in screen printing technical advances, plant design, layout, troubleshooting, productivity, quality analysis, and complete apparel decorating solutions. Learn more at www.graphicelephants.com.

Being from Colorado and the West, we like both kinds of music, country and western! Over the last three plus decades we have worked with a number of western clothing brands that originate right here in the Rocky Mountains. As many of you know, brand and line development has its challenges, but we have been doing it long enough that we have more method than madness at this stage. It typically begins with a meeting where the designers and developers discuss subject matter in broad strokes. We talk about what's trending in fashion according

to the client. Design evolves like everything else. It does seem like western follows mainstream by a season or two, so there is always plenty of influence available for inspiration. The client typically gives us the direction on subject matter and style.

Every spring and fall we develop, test, modify, sample, and run production on two brands for both men's and women's styles. Two very different markets. Men's styles lean toward darker garments and tonal inks where women's continue to be more pastel and softer styles with more opaque brighter tones. There



(Images courtesy Lon Winters)





are some exceptions for styles requiring more attitude. The Stetson brand is for a more mature conservative buyer, while the Tin Haul brand targets a more youthful market with more attitude. It might be described as a country style with a board sports and street flare. More bold graphics and aggressive solutions.

We had nearly 50 designs that needed to be developed between the two brands, so we had our work cut out for us. Our client had gone over each individual design with details and expectations. Many designs end up being simple type solutions only with some secondary elements to fill out the compositions. So, we had font and type style hunting to do. Bold faced and condensed, curly and retro styles, classic, and distressed were all among the those requested. Free fonts sites and our library were the best places to start. Text can be boring so to be more design oriented we applied arches and warps to many of them. Utilizing Adobe Illustrator was the simplest. We could arrange vector objects in a multitude of ways. Under Effect, we can scroll down to the Warp options and choose different effects that we can apply. With the preview box checked we scrolled through plenty of options quickly.

For a couple designs, we used retro fonts and applied effects. A texture was layered over the top and airbrushing techniques applied in Photoshop for a weathered look. We applied some textures as vector objects in Illustrator as a bitmap for complete knockouts. For other type solutions we brought in separate textures to use in combination. We wanted a deep recessed texture to break up patterns but

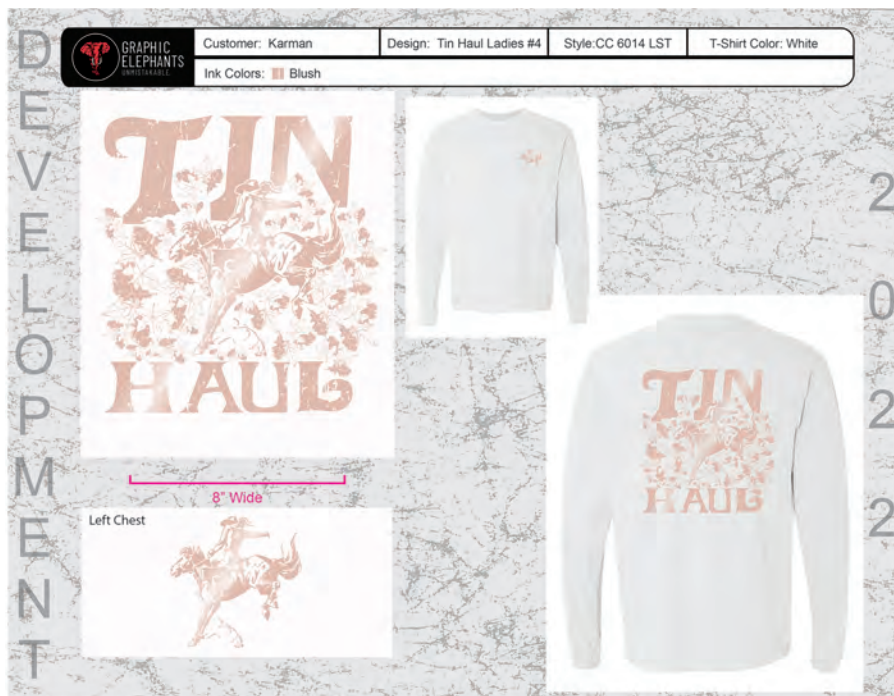




also applied a soft and worn edges feel throughout. The combination together made a great distressed print.

Most images would be printed on a dark garment, and we — mostly — didn't use a white printer or baseplate that we might ordinarily use. The ink was mostly transparent from the dark fabric's influence and pushed way back for the illusion of a well-worn garment.

Additional designs called for a vintage style with secondary elements. These simple one to four color concepts were great for the old authentic feel. Some of this old art style has an overexposed look to it as well. We started in Photoshop and built our basic shapes for overall compositions. We hand-drew some of the unusual shapes and scanned those into Illustrator, then placed into Photoshop and merged



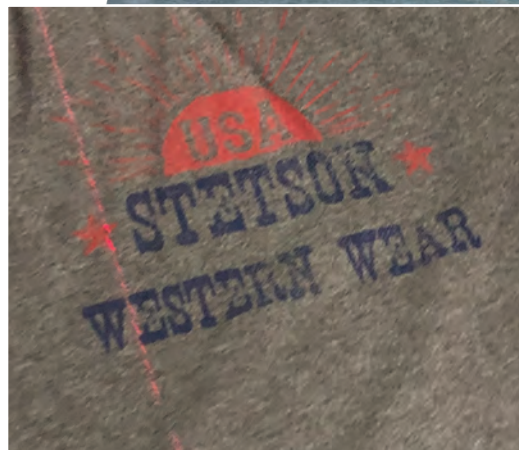
*We had nearly **50 designs** that needed to be developed between the two brands, so we had our work cut out for us.*



the layers in correct placement as a Smart Object. We then used canned tiff distress patterns from our archives library and positioned them over many of the images. We brought the transparency back to 100% on the layers pallet. In the Color Range with the dialog box selected, we chose the darkest object and adjusted for fuzziness. After deselecting and changing the background layer to a color we were able to see our textures.

There was an additional Southwest theme throughout the ladies' designs. Many of those images had a desert scenic ambience with plenty of cacti and desert valleys within. On the other hand, there always seems to be a sarape-filled image. They have a few more colors.

Once colored, each layer was selected and copied to a Channel for separation purposes. This processes the info into black or white and grayscale. This will be either positive or negative information. The in-between is loosely how the half-tones get built in output. Separations were fairly simple.







They also wanted a very soft hand to all the inks, especially on dark garments. Once seps were completed we out-putted them all on CTS (Computer to Screen) with different frequencies all at 22.5-degree angle and a round shape. We used high meshes on everything starting at 230 and up to 380 all at 30 N/cm² and 10 - 15% EOM using 65/90/65 or 75/90/75 triple ply dual durometer squeegees depending on our desired opacity. Nearly all the inks were cut with extenders and softeners and were printed wet on wet wherever appropriate. We pre-ironed or pressed all the garments to start out with a smooth base and post ironed after any flashing with a smoothing screen to matte down the fibers. We used these methods and considered a multitude of additional processes to soften prints and aid in smooth clean drape desired. We added what we call a step screen at the end of many of the prints with craft paper to step on the wet inks lifting off much of the deposit and creating a matte finish.


That's a whole lotta design and development. Most everything had techniques in common, which makes the job a bit more manageable and merchandises nicely as well.

Most everything had techniques in common, which made the job a bit more manageable.

 GRAPHIC ELEPHANTS DIGITAL ARTISTS	Customer: Karman	Design: Stetson Ladeis #7	Style: 6400CVC SST	T-Shirt Color: Dk Gry Heather
	Ink Colors: ■ ■ ■ Multi			



8" Wide



Digital Time Machine

Working with history



Stephen Romaniello is an artist and educator who has taught computer graphics since 1990. He is Professor Emeritus and the founder of the Digital Arts program at Pima Community College in Tucson Arizona. Stephen is a certified instructor in Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Premier and the author of numerous books, articles and media on the creative use of graphics software. Stephen is the founder and CEO of GlobalEye systems, a company that offers training and consulting in graphics software and creative imaging.

We all make mistakes! It's human nature to err, and I'm sure if we closely examine our lives there are things that we have done that we wish we could erase. Unfortunately, the past is the past and it's best to move on. But what if ...

Time machine

What if we could travel back in time and undo those unpleasant little errors and mistakes that we regret. Alas, nobody has yet invented the time machine. (I know this because I checked Amazon and looked for one to buy). You can probably guess what I'm about to say next — *drumroll!* Image editing software programs including Corel PaintShop Pro and Adobe Photoshop both have built in “time machines” that enable us to access any moment in the workflow to make alterations, corrections, and erasures. Both programs have similar features that allow multiple undos and non-linear editing. Because I'm primarily an Adobe user, I'll demonstrate the History “panel” in Photoshop but rest assured, there are similar features in PaintShop Pro's History “palette.” Although the icons and interfaces are a bit different, the end results are essentially the same.

Undoing

Let's look at the simplest techniques that instantly reverse unwanted edits. Let's say you are carefully cloning out the blemishes on uncle Herman's portrait. You've had one too many double espressos, and your hand is a bit jittery. You slip and drag a little too far and place a rather unsightly blotch on the tip of his nose.

An easily corrected mistake? Yes! The first course of action is to head straight to the top of the Edit menu and choose Undo, (**Fig. 1**) to instantly revert the image to the moment before you made the ill-fated clone stroke. Better yet, use the key command Cmnd+Z in Mac or Cntrl+Z in Windows. When you choose Undo, a new command on the Edit menu appears *-Redo*, that restores the undone action. You can toggle back and forth between the previous artwork (Undo) and the later (Redo) by selecting the command again, or better yet, use the key command Shift+Cmnd+Z in Mac or Shift+Cntrl+Z in Windows. Pressing these key commands reverses the image sequentially backwards or forwards until the beginning or final state is achieved.

An additional command in the Edit menu applies to the undo operations.

Toggle Last State, Opt+Cmnd+Z (Mac) or Alt+Cntrl+Z (Win). This operation toggles back and forth between the current state and the state immediately before it. These key commands are worth remembering because they are among the most frequently used operations.

The history of your workflow

Imagine a workflow where every command, tool application or menu item that you initiate during your work session is recorded and compiled on a sequential list of history

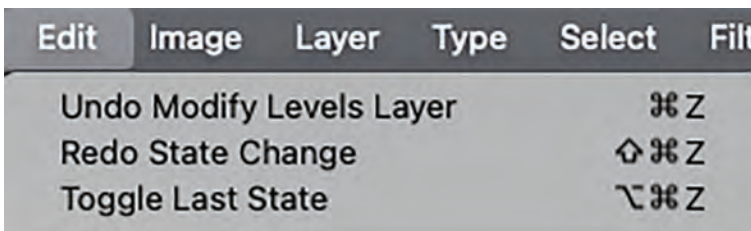


Fig. 1. The first course of action is to head straight to the top of the Edit menu and choose Undo.

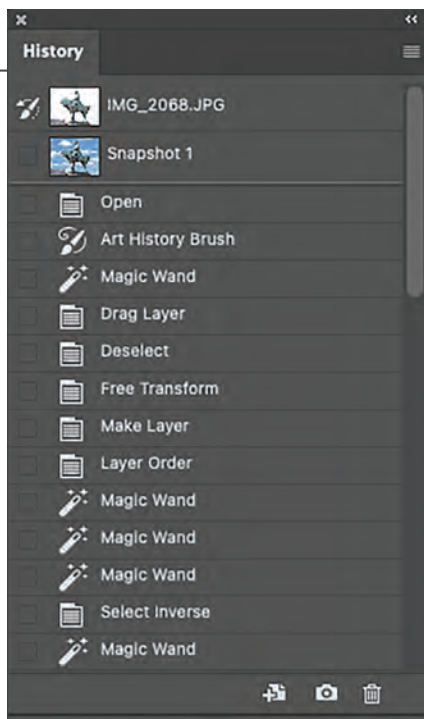


Fig. 2. The History panel is the recorder for each step in the workflow.

states that can be accessed at any time. The recorder for all the states is the *History* panel found in the *Window* menu. (Fig. 2). By default, when the image is opened, the History panel displays a snapshot of the image as it appeared when it was last saved. It is from this point on where you will make changes to the image. Each time you perform an operation, the History panel produces a state with the name of the operation or tool that was used — for example, Brush Tool, Levels, Smudge Tool, and so forth. The most recent state is at the bottom of the stack.

The History panel is one of the most dynamic features and the one that can transport you forward and backwards in time to make observations or corrections.

Memory

What enables Photoshop to remember all the History states is, of course, memory. Each state is stored in your computer's RAM or on the scratch disk. When you exceed the current limit of states, the oldest state is deleted to make room for the most recent state. The number of History states is limited to fifty by default. That number can be increased or decreased by choosing Photoshop (Mac) or Edit

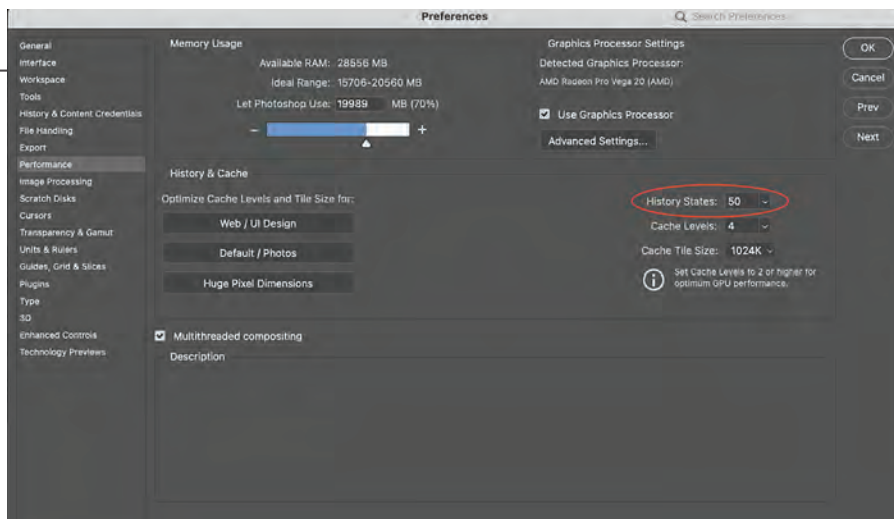


Fig. 3. The number of history states can be increased or decreased in the Performance Preferences.

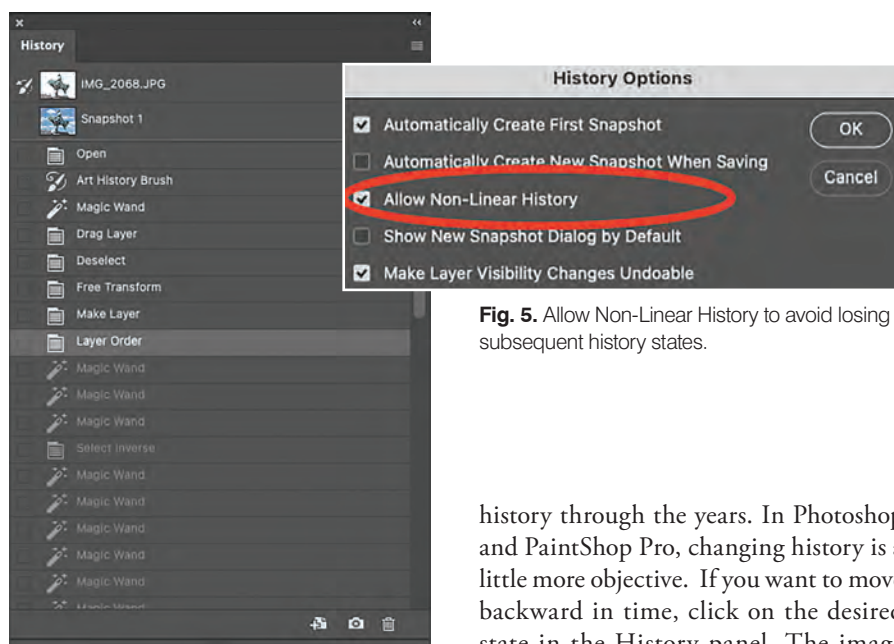


Fig. 5. Allow Non-Linear History to avoid losing subsequent history states.

Fig. 4. When you select a History state, by default all states below it in the History panel are grayed out.

(Windows) > Preferences Performance > History States and entering a number from one to one thousand. (Fig. 3)

Specifying an excessive number of History states earmarks memory for the History cache and takes the allocation away from Photoshop's other operations. This could potentially compromise Photoshop's performance. Whenever possible, keep the number of states at the default.

Changing history

Historians frequently rewrite history depending on their point of view and we've certainly seen a lot of revisionist

history through the years. In Photoshop and PaintShop Pro, changing history is a little more objective. If you want to move backward in time, click on the desired state in the History panel. The image window displays the image as it was after you applied the edit. All states below it in the History panel are grayed out. (Fig. 4) If you paint a stroke with the brush tool for example, all the grayed-out states disappear.

To avoid losing the grayed-out states, choose History Options from the History panel menu and check the *Allow Non-Linear History* box. (Fig. 5) You can then eliminate or edit a state in the History panel and preserve all the states below it in the stack. A state can then be altered and saved as a snapshot or document. Work can then be resumed on the current document. I don't know why Non-Linear History isn't the default. It should be because it ensures that nothing is lost. That being said, check this box when you first start working and you will be certain that all is preserved.

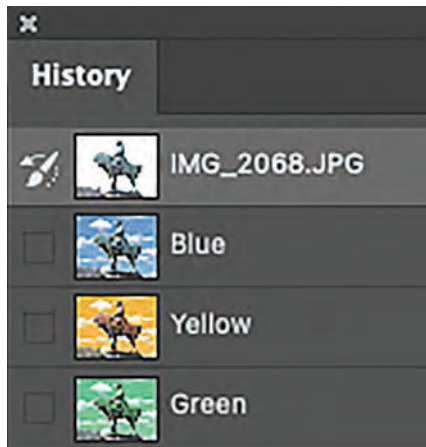


Fig. 6. Collect multiple snapshots of key points in the workflow

Snapshots

Instead of adding excessive history states, it's advisable to make a *snapshot* of the image at key intervals in the editing process. With the current document active, click on the snapshot icon (it looks like a camera) at the bottom of the Layers panel. The snapshot is saved in a list at the top of the panel. If you reach a state in the editing process and are dissatisfied with what you've done, click on a snapshot to revert back and continue editing from that point on. You can collect multiple snapshots of key points in the workflow or even multiple versions of the image. (Fig. 6).

Another way to save a snapshot is to click the History panel menu and choose *New Snapshot*. The dialog box that appears enables you to name the snapshot and determine which combination of layers the snapshot will be made from. Here are the choices:

- *Full Document* makes a snapshot of all the visible layers and the Background.
- *Merged Layers* makes a snapshot of all the layers and merges them into one layer.
- *Current Layer* makes a snapshot of the currently targeted layer.

Documents

Any history state or snapshot can be saved as a document. Select the desired snapshot or state in the History panel and click the new document icon. The image appears as a new document with a snapshot and new history. Don't forget to save the new document.

History options

Change the behavior of the document's history by choosing options in the History Options dialog box. In the History panel menu, choose *History Options* to view or change these settings. Here is what the

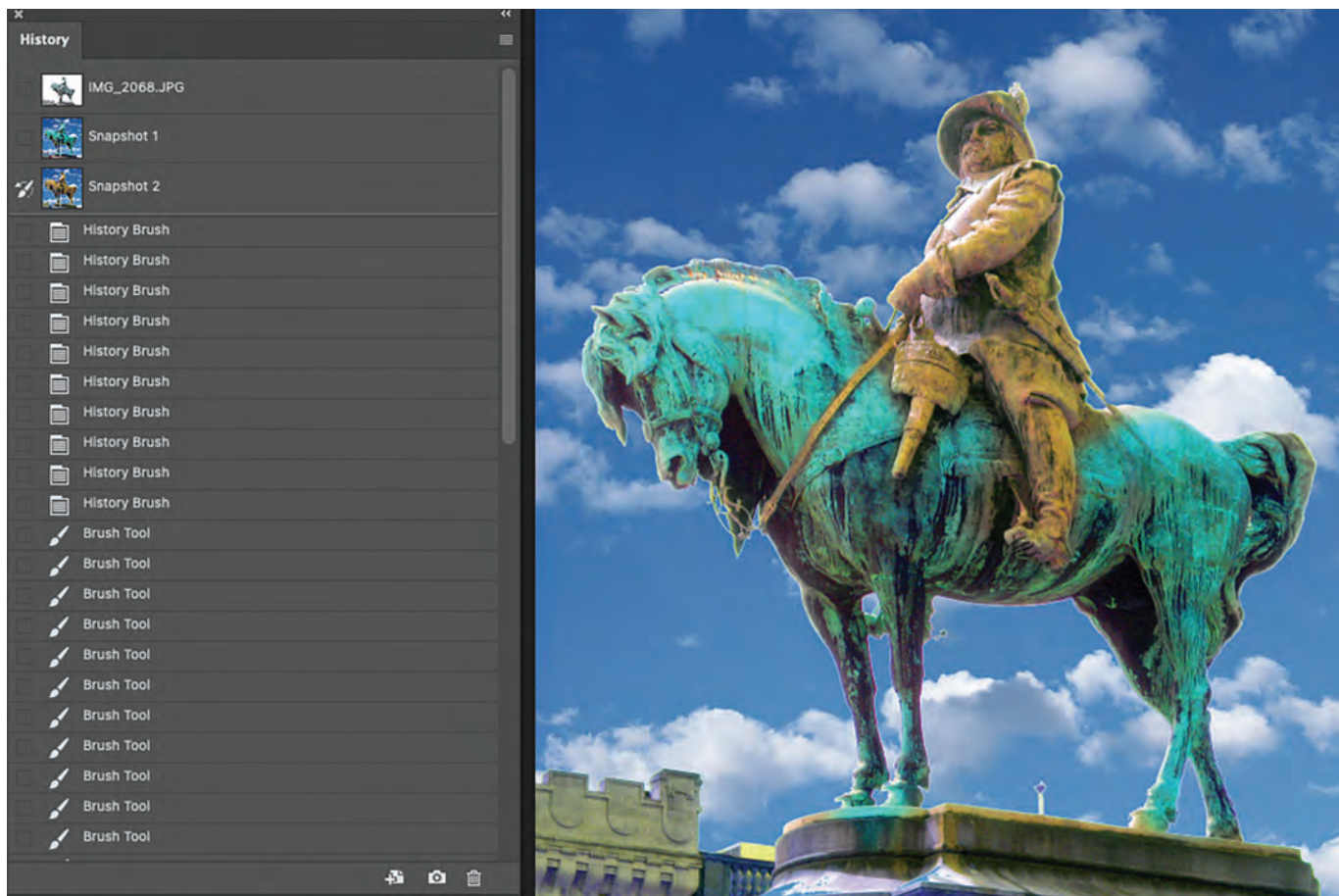


Fig. 7. Choose History Options to view or change settings.

dialog box presents:

- *Automatically Create First Snapshot* produces a snapshot of the original image upon opening it and places its thumbnail at the top of the History panel.
- *Automatically Create New Snapshot When Saving* generates a snapshot of the current state when saving and adds its thumbnail to the top of the History panel.
- *Allow Non-Linear History* enables you to discard or edit a previous History state without deleting more recent states.
- *Show New Snapshot Dialog By Default* automatically displays the Snapshot dialog box when a new snapshot is created, prompting you to name the snapshots as they are made.

History brush

The *History Brush* will edit specific regions of the current image back to a former state for maximum flexibility. With this tool it's easy to combine elements from various stages of the document. Simply choose the tool, click the box to the left of the history state, choose brush options, and paint. The brush copies the content from the former history state to the current one. (Fig. 7).

Additionally, Areas can be filled with History from the Fill dialog box. The process is similar to using the History brush, Select an area, click the box to the left of the history state, Choose Edit > Fill > History (Fig. 8)

I should point out that these techniques don't work if the targeted content is on a separate layer. Tonal and color adjustments on Adjustment layers are also unaffected by the History brush and fill command.

Good news bad news

The good news is that History features create an extremely dynamic workflow. The bad news is that History states are recorded only for the current work session and are not saved along with the file. Each time a file is saved and closed and then opened again, a new history begins. You can, however, save any snapshot or history state as a document and thereby generate as many versions as you like.

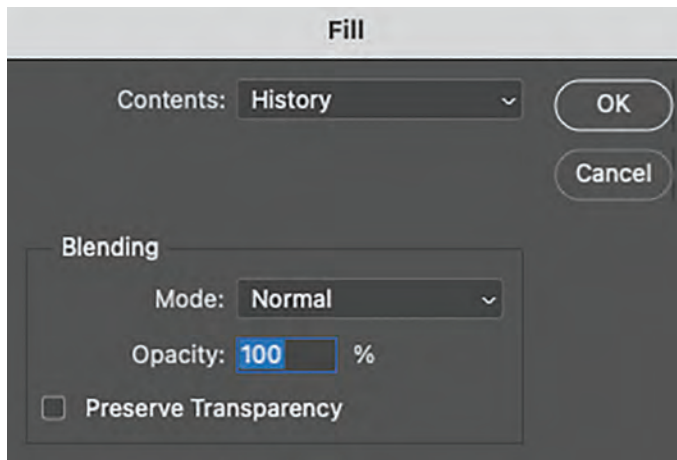


Fig. 8. The History Brush copies the content from a former history state to the current one.

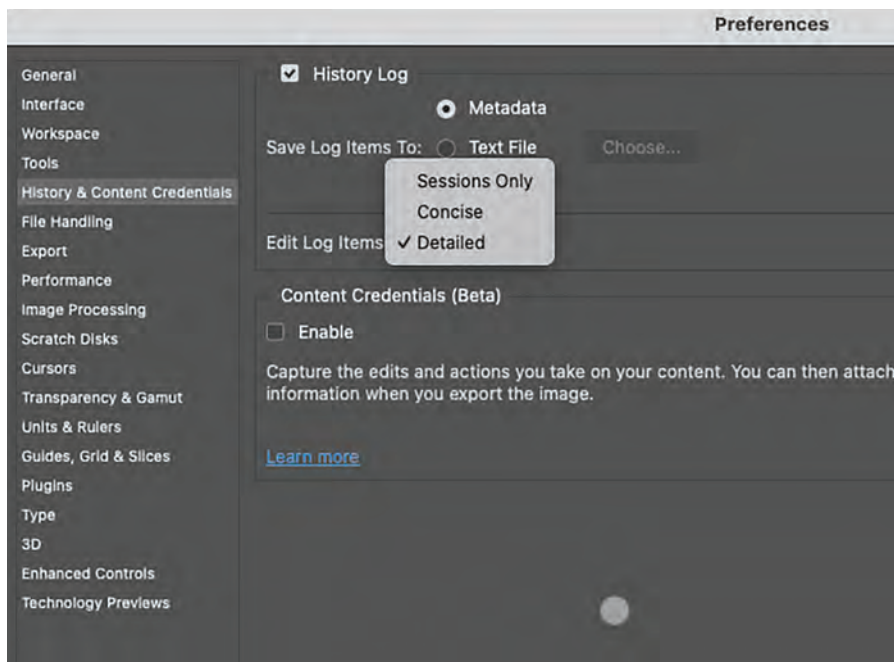


Fig. 9. Setting up a History Log in the History and Content Credentials preferences is a convenient way to have a written record of a work session.

History log

Setting up a *History Log* in the *History and Content Credentials* preferences is a convenient way to have a written record of a work session. (Fig. 9) A history log is a written record of the workflow. A History Log can be generated as a Text document, Metadata, or both. Once generated, the metadata is accessed from the File > File Info > Photoshop dialog box (Fig. 10) and the text document is located where you saved it. From the *Edit Log Items* menu, choose *Sessions Only* to generate the session date, *Concise* for a list of tools and commands that were used and *Detailed* for a complete accounting of each history state including settings and specifications.

Instead of adding excessive history states, it's advisable to make a snapshot of the image at key intervals in the editing process.

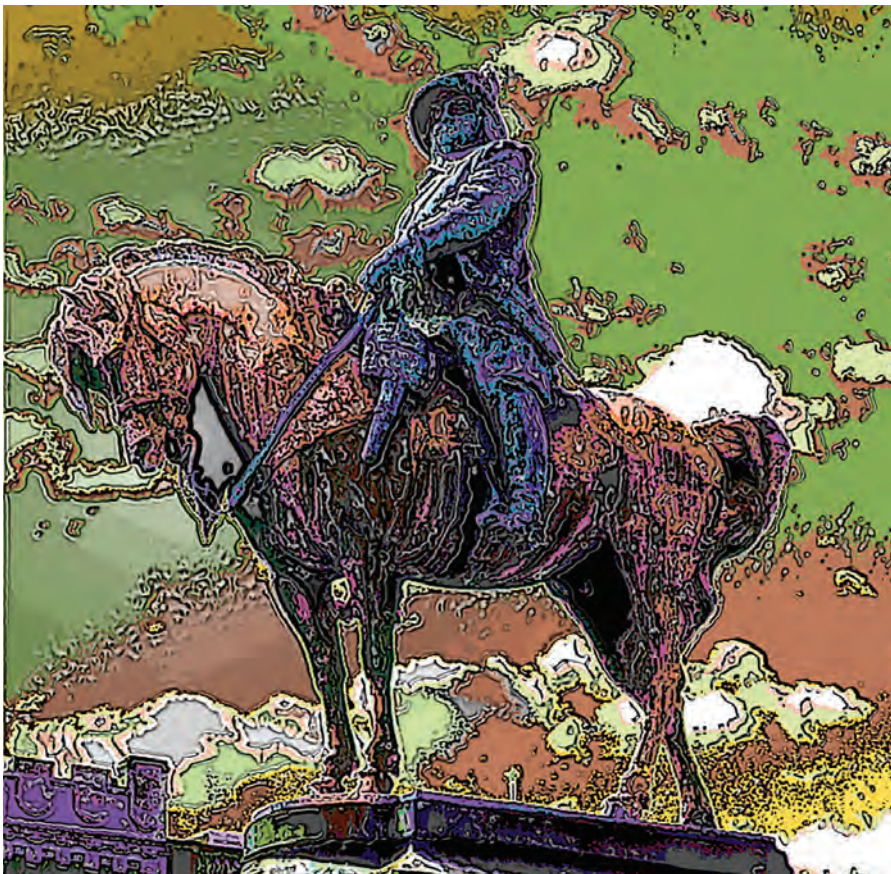
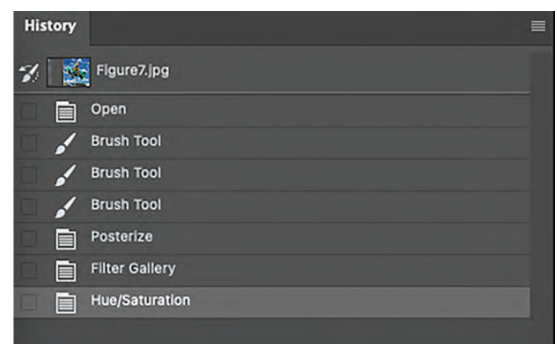
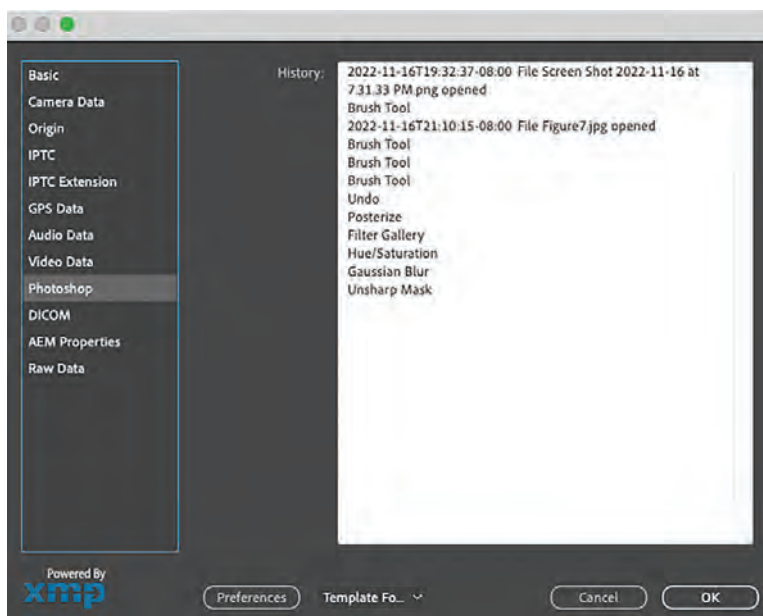


Fig. 10. Set up a History Log in the History and Content Credentials preferences.

History repeats itself

The History panel is the answer to the concept of multiple undos. Whereas some programs provide a system of undoing operations backward in a linear sequence. Photoshop's and PaintShop Pro's interactive History enable both sequential and nonlinear editing. Considering the amount of time and effort that goes into most well-edited images, working dynamically is not only wise, it's essential. These features are insurance against errors and make your experience as rewarding as possible with a minimum of effort.

Even the most accident-prone among us will find that it's almost impossible to do any permanent damage while working in Photoshop or PaintShop Pro. Because you have the ability to instantly correct errors, no compromises are necessary. Happily, you can reverse any operation at any time. With this in mind you'll feel secure while experimenting freely with your images. **GP**



You will find that it's almost impossible to do any permanent damage while working in Photoshop or PaintShop Pro. Because you have the ability to instantly correct errors, no compromises are necessary.

Customer Service and Expectations

Determining what good customer service is and how to achieve it



Aaron Montgomery is certified by New York Times best-selling author Jack Canfield as a Success Principles Trainer and is the co-founder of OurSuccessGroup.com. Aaron has over 25 years of experience with personalized products and small business development and is the co-creator of the “5 Keys of Business Success.” You can also find Aaron co-hosting the decorator’s industry podcast 2 Regular Guys Podcast (2RegularGuys.com). Also, check him out on his podcast channel called Small Business Saturdays (SmallBusinessSaturdaysPodcast.com).

Not too long ago, I ran across this poll in one of the industry groups on Facebook. The responses and options made me wonder how we stack up as an industry when it comes to customer service. How would I want the company to handle this issue if I put myself in the customer’s shoes? As you could see from the top vote-getters, most votes were to make the customer feel stupid, be passive-aggressive, or turn away business. There was only one option, and I was pretty surprised that after 24+ hours of the poll being on Facebook, the choice of “explain to the customer why it won’t work” only had one vote.

In this month’s column, I’d like to explore some of the other choices, why I don’t believe those are the best, and ultimately explore what good customer service is and how we can achieve it. By having outstanding customer service, your company will grow organically, you will be working with happy customers, and your idea of success is only a matter of time.

Print it as is — Technically, you can do that, and you will be “right.” It is one of the “I told you so” options. When the customer gets

it, they will not be happy, you will be putting low-quality work out into the marketplace, and other than feeling vindicated, there is no upside. If your goal is to make your customer feel stupid, print it as is.

Try and upscale the art — If you are not passive-aggressive, this might be your option. Doing it for the customer is for the people pleasers out there, and they think that by just doing the work for the customer, they are providing good customer service. As I will explain at the end of the article, this is not good customer service. As a recovering people pleaser, I get this choice but read to the end to learn what to do instead.

Print a test print and let them approve the quality — If you know it is going to be bad, and if your business values the quality you produce, why take on the extra expense and time? Ultimately if the customer insists it will be fine, this could become an option, but certainly not after one time of trying to get high-quality art.

Refuse to print the job / give the customer a refund — These two options seem odd for companies trying to keep the doors open, increase their revenue, and become successful. The customer clearly wants to do business with you, so why walk away from it?

Again, there is only one choice on this list — explain to the customer why it won’t work. It’s all about education and ensuring the customer experience is good and your workflow is not hindered by the customers you are working with. The investment in educating your customer has so many benefits. It creates loyalty, word-of-mouth referral, and happy customers who can’t wait to do business with you again because you helped them learn something they didn’t previously understand.

If the two that are on the list that I didn’t break down would be your choice, then you



Essentially, customer service boils down to setting expectations upfront and then delivering on those expectations.



might want to stop reading at this point as that is not only bad customer service, but I doubt you will be able to stay in business very long if that is how you treat all of your customers. I hope those choices were added as a joke, but if it is fun to print XXXXS shirts or you want to charge your customer even more before providing a lousy product, my take on customer service is not for you.

Essentially, customer service boils down to setting expectations upfront and then delivering on those expectations. It is not about bending over backwards for everyone who has a dollar in their wallet, as that is not sustainable and will lead to future bad customer service. Setting expectations has to be abundantly clear to the customers about what you need precisely. The point should not only be clear to you. Remember, you are the expert, and you live this daily. The customers are paying you because you are the authority. In the poll example, the customer needed to be clearer about expectations. Maybe they need help understanding what 72 DPI means. You have colleagues in this industry that do just fine for themselves, yet they don't accurately understand what 72 DPI means.

Many businesses make the next choice of doing it for them, thinking this is extra value for the customer. Just doing it for them to save time is a bad idea in my book because you have now reset the

expectations. The customer now expects you to take care of it every time. Even if you tell them, "I'll take care of it this time only." Until they fully understand what you need and why they will expect you to bail them out. As I said, this is not sustainable. You will become resentful towards your customers, passive aggressiveness will set in, and you will start printing their orders on XXXXS shirts.

Before you take the order, it is up to you to clearly set the expectations. It might be in the form of a conversation in the quoting process about what is needed. That might be in the form of clear policies and procedures they can find. If you have to make your policies and procedures fine print because you are worried that customers won't do business with you, then it is time to revisit them. Your policies and procedures should be drafted to indicate to the customers that they are made to improve their experience. For example, "We need high-quality artwork to deliver the best quality end product to you. Therefore, we cannot accept 72 DPI files." What other frustrations do you have when dealing with your customers? I can safely say that you are either not clearly setting expectations in that area or attracting the wrong types of customers who will never understand the expectation, to begin with.

Finally, once you take the order, then the expectations switch onto you. The switch

of expectations landing on you is where the phrase "the customer is always right" comes from. Now you have their money, and how they perceived the expectations of them and their own expectations of the finished product take over. Customer service heroes jump in and start educating. You could even jump in at this point and do it for them, but only do it while also educating them. You might think moving forward is faster and easier, but this is never the case. We can't see the future, but from my experience, the customer will never go out and educate themselves. They are coming to you to get your expertise, so they expect that education from you.

So, what does 72 DPI really mean? What are the options if that is the only file they have available? They could go back to the original designer and see about some new files if it is a logo. Do you have a designer you can refer to?

If you find that you are doing a lot of educating on the same topic over and over, then use that opportunity to educate better before you ever take the order. Create a video, write a blog post, or update your customer policy. Customer service is all about setting and achieving expectations. I'd love to hear from you about what you will change to help meet your customer's expectations and deliver better customer service. **GP**

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