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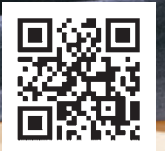


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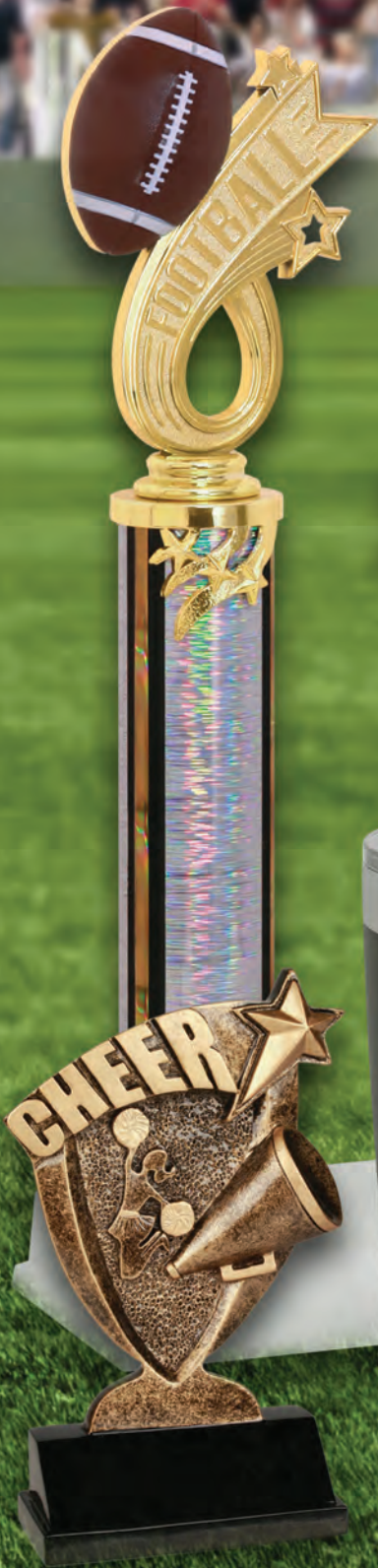
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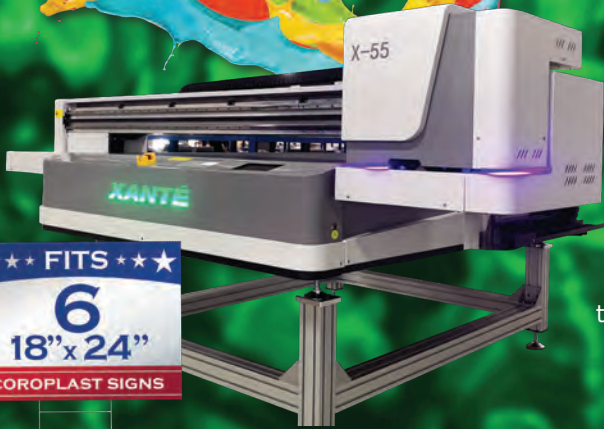
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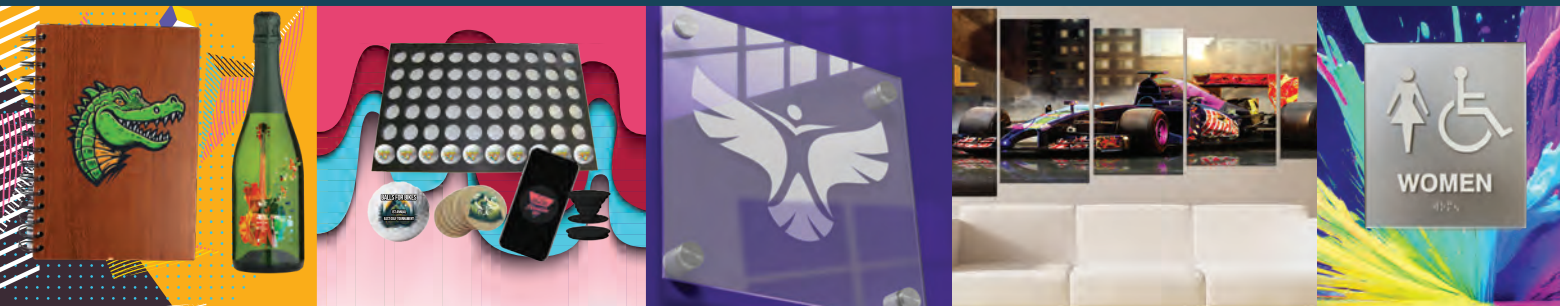


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For my our friend Rick

Bob Wieber is the founder, owner, and CEO of National Business Media, based in Broomfield, Colorado.

This is for our friend Rick. Going back to 1986 and through August 2022, this space was filled with the wit and wisdom of Rick Williams. My friend Ricky.

Since his sudden passing in January, I've struggled to accept our immense loss. After an almost 60-year friendship, how do I find the words? Perhaps writing this for you will serve as a bit of therapy.

His column was called *In The Trenches* because it was for folks just like him — in the business and in the trenches. Most of us who have owned and built businesses could relate often to Rick's candid and common-sense stories, dressed up to entertain but almost always creatively blended with a practical lesson. When I asked him in 1986 to write about sign making, he told me that he really didn't have much to say. Then came more than 600 columns and articles and 30+ years of presenting educational seminars at our trade shows, more often than not to packed audiences. (Turns out that he had a lot to say, and he was happy to share.)

My connection with Rick started much earlier. From the start, we influenced each other, and I know we changed each other's lives. He was profoundly

more important to me than just business, going way back to elementary school and into our growing years when we loved to race each other on our bicycles and spend endless hours at the pond or in the woods around our neighborhood. Our raw innocence laughed at everything, often prompting Rick's Mom to scold us with "you boys have no couth!"

(Imagine our delight as we repeated over and over our newfound word: Couth!)

As schoolboys, Rick and I were energetic door-to-door subscription sellers for Longview News, along with Ricky Webb, Steve Wieber, Jimmy High, and Rod Paasch. (Rod was the smartest of all of us and the top salesperson.) It was important developmental experience, and as we became more and more

confident and sure of our own opinions, we would have some fun with those who disagreed with us by simply saying, "Well, you can be wrong if you want to be wrong." The predictable reactions only fueled the tease.

As the 1960s rolled into the 1970s, I stumbled into and through the then-exploding T-shirt business while Rick started in the business of sign making. We were both 19 years old and newcomers to the world of business, completely unaware, but willing to work. Like most young entrepreneurial minds, *we didn't know, and we didn't know we didn't know*. I learned some brutal lessons the hard way while Rick steadily built his sign business. Who could have predicted that he would become one of the most recognized and prolific storytellers of the entire sign and graphics industry?

When I began my publishing business in early 1978 based on earlier missteps, Rick was right there, risking his hard-earned cash (for me!) and always encouraging, even as my imperfect efforts took much-needed time to mature and polish. In 1986 we launched *Sign Business Magazine*, uniting my previous media endeavors with Rick's basic day-to-day sign business know-how. It was a home run from the beginning.

Time, of course, filled up our respective worlds with more and more serious life, but away from our myriad responsibilities, our familiar childhood antics often bubbled up no matter where we might be in the country. When our families witnessed this silliness, they just stared in amazement, no doubt wondering what happened to two normally laser-focused grown men.

We could not have imagined that the seeds planted so long ago would yield meaningful income for more than 1,000 gifted professionals over a 45-year span. Thanks to so many world-class people, we have launched and owned 28 trade magazines, plus trade shows and educational seminars in 35 different cities throughout the United States.

Most people don't know or don't understand that Rick was a huge part of it from the very beginning, and especially the early iterations of this very publication. But I remember it all, and I'm forever grateful.

It's been said that our true friends know us — *and love us anyway*.

Rick was a friend to many, many people. And he was *my* friend.

In my whole life, I've never known a better person.



Rick Williams and Bob Wieber.



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Window Graphics Considerations

BY CHRIS RODKEY

Factors to consider when creating and installing window graphics, from ink to vinyl and beyond



Chris Rodkey is the president of Vinylbomb in Hamilton, New Jersey. He has over 20 years of experience and in-depth knowledge of printing, fabrication, and color profiling. Vinylbomb is known for tackling the strange and unusual, offering in-house grand format printing, fabrication, painting, and installation for high-end retail displays and exhibitions.

Windows, windows everywhere... Windows are prime real estate space for sale signage, new promotions, and branding. Window graphics are so common that manufacturing them on the right combination of ink, base, and laminate should be a piece of cake, right?

The truth is producing window graphics can be more complicated than you think. Chances are, if you are reading this magazine, you're similar to me, inspecting and picking at graphics everywhere you go, taking away valuable lessons from other shops' failures or successes, and making your shop more profitable by learning from observing.

An example of a recent mistake I noticed was a retail chain static cling campaign. Ink was printed to the edge of the cling; the tension of the ink was stronger than the cling holding to the glass. This caused the cling to dog ear in the corner of the graphic. Once this happens the cling rolls onto itself and causes graphic failure.

Example of transparent ink from a solvent printer on optically clear adhesive vinyl.





Example of translucent UV ink printed on clear film without white ink.

For shops large enough to have clients like this particular chain, how did they not realize this would be a problem? Below are some important considerations you should think about before putting window graphics into production...

- Should the ink be transparent, translucent or opaque?
- If the project demands clear vinyl, should it be optically clear or an economy clear?
- What build of the adhesive is needed for clear vinyl (solvent or water based)?
- Does the client want direct or reverse application (first or second surface)?
- Which seam should be used for overlap (standard, butt, or ghost)?
- Is the window one large piece of glass or are there multiple pieces? Breaks such as mullions, silicone, or gaskets between panes allow a nice place for panels to begin and end rather than having overlap in the middle of the window.
- Ask if the client is aware of security film or tint on the glass. Window graphics can potentially damage these films if they are installed on top.
- Consider glare and natural tints to the glass (green or blue) that can affect the final look of a second surface graphic
- Should pre-mask be used for install?

Transparent vs. translucent ink

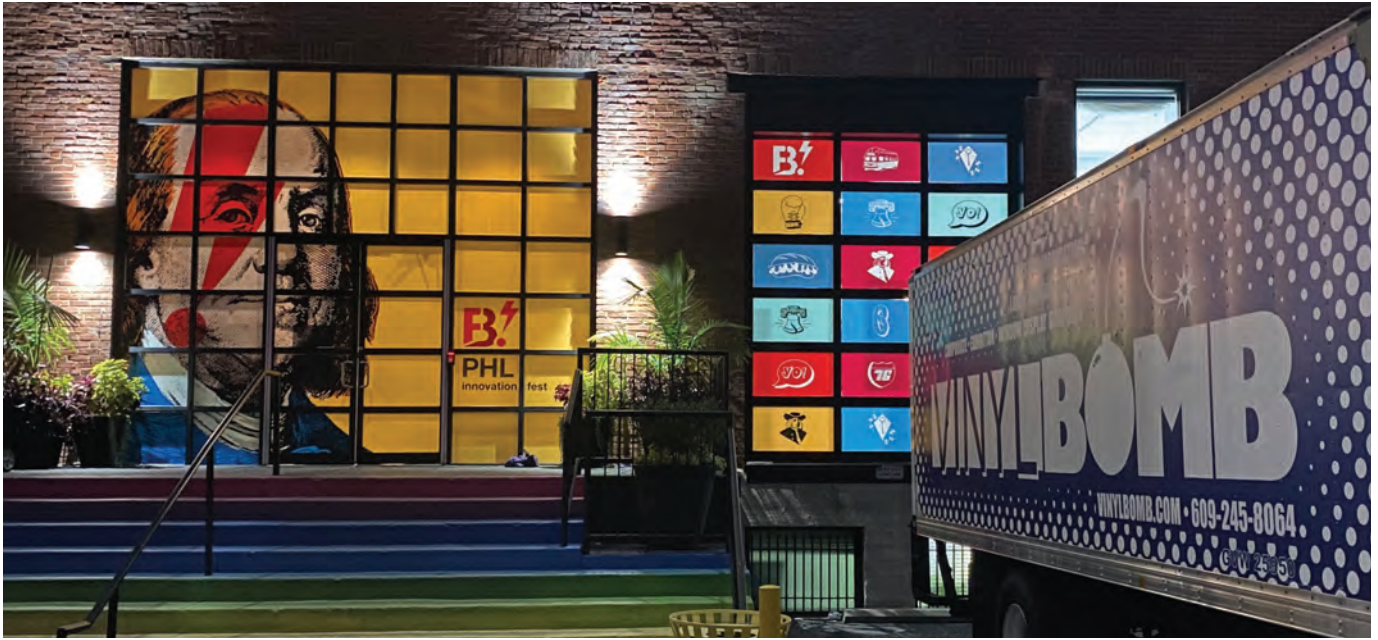
A transparent graphic means you can see through it when printed on optically-clear film. Sometimes this is desirable with window graphics, but can only be achieved on certain ink sets. When we get this request we print on our Mimaki solvent printers. The properties of the ink formulation will allow you to see color but allow a clear view of what is on the other side of the glass. You can also achieve denser transparent/translucent solvent prints by running higher passes or double striking.



Another example of transparent ink from a solvent printer being utilized for a high-end retail display.



Solvent ink transparent graphics being applied to mirrors. The mirror could not be seen if we produced these graphics on our UV printer.



Color / White / Color print at night is illuminated by the location's interior lighting.

Translucent graphics cannot be seen through. The ink is opaque and has more of a privacy film effect when printed on optically clear film. This is typically a result of printing with UV ink or double striking on a solvent printer.

UV ink still needs to be used in combination with white ink for opaque graphics (not *dead opaque*, which does not allow any light through). You can tell if it is light or dark outside, but you cannot see through the combination of film and ink. UV-printed inks allow for *day/night* applications when printed with Color/White/Color or Color/White/White combinations of ink. This allows for a front-lit graphic during the day but has

enough density to be backlit at night from the lighting from a lightbox or inside a building.

“Clear” films

It is important to know there are clear and optically clear films available. Optically clear films allow spot graphics to seem like they are floating or CAD-cut on the window. They also allow specific areas to be translucent or transparent with the right ink.

More cost-effective clear vinyls that come on a paper liner have a natural haze to them. This is okay for second-surface window applications that have a white vinyl backer. The clarity of the film will not be noticed because it is intended to be viewed as an opaque graphic.

Polyester films like Lintec or Wincos are the clearest films available. There is a solvent version available, but a majority are intended for UV printing. While they deliver exceptional clarity, the film is delicate to work with for a novice installer. On the plus side, registration is easier because the film does not stretch. We typically do not laminate when printing with UV ink so there is cost savings on optically clear lamination.

I have learned a lot from having the right suppliers. Frank Corey (frank.corey@qmls.com) at Quality Media and Laminating Solutions (www.qmls.com) has been my go-to for specialty films. Feel free to reach out if you are looking for specific products; he is very knowledgeable and can recommend the right film over the phone.

Water-based vs. solvent-based adhesives

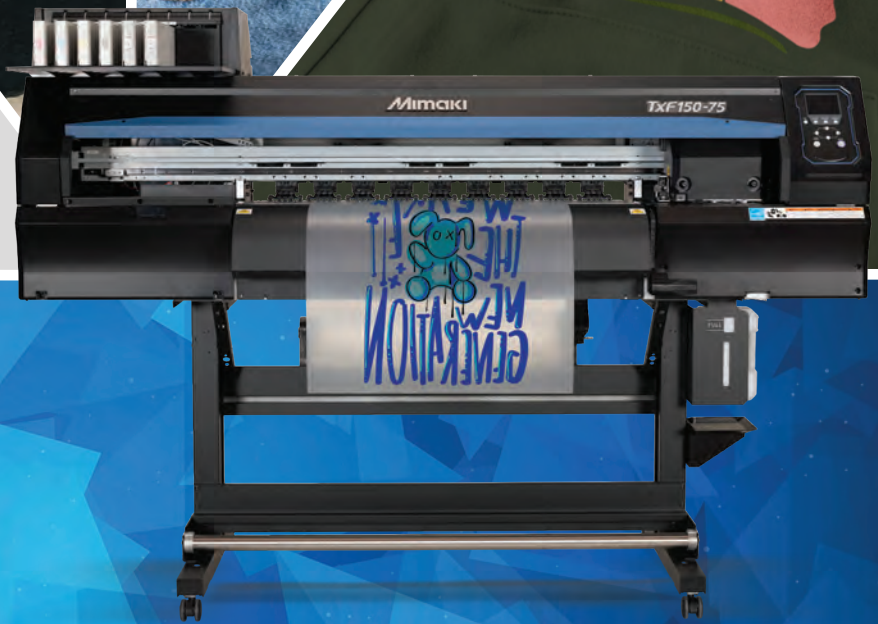
When you are shopping for vinyl, take into consideration what you are getting for the cost. Noticing what adhesive is being used and what properties the adhesive holds is very important. Does it need to be removable, permanent, or changeable? How long will the film be applied for? Is it expected to last a day, months, or years?



Color / White / Color print front lit during the day.



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Also pay attention when buying calendared vinyl. Is it monomeric or the higher-quality polymeric vinyl? Water-based adhesives are typically cheaper and not intended for a wet install. If you apply an application fluid to them, it attacks the

adhesive and causes the adhesive to haze.

Solvent acrylic adhesives can resist app fluid and will install soundly without haze or cloudiness. Solvent acrylic adhesive is typically found on more expensive vinyls. Realizing what type of adhesive is

important for both clear adhesive vinyls as well as colors for CAD-cut films.

Water based adhesives should never be applied with app fluid. If they are mistakenly installed wet you might get away with a first-surface application. The haze of the film may not be noticeable because it is on the back of the print. It will be a problem with second-surface applications using CAD-cut vinyl or printed graphics on clear with a white backer. The water-based adhesive being attacked from the app fluid will be noticed as soon as the film is installed, and the haze will typically not clear up.

First surface vs. second surface

First surface (direct application) means the graphic is installed on the outside of the glass. This would be considered a standard install that would be used on dry-wall as well. Second surface means the graphic is printed in reverse on clear film. With this process the graphic is typically backed with white ink or a white vinyl backer. When second-surface graphics are installed they are done from the inside of the store.

Pressure pots for wet application

As our shop evolved, so did the method of applying application fluid. We started with a standard trigger spray bottle for wet application. Then we graduated to pump hand sprayers which were nice for smaller jobs but needed to constantly be refilled for larger installs.

The king of all wet application sprayers is the *Keg Tank* or *Pressure Pot*. These are 3- or 5-gallon containers that get filled halfway with your application fluid. The rest of the tank is filled with compressed air using an adapter for your air compressor. No pumping or refilling necessary; just pull the trigger.

We have gotten through some large jobs without our tanks emptying. Everyone has different formulations for their app fluid. We decided to print our custom formula right on the Vinylbomb wrap we applied to our tanks. This allows any employee filling the pot to get consistent app fluid for great results.



Example of a larger CAD-cut vinyl job utilizing registration blocks on the top for proper alignment of the panels.



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Angled graphics that were print and cut for glass application. Without the aid of the registration blocks, we would have a hard time determining what is "straight".

CAD-cut vinyl

CAD-cut vinyl can be as simple or complicated as you want to make it. When we cut our vinyl, we always put registration marks in the corners, typically, 1" x 1" blocks that are cut along with the design. Registration blocks can be used for straight cutting of the vinyl after it has been pre-masked. Imagine installing a circle or script text on an angle. The registration blocks allow reference as to what straight actually is.

Using the cut as a guide, a laser level or tape measure can be used to make sure the vinyl is installed straight. Registration marks can also be used for paneling larger cut vinyl jobs that need alignment on glass.

When we install CAD-cut vinyl we always install dry unless there is a lot of

solid vinyl in the design. At that point we will install wet. Wet install works great, but sometimes waiting for the graphic to tack up enough to remove the pre-mask is very time-consuming. To aid in helping the pre-mask release, you should keep the pre-mask soaked with app fluid. Once you see tunnels forming in the pre-mask, it is ready to be removed.

Overlap

Overlap can be executed in a variety of ways on glass. A standard 1" overlap, butt seam, or ghost seam could be utilized depending on the demands of the job. The type of graphic being printed and film being used will determine what overlap should be used. Below is a general guideline and how to utilize the three options...

Anything produced on white vinyl film or with a white vinyl backer needs a standard 1" overlap. This is regardless of the film being cast or calendared. The film is opaque enough where the overlap cannot be seen.

A butt seam should only be used on cast films because they are dimensionally stable. Calendared films with a butt seam will shrink over time and leave a gap between the panels. Butt seams are effective for larger light box graphics where the overlap will be an obvious density change.

If a butt seam is executed it has to be done in the shop pre-installation. Both panels would have to be aligned on a large flat table. Once the overlap is good both pieces should be taped down to the table or the panel underneath. If you have a 1" overlap you have to measure 1/2" over and

make a solid cut with a ruler through both pieces at the same time.

Ghost seams are effective with optically clear film with UV ink. A ghost seam still has overlap but the film where the overlap is does not have anything printed on it. The ghost seam is essentially a butt seam with ink, but still has overlap for easier alignment. This allows faster production, cutting the panels down for install. Remember, the ghost seam should always be on the bottom of the overlap. If the ink is matte and the ghost seam is on top you will have gloss overlaps showing on top of matte ink.

Handling pre-mask

A note about pre-mask... It should not be used to pre-mask optically clear vinyl. When optically clear vinyls are made they have a smooth polyester liner, not paper. Vinyl is soft and conformable. Pre-mask is a paper that has a slight texture to it.

When pre-mask is applied to optically clear vinyl, the texture of it is transferred to the vinyl, causing distortion. What was once optically clear will look textured and cloudy.

Privacy films

Entering the market of privacy films like Avery Etchmark or 3M Dusted Crystal is profitable, but it has to be done right. The repeat customers that order this film are professionals, and they expect professional results.

Confirming if it should be applied first or second surface, knowing what door hardware to remove, and what not to touch are important considerations. Site surveys are typically always needed for these, so charge accordingly.

For one of our repeat customers we bring a roll of Etchmark, straight ruler and folding table with a cutting mat mounted to the top of it. Ultimately, it is easier and more profitable to cut the panels on-site.

Also, if they needed an extra panel the installers have the film on site to cut if need be. This saves a trip from NJ to NYC and also saves material if we cut extra panels that are not being used. We also bring towels to sop up the application fluid so it



An example of first-surface vinyl applied to glass.



Installing Etchmark privacy film with a soft handle squeegee from 44tools.com.



A high-density double-strike solvent print wet mounted to acrylic spheres.



Two of our pressure pots used for wet application were purchased from 44tools.com.



Example of window perf with no lamination in the rain.

does not get all over the carpet and floor when installing.

Being neat and clean goes without saying, but it must be done for repeat business. Handle squeegees work really well for these applications. You could even use a window washer squeegee in a pinch.

Window perf

Perforated window film allows natural light to come in from the outside. This is great if there is poor lighting inside the building. With the right lighting conditions, you can see outside but no one can see inside through the perf. The only exception is at night.

If the lighting inside the store is brighter than the lighting outside at night, customers will be able to see inside the store through the perf. What we get asked a lot is if the window perf needs the optically clear gloss lamination. Yes, especially on cars. It will aid in removal of the perf film and not allow water to collect in all the holes when it rains. Rain completely blocks visibility and this is extremely dangerous with vehicle wraps.

Dust can also start to collect in the perforated holes over time if it is a longer-term installation. The other question we get asked is if a luster or matte lamination can be used. It can, but it will block all visibility. The only way to do it right is with optically clear gloss lamination. At times, I have seen a gloss polyester lamination be used that is a less expensive alternative.

Another quick tip — and I have never seen it done — is do not install window perf wet. The solution will get trapped in the holes behind the lamination, blocking visibility and eventually causing graphic failure. **GP**

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COLA WARMS

How a long-established company in South Carolina evolved into a leader in the national and global architectural signage market

BY JD HAMILTON



James Dean Hamilton has more than 30 years of experience in the sign industry with a vast knowledge of everything signage, marketing, and workflow management.

Some refer to Columbia, South Carolina, as Soda City. It is the capital of South Carolina and a city steeped in history and tradition that has recently evolved into a hub for high-tech manufacturing. The emergence of large and growing manufacturing enterprises — BMW, Volvo, and Volkswagen's new Scout truck manufacturing plants, for example — have created great opportunities for skilled fabrication and supporting positions.

But what's in a name? The nickname Soda City had nothing to do with soft drink manufacturing. In fact, COLA was the old abbreviation of Columbia, and the nickname Soda City stuck.

Global sign manufacturer Colite can be considered part of this group with a unique history based in the Columbia area. In the early 1950s Hites Manufacturing Company and Colonial Metal letters merged, becoming the Colonial-Hites





Photos of early Colonial Hites Company at its original location. The name was changed to Colite, and it is now headquartered in a 133,000 sq ft. in modern manufacturing facility.

Company, which became known as Colite.

With an experienced fabrication background, Colite has continuously transformed signage over the past 75 years to become a top contender in the national (and now global) market for turnkey sign fabrication and collateral services.

With its first large global project for the Addis Ababa Bole International Airport in Ethiopia in the 1960s to the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the largest airport terminal project in the world in the 1980s, the company grew extensively over this time. The company has recently settled into a state-of-the-art and spacious 130,000 sq. ft. manufacturing and office facility.

Colite's core business consists of corporate conversion programs and rebrands, specialty retail, and is a major signage service provider for the hospitality industry.



Colite provides turnkey signage packages for large corporations, hospitality, and upscale retail around the country and around the globe, to which this collection of prototypes illustrates.



Colite had over 75 years of experience under its belt before designing and constructing its new modern facility for maximum efficiency in 2008.



(Far Right) Technical drawings of Colite's unique renewable energy light pole product, illustrating the ability to uniquely brand with traditional pole banner supports, framed blade with ACM panel inserts, or decorative cut metal art.

The lighting for Colite's light pole product can either be solar, wind-powered, or both. The system is turnkey with a battery storage unit located at the base. This is ideal for locations off the grid or for energy independence.



Examples of Colite's unique Signature LED product, one of the first viable faux neon products for commercial use. (Images courtesy of Colite)



During this time, Colite has been involved in complementary facility services such as commercial exterior lighting and renewable energy systems. In the 2000s, Colite introduced its own line of unique illuminated letters called SignatureLED.

First sips

I had the opportunity to meet with Adam Regenthal, Sr. Vice President, Sales & Marketing, who has a strong background in the hospitality market. We met at the company's modern office and manufacturing plant and later caught up with Martin Brown, CEO and co-owner of Colite.

Martin's brother and fellow owner Peter Brown has been acclimating to his newly elected position as 4th District Councilman for the City of Columbia while maintaining his position with the company. Both grew up in their father's sign company and took the helm with Colite in 1992.

Marty's emphasis is more on marketing, and Peter is more operations-oriented. They both seem to enjoy people, and it became clear the Brown brothers' commitment to community carries through to the collaborative work culture of the company.

Regenthal has been with Colite for over 18 years. "I started with Colite in the old facility," he recalls. "It was huge, but so much had evolved in fabrication techniques and technology that the workflow was no longer efficient. I can remember getting crews of people to move large projects across streets to various departments. The company relocated to the Technology Circle industrial park in 2008."

I noticed an attractive system of streetlights when I drove in and asked about it. "Many people comment as they drive into the complex about our unique renewable energy light poles," Regenthal says. "They are usually something you don't think about. These self-sufficient systems operate via solar and/or wind power. As an added bonus, we can customize the structures with branded messages, special events, or custom artwork. The renewable energy trend has been so successful that



Colite produced the Twitter blade sign in downtown San Francisco. This iconic three-sided behemoth was an architectural blade sign marvel with halo-lit lettering and logo complete with functional clocks.



a sister company Colite Technologies was created just for it.”

It is an eye-catching product, customizable, totally off-grid for power, and, best of all, it makes complete sense as it uses all the company’s talents already used in signage. The division has also quickly grown into one of the region’s largest providers of commercial solar power systems, many taking advantage of rooftop installations on large corporate buildings.

This, along with the company’s unique SignatureLED line of faux neon, shows the company’s progressive and innovative use of technology and fabrication.

“For years SignatureLEDs were the only truly customizable faux neon that looked real and made for realistic commercial signage applications,” Regenthal says.

The process consists of a custom-machined acrylic backer with embedded LEDs and a proprietary resin fill that looks like neon and is built to last. Not only was this one of the first successful faux neon products, but it performed well in harsh weather and salty air environments like beach resorts. Both products illustrate Colite’s commitment to finding solutions to unique challenges using the existing resources of its sign business.

“Much of our work is for national corporations that have merged or are rebranding,” Regenthal explains. “With that many locations stretching the globe, our clients want one company to work with that can control brand standards, ensure quality, and coordinate final transportation logistics and installation. Our team offers every aspect involved to ensure success. Initial site surveys, creation of design guidelines for signage, permitting, shipping, customs (if out of the country), and follow-up service: all those unseen services that add tremendous value to our clients and eliminate their legwork in finding multiple vendors across the country or globe.”



High-end retail signage is another market Colite services. The Levi tag sign is in production and on location for one of its company stores.



Helping large corporate clients with signage challenges is something Colite provides nationally and globally.



Hospitality is a large portion of Colite's customer base. Care is taken to ensure unique PMS colors can be accurately and consistently replicated in a variety of applications such as channel letters and monuments.

Meat and potatoes

To accomplish this, Colite takes great pride in its in-house production, project management, and design teams. With over 130,000 square feet to work with, Colite has created a very efficient workflow on the shop floor using the latest high-tech hardware.

At the core of fabrication are the workhorses to cut and machine aluminum, acrylic, and steel. With two oversized 5' x 12' MultiCam 5000 routers with multiple tool head changers, there is no shortage of capability to cut aluminum and acrylic parts. The new Trotec SP2000 flatbed laser adds greater speed and a flame-polished finish for acrylic cutting and the ability to do large-format engraving. The laser has a 68" x 99" work area capable of delivering up to 400 watts of power. Finally, an OMAX MAXIEM 1530 waterjet cutter is available for cutting structural steel parts on its 10' x 5' 2" bed.

Multiple channel letter benders are on the floor, and all electrical work is assembled with UL certification. The welding and fabrication areas allow flexibility to accommodate larger projects and are adjustable for streamlined production on larger rebrand projects requiring a tight deadline.

An overhead crane system allows the movement of those awkward or large projects to move easily through the shop. Three paint booths provide plenty of capacity to paint in a department that is notorious for many sign companies as a backlog area when things get busy.

Matthews Paint appears to be the go-to choice here. There is a separate steel fab area to weld structural components. Between the steel fab department and waterjet Colite can handle almost all structural components that a lot of other sign companies farm out.

A spacious preview area at the front of the shop floor is where the final assembly of unique projects takes place and for client preview before rollout. There is still plenty of area for storage (very important for inventorying products for large rebranding projects) as well as an oversized shipping receiving area. "This department often goes unnoticed, but for



The often-overlooked shipping department is the unsung hero. When they do their job right, nobody knows. This behind-the-scenes crew carefully crates and packs products designed to arrive on-site unscathed.



Colite's shop floor has ample room to stage signage programs before shipping and installing.

Large corporate clients with signage challenges is a specialty of Colite, both nationally and globally.

Colite, this unsung hero is one of the keys to success for secure and organized packaging and crating of products going across the country as well as the world. Some companies often underestimate what is involved in a department that basically custom crates almost every project and the costs associated with materials and labor," Marty Brown says.

This department is also often tasked with ensuring all the hardware, touchup paint, and final shop notes for the installers are included and easily located. The department has the flexibility to crate or stage final products of any size and accommodates the Colite Technology division's needs as well.

The graphics department consists of a full vinyl department and the recent edition of a large-format flatbed UV printer. Colite chose to go with the swissQprint Nyala 2 that can print up to 10 feet wide. With its white ink, high resolution, and large production capabilities, it has helped transition Colite into printing more ACM panels.

"ACM's use has increased significantly for us, so much so that after purchasing the UV flatbed, we invested in an Oasis cutting table that takes the printed ACM and incorporates various bits and cutting tools to fabricate and fold ACM. We see this need continuing to grow," Marty Brown explains. This streamlined setup covers the vast majority of Colite's graphic needs.

The in-house design department team of 18 people consists of environmental graphic designers, technical designers for shop and technical drawings, and various programmers to set up files for machining and printing.



More examples of Colite's unique Signature LED product.



Learning from the pandemic

“We have a great system staffed with an experienced team. We have great longevity with some employees on board for decades,” Marty Brown says. “In fact, some are closing in on retirement. Hiring new talent is on everyone’s mind right now. Finding the right people that are skilled craftsmen in our fabrication department is a priority for us that we have been working on. This employment need was exacerbated by the pandemic.”

Commenting more on its effect, Marty explains, “The pandemic had an impact on Colite as it did every company in our industry. We did what we could to keep our staff employed. Business dropped but did not bottom out. We also were successful in landing a few projects for clear acrylic partitions and distancing floor graphics for some of our large clients that have multiple locations. Our customized workflow and project management software we had been tweaking prior to Covid enabled the project management team to cover whatever tasks were required either here, remote, or on-site.”

The design department was designated to work from home during this time and still the majority follow that schedule. This seems to have become a common trend. Design departments are still getting the job done, but the designer work environment seems to be a department most significantly changed during, after, and going forward from the pandemic.

“We had already been outsourcing installations before Covid,” Marty Brown says. “We have created a very experienced and dependable network of vetted installers across the country and beyond. The pandemic just reinforces our decision to maintain that business strategy, although finding good, consistent, and reliable installers is often challenging. Our installers also face the same turnover and challenges of finding experienced people we have with fabricators.”

This is another common trend in our industry as many veteran installers working in-house are retiring, new skilled help is difficult to find, and the cost of equipment, insurance, and just about everything else has increased. This has jump-started the need for installation services for interior and exterior signage installation, and there are a good number of install-only companies growing and emerging.

Last sip

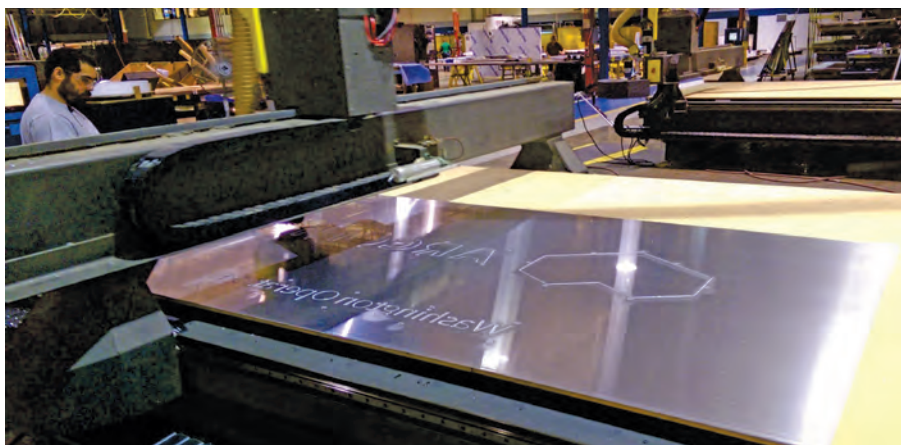
The whole system of sales, design, fabrication, and project management has been honed and grown from decades of experience at Colite. After reviewing past and present projects that are either large in size or large in quantities or both, it appears to be working well.

“Our business currently is near capacity; our challenges going forward are managing and growing that capacity. That really puts the pressure on us to deliver, which is something we take pride in and the cornerstone of our reputation with our clients, most of which are repeat customers for decades,” explains Marty Brown. “The success of Colite is building on nearly a century of experience, taking care of our team’s talent, keeping on top of industry trends, investing in technology, and never forgetting all the little things performed in the background by our skilled project management.”

That pretty much sums up my visit to the Soda City. Feeling a little parched, I stopped when leaving and got a Pepsi... can’t wait to see what debate that opens up in the never-ending Cola Wars! **GP**



Colite’s skilled and experienced fabricators are essential to the company’s success.



Investing in technology for CNC routers, laser and waterjet cutters, as well as graphic equipment, has enabled Colite to stay competitive and innovative while maintaining a high level of quality.



Whether it is community or company nomenclature, people are the heartbeat of the Colite organization.

Wrench Room Revisited

Designing signs with installation in mind; wrench room, if you will...



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. He also provides sign design training at his site: LearnSignDesign.com. Contact him at matt@stormmountainsigns.com, LearnSignDesign.com, or 970-481-4151.

Ahhh, I remember it like it was only 15 years ago. To set the stage, envision in your mind's-eye oversized golden harps played by chubby little cherubs with puffy white clouds that appear to be parting — opening to a daydreamy fuzzy image of days gone by.

It was the spring of 2007, and I found myself, once again, carefully planning the ultimate article topic that would impress my editor at Sign and Digital Graphics magazine. Each month it was the same struggle to *make the traveling team*, which was my term for *getting my story published* in the magazine that month. With so many seasoned writers already filling the pages, I had to be on my A-game if I wanted to even stand a chance.

It's not as easy as it seems; I mean, sure, we see it almost daily on the social networking platforms; stories and pictures of how the contributing writers for GRAPHICS PRO Magazine are living the *glam-leisure life* that seems to soar past the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Oh sure, during the initial years of writing for the magazine, it was a lot like pulling tissues out of a Kleenex box. My head was packed full of unexplored topics and story ideas that seemed to roll out of my head faster than the tongue of a diabetic in a candy store. However, as the months passed, I soon came to realize that producing sign design articles of that caliber every month was not easy.

Add to that pressure the newly realized and highly unexpected dilemma of making sure I didn't accidentally contradict myself on a process or opinion from some previous article. I've come to realize that past notions, which seemed logical in nature at the time, even opinions formed from actual product failures in the field can change.

New discoveries are made, and just as I



Wrench Room is planned for during the design process, by the designer. Ever wonder why a monument cabinet is wider than it *seems* it would need? *Wrench Room* was most likely a factor. It's the ability to place yourself in the moment when that nut needs to be tightened and it's your hands that must fit the space provided. Can it be reached with both hands, or only one hand?



Wrench Room also involves the planning of the location of access panels in the right places for reaching the attachment saddles, brackets and or gussets after the sign is in the field. It may not look like it's a big deal before the pretty painted metal is attached. Heat is the evil destroyer of painted surfaces when welding is required. Removable panels and proper space in and around the weldable areas provide safe, quick and damage-free scenarios for fabricators and installers.

was initially nervous about the use of VHB tape (by 3M — Very High Bond adhesion product) for certain aspects of sign fabrication, I found out my fears were not valid at all. My opinion was most likely due to early versions of the product that failed, possibly due to improper surface prep, overall limitations of the tape, a host of variables I may not have considered, or that had not been discovered yet.

More on that VHB Tape topic later on in this article.

But once I learned that using it for aircraft fabrication produces a safer, stronger hold than rivets, I had to reconsider my opinion and look into it further. Not that we build many airliners, but the principles of aluminum expansion and how to make it work in your favor make that study a significant consideration for wind load calculations. And yes, it turns out to

be stronger and more versatile than I and others within my *circle of sign professionals* had presumed. I mean, quite frankly; this one made me think of a lot of areas that I may have considered as *set in stone*.

Now back to the article. I had an idea that I felt would help new designers improve their electric sign design projects so they could avoid fabrication and/or installation issues.

I truly felt that this was one of the most important considerations for all sign designers to pay attention to (unless being called out by fabricators and installers is something they enjoy).

After the article was published, it hit a hot button with some fabricators as I remember getting a few *thumbs-ups* during subsequent shop visits.

Fortunately for me, the editor way back then is the same editor I have the pleasure

of working with today at GRAPHICS PRO magazine, and he has made my world easy this month because he has asked me to revisit this insightful topic. I cannot tell you how much fun this is going to be. I finally get to revamp the original article on *Wrench Room* to include some of the new discoveries I have made on the subject.

I must confess, I am adding in this chapter to say what an assumptive fool I have been. I really thought this second time around, the article would be so easy to write, like pulling a tissue out of a box! Nope! Not at all, and that is because there have been not just a few, but at least 1,000 or more scenarios in which I've said... way back in '07, I wrote an article about *Wrench Room* for designing electric signs, and blah, blah, blah, and my biggest problem is which anecdotes do I include to



This is one of the sites I found online where 3M VHB tape is marketed for assembly of aluminum sheets that have a higher *consequences of failure* than the typical sign face blow-out on a windy day. Imagine planning your sign and utilizing VHB tape to eliminate certain fastener location challenges? Check it out, buy a small roll and experiment with materials. Be aware and understand how it works, and how it can speed up fabrication, and how it can minimize the need for so much wrench room, if needed.



Wrench Room Hands: Men and women who fabricate metal signs have hands that look the part. They have to; it's part of the territory and as the *desired experience* is gained through years of fabrication, arthritis can set in and does for most people at some point in time. The more abuse the hands take, the quicker this disease can progress. At 18 or 22, you may not feel the need to care much about how much someone's hand hurts when they use them, but giving this concern consideration will only provide smiles on the faces of those whose hands hurt with every grip and re-grip of the ratchet, especially if it must be gripped by the finger tips because there isn't enough room inside the cabinet to *grab* the wrench. Providing enough room to easily obtain a full grip and maneuver a wrench inside the sign requires visualization with a higher concentration level.

further expand on the subject? I'm lost in my own forest of the trees I planted in my own brain! I am at least two days late to meet the deadline, and my incredibly understanding and almost Gumby-like Editor for being so flexible with a brain like mine that's enslaved by the strengths and challenges of A.D.D.

Wrench room II

As an electric sign designer, you have been assigned the task of reading minds, predicting what everyone needs, and spitting it all out in no time at all and with enough forethought that it can be built under budget.

Sometimes, the last thing you naturally consider is *how this will be assembled and installed*—forgetting to consider this can be not only costly to correct, it can create an unsafe situation in the field.

I appreciate your wading through my introduction as it allows me to get to the meat of this article without all the previous articles' scenario setups, so here we go!

Wrench room redefined

The area, space, and or clearance provided by design for the fabricator and installers to reach, connect to, weld, screw to, fasten, attach, and adjust all the components of the electric sign, all the while remembering and adhering to UL guidelines.

Fabricators' and installers' hands

Have you ever shaken the hand of an electric sign frame fabricator or pylon/monument installer? Male or female, the differences are instantly noticeable. Rough, calloused, strong, and larger than the hand of the average person who isn't using them daily to lift and steady a 100-lb piece of I-beam while it's being welded in place.

Cold, heat, wind

Sure, you may say that working conditions are not much fun but are part of the job. So, as designers, we have the opportunity to help the situation by paying attention to things like *reach*. How far does the service tech need to reach into the sign cabinet to get the wrench onto the bolt?

Wrench room: The area, space, and or clearance provided by design for the fabricator and installers to reach, connect to, weld, screw to, fasten, attach, and adjust all the components of the electric sign.

What if the cabinet is black, it's downtown Houston, in July, with 100-degree temps. The length of time it takes to be *inside the box* in those conditions makes all the difference to the service tech alone. Be the unsung hero by placing access panels where critical attachment elements are easily reachable.

Maturity + wisdom = arthritis

Now, here is the new discovery I want to add to this visualization: the tolerance for pain. Those hands for some fabricators are also dealing with mild to severe arthritis. Holy cow, that's a game changer when it comes to *Wrench Room* in cold weather. I speak from absolute authority on this subject.

When pain limits what the installer can and can't necessarily hold, turn, or maneuver *as easily* as it was when they were 21, young, fast and fearless, planning for and providing *Wrench Room* can mean a less-painful installation process.

All of this involves looking beyond the 4 o'clock deadline to double-check that you have considered most of the things that matter the most. Paying a bit of attention to the work conditions, the challenges, and the struggles of those who actually use the files you create is not only kind, it's cost-effective for the company. It provides happier team members, rather than grumbling disgruntles who are *tired of telling them they can't reach the saddle in that design without removing the whole face*.

At the end of the day, a happy team member *is* what our jobs are all about as designers. (Yep, I said that!)

Wiggle room and welding room

Two of *Wrench Rooms'* favorite cousins, they too are part of the *Wrench Room* family of fabrication considerations. Will the installers be required to weld at the job site? If so, have you provided a removable panel or panels so that the installer is not required to *invent one* on-site?

Heat is the killer of welding on-site, so making sure that installers can do the required welding without compromising the painted finish is absolutely vital to a profitable installation project.

Wiggle Room is what makes every fabrication and installation team member smile. Providing files that fit together with tolerances that are tighter than the specs for the door seals of the space shuttle does nothing to foster friendships in the shop. Understanding tolerances for assembly-style fabrications requires a lot of up-front communication and is one of the benefits that adequate *Wrench Room* can help to alleviate.

So, I mentioned VHB tape earlier in the article, and I wanted to add that the use of VHB tape can almost eliminate the attachment-connector access dilemma by creating 99% permanent bonds between materials. Planning for *Wrench Room* can get exponentially easier if VHB is able to be used for certain attachment challenges. Its strength is amazing when used according to its limitations.

I saw a documentary where VHB was used on aircraft aluminum, and the results were amazing and scary. Reason leads us to presume that strategically placed rivets are as strong as you can get, mechanically, other than welding. Here is a chemical that does a better job as it eliminates tears in the aluminum from the rivet hole that punctured the aluminum, creating weak points that can tear across the aluminum sheeting under extreme conditions.

I was also privy to hearing about this being used by machinists who needed a permanent bond between two pieces of titanium when welding them or tapping new attachment points could warp both surfaces. So yes, I have a new opinion on this based on new developments in research and actual use in the field. That's what makes this industry so interesting; change is constant. GP

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BREAKING DOWN

DYE- SUB

PART 4

THE FINISHING TOUCH

Finishing can make the difference between a high-end fabric graphics job and one that isn't



Mike Syverson has been in the printing industry for over 20 years, at the forefront of the pivotal time of analog to digital conversion. Mike's industry experience over the past 20+ years was instrumental in the development and launch of multiple industrial inkjet printing devices, helping to create and refine many techniques that are still critical to successful print through digital methods.

BY MIKE SYVERSON



To view Part 1, visit
<https://gpro.link/syverson1>



To view Part 2, visit
<https://gpro.link/syverson2>



To view Part 3, visit
<https://gpro.link/syverson3>



Fabric graphics often require some finishing in order to present well. These famous album cover designs are printed onto fabric that was then stretched over wooden frames.

Most professional fabric graphic printers understand that there's more to a project than just printing. Once you print it, you have to finish it and oftentimes, finishing techniques can make the difference between a high-end product and something that isn't compelling enough to compete in the marketplace. Finishing procedures can range from seaming and hemming, to adding pockets and grommets. While the options are numerous, the equipment to perform these tasks is also formidable. Fabric steamers, heat presses, industrial sewing machines, sergers, welders, and seamers all contribute to the successful finishing of soft signage and textiles.

In Part 4 of our 5-part dye sublimation series, we provide you with information on the various finishing procedures, the equipment available to achieve the best results and ways to determine if a finishing department can contribute to your business success.

Q: What are the advantages of investing in a dye-sub fabric finishing department?

A: These days, finishing is seen as a necessary part of the dye-sub process and a business should consider it seriously if it's going to get into the game. Adding an internal finishing production area can help retain customers and build loyalty. It alleviates the cost of outsourcing for these services and in the long run, can make a shop more profitable. It also is added value to be able to offer high quality finishing as part of the entire project, saving time as well as the risk of error, as multiple people handle the project if it's not under one roof.



Grommets are not often used with fabric applications, but can come in handy. This tool is commonly used to set grommets into vinyl banners.



Although more commonly associated with cutting rigid substrates, an X/Y cutter can be very beneficial for high production needs. Some manufacturers carry special blades that will cut fabric very easily, such as Zünd's Driven Rotary Tool (DRT).

Q: What should digital graphics and sign shops know if they are just starting to explore offering finishing services?

A: Print providers need to understand the equipment requirements for the various finishing techniques, look at the pros and cons of each piece of equipment, research the pricing, labor and training involved and determine what types of applications they want to pursue, whether it's large- or small-scale production. Also, a shop needs to have enough space to stage graphics for large applications. The application determines if it is sewn or welded. With dye-sublimation, sewing is almost always the preferred, proven finishing technique. However, both welding and sewing have their benefits.

Q: What type of equipment is used in finishing procedures?

A: Finishing can have different meanings in the textile world. Many companies will look at finishing as the fixation process of the printed ink into the fabric, such as the heat transfer you have with polyester, or steaming and washing cotton fabrics after they have been printed.

We will focus on the cutting and sewing aspect of finishing fabric in preparation for its final application. Almost all fabric will need to be cut before it can be sewn into a final product. There are several ways to cut fabric today, with digital flatbed cutters being the most popular. They are very versatile and have specialized tools to cut fabric quickly and accurately. Recently, there has been a new trend in fabric cutting utilizing a laser cutter. They are generally geared for higher volume production shops, as they can cut fabric many times faster than most cutting tables. These systems are usually found in companies that have a very high amount of cutting to do on a daily basis.

Once the fabric has been cut, it's time for sewing. There are different sewing techniques depending on the final product. SEG (Silicon Edge Graphics), for example, need to have a keder, or gasket, sewn on to the fabric. This can be challenging for a



With dye-sublimation, sewing is almost always the preferred, proven finishing technique. However, both welding and sewing have their benefits.

stand-alone sewing machine. The industry has developed some equipment to make this process much easier, by automating much of the sewing to properly align the gasket with the fabric, creating a much nicer product with lower labor and skill requirements. Other applications, such as hanging banners, feather flags, pillowcase tradeshow graphics are all typically sewn with more traditional sewing machines.

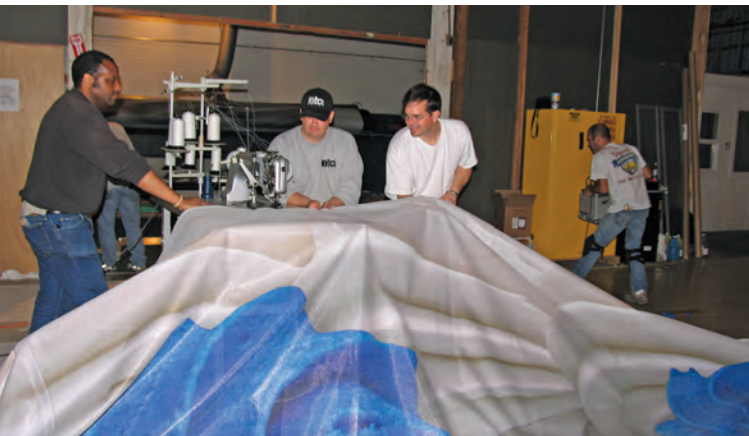
Q: What should you look for when buying sewing equipment for dye-sub finishing?

A: It really depends on the needs of the company. A shop that only does a few sewn products a day should consider a low volume solution for their sewing needs. A standard sewing machine and serger in this category can be obtained for under \$800. If a PSP is a very high-volume shop, then they should consider an industrial solution for their needs. Equipment in this category

can cost from \$6,000 on up. There are benefits for these industrial machines as they will last a lot longer in a high production environment and can often have features not available in the lower volume segment. The semi-automatic systems are significantly more expensive but have the added benefit of easing the process of working with SEG graphics and running very quickly.

Both automated and hand-action grommet machines are available. Which is the best choice?

Both pieces of equipment are valuable and again, the choice really comes down to the volume of work in the shop. A high production facility will more than likely have an automated grommet machine which will automatically punch and grommet the



The sewing station is an important part of any sign shop that's serious about tackling dye-sublimation work.



A serger is a type of sewing machine that can create a stitch with two, three or even four threads, and can also cut the edge of the fabric automatically to create a finished edge.

fabric, but a smaller shop with less volume can function just as well with a hand-action, manual grommet machine.

Q: How can this equipment increase productivity and profit?

A: Higher end sewing machines are faster and can increase productivity, but you still need talented sewers to produce the high-end finished product that customers expect. Additionally, by bringing the finishing in-house, a print provider can further control costs, scheduling and manage the entire project to ensure a high level of quality and increase efficiencies. Interestingly, the semi-automatic sewing systems lessen the learning curve of sewing fabric (especially for SEG applications). Often times, we see printer or cutter operator running these systems.

Q: What are the various finishing options and their applications?

A: Finishing techniques really depend on the final application and need. Here are some common ones:

- **Pole pocket** — mostly used for hanging banners. The poles are inserted in the top and the bottom. Equipment: sewing machine or welder.
- **Grommets** — not often done in fabric, mostly used for vinyl. Equipment: grommeting machine
- **Hems** — for finished edges, seams, and multiple panels. Equipment: sewing machine, welder
- **SEG** — sewing of a silicon or vinyl gasket to fabric. This in turn stretched into a frame with a small channel (usually an aluminum frame). Equipment: sewing machine and the frame.

Q: What are some of the challenges in running a finishing department?

A: One big challenge is finding skilled labor that can sew. Another challenge is having the space to stage large graphics. When bringing in fabric printing (along with large banners in general), it is important to properly plan the space so there is enough room to stage graphics for finishing. In addition, if the final graphics are being used on a stretch frame, it is advisable to stage the frame and attach the graphics to the frame for proper fitment.

Q: What are some of the trends in the finishing arena?

A: As far as trends go, it seems that many PSPs are continuing to look for ways to minimize the steps in the production process with equipment that is faster and used for various applications. Shop owners want consistency, reliability and more and more are bringing finishing in-house to cut down on outside sourcing and fulfillment. Many PSPs are looking at ways to finish graphics more efficiently to improve their turnaround time and reduce labor costs. Equipment such as faster sewing machines, automated x/y cutters with fabric attachments and welding units designed for textile are some of the products shops are looking to invest in for future. **GP**

GP+

LOOKBOOK

GP+ is a monthly section of GRAPHICS PRO dedicated to taking a deep dive into a specific graphics market. This month's section is our annual LookBook, which takes a look at the upcoming year's top fashion ideas.





NEXT LEVEL
A P P A R E L[®]

ELEVATED BASICS

Experience comfort and luxury



Heavy Weight Hoodie

Color: Arctic white, charcoal desert sand, heather grey, jet black, oxford navy

Sizes: S-3X

Fabric Composition: This new 10 oz heavy weight hoodie is composed of 70%/30% ring spun cotton/polyester blend with a 100% cotton face, ideal for all printing needs. This heavy weight hoodie features round draw cords with a metal tip, kangaroo front pouch, and a three-panel hood

Features: This comfortable over-the-head style is a wardrobe essential for all hoodie lovers. Designed with a relaxed fit and constructed from heavy weight soft-touch fabric. This hoodie is the graduate of prints



JHA101

Just Hoods[®]
AWDis

Pre-treated Perfect-T

Colors: Ash, athletic red, black, charcoal heather, deep forest, deep royal, light steel, navy, smoke gray, white

Sizes: S-3XL

Fabric Composition: 100% ring spun, us grown cotton, 30 singles, 4.5oz weight

Features: Fully pre-treated with PrintNOW technology for dry process Directed to Garment (DTG) printing anywhere on the shirt. Eliminating the need to add pretreatment, which saves time and money



498PT



Hanes®

>CHAMPION GAME DAY FLEECE



 **Champion**®



CHP100 Womens Game Day Hoodie



RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

Go beyond the norm and unleash real style with our Game Day collection. The collection features a recycled polyester blend that gives it stretch and moisture-wicking strength.

View the entire line at BrandwearUnited.com



Unisex Hooded Sweatshirt

Colors: Black ink, black ink heather, blush pink, cloud heather, frost grey heather, j. navy, military green heather, putty, sweet cream heather, white

Sizes: Adult: S-3XL

Fabric Composition: CVC 57/43 combed ring-spun cotton/recycled polyester pre-shrunk fleece, 8.5 oz/288 g

Features: Eco premium blend, ring-spun, cotton-rich 3-end fleece for superior softness; 2-ply jersey-lined hood with grommets; tipped and knotted, dyed-to-match flat drawcord, tear-away label; 2x2 rib cuffs, and waistband



700MR

JERZEES®




8.5 oz. CVC 57/43
Combed Ring-Spun Cotton/
Recycled Polyester Fleece
**700MR NEW HOODED
SWEATSHIRT**

NATURALLY **INSPIRED**

INTRODUCING JERZEES ECO™ PREMIUM BLEND FLEECE
Sustainable styles to showcase your creativity

Made from a blend of 100% recycled polyester and sustainably-sourced, USA-grown cotton, our 3-end fleece provides more loft for added softness and comfort, and combed, ring-spun cotton ensures a super soft hand. Choose from 2 styles and 10 colors.

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Adult Vintage Wash Tee

Colors: Washed basil, washed black, washed coyote brown, washed gray, washed mauvelous, washed natural, washed navy, washed rouge, washed saltwater, washed tradewind

Sizes: S-3X

Fabric Composition: 5.7 oz. 52% polyester/48% ringspun cotton vintage wash jersey

Features: Coverstitched hems, coverstitched side seams, self fabric back necktape, EasyTear label



6902

LAT APPAREL

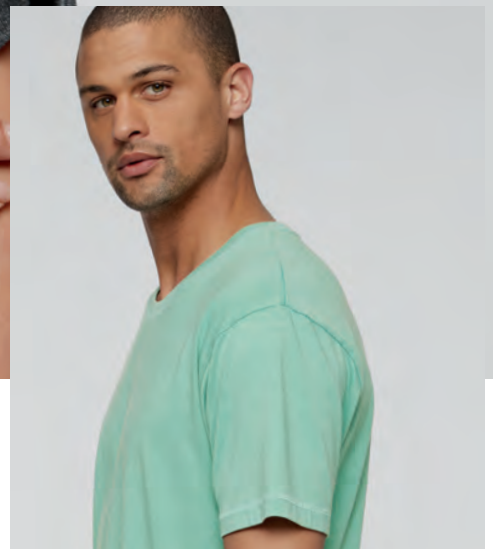




THE

VINTAGE WASH

DEFINITION OF SOFT



- 
WASHED BASIL
- 
WASHED BLACK
- 
WASHED COYOTE BROWN
- 
WASHED GRAY
- 
WASHED MAUVELOUS
- 
WASHED NATURAL
- 
WASHED NAVY
- 
WASHED ROUGE
- 
WASHED SALTWATER
- 
WASHED TRADEWIND

3502 LADIES' RELAXED VINTAGE WASH TEE

5.7 oz. 52% polyester/48% ringspun cotton vintage wash jersey. Relaxed Fit. Deep Crew Rib Collar. Drop Shoulder Construction. Rib Sleeve Detail. Coverstitched Collar & Bottom Hem. EasyTear™ label.

Fit: Relaxed - Slightly oversized. Our ultimate comfort fit.

6902 ADULT VINTAGE WASH TEE

5.7 oz. 52% polyester/48% ringspun cotton vintage wash jersey. Coverstitched Hems. Coverstitched Side Seams. Self Fabric Back Necktape. EasyTear™ label.

Fit: Adult Unisex - A true-to-size fit.

The LAT Vintage Wash assortment achieves its authentic look and feel through a special wash process, which creates unique and natural variances in texture, distress, and shade. These are intentional and are NOT considered defective.

Perfect Blend CVC Tee

Colors: 8 colors: black, grey frost, heathered charcoal, heathered navy, heathered olive, heathered royal, heathered teal, light heather grey

Sizes: XS-4XL

Fabric Composition: 4.3-oz, 60/40 combed ring spun cotton/poly, 34 singles 90/10 combed ring spun cotton/poly (light heather grey)

Features: 1x1 rib knit neck and cuffs, shoulder to shoulder taping, tear-away label



DT109

SANMAR®



DISTRICT

Practically Perfect In Every Way.

Now with a rich 60/40 blend, the new and improved Perfect Blend CVC offers superior quality and softness. With a wider range of styles and colors, this is the perfect fit for your fashion tee needs.

- 7 tee and tank styles
- Up to 33 solid and heathered colors
- Tear-away label

Explore the District Perfect Blend CVC Collection at SanMar.com.



Women's Sueded Hoodie

Colors: Black, white, desert pink, heather gray, maroon, midnight navy, military green, stonewash denim

Sizes: XS-2XL

Fabric Composition: 60% combed ring-spun cotton, 40% polyester sueded French terry fleece

Features: Our streetwear-inspired Sueded Raw Edge Cropped Hoodie has an elevated softness from our buttery soft sueded Laguna fleece that offers smooth printability and comfort from our French Terry fabric backing



9384



NEXT LEVEL
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Limitless *color*

JHA050
COLLEGE
ZOODIE

JHA001
COLLEGE
HOODIE

JHA030
COLLEGE
SWEAT

JustHoods®
ALWAYS

WWW.JUSTHOODSUSA.COM

Perfect Sweat Crewneck

Colors: Athletic red, black, charcoal heather, deep royal, fatigue green, light steel, navy, sand smoke gray, white

Sizes: S-5XL

Fabric Composition: Solid: 80% cotton/20% polyester; light steel: 78% cotton/22% polyester; heather: 50% cotton/50% polyester

Features: Smooth 100% ring spun cotton-faced fabric, and Clean Canvas print technology makes these sweats ideal for direct to garment, plastisol, water-based printing, or other embellishment techniques, especially embroidery



RS160

The Hanes logo, featuring the word "Hanes" in a white serif font on a red, wavy rectangular background. A small registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the upper right of the logo.

Hanes®

Unisex Sweatshirt

Colors: Black ink, black ink heather, frost grey heather, j. navy, sweet cream heather, white

Sizes: S-3XL

Fabric Composition: CVC 57/43 combed ring-spun cotton/ recycled polyester pre-shrunk fleece, 8.5 oz/288 g

Features: Eco premium blend, ring-spun, cotton-rich 3-end fleece for superior softness; tear-away label; 2x2 rib collar, cuffs, and waistband



701MR

JERZEES®

Ladies' Vintage Wash Tee

Colors: Washed basil, washed black, washed coyote brown, washed gray, washed mauvelous, washed natural, washed navy, washed rouge, washed saltwater, washed tradewind

Sizes: S-2X

Fabric Composition: 5.7 oz. 52% polyester/48% ringspun cotton vintage wash jersey.

Features: Relaxed fit, deep crew rib collar, drop shoulder construction, rib sleeve detail, coverstitched collar & bottom hem, easytear label



3502

LAT APPAREL



Unisex Soft Wash T-Shirt

Colors: Washed black, washed banana cream, washed cardinal, washed graphite black, washed mauve, washed military green, washed purple rush, washed royal pine, washed royal, washed stone-wash denim, washed white, washed natural

Sizes: XS-3XL

Fabric Composition: 100% combed ring-spun cotton

Features: Everyone has a favorite T-shirt that they love...it's soft, broken in and slightly faded in all the right places. The 3605SW is pre-shrunk and has all the familiar qualities of our 3600SW T-shirt plus a bonus chest pocket. The unique markings on our beautiful Soft Wash garments are a special characteristic that makes each piece ONE-OF-A-KIND, just like the person wearing it.



3600SW



NEXT LEVEL
APPAREL®



WORKWEAR: Beyond Branded

Attracting new business opportunities with branded workwear



BY ADAM MCCAULEY

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

When you hear *branded workwear*, you may envision stiff giveaway t-shirts and polos with company logos on them... the same clothes that management makes you wear... clothing you'd never wear outside the office or shop.

For years owners and managers spent the least amount of money they could on company apparel. Thankfully, times are changing, and ownership realizes that not only can your workwear create opportunities to attract new business but also create avenues to attract talent to your organization.

My wife and I love to cut the grass. We fight over who gets to do it because it gives us a solid hour and 30 minutes of uninterrupted break from our usual responsibilities with a nice podcast or good audiobook. It's relaxing.

But recently, we've been just too busy, and we're becoming the neighbors the HOA has warned everyone about. So, to fix that, we've decided to give up our *me time* and hire one of the 100 landscaping companies in the area.

Now, because I'm in the apparel decoration industry, there is only one thing we will consider while searching for our new lawn care partner... *Do they* look professional? Each week we drive through the neighborhood dodging trailers, mowers, trucks, and cones while dozens of employees are rhythmically pacing back and forth over the well-manicured lawns. I really do believe they could all do the job I need. Who do I hire?



Beanie caps for a lawn care company.

Do I stop to hire the disheveled worker with a backward Buc-ee's hat, ripped cargo shorts, sleeveless Van Halen tee, and flip-flops cutting the grass? Or do I hire the gentleman pacing behind his mower wearing his company logoed trucker hat, matching polo with his logo adorned to the left front chest, American flag printed on the sleeve, and tucked into his matching work pants? The choice seems easy to me.

As you ponder which lawncare worker you'd like to entertain, I will explore some new advantages of branded apparel in the workplace. There are clear benefits of having your work garments adorned with company logos. They create a professional image, they can unify your team, build customer trust, and they can build brand awareness.

Creating a professional image

When it comes to workwear, having your company logo emblazoned on your apparel can make a significant impact. The reality is that first impressions count.

Branded workwear instantly elevates your professional image and sends a clear message to customers, clients, and even competitors that you mean business. It showcases your commitment to quality and attention to detail, establishing trust and credibility right from the get-go.

Unifying your team

Branded workwear has a hidden superpower. It unifies your team. When employees wear the same logoed attire, it creates a sense of belonging, fostering team spirit and camaraderie. They become part of a cohesive unit, proud to represent the company they work for.

Plus, it eliminates the age-old question of what to wear to work, saving precious time and energy. The team that dresses together, stays together!

Branded apparel can also help bridge this gap by unifying remote teams and reinforcing company values. Companies can provide branded merchandise, such as t-shirts, hoodies, or caps, to employees working from home. Wearing these items during virtual meetings or team-building



Local firefighter quilted jackets decorated with larger outline embroidery on the back. Large and bold to contrast the navy color of the jacket.

activities creates a sense of unity and camaraderie, strengthening the company culture despite physical distance.

Building customer trust

Who do you trust more, Mr. Buc-ee's hat, ripped cargo shorts, sleeveless Van Halen tee, and flip flops or the other guy? Or, imagine you walk into a store, and all the employees are wearing mismatched, outdated clothing. What does that say about the business?

Now, imagine the same store, but with a team sporting stylish, well-fitting workwear, complete with the company logo.

When it comes to workwear, having your company logo emblazoned on your apparel can make a significant impact.



Custom patch on a trail guides vest. Also used as a gift to all the riders after the trip.



Custom embroidered patches applied easily on the left and right front chest locations. You can easily adapt to new locations with patches when your base apparel has branding in unexpected areas.

Boom! Instantly, you feel a sense of trust and professionalism. Branded workwear reinforces your commitment to quality and tells customers you take your business seriously. It's like a silent handshake, sealing the deal.

Branded apparel can also play a crucial role in instilling confidence in customers and employees alike. Companies can incorporate safety messaging, core values, highlight awards or even acknowledge brand partnership with other companies within the community. These visible reminders demonstrate a commitment to community, safety, and more.

Building brand awareness

Branding is all about making a name for yourself, and what better way to achieve that than by turning your employees into walking billboards? When your staff wears workwear with company logos, they become brand ambassadors, spreading awareness wherever they go.

Think about it... you're not just limited to the confines of your office or storefront., Your brand reaches places you never imagined. Talk about exposure, right? With the right people in place, not only do those ambassadors spread awareness around the community, but they also attract likeminded and talented people to your company.

Decoration techniques for different industries

Now that we've articulated a handful of advantages of branded workwear, it's important to note what types of apparel work well within different industries.

Just as creating a professional image, unifying your team, building trust, and building brand awareness is important, providing apparel and decorations to complement your field is equally important. Here are a couple of industries and some recommendations for decorating apparel.

Hospitality industry

In the fast-paced world of hospitality, first impressions are everything. For hotels, restaurants, and catering companies, consider embroidered logos on sleek, wrinkle-resistant shirts, blouses, or aprons.



DTF transfer on back collar along with another DTF image within the strip of the sleeve.



Healthcare fulfillment order using screen-printed left chest logo.

The raised texture of embroidery adds a touch of sophistication and durability, ensuring your brand stands the test of time. Sleek and sophisticated is one thing but another measure of the style of apparel being used is based on the clientele you're advertising to.

I would expect Marriot to have wonderfully embroidered shirts and blouses. I would expect the biker tavern and motel to have totally different workwear apparel standards. *Your Vibe Attracts Your Tribe* theme comes to mind. Just because it's not Marriot apparel doesn't mean their apparel isn't being used to build brand awareness, unify a team, create a professional image, or build customer trust.

Construction and trades

When it comes to the rugged world of construction and trades, durability is key. Opt for screen printing on heavyweight, high-visibility workwear such as jackets, coveralls, and vests. This technique provides vibrant colors and clear, bold logos that can withstand the demands of the job site.

This is where you may have to lower your screen mesh to allow maximum ink deposits and better coverage on your canvas-like fabrics. Hi-Vis mesh vests are always a little tricky. Depending on the size of your mesh, you can add a scrap sheet of paper between the vest and the platen to minimize the ink printed through the holes. Not super-efficient, but more efficient than removing ink from places you didn't want it.

You'll see a lot of printed logos on the front and back of tees and hoods, along with hard work slogans or safety policies such as *Safety First* or *Licensed and Insured*. While screen printing and embroidery are still the mainstays in decoration for the rough and



Woven airplane-themed tie with airport on the bottom. Tie stays on-brand and on-theme with the airport.



Bushwick quilted jacket with traditional embroidery on the left front chest above the pocket.



Quilted jacket, beanie and sweatshirts all embroidered.



Aerospace working mechanic coat with embroidery on left chest along with matching cap.

rugged world of construction and trades, DTF logos add an amazing opportunity to add a full-color flare to pockets, sleeves, and other unique locations.

With the proper heat application, you can count on them to withstand any outdoor work site.

If you really want to apply some *wow* factor, look to adding custom patches to workwear apparel. Not only will it raise the perception of value, but it will also allow you to apply the patches in multiple locations. The same patch could be used for hat front, jacket left chests, coverall front pockets, computer bag front sleeve, shoulder sleeve, and more. Experiment with leather, faux leather, woven, and embroidered patch to see what style best fits the brand.

Healthcare and medical

Healthcare professionals deserve workwear that is functional, comfortable, and easily identifiable. Embroidered logos on scrubs, lab coats, and tunics strike the right balance between professionalism and practicality. The subtle elegance of embroidery on these garments adds a touch of class to the medical environment.

When working within this industry, it's important to make sure you have a firm

If you really want to apply some **WOW** factor, look to adding custom patches to workwear apparel.

grasp on the correct stabilizers on the back of your embroidery. Lab coats look silly when you see the beautifully stitched logo with a gigantic white rectangle outlining the embellishment from the inside of the coat. Look to use something soft or medium-weight cutaway. Those types of stabilizers will provide sufficient support without adding too much stiffness.

Also, make sure you are using the correct needles to achieve the professional look that the industry requires. Design complexity and fabric types are two factors to review when stitching for the healthcare field.

Retail and service

For the retail and service industry, personalized and eye-catching workwear is essential. Consider heat transfers or vinyl printing techniques on shirts, polos, or caps. These methods offer versatility,

allowing intricate designs, gradients, and vibrant colors to shine through. Your team will rock that stylish and memorable look.

The past few years have highlighted the importance of giving back to the community. Branded apparel can serve as a platform to showcase a retail company's commitment to giving back and supporting communities in need.

For instance, companies can launch limited-edition apparel collections, with a portion of the proceeds donated to charitable organizations like a homeless shelter. By wearing these branded items, customers and employees become part of a larger movement, spreading awareness, and encouraging others to contribute to worthy charities.

Not all landscaping is equal

For the sake of this article, I'm making landscapers a standalone industry.

Landscaping is hard work. They are in the truck at 6 a.m., cutting lawns, trimming, fertilizing, seeding, and working under the hot sun throughout the day.

At 6 a.m. it's 48 degrees; at 1 p.m. it's 87 degrees. Logoed polos, tees, hoods, jackets, hats are a must if they expect to earn my business.

Branded workwear is a powerful tool with the potential to elevate your business to new heights. It creates a professional image, enhances brand awareness, unifies your team, and builds customer trust.

Yes, Mr. sleeveless Van Halen tee with the flip-flops could cut my grass, but I'd rather take a flyer on a company that invests in its people and understands the value of branded workwear.

I want someone that takes their profession seriously. They say clothes don't always make the man, but branded workwear will earn my business. **GP**

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Making Moves for the Future

Tips all shops should be employing to maintain growth



Howard Potter has worked in the promotional industry since 2003, from designing to building brands and a family-owned business. He is the co-owner and CEO of A&P Master Images LLC, Utica, N.Y., with his wife, Amanda. Their company offers graphic design, screen printing, embroidery, sublimation, laser engraving, direct-to-film, online stores, vinyl graphics, and promotional items. For more information, visit MasterYourImage.com.

Twenty years ago, my wife and I started our company from a little 14' by 14' space in our home and never thought all of these years later we would employ 30 full-time staff, offer seven-plus services in-house, have two buildings to work out of, and so much more. As we grew, our customers' needs had changed, as well as our company needs.

The days of opening a mom-and-pop store and just taking on what you can handle are hard to maintain these days due to several factors, but the main reason is online sales. Now anyone can order from anywhere and have their customized order shipped right to their door. So, my wife and I learned over 12 years ago we must keep innovating or expect to lose market share year after year to online companies back then that were leading online sales ahead of most, since it was not as popular to order online as it is today. Let's talk about some things business owners should be doing, no matter their size.

Space is always an issue for all companies. When we originally started from our home, we knew ahead of time we could use some of our dining room, and we had a 12' by 12' office out in back of our home to expand, which held us for almost our first five years in business which by then gave us around 400 square feet to work with. At this, we were offering design, sublimation, and embroidery in-house and subbing everything else out. From there, we moved to a plaza into 650 square feet, which gave us around a third more space, but more importantly, the plaza had more room downstairs and upstairs for us to expand as needed. The new space allowed us to have our first little showroom area, and more room to purchase more heat presses for sublimation and to buy more embroidery equipment and supplies, along with me having an office with a door



Space is always an issue for all companies. (Images courtesy of Howard Potter)

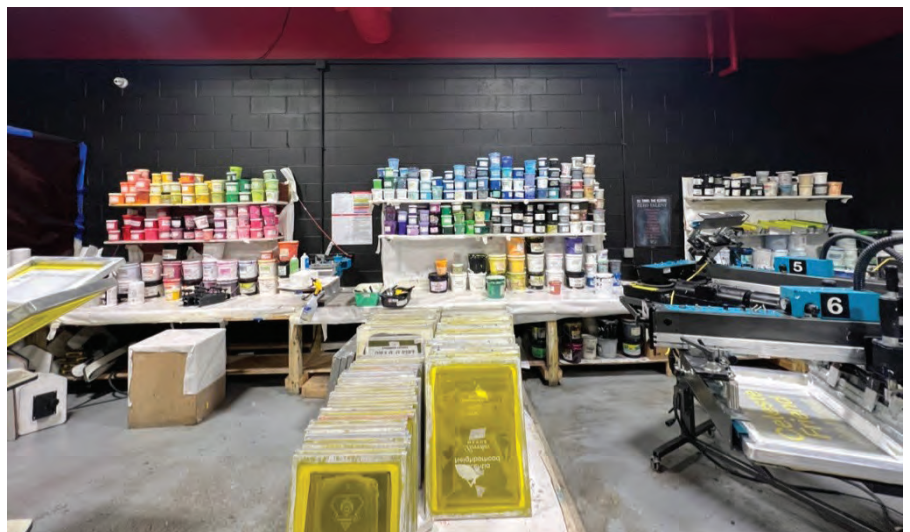
instead of sitting right next to the embroidery machines to design.

At this time, we also hired our first employee. During our five years at this location, we expanded next door to create a full-size showroom with hundreds of samples, which really opened our customers' eyes to what we could do for them. Then from there, year after year, we kept taking over the rest of their space upstairs. By the end, we were up to 4,000 square feet that we were working out of. Once we took on space upstairs, we took on screen printing in-house with two manual presses, a dryer, and two flash units. On top of that, we started offering rhinestones too. Now let's fast forward to over our past 10 years of growth and changes. When we bought our first building, we had 10 full-time staff. Over our past 10 years we purchased our first building of 5,400 sq. ft. and built another building this year that is 3,000 sq. ft. Our list of services has grown drastically, offering vinyl graphics, direct-to-film, online stores, fulfillment, 2D/3D laser engraving, UV laser engraving, first responder uniforms, and more. A lot of evolution occurred during these times.

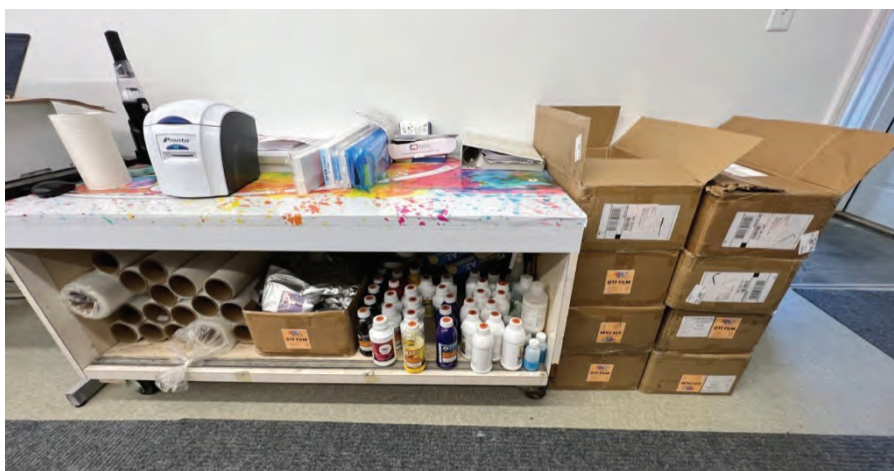
During all of this, my wife and I realized to keep up with writing up orders and producing them, we needed to create structured pricing. So, for several weeks she and I worked on pricing structures together so she could help me quote orders faster, but I was also managing production by writing a production list, which was very time-consuming and slow. So, from there, she researched an online calendar system in which we could load our orders to it and organize them by machine to run each order on time. All during this time, we were researching production software



Over our past 10 years we purchased our first building of 5,400 sq. ft. and built another building this year that is 3,000 sq. ft. Our list of services has grown drastically, offering vinyl graphics, direct-to-film, online stores, fulfillment, 2D/3D laser engraving, UV laser engraving, first responder uniforms, and more. A lot of evolution occurred during these times.



Every company in our line of work has to have some type of online platform that makes it easier for customers to order.



that we could use to quote orders, manage production, and so much more, but back then, nothing was close to the quality or style of what we were looking for.

So, over six years ago, a friend of ours offered to help work with us to develop our own software called “PRESSV.” This software at first only handled quoting and writing up orders, and then from there, handled all of our inventory, suppliers, customers, production, and more. The best part is that as we grow, the software grows with us. Every week we are adding new features and advancements. We can track who the top clients are, how much they purchase in a year, what is our error rate, how much we have in process with half-downs versus net 30 accounts, and so much more. Having our own software has been a game changer for us to help us scale our growth and set checks and balances in place, which helps take work off of our team.

Every company in our line of work has to have some type of online platform for making it easier for customers to order. As of right now, we have created and manage over 300 online stores for customers to sell products we customize for them, but then we have customers reach out to us for quotes using our website, calling us, emailing us, and stopping into our showroom to see our work in person. The key is options! Never limit yourself if you can

help it. It allows you to move with the market rather than against it. Remember, online sales happen 24/7, so you can gain more orders while you sleep.

Over the years, our buying habits changed in several ways. We used to order only what we needed as we needed it with net 30 accounts and paid with checks. Now we use our Amex to pay for everything as much as possible for two reasons. One, you have a net 30 account and by using your Amex at zero percent interest, you gain an additional 30 days to pay, making it a net 60. The majority of the time, you are paid well before then, but the other bonus is you gain Amex points, which helps you cut business expenses like travel and more by using your points.

Another change in our buying habits was investing in stock for our supplies. I would look at how we would buy for



a month, quarter, and year. From there, reach out and work pricing deals to buy what you can afford in bulk since you know it will sell. You will typically save a minimum of 2% to 6% at minimum and sometimes more. It reduces the amount of time wasted ordering and checking the supplies in. You also save on shipping charges, and again use your Amex to extend your payment terms and to gain points on the back end.

As you can see, these are just a few things needed, but all very important steps in order to keep up in business and maintain old and newer customers. These days if you simply coast or get comfortable, you will have more opportunities to lose your customer before you even know it has happened. So, work every day like it was your first day. Always stay hungry. Keep making moves! GP

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For Those About to Rock ...

Bringing back that classic rock design



The final design. (All images courtesy of Lon Winters)



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. Lon is also a presenter at GRAPHICS PRO EXPO (g-p-x.com).

A dealer client and partner asked us to develop the art and print the shirts for the upcoming year's open-house events. The theme was "We Are GSG!" The marketing team presented their idea: they wanted a rock 'n' roll tour shirt. You know, a black concert T-shirt with the tour dates (open house dates) on the back. Brilliant! Too easy. Old skool sim process on black. We loved that!

We do simulated process quite often, and we got to fill up the press, so to speak, with this project. That gave us more freedom in the coloring process than in some cases. You know we love coloring! That classic rock design style that is so retro and popular again still has solid color theory.


As great and influential musicians such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky were, they never had great album-cover art. Cover art was pretty boring up until the late '40s. There seemed to be a Renaissance around the '60s and an all-out movement by the '70s. There were beautiful covers all across the music spectrum, none more spectacular than in rock and roll. Rock music has always broken barriers.



Customer: GSG Design: GSG Open HSE 23 Style: SST T-Shirt Color: Black
 Ink Colors: ■ Multi



Proof of concept.



OPEN HOUSE TOUR 2023

Press	Chemistry / Smoothing / Flash			Squeegee Controls			Flood		Screen			
Step	Separation	Formula	Ink System	Pressure	Durometer	Speed	Strokes	Type	Speed	Mesh	Tension	Stencil
1	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
2	Gray	Charcoal	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	300	45 N/cm	12%
3	Base	80g Amazing Bright Tiger White 20g Fashion Soft Base	Epic	50	65/90/65	5	1	Wing	5	205	45 N/cm	16%
4	Flash											
5	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
6	Dark Blue	Royal	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
7	Red	Drake Red	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
8	Yellow	Light Gold	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	228	45 N/cm	14%
9	Flash											
10	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
11	Blue	Contact Blue	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
12	Brown	Brown	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
13	Flesh	Tan	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
14	High Light	90g Amazing Bright Tiger White 10g Fashion Soft Base	Epic	50	65/90/65	5	1	Wing	5	228	45 N/cm	14%

Press	Chemistry / Smoothing / Flash			Squeegee Controls			Flood		Screen			
Step	Separation	Formula	Ink System	Pressure	Durometer	Speed	Strokes	Type	Speed	Mesh	Tension	Stencil
1	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
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3	Base	80g Amazing Bright Tiger White 20g Fashion Soft Base	Epic	50	65/90/65	5	1	Wing	5	205	45 N/cm	16%
4	Flash											
5	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
6	Red	Drake Red	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	272	45 N/cm	14%
7	Gold	Light Gold	Rio	50	75/90/75	5	1	Wing	5	228	45 N/cm	14%
8	Flash											
9	Smoothing			70	Roll		1			Teflon		
10	High Light	90g Amazing Bright Tiger White 10g Fashion Soft Base	Epic	50	65/90/65	5	1	Wing	5	228	45 N/cm	14%

The M&R Companies, Stretch Devices, Wilflex by Aveint, Shur Loc,
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Spec sheet.





We salute you

AC/DC is a rock band formed in Australia in 1973 by guitarist brothers Malcolm and Angus Young. Their music has been described as hard rock, blues rock, and heavy metal. The band calls it simply rock and roll.

The debut album, *High Voltage*, rolled out in 1975 with Bon Scott on vocals. The band's breakthrough album was *Highway to Hell* in '79. When Bon Scott died unexpectedly, AC/DC considered calling it quits. However, at the request of Scott's parents, they continued and recruited current lead singer Brian Johnson as their new frontman.

The first album with Johnson, *Back in Black* in 1980, was dedicated to Scott's memory and was a massive success. The lineup remained the same for 20 years until 2014, when Malcolm Young retired and eventually passed. He was replaced by his nephew, Stevie Young. Johnson had

to stop touring due to worsening hearing loss, among other troubles.

Upon a reunion in 2020, the band released their 17th and 18th studio albums. AC/DC has sold more than 200 million records worldwide, making them the 16th best-selling band in the world. *Back in Black* is the second-best-selling album of all time and the highest-selling album by a band.

They ranked fourth on VH1's list of the 100 Greatest Artists of Hard Rock and were named the seventh Greatest Heavy Metal Band of All Time. They ranked No. 72 on the Rolling Stone list of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time.

An AC/DC adapter is a type of external power supply. Use of an external power supply allows portability of equipment. Wait, we aren't talking about that AC/DC. We are talking about maybe one of the greatest hard rock bands of all time. All rock bands have a story, right? AC/DC was

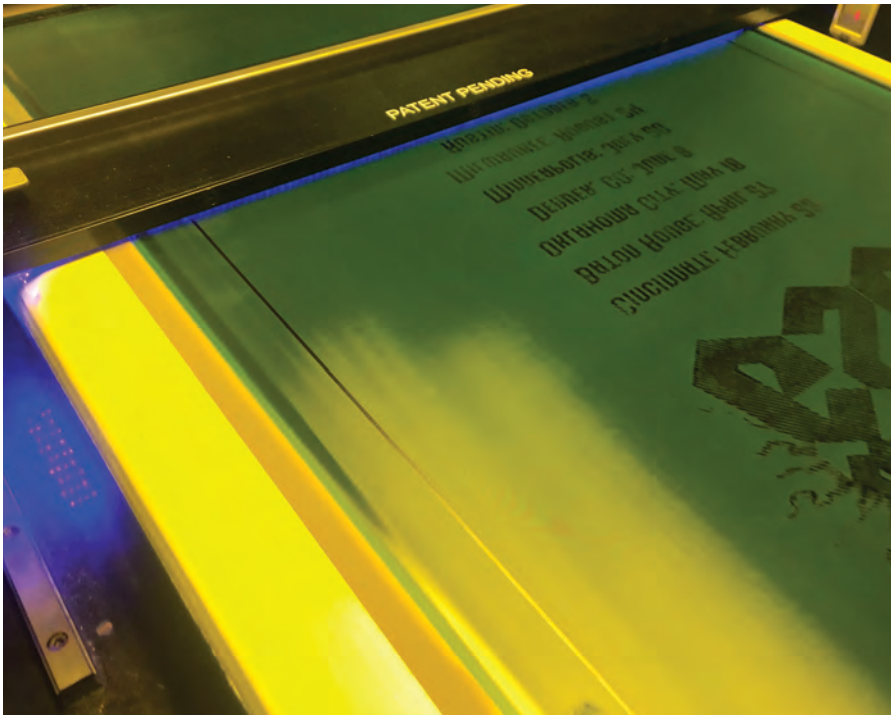
our inspiration for this rock 'n' roll concert tour shirt.

Dirty deeds

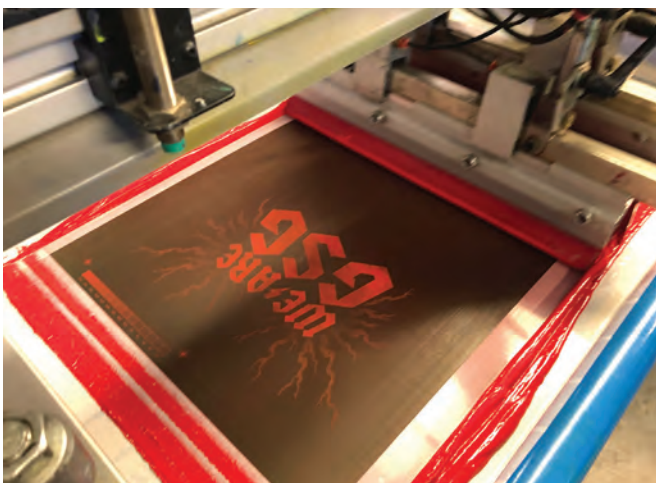
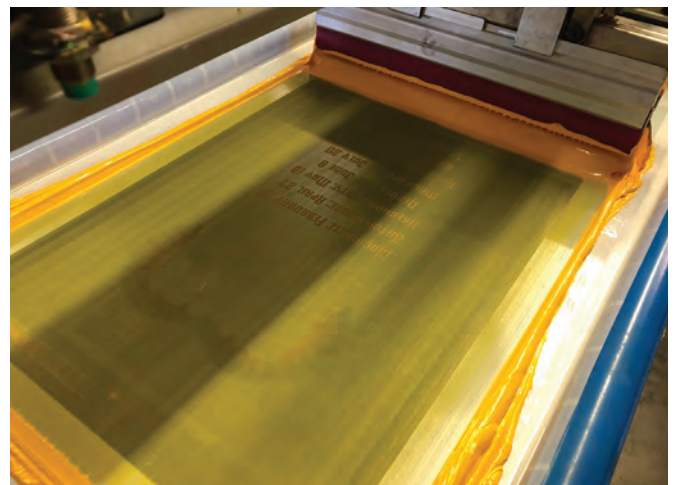
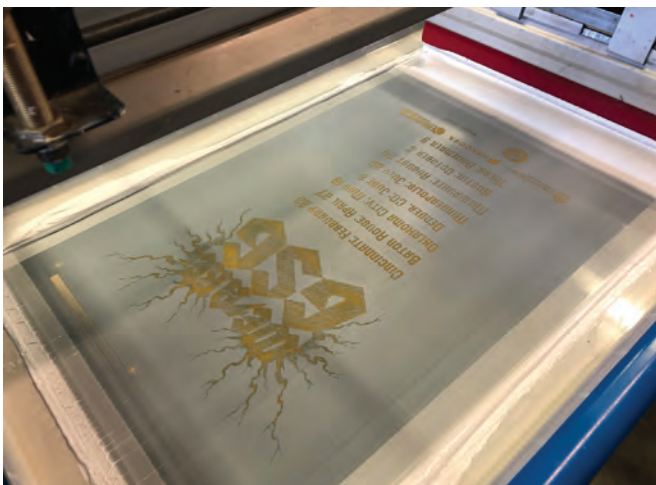
Using both Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop together, we set up our layout. We pushed the boundaries of the rendering with some Photoshop tricks. Photoshop allowed freeform painting and effects while Illustrator made it easy to move elements around.

We laid it out in Illustrator, then moved to Photoshop for the candy coating. This was a series of vector graphics working together to give the appearance of a live, on-site flavor. We incorporated a series of heads at the base. Since we were looking for the live feel, we needed some fans. Screaming and rocking would help convey the intensity.

Using photos of stock imagery, we adjusted the exposure to have high contrast for the shadows. These were added



Screen making.



The production process.

effects using the Filter Menu. Under the Filter Gallery, we found effect filters for a dramatic flare. We chose the Distort option and moved the levers to our liking with the texture option on Frosted.

For reference, we made a duplicate of original source photos from researched concert Ts and changed the color mode to grayscale, changed it to bitmap, and chose the styles. We pasted it back into the working rendered file and created the overlay.

We filled in some of the breaks for a more seamless transition. For the stone and framing imagery, to give it some flare, we duplicated the shapes and layered behind the originals. Then we filled it and applied a Gaussian blur, found under Filter. To complete it, we used Layer Effects and Outer Glow, which did exactly what it implies.

For the classic type in the center, we used bold, clear colors brought over from Illustrator. Fortunately, with thousands of fonts at our disposal, finding the style from the classic AC/DC logo was easy. We added some more layer effects, Bevel and Emboss, to take some of the flatness out of the shapes. Big-time distress and patterns added to the whole thing. To give it more drama, the highlight and shadow modes were instrumental for contrast.

We output on CTS that matched the registration system on press. Halftone frequency was 55 lpi at a 22.5-degree angle. We chose an N-166 tpi mesh and followed up with a flash and a smoothing screen. The colors and hi-white printed wet on wet within lightest to darkest and least coverage to most on N-272s, all at 45 N/cm₂ tension. Squeegees were 75/90/75 for the colors and 65/90/65 on the whites and were triple-ply, dual durometer.

What better way to put a bow on the project than to recreate a tour-like list for the back print? Each of the open house dates was set up like they would be on a concert T using a simplified color theory from the front. All attendees of the open house events were given their very own tour shirt. **GP**



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Create Value

Bridging the value gap with the right presentation



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.

What springs to mind when you hear the word *value*? It is a word with a lot of meanings. A few definitions from my dictionary include 1) of relative worth, merit, or importance; 2) monetary or material worth, as in trade or commerce.

In the context of our decorated apparel and promotional products industry, what is value? When your objective is to give your customers good value, you must first understand how they define and measure value. You won't be able to predict what your customers would think is a good value or not until you know their baseline of the perceived value of any given order or product.

Measuring value

Distributors of decorated apparel and promotional goods have admitted to me that they are unable to convince customers to pay for embroidered clothing. Therefore, they typically sell screen-print or heat-transfer orders instead.

The idea that people won't spend a lot of money on a high-quality product with fantastic, personalized embroidery on it is not one I accept. They pay retail prices all day long for apparel and products that are not customized or personalized. When an embroidery professional embellishes garments and products for a client, the customer gets exceptional value. So where is the disconnect?

No matter if you are the one offering value or expecting value, there is one key question: how, exactly, is value perceived and measured? After working with people who have bought and sold embroidered goods for more than 25 years, here is what I think value is: value is the difference between what someone expected to pay and what they were quoted, which would be the market price.





The way you present a sample product might affect the customer's perception of the value of that product more than you might expect.

When you quote a customer a price of \$55 for a moisture management golf shirt with a custom logo, and they are expecting to pay \$60-70, they feel as though they are receiving an exceptional value. When a consumer exclaims, “Oh, I thought it would cost more,” you know you have delivered a price that is rich in value.

On the flip side, you exceeded the value potential for a project if the price you gave is higher than the amount they intended to pay for that order. The customer will express this to you much more passionately than in the scenario described above. They say something along the lines of, “Oh, there’s no way I could spend that.” The consumer feels that this is not a good value in this instance.

You may need to put forth a lot of effort to win the order. You could propose an alternative product, giving the customer a less expensive option. Offering a *good, better, best* set of product options often demonstrates value and gives the customer the ability to stay within their expected budget. You could propose making the design smaller or suggest decorating fewer locations on the product, which are both excellent strategies to reduce the cost of the embroidery.

The way you present a sample product might affect the customer’s perception of the value of that product more than you might expect. A shirt that is shown on a nice hanger and is free of wrinkles, stains, and snags will be seen as having a far higher value than one that you take out of a duffel bag and smooth out on the desk to try and reduce the appearance of wrinkles.

Indicating that a product is a personal favorite and that you frequently wear it

yourself while displaying a sample creates a high expectation of value for that product. On the other hand, if you tell a customer, “This is the shirt that all the contractors use because they know they will be replacing it pretty often due to the nature of their work,” they will correctly assume that the shirt you are showing them is less expensive.

Professional value

The perceived value of anything can be influenced by the surroundings. At a Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse, a side of shoestring fries will cost you close to \$10. A side of fries costs \$1 when you order it from McDonald’s.

Nevertheless, both begin with the same basic ingredient... the lowly potato! One dish has a 10 times higher perceived value than the other. What a fantastic illustration of controlling value expectations! Who would have thought that some good napkins, soft lighting, and well-groomed waitstaff could have such a significant impact on the value? Well, Ruth’s Chris

leadership is aware of it, that’s for sure.

The customer’s expectations of what they are willing to spend may be impacted if you pitch your embroidered clothing in a less-than-ideal setting. If the client says they can meet you anywhere, pick a spot that will help you showcase your work’s worth accurately. Meeting someone in an office might be preferable to meeting them at the warehouse loading docks if you are discussing an order for dress shirts for the sales staff.

Your customers will have faith in the value they are receiving from you if they visit your place of business and see stacks of goods neatly folded on tables, machines in operation, and efficiently working employees.

Do you think they would feel the same sense of value if they enter your shop and disorder is the norm, clothing and products are piled on the floor, and the staff is hurrying around, seeming anxious or overwhelmed? Would you be willing to spend the same price at both shops if you were the customer?

Value fluctuates. It is influenced by factors over which we have full control. It is a sound business strategy to create expectations that are in line with the rates you want to charge for your embroidered garments and products.

Because we can affect our environment, how we present our products, and even the context in which we present our offers, we can influence the value others associate with our items. It could be time to take an honest look at how you are, perhaps even unwittingly, impacting your consumers’ expectations if you are not receiving fair prices for your embroidered garments and products. **GP**



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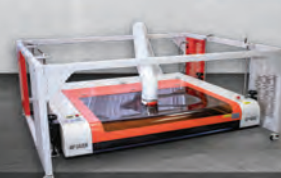
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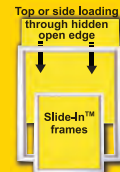
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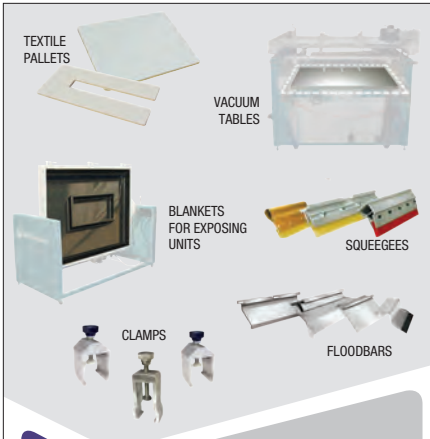
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EMBELLISHING GLASS

BY JOHN MORMAN

Having a consistent routine minimizes the chances for a mistake



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

One of the most fun aspects of working with your laser is glass and crystal embellishment. I use the term *embellishment* because you are not restricted to engraving only.

There are a host of items available in glass that your customers might choose from. Of course, the majority of items will involve barware. Glasses of all shapes and sizes, tumblers, mugs, decanters... if people can drink or pour from it, people want it personalized somehow.

And personalized gifts aren't the only thing you can do. Corporate and college awards, as well as recognition pieces, are all options for your customers. There are plenty of choices open to you in blankware. Have you ever thought of engraving a full wine bottle or a mirror? Both are possible. (The recipient of an embellished wine bottle also has the benefit of drinking the contents, then converting the empty bottle into a lamp or other kind of home décor item.)

Engraving embellishments

Of course, certain hardware is required if you intend to engrave a typical round

By engraving a reversed image into the silvered side of the mirror, I could produce a crisp image. (Images courtesy of John Morman)



A wine bottle can be engraved while still full, making a truly unique gift.

piece of glassware. Top manufacturers have rotary adapters designed for their machines, and these are essential for any cylindrical piece. Naturally, a straight-sided glass is the simplest to work with, so I'll start with that.

I can't speak for every machine, so I'm going to cite my own procedure, developed over 20 years using a laser engraver. I would imagine that other manufacturers employ similar procedures. First, set your *page size*. This is calculated by finding the circumference of the glass. Just as a gentle reminder, that's pi (3.142) x diameter. For a 3" diameter glass, then, the page size will be 9.426". Please remember that the machine can only accept pieces up to a certain diameter.

Adjust your page size accordingly. Go to the menu showing the vertical height and reset that to zero, then check that the page size has been adjusted. Now we'll get into what I have developed specifically for my machines. I'm not saying this is the only way to do it; just that it works for me. You may very well develop your own routine suiting your machine.

I stick to basically the same routine for glasses with and without handles, and regardless of the shape, even if all the steps may be unnecessary. I simply believe that a consistent routine minimizes the chances for a mistake.

With the lid of the machine open, I bring the head of the machine to the appropriate point on the Y axis, which will be the mid-point of the cones on the rotary adapter.

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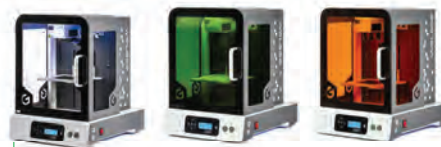
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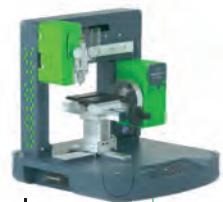


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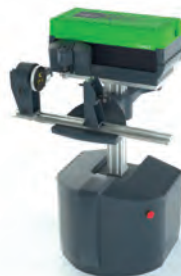
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Certain hardware is required if you intend to engrave a typical round piece of glassware. Top manufacturers have rotary adapters designed for their machines, and these are essential for any cylindrical piece.



Glasses of all shapes and sizes, tumblers, mugs, decanters ... if people can drink or pour from it, people want it personalized somehow.

Place the glass into the cones, making sure that it is centered, and secure it.

The arrangement of the cones will mean that the mouth of the glass will be at the *far end* of the machine. Now, bring the head to a point on the side of the glass and focus the head. Rehome the X and Y axes. Now you need to set your graphic.

My routine has me position the graphic at a height equal to $3/4$ of the page height. Position a guideline at this point and center the graphic at the guideline. Next, move the head so that the red dot aligns with the very edge of the mouth of the glass where it meets the cone. Set a vertical guideline at this point (let's say 21.5"). Position the top edge of the graphic at the guideline.

Tell the machine to print. You'll need to select the rotary option on the control panel and enter the diameter of the glass.

At this point, you are ready to start the machine. As a matter of course, though, I would recommend placing a thin, water-saturated piece of paper over the area where the graphic will be engraved

There are a host of items available in glass that your customers might choose from. Of course, the majority of items will involve barware.

(newspaper is ideal, though not necessary if you are using a glass-marking compound). This is essential on thin glass or crystal in order to help dissipate the heat from the beam and prevent the workpiece from cracking. It also helps reduce chipping.

At the same time, start the fan. Ensure the paper is saturated in order to prevent it from lifting off the glass and interfering with the beam.

Start the machine and engrave the piece. When finished, remove the piece and rub it down to *smooth* the graphic. I use very fine abrasive pads available at your local hardware store. Be careful not to use anything too harsh so that you don't scratch the rest of the piece.

If you are engraving both the front and back faces of the piece, the handle should be positioned vertically. If only engraving one face, set the handle parallel to the bed of the machine, either toward the front or back of the machine, depending on which side of the handle you are engraving. This is where setting your horizontal guideline at 3/4 of the page height becomes necessary. (Depending on which side of the piece your customer wants the graphic on relative to the handle, and the direction the rotary adaptor will turn, you may need to set the horizontal line at 25% of the page height instead.)

Tapered pieces don't need to be a challenge. The rotary adaptor can be adjusted so that the face of the glass is parallel to the bed of the machine. I don't do this, but I focus the beam to a point somewhere around the center of the graphic. Experience will tell you the best point to focus on — too far one way or the other can drastically affect the final result.

The most challenging pieces are what I term *waisted* pieces — items with a varying geometry (parallel or tapered). Experience is the best teacher for these pieces because the effective diameter affects page heights and focus points. Some examples might be certain decanter shapes that have a long, narrow neck that develops into a deep bowl shape.

With a wine bottle, the same basic directions still apply, although the shape

of the bottle and its overall size can alter the necessary settings. As mentioned earlier, the bottle can be engraved while still full, making a truly unique gift. Even if the bottle is full, I still recommend using wet paper as a mask. Of course, it'll be necessary to remove the label or labels.

Now to other types of glass blanks... A flat piece of glassware can be engraved in the same manner as any other flat piece of material, with the necessary adjustments appropriate for glass. In most cases, I will engrave on the back side of the piece, which entails creating a mirror image of the graphic. A curved piece of glass only requires the appropriate adjustments to the focus point relative to the curve of the piece.

Mirrors

In the early stages of my engraving business, and after years of watching bad science-fiction movies, I was convinced that hitting a mirror with a focused laser beam

would somehow reflect back into the machine and cause catastrophic damage. Irrational, I know.

After some thought, I realized that by engraving a reversed

image into the silvered side of the mirror, I could produce a crisp image. Again, I highly recommend using the wet paper mask. The mirror can be set into a frame if the customer wishes; an adhesive backing piece can be attached to the back of the mirror, or a hanger can be attached.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, glass can be embellished using other procedures. There are spray-on compounds similar to those used to embellish metal but formulated for glass or ceramics. The application is the same, but the engraver settings will be slightly different. Currently, these compounds are available in black, blue, and bronze.

Again, these procedures are just what I have developed for use on my machines. I don't mean to say that these are absolutes. Your own experience will be your best guide. GP

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BY SHELLEY WIDHALM

George Riffel adds community service to printing business acumen



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



George Riffel

George Riffel of Evergreen, Colorado, intended to purchase only one business according to his wife, Jacklyn, but he now owns and operates seven.

Riffel is the president of each of the businesses, all in the Denver metro area, and Jacklyn is the CFO.

Together, the businesses are a full-scope B2B provider of marketing materials, graphic design, corporate awards, and print and apparel manufacturing. About 90% of what the businesses manufacture are promotional and print products, apparel, and corporate awards for the construction industry and provide fulfillment services for those products.

"COVID and differences in culture cost me my corporate job in the printing industry. I thought I would retire, but that became very difficult," Riffel says. "(Jacklyn) teases me about it a lot, because she knows I can't sit still."

Riffel started the businesses three years ago, all under the umbrella of Riffel Inc.

The businesses include three franchise locations of AlphaGraphics, which provide an array of technology platforms to his franchises, including invoicing, estimating, fulfillment, and general business counsel.

"They manage all the technology for the brand," Riffel says, adding that he doesn't have to write his own code or manage multiple technologies.

Riffel's other businesses are Print Connection, Wet Ink, Seven Pines Print & Promotional Products Inc., and ABC Reprographics Inc.

"Our specialty is marketing. We want to promote your business. You come to us, and we create a brand and all the channels of marketing that touch your business," Riffel says. "We're end-to-end, full scope. We have the broadest scope of products and services in our industry."

Riffel focuses on technology solutions that help his customers maximize their brand exposure, control spend, and avoid the distributor middlemen. His products and services serve as an extension of their marketing department, he says.

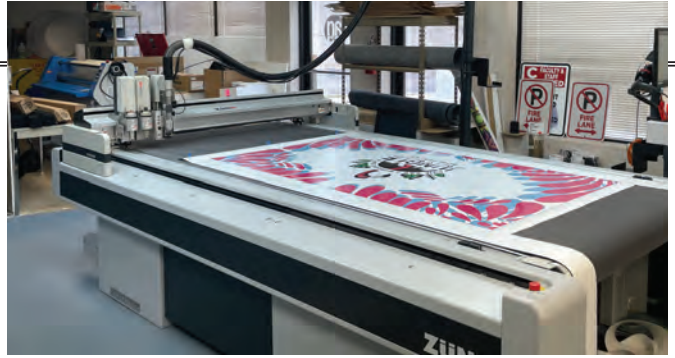
"I help small companies get business and get noticed," Riffel says.

One of Riffel's companies, Print Connection, provides various print services, such as books, labels, and vinyl graphics, as well as digital printing. Wet Ink also offers digital printing in the areas of large-format signage, yard signs, wall vinyl, car wraps, car magnets, labels, promotional products, corporate awards, T-shirts and other apparel, and embroidery. Other services include digital small-format printing of perfect-bound books, training manuals, booklets,





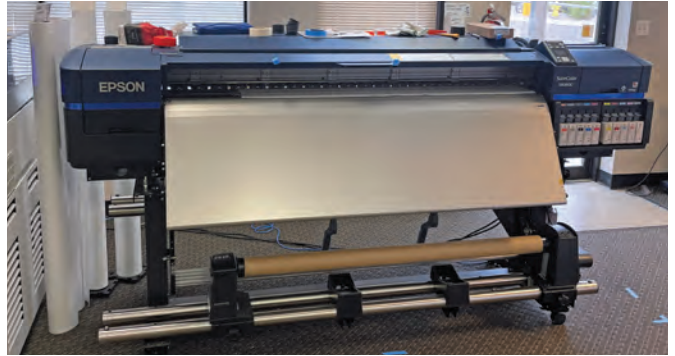
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"Our Xerox Iridesse family of color printers. Prints at 2400 DPI for exceptional quality."



"Our Epson SureColor S80600 vinyl printer ensures high quality and prints white."

brochures, and envelopes. There also is foil printing and laminating services.

Seven Pines Print & Promotional Products offers the same line of signage and print services as Wet Ink, minus foil printing. ABC Reprographics is a copy shop that provides corporate awards, engraving, copying, duplicating services, and blueprinting of training manuals, books, and signs.

"They're all intertwined into one. Our motto is 'We are one,'" Riffel says. "Not every business provides the same services and products. ... There are things missing from one business to another, where products and services are missing, and one of the other businesses provides it to them."

For instance, if Print Connection needs to print corporate awards for a customer, it can work with Wet Ink and ABC Reprographics, Riffel says. All of the companies are connected by its company delivery vehicles, he says.

Riffel worked in the print industry in the area of sales for 35 years, starting out as a senior account executive, then becoming director of business development for a print distributor company in New York City, where he worked for 28 years. He then became director of business

development for another print distributor in San Diego before purchasing his businesses in Colorado.

"I doubled my sales in a period of three years across all my business units," Riffel says. "I pretty much maintained the same number of employees, which is pretty impressive."

Riffel has 24 employees who work in the areas of graphic design, large format sign production, project management, account management, customer service, and delivery. His team serves more than 68,000 customers through the various businesses.

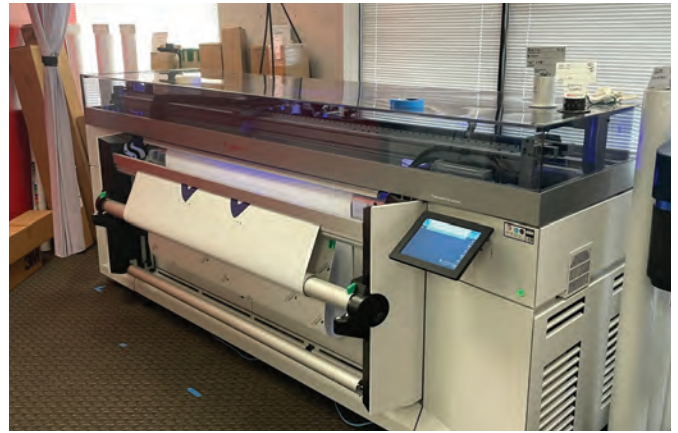
"We go to market as a team of associates, vendors, and customers that trust each other," Riffel says.

Riffel leads the associates on his team by challenging them to step outside of their comfort zone to take risks, allowing for them to make mistakes so that they can grow and have eventual success, he says. He put in place a quality control buddy system that catches 95% of errors before products leave the factory, he says.

"There is no penalty in my company for making a mistake. Nobody gets reprimanded or a harsh voice," Riffel says. "When you work in corporate America, you're told what to do and the metrics you



"Our Graphtec vinyl label cutter will cut any shape and size."



"Our Canon M5 large-format printer prints spot UV."



"Our big red large-format rigid printer."



"Our HP large-format engineering plans printer. High quality at a low impression cost."

have to meet. Here, we expect employees to know their roles and responsibilities and encourage them to bring forth innovative ideas."

Riffel wants his employees to use their creativity to come up with a solution when they don't exactly know what to do in a situation, he says. This results in employees taking pride in the work they do and being happy at work, he says.

"I'm very different that way," Riffel says. "Even though I'm the president of the company, anybody can talk to me at any time. ... If you have happy employees, you have happy customers."

Riffel is proud of his employees and his team and of the working environment that's been created, he says.

"Products are products. You can make something new every single day," Riffel says. "We're proud of the products. We're more proud of the working environment we have, the trust we have with our vendors, associates, and customers."

Every day, Riffel wakes up and does the best he can for his family, community, businesses, and employees, he says. He originally bought the businesses because

he needed to find a purpose in his community, he says.

"This job or business has brought me closer to the community in a lot of ways," Riffel says.

Riffel supports his community by making donations, providing sponsorships, and volunteering at local nonprofits, such as sponsoring the Foothills Animal Shelter in Golden. He also purchases building supplies for the Homebuilders Foundation in Englewood, and he and his staff, in turn, volunteer to build handicap-accessible ramps for the nonprofit's applicants.

"I believe in supporting small business and supporting the community that we're in," Riffel says. "It's part of your responsibility and purpose to help those who are less fortunate and in need."

Riffel supports the local Chambers of Commerce for Evergreen, Arvada, Golden, and Aurora. He provides free printing for Taste of Arvada at the Apex Center, the Miners Alley Playhouse in Golden, and the Colorado School of Mines Athletics department. And he donates to the annual summer gala for Mother Cabrini Shrine in Golden.

Riffel also sponsors the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, providing print and print-related services and marketing for the annual spring gala and programs for the plays, plus other printing as needed, most of it donated.

"The arts are really important to us, because it's part of the community," Riffel says. "The depth of things to do at the art center is just amazing."

The community is the lifeblood of Riffel's businesses, and "we are one with it," Riffel says. "It is something we do by being part of the community." GP

NEW PRODUCTS

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

OPAQUE FILM

General Formulations

offers the GF 209AE MetroMark, a conformable opaque film meant for short-term transit advertising. It has the MetroMark adhesive and an air egress liner, and it can be placed over existing designs and decals according to the company. The company also says it can be printed across eco-solvent, resin, and UV print systems.



800-253-3664

generalformulations.com

VINYL CUTTER MACHINES

GCC America Inc. introduces the Jaguar V 163 and 163LX vinyl cutters, which have a 64" cutting width. The products also come with an optional roll-to-roll system which can be used for car restyling, PPF, window tint, and signage applications.



909-718-0248

gccworld.com

LASER SOFTWARE

Trotec Laser Inc. announces the Ruby 2.6 laser software update, which features new rotary positioning, new shapes for designs, and smart selection that makes overlapping elements visible. The company also says there is a simpler materials



window, default settings for design margins, and improved usability to the design grid and arrays.

866-226-8505 • troteclaser.com

WORKFLOW SOFTWARE

Onyx Graphics Inc. announces the availability of ONYX 225, the company's newest version of its wide-format RUP and print workflow software. The new version introduces ONYX Archive for backups, search, restoration, and management of print jobs, which is connected to the main ONYX user interface as a standard feature for the entire portfolio of ONYX. Other features include XY Trimmer updates and Adobe PDF Print Engine 6.1.



800-828-0723 • onyxgfx.com

HOODED PULLOVER

Independent Trading Co. offers the AFX90UN lightweight fitted hooded pullover in two new patterns, forest camo and black camo. The product is made of 6.5-oz prelaundered 80/20 cotton/polyester blend fleece with 100% cotton, 40-singles face yarn. It has a slim fit, and the hood is unlined with nickel eyelets and a plastic-tipped, round white drawcord.



877-366-9911 • independenttradingco.com

RETAIL MERCHANDISING SYSTEM

Orbus Visual Communications offers the MODify Retail Merchandising System, a retail display that incorporates SEG push-fit fabric graphics. The company says it allows for easy modification with graphics, accessories, and furniture. Kits include single-sided, double-sided, gondola, and four-sided options, as well as a range of accessories including shelves, hooks, hang bars, waterfalls, base decks, casters, and monitor mounts.



630-226-1155 • orbus.com

NAME BADGES

NameBadges

International offers the Prestige Name Badges, which measure 2 15/16" long and come in heights including 1/4", 1", 1 3/16", and 1 3/8". The company



says there is a wide range of background colors and fonts and that a full-color custom printing of artwork and logos is included. The fastener can be either a pin or magnetic-back.

800-766-0448 • namebadgesinternational.us

BEANIE

Kati Sportcap & Bag offers the 143r Richardson Chunk Beanie. It is a 13" slouch knit with a chunky knit pattern and a pom-pom top, made of 100% acrylic. The product is available in nine colors.



800-392-5559

katisportcap.com

KNOW YOUR Retirement Options

BY PAUL INGLE

*As an entrepreneur, you plan each day.
What's your plan when you sell?*



Paul Ingle started selling signs in 1985 and has worked with regional, national, and international accounts with custom, architectural and production manufacturing firms. He has held various positions in sales, sales management, and marketing since 1973. From 2006 to 2017, he and his wife Nita owned Design Center Signs in Tyler, Texas (A Comet Signs Company.) Comet Signs is now part of Stratus, the leading facilities and branding implementation firm. Paul is a past president of the Texas Sign Association and its regional chapter the Greater DFW Sign Association. Contact him at paul.ingle@cometsigns.com.

You probably love what you do. Most of us in this industry are dysfunctional enough to still get a kick out of winning jobs, nurturing great employees, creating lasting relationships, and making our competition squirm. If we live long enough, we see good and bad economic times, years of big profits, breakeven, and alas, losses.

Your legacy

There is something inherently attractive about branding that impacts our psyche; it can provide an allure of seeing our work live on in the public eye. Whether you call it a legacy or short-term immortality, having your creative juices coalesce into a building sign, vehicle wrap, or interstate electronic message display is meaningful.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, the psyche is the part of us that is the most influential in effecting behavioral change and improving self-esteem. When you envision and execute a great design that works, it is very satisfying. That means it feels good.

Another legacy you can leave is the enterprise you have spent years perfecting. You might be lucky and have a child that wants to dance in your shoes when you are finally done working those long and sometimes lonely hours.

I'm not a big fan of just gifting a hard-earned business over to your offspring. They need skin in the game so have them buy it if they have a dream like you did. You either had to create this endeavor originally or buy it yourself. There is no free lunch, even if you are mom or dad. Sorry, I am from the Baby Boomer generation.

Retirement planning

You probably have not spent a long-time planning for retirement and assumed that when you sell the company, that's your retirement plan. This is common for us over-achieving, tunnel-visioned, persistent entrepreneurs with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

While we can multi-task when required, we are best at time-sensitive project management to its conclusion. That often leads us to let slip the important aspects of our

personal life — and finances, especially planning for retirement.

As I've mentioned in previous articles, you should always make any large financial decision, whether capital equipment investment, expansion, or hiring with its impact on the day you sell your business. That gives you a different strategy and way of looking at decisions. In fact, it will sometimes lead to forgoing a decision when you weigh the alternatives. When you are focused on the outcome (selling the business) your brain considers alternatives in a new light.

Get legal advice

Consider hiring a business attorney before you sell. A legal professional can perform due diligence, oversee disputes, negotiate on your behalf, provide clarity and confidence in the myriad of contracts and agreements, and minimize the chances of a legal dispute.

You will need a valuation of your company's assets to determine your selling price or range. What you think the business is worth is not always what the numbers prove. Assets, revenue, and profitability all play a part in an accurate valuation.

Finding a buyer

Finding a buyer has many routes. Your vendors can often help you locate a firm that is interested in acquisitions. The business attorney you hire may have a path to help you sell or advertise. There are broker firms that specialize in buying/selling businesses for a fee.

Congratulations if you can achieve an asset sale of your company for millions of dollars and have no debt at closing. You may only need a great financial consultant to help you keep from having inflation and/or taxes erode your big chunk of money so your funds last the rest of your life.

Transition steps

You may have a payout plan as part of your closing that lasts a year or longer which may help with income taxes (and they will be heartbreaking.) You may even be asked to stay on and work for the

*Time does seem to move a lot quicker as you get older,
so make the most of every second now.*

new entity for a minimum term with an Employment Contract to help the transition and ease you into the next phase of your life (depending on your age.)

Most definitely, you and the new owner will execute a Non-Compete Contract that is negotiated for its term, stipulations, and geographical conditions. I would urge you, however, to start right now thinking about this future event.

Prepare for the end

Make sure you have a current will. Again, invest in an attorney; this is not the time to download a will template from willsrus.com. Your estate and the sale of a business are complex matters that can have a big impact on you, your heirs, and those who seek your money (like the state and federal government). Out of the woodwork will also come other relatives you may not remember or recognize.

Retirement plan for the self-employed

What is the best retirement plan for the self-employed? It depends on how many people are in your organization.

- A Roth IRA can be ideal if you have or do not have people working for you. The Roth IRA has limits on income generated and certain caps for wealthy individuals.
- Solo 401(k): For individuals, especially business owners with no employees.
- Simplified Employee Pension (SEP) IRA: Great for entrepreneurs with employees.
- Savings Incentive Match Plan for Employees (SIMPLE) IRA: Also great for owners with employees.
- Individual 401(k): Very common and excellent for entrepreneurs with employees

Get help from a financial advisor

Choosing the right plan that works best for your situation requires thoughtful planning and collaboration with a qualified financial advisor. Consider a fiduciary planner; they only act in your best interest. Many do not earn commissions, so you will get objective advice.

When should you begin your Social

Security benefits? While you can start at age 62, your monthly benefit rises 8% for each year you wait, until age 70, when increases stop. There are many factors to consider: your need for income, your other sources of income, and even your health. Your retirement planner can help you run the numbers and compare scenarios to decide whether earlier or later is right for your situation.

Health care is one of the biggest expenses most people will face in retirement. A 65-year-old couple today will spend an average of \$315,000 on health care, according to a new estimate by Fidelity Investments. That's scary. So, you need your financial professional to help you budget for health care needs as part of your retirement plan.

Speaking of scary, a 2021 study* concluded that running out of money in retirement scares most people more than dying. The concern is real, as longer lifespans can mean a retirement that lasts 30 years or more. Your lifestyle, when and where you want to retire all play a role and make your financial planner even more critical to working through these questions.

Dream for the future

If you are like most people, you want to have enough money to live comfortably through retirement, but also leave something behind for the people you love and the causes you care about. This is all part of estate and legacy planning and your will, durable Power of Attorney, living will, and living trust are aspects of strategy.

I want my surviving spouse to be cared for, but my overwhelming wish is to die *broke*. Again, I'm a Baby Boomer, and there were no inheritances available from relatives that have preceded me. As an entrepreneur, I missed a lot of family time, took short vacations, and did not make extravagant purchases. I will look forward to more time with kids and grandkids, golf, working out, bucket list travel, home projects, writing and being spontaneous!

Investing

When you are retired, should you still invest your money? It makes sense to reduce your stock market exposure as you move into retirement, but you should still have a diversified portfolio. As a successful entrepreneur, being diversified was part of your strategic planning. Therefore, it is still important to maintain a wide range of investments as the economy and markets rise and fall.

While your risk tolerance may have changed, do not let inflation rob you of the dollars you have accumulated. There is still time to grow your savings as you age. If leaving a legacy to your family or your church, or some institution motivates you, plan for it.

Start planning

If you are not quite ready to sell your business and/or retire, start your retirement plan as soon as possible. The older you get, the faster time seems to increase exponentially. *Clock time* does not really change, but *mind time* and how we perceive time as we age makes time fly by.

The processing power of your brain as you age slows. We are unable to process as many mental images per second as we could when we were children. Think of it as timelapse photography. The more photos that are captured per second (mental images we can process per second), the slower it seems time is moving. However, take fewer photographs per second (processing fewer mental images per second), and it will give the illusion that time is moving quicker. Simple, right?

Time does seem to move a lot quicker as you get older, so make the most of every second now.

Create a plan. Hire subject matter experts to help you with retirement and selling your business. Work on the plan, evaluate, and change as needed. Are these not the same things you do every day now? Do them now and live your later years as you deserve and are entitled to with good health and prosperity. **GP**

*Reclaiming the Future white paper referenced in the article What Happens if I Really Do Run Out of Money in Retirement? Retrieved and updated on July 19, 2022, from newretirement.com and allianzlife.com.

Excuse Me, Comfort Zone

Expanding your comfort zone is not about making huge leaps



Aaron Montgomery is certified by New York Times best-selling author Jack Canfield as a Success Principles Trainer and has nearly 30 years of experience providing essential support to small businesses. Those small businesses get the support needed to create a business they love, not just another job that steals all of their time. Montgomery's company, Our Success Group, assists with setting and reaching goals, creating a solid business plan, knowing your numbers for a better pricing strategy, and establishing a customer-focused approach while devising a targeted marketing strategy.

He is the author of the business foundation book *The FUNDamentals of Business Success*. He is the co-founder of a facilitated 6-month Mastermind collective called Radical Goal-Getters which fuels participants to achieve their No. 1 goals through accountability, support, and inspiration. You can also find him hosting a weekly show called Small Business Saturdays and co-hosting the 2 Regular Guys Podcast, which has over 500 episodes.

Excuse me, comfort zone, I need to get through because I know success is just beyond here.” Wouldn't it be nice if we could just tell our comfort zone to step aside and open up a world of new skills, new solutions, new goals, and limitless potential in our business?

We all have that space we retreat to that is our comfort zone. It is the autopilot of just doing the same things day in and day out, yet somehow, we tell ourselves that we should expect a different result because we “tried harder today.” I hope that, if you are reading this, you have read some of my other articles and know I strongly believe that having the right mindset is a key ingredient for a successful business. I also hope we can all agree that, if we want to have success in our business, our personal lives, or anywhere, we have to step outside of our comfort zone.

Those of us that have a partner, or a significant other, had to get outside of our comfort zone for that to happen. Starting your business required you to get outside of your comfort zone. For some, that meant making an uncomfortable investment, and for others it might have meant forgoing a steady paycheck that came every two weeks no matter how much we hated the job.

Any success you have had required you to do something you didn't previously know how to do, and that is uncomfortable. To be able to walk, we had to get outside of our comfort zone. I could go on and on here.

Baby steps

What I have seen is that most people (past me included) don't know how to get out of their comfort zone. We think we have to just rip the band-aid off, jump across this wide chasm, or face the scary, *massive fear* head-on.

But look back on your successes, and I challenge you to find a time where you went from zero ability to mastery in one big leap. When you learned to walk, you didn't just pop up from crawling and head outside to go for a run. When you met your significant other, you didn't walk up to them and ask for their hand in marriage. Expanding your comfort zone does *not* require nerves of steel or the ability to just do something that terrifies you.

The key is to take small, intentional steps pushing up against your comfort zone. It could be the discomfort of asking a question when you are not sure and overcoming the fear of looking stupid. It could be using new technology and trying things without thinking, “I don't know what I'm doing.”

It's testing; it's being playful; it's being willing to fail that allows for our comfort zone to expand. Let's talk about the process of expanding our comfort zone to allow us to reach the idea of success we have set for ourselves and our business.

Before we do that, let me clarify. The comfort zone is not a bad thing. We need it to rest and recharge. We need that comfort zone to give us a place to retreat to when things get a little too scary. We are trying to expand your comfort zone here, not obliterate it.

The challenge with our comfort zone is that most of us stay there way too long and hide. We decide our story is our story and it can't be changed, and our comfort zone is fixed. We don't have the



LOOK BACK ON YOUR SUCCESSES, AND I CHALLENGE YOU TO FIND A TIME WHERE YOU WENT FROM ZERO ABILITY TO MASTERY IN ONE BIG LEAP.

power to move it, so we default to complaining, blaming, making excuses, and commiserating. If you are not willing to make a different choice and change your story, no one else will do it for you, and the rest of this article will not help you.

But if you are ready to change your story and you feel like there is more for you, then let's figure out how we can trigger an expansion of your comfort zone. It is that feeling of realizing there is more for you that is crucial to recognize. That should trigger some movement through several levels, pushing beyond your current comfort zone. In fact, I tell people it should trigger “getting comfortable being slightly uncomfortable.”

Into the right zone

We have already discussed in detail the comfort zone. What we don't realize is that what keeps us there is the fear zone. The fear zone is the barrier that we create with our stories. “I'm not smart enough, I'm not good enough, I have not been given the same opportunities, my parents did this, my relationships made me this way, etc.”

It is all the stories we create to hold ourselves back so we don't risk getting outside of our comfort zone for fear of getting hurt, physically or emotionally. Fear creates all of the stories holding us back and

when we are pushed to deal with that fear, even in the smallest actions, those stories of fear surface and turn into excuses. It is important to remember that these are just stories we tell our-

selves, and they can be rewritten.

It is crucial to push past the fear zone. There are several techniques we can use to do this, but one of my favorites is to just act as if. When the fear shows up, just thank it for its concern, then change the story to act *as if*. “What if I *were* smart enough, good enough, had been given the same opportunities, got the support from my parents, or was in a supportive relationship? How would I act then?”

Next, take that action and see how it feels. Now you are in the learning zone. Getting to the learning zone is the leap we need to make. We need to blow through fear and start learning. This is why we don't need to make huge leaps. Small, intentional steps can lead to significant growth. It's about embracing the discomfort of not knowing and using it as a catalyst for learning and growth.

The great news is that the learning zone catapults us into the growth zone as long as we are willing to fail, but actually reframe failure as a learning opportunity. The growth zone is where our purpose is waiting for us, and in this zone the actions you take make time seem like it is standing still. You could do it all day because you are stacking success upon success.

If you have clarity on your reason, clear goals, and a review cycle mindset, it will feel like your comfort zone doesn't even

exist. Everything feels safe, and you are willing to try things, be comfortable as a business owner, and seem like the guru that you truly are deep down. This is where we can truly start to see the fruits of our labor.

Let's just recap: the comfort zone is a place of rest and recharge, though it can also become a place of stagnation if we stay there too long and don't also recognize it as a jumping off point. It's essential to recognize when we're getting too comfortable and to challenge ourselves to step outside of this zone.

The fear zone is a barrier that we create with our stories. It's filled with self-doubt and excuses. But these are just stories, and they can be rewritten. By recognizing and challenging these fears, we can start to move toward the learning zone.

The learning zone is where growth happens. It's a place of discomfort, but it's also a place of exploration and discovery. It's where we learn new skills, try new things, and start to see the possibilities that lie outside of our comfort zone.

Finally, the growth zone is where we find our purpose and start to see the fruits of our labor. It's a place of achievement, fulfillment, and success.

Expanding your comfort zone is not about making huge leaps or facing fears head-on. It's about taking small, intentional steps. It's about embracing discomfort as a part of the learning process and using it as a catalyst for growth. It's about rewriting the stories we tell ourselves and moving toward our true potential. So, step outside your comfort zone, embrace the discomfort, and witness the remarkable expansion of your business. **GP**

THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS IS

DIGITAL

Moving your company forward through online sales

BY STEFANIE GALEANO-ZALUTKO



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.

With technological advancements and client expectations soaring to new heights, shop owners are continuously challenged to evolve their traditional brick-and-mortar businesses into modern omnichannel experiences. Doing so provides both current and prospective customers with a unified and seamless brand experience, whether they are conducting business at a physical location, perusing a company's social channels, or shopping in a dedicated webstore.

While the initial shift in sales, marketing, and customer support strategy predates 2020, industry professionals agree Covid undeniably flipped the script at an unprecedented rate.

"A company's website alone quadrupled in magnitude of importance — and not just to sell," states Andy Evans, corporate account manager at research, marketing and business solutions company SAGE.

"It also became a way to communicate you were still in business, still operating — even though teams were spread out."

As a result, the pandemic not only radically accelerated e-commerce sales and normalized remote work, but also increased business automation and fast-tracked artificial intelligence development — presenting numerous opportunities for businesses to scale up production and sales, even with less staff onsite.

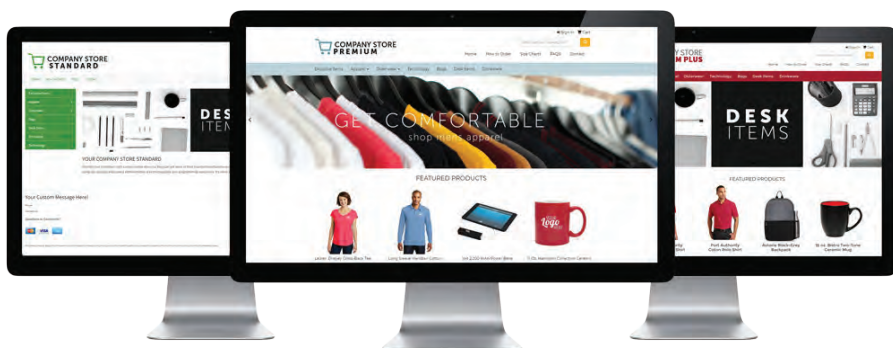
The future is ripe with opportunity, yet shop personnel feel mounting pressure to do more with less amid ongoing supply chain fluctuation, inflationary pressure and labor constraints in a post-Covid world, says Jay Malanga, owner of ShopWorks, a business management software solution specially geared toward the embellished products industry.

In order to *survive* current conditions and *thrive* in a digital future, industry professionals agree it is increasingly important for shop owners to step up their investments in digital tools. As entrepreneurs across the graphics and promotional products industry seek more informed ways to serve existing clientele plus look to geographically expand into emerging markets with new brands and product lines, they are turning to proven business management and e-commerce solutions to help chart the course and maximize their efforts.

“With the right tools, technology has the power to revolutionize businesses in the sign and print industry by enhancing efficiency, creativity, and sustainability,” says Lila Carsten, head of branding at shopVOX — a comprehensive cloud-based business management software designed specifically for the print, sign and apparel industries.

Experts say those who fail to keep pace with technology risk being left behind — perhaps entirely. Companies like SAGE, Inktavo, shopVOX, Webstores Simple and ShopWorks are at the forefront of comprehensive software solutions, featuring a finely-tuned suite of products specially designed to handle industry-wide daily operations, from e-commerce and webstores to backend business management and data analytics.

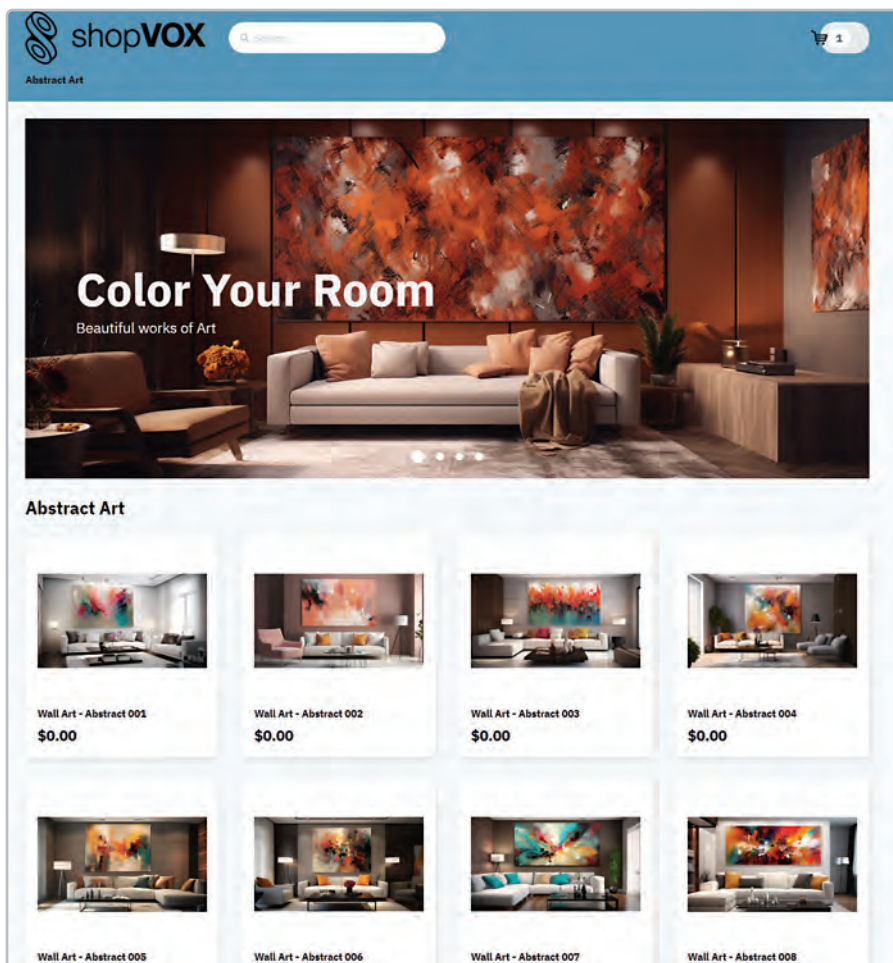
From product research, project management, and a virtual design studio to payment processing, order management, and more, Evans highlights SAGE Total Access as the “a total package” experience for business owners in the promotional products industry. (Images courtesy of Sage.)



Qty		Product	Price	Total		
1		Jersey Knit Sport Shirt [054X] Size: M Color: Orange Enter Name for Back of Shirt : Savage Enter Number for Right Arm : 88	\$28.00	\$28.00	Total (before tax and shipping) \$142.00	
1		Flexfit Wool Blend Cap [C928] Size: L/XL Add Number : 88 Add American Flag : Yes*	\$21.00	\$21.00	Shipping Total \$10.00	
1		Mesh Reversible Tank [T560] Size: S Color: True Navy Select Logo : Cheetah Text Only Logo Uniform Number for Back : 88 Enter Name for Back of Shirt : Savage	\$46.00	\$46.00	Tax Total \$12.00	
1		Fan Favorite Tee [PC450] Size: M Color: Orange Lacrosse : Yes	\$22.00	\$22.00	Grand Total \$164.00	
1		Orange Polar Camel Insulated Beverage Holder [LBH32] Color: Orange	\$25.00	\$25.00	Payments:	
					Payment Method	PO
					Purchase Order Number	11
					PO Amount	\$164.00

Order Information		Shipping Information	
Order ID	444409	Shipping Address	Test Test Last 123 Main St. Wall, NJ 08736 US
Store Name	Cheetah Team Store	Shipping Method	Ground Shipment
Date Purchased	07/26/2023	Other Information	
Customer Information		Select Fundraiser	John Smith
Phone	(732)782-9100	Enter Athletes Name	Tom Savage
Username	guest	Select Coach	Coach Diane
Email Address	gsavage@webstoresimple.com	Billing Address	
Billing Address	Test Test Last 123 Main St. Wall, NJ 08736 US		

Sample invoice report. (Image courtesy of Webstores Simple)



(Image courtesy of ShopVOX)

Power to the people: seamless self-service

While the graphics and promotional products industry values tried-and-true sales methods such as in-person visits, trade shows, and direct mail, company representatives note the exponential impact e-commerce is having on how customers interact with the companies they buy from.

“Selling organizations must ask themselves what their business customers want today, what pain points they encounter as they seek to buy online and what processes should be modified to serve customers more effectively,” according to a joint survey published by Adobe Inc. and Digital Commerce 360.

The umbrella term e-commerce describes the entire process of buying and selling goods and services via the Internet. This method allows businesses to reach new customers and facilitate transactions through a combination of proven online

channels like websites, social media, mobile applications, and email.

Generally speaking: a traditional e-commerce strategy, coupled with effective digital marketing tactics, allow branded merchandise businesses to attract and capture a *broad audience*, according to JP Hunt, head of partnerships at Inktavo — parent company of InkSoft, Printavo and GraphicsFlow.

“The other contemplation is digital marketing strategies and tactics can capture prospective customers, while e-commerce can *convert* these prospects into customers,” he continues.

Hunt considers the joint investment to be “the most significant growth lever” for today’s branded merchandise business owners. “Technology has leveled the playing field and is accessible to businesses large and small,” he says. “Competing with the same tools helps bridge the gap.”

Case in point: 74% of Adobe Inc./Digital Commerce 360 survey respondents expect

their company websites to generate more than 50% of sales in 2023. As such, 59% of business owners list e-commerce platform and applications among their top three technology budget priorities this year.

Company representatives agree the reality is most modern consumers, whether B2C or B2B, expect to purchase online and on-demand.

When it comes to branded merchandise, Hunt says a main motivator for purchasing online is self-service. Traditional e-commerce platforms like customink.com, vistaprint.com, jakprints.com, and 4imprint.com make it easy for customers to be involved in both the branding design and product selection processes. The platforms’ digital tools support various use cases, including logo uploads and customizable templates, as well as intuitive design software for new creations.

Hunt says independent shops can offer the same feature set to their own clients. He points to InkSoft, which offers an interactive online design tool that allows customers to design and order customized print, apparel, and promotional products at their convenience, then process directly through a shop’s website.

To further streamline production, shops can add GraphicsFlow, a print tool with an extensive library of vector-based, professionally-designed graphics. The catalog can be embedded right on the business’s website, allowing customers to easily peruse designs, communicate requests and finalize artwork approval all in one location.

No website? No problem, Hunt adds. InkSoft designed its online store builder as an economical way for shop owners to create a professional e-commerce-friendly website on a budget.

Similarly, Carsten points to the shopVOX Express and PRO platforms as effective ways to boost B2B and B2C sales opportunities. The e-commerce feature includes three different selling tools, including a customer portal (cPortal), an online shopping cart and webstore functionality. With the e-commerce add-on



This is an example of a custom webstore included in the eCommerce package from shopVOX. Shops can enable as many webstores as they like and can customize each webstore with their own branded colors, logo, banner images, and descriptions. Also, shops can curate a list of webstore products with their own custom pricing. (Image courtesy of ShopVOX)

package, customers can browse product catalogs, view pricing and place orders at their convenience, while integration ensures orders flow seamlessly into shopVOX and its production processes — reducing errors and saving time.

While e-commerce construction can vary based on customer needs, the overall process today is much more democratic. Modern platforms like shopVOX, Inktavo, and SAGE prioritize no hassles, no angst, and no coding. They also bolster their ease-of-use with impressive levels of performance, as well as ample onboarding support, training and customer service.

Additionally, since these companies develop their software in-house, customers benefit from all-inclusive e-commerce setups, with company servers specially equipped to host, maintain and update the sites on an ongoing basis.

Structural limitations on shops looking to expand their e-commerce selection

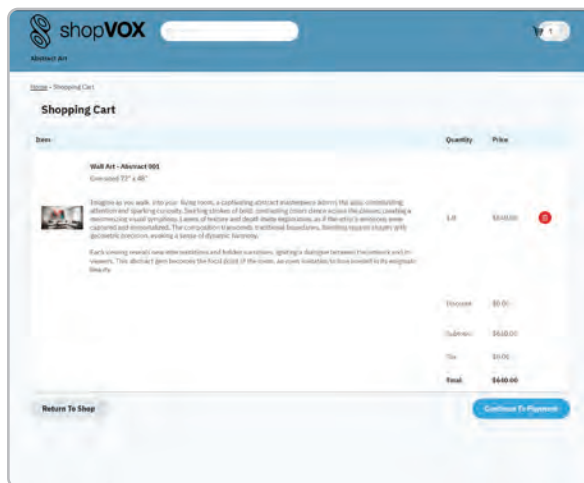
past promotional products are also lifting. SAGE, for example, provides its customer base with a flexible presentation publisher tool, which enables users to easily add promotional *and* cross-industry products at the click of a button.

“Say your main business is printing, and all you need is 5% promotional,” Evans says. “A SAGE website will support your primary print shop needs, plus offer your customers a promotional products search.”

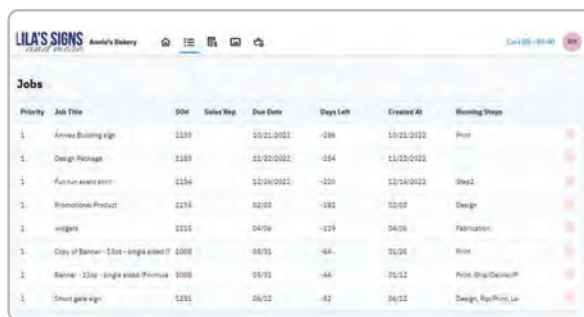
Tailored webstore solutions, enhanced B2B experiences, curated client shopping

Industry experts also note the significant rise in B2B e-commerce during recent years, with Forrester Research projecting annual growth of 10.7% between 2022-2027, versus 0.5% for offline B2B sales.

Selling online to business buyers presents additional layers of complexity. For example, products typically must meet



Once a customer selects a product from the Shopping Cart, they will see a price breakdown of their order before they enter payment details. Here they can also read a description of the product and flip through multiple images. (Image courtesy of ShopVOX)

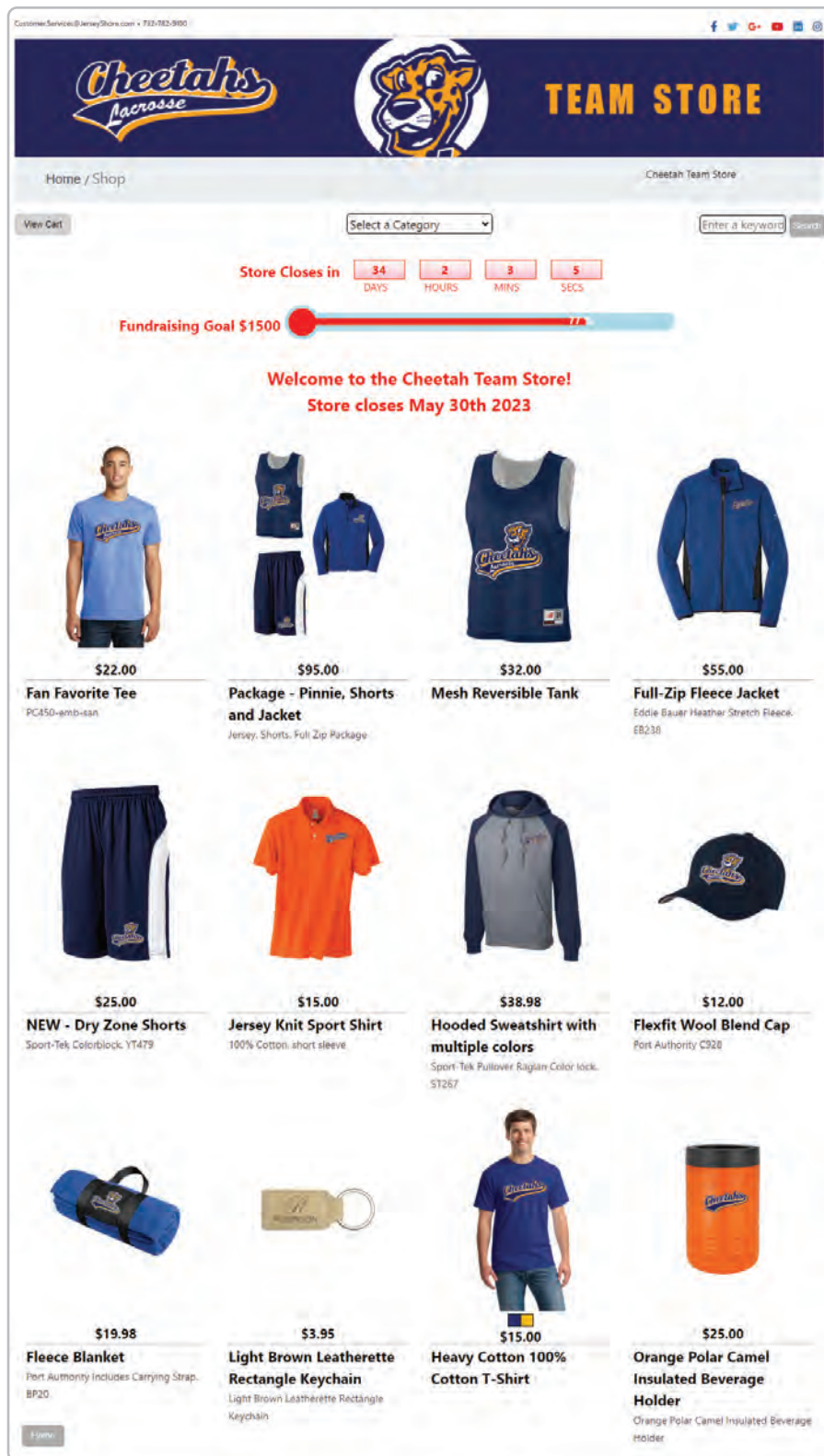


This is an example of the job board customer view inside a cPortal. Here, the customer can view the status of their production orders and see the progress as jobs move through the workflow stages. This eliminates the need for clients to call inquiring about the order status. (Image courtesy of ShopVOX)

strict specifications, large transactions may require credit arrangements, approvals often involve many individuals at the purchasing company, plus multifaceted shipping and freight arrangements complicate logistics. Completing these B2B transactions online requires sophisticated digital tools capable of replacing outdated manual processes.

As such, manufacturers, distributors, and shop owners alike are doubling down on their investments in online retail channels like niche webstores, which facilitate the purchasing process directly through a company’s website. Like traditional e-commerce, webstores provide their captured audiences with product categorization, search functionality, and self-service tools such as secure payment processing and on-demand convenience.

What differentiates the two, Hunt says, is the user transaction and the desired experience.



Sample fundraising store. (Image courtesy of Webstores Simple)

“The general rule of thumb when deciding how to best transact pre-decorated products is to look at the total revenue opportunity,” he says. “If the opportunity is large and the marketing resources have a greater demand, a dedicated webstore is likely to be the best course of action.”

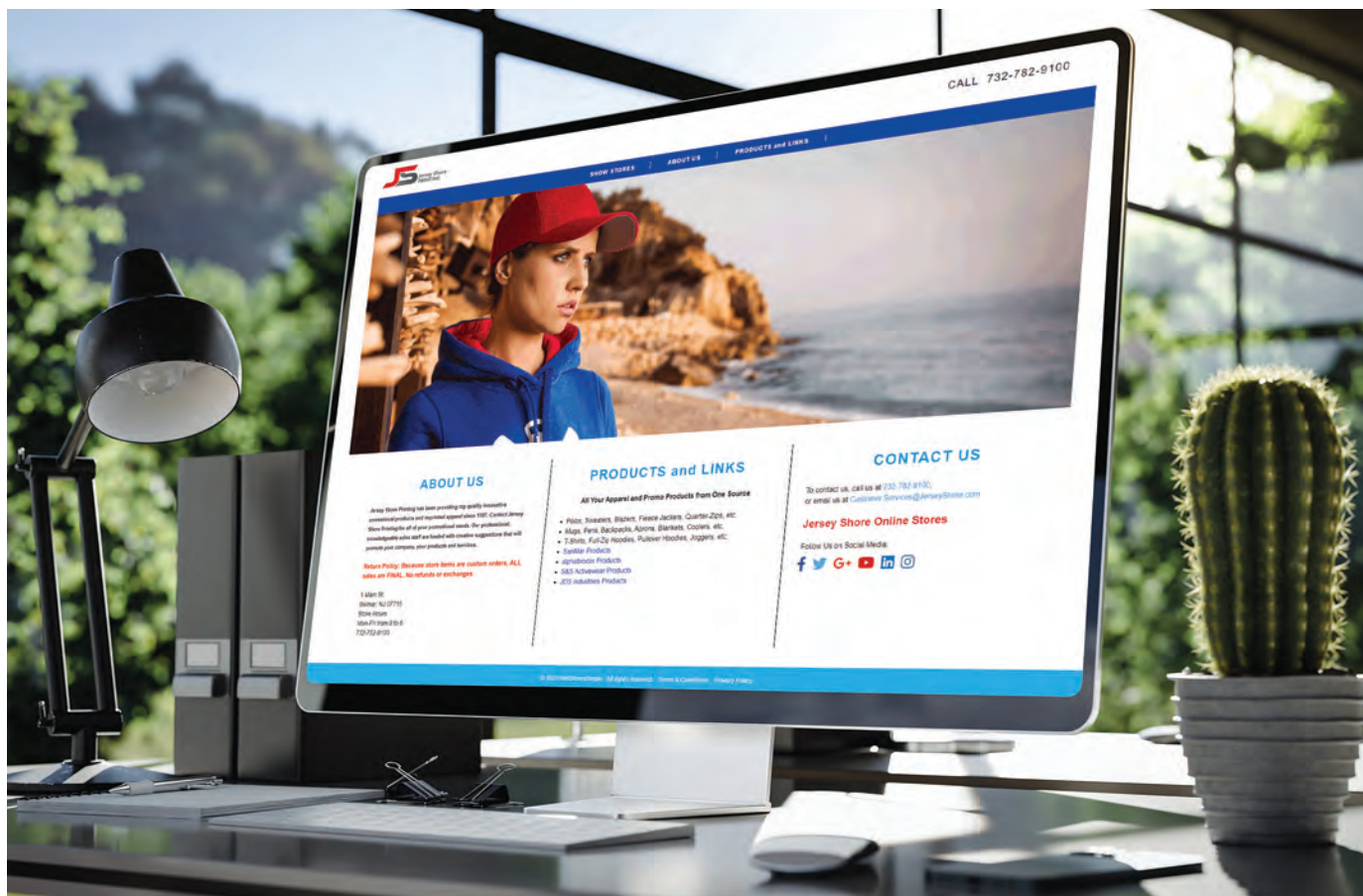
“The qualifier I always use is ‘Do you sell to groups, clubs, and other companies?’” adds Dave Dauer, president at Webstores Simple. “For me, that’s the line in the sand between e-commerce and online webstore capability.”

Webstores provide a virtually-curated shopping experience, whereby clients can browse a product selection *specific* to their organization, government agency, school system or dealership, then add items to the cart, check out and even view shipping status — similar to an Amazon-like shopping experience.

The purposes are endless, with Dauer and Evans pointing to community fundraisers or events, reward incentive programs and private employee stores as some key examples. The latter model proved to be a highly-effective way for SAGE to centralize its own internal affairs. With many people still working remote, the team set up a convenient online employee store to order office and tradeshow supplies. It not only reduced unnecessary visits, but also essentially replaced the on-site storage closets, Evan says.

Through a platform like SAGE, InkSoft, Webstores Simple, or shopVOX, decorators can build, launch and manage multiple webstores for a variety of requests. Each is uniquely designed and hyper-personalized with feature-rich options, from the custom link or password-protected access and branded products on display to the level of functionality available on the site and how long the webstore remains open.

A decorator may have a half dozen or more departments, sports teams, or groups it serves within the same school system. Webstores allow, for example, the lacrosse team, booster club, and PTA to each browse their own branded items, process and track their group’s orders, then be invoiced separately. The platform can



Optional sample home page. (Image courtesy of Webstores Simple)

serve as a “reorder portal” for companies as well.

“Think about how the rise in and versatility of webstores has changed the dynamic,” Dauer says. “Once before, you had a group administrator manually collecting all the orders and money, then coming to the decorator and beating him up to get the best possible price. In addition to eliminating paper order forms and inaccuracies that lead to production errors, now the decorator becomes more of a *partner* with that group — taking the grunt work off the back of the group administrator. They see the value in the webstore because they get to participate in more of a retail-type experience, as opposed to the [tense and tenuous] wholesale exchange.”

Dauer says webstores are generally a profitable venture for decorators, too. He points to Webstores Simple as a low bar to entry, with an affordable monthly plan, no cost per store model and no additional fee per transaction.

Plus, the ease-of-use and accessibility of a webstore allows a decorator to bake in a favorable margin, capture more order opportunities, collect payment up front,

save time processing and producing in bulk — all while improving the customer’s experience.

At companies like SAGE, Inksoft, Webstores Simple, and shopVOX, customers receive detailed onboarding, varied training resources, and technical support. Like e-commerce platforms, the webstores are hosted, maintained, and updated via secure company servers.

“Not all companies — nor all webstores — are created equal,” Dauer says. “Do your research and know who you’re getting into business with.”

Tackling daily tasks, automating daily operations

Nowadays, there are numerous expectations placed on business owners — especially small and mid-sized operations with limited resources — to carry out the many monotonous tasks which tend to burden day-to-day productivity.

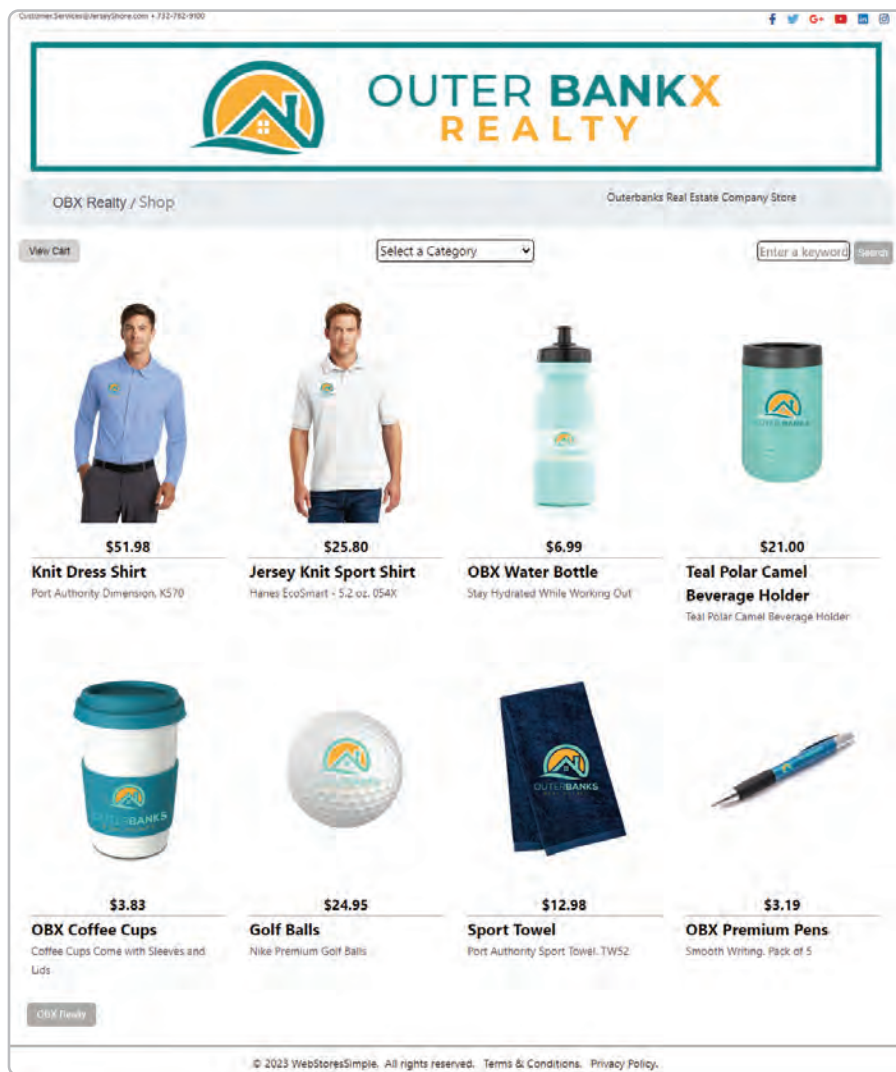
With advancements in technology, however, Carsten says automation is revolutionizing the efficiency of managing sign and print shops. Customers now expect quicker turnaround times and error-free

outputs. She points to shopVOX Express and shopVOX PRO as “all-inclusive” shop management software solutions built specifically for the graphics industry, including signage, apparel, promotional or print product businesses.

In addition to its e-commerce package, shopVOX provides tools such as CRM, online proof and quote approval, workflow and production management, as well as scheduling and reporting. Its custom pricing templates, for example, allow users to fold in their own materials, labor and machine rates when pricing a product selection, including options, modifiers, drop-downs and automation formulas.

As a result, Carsten says a product is built once then used repeatedly for additional quotes and estimates. The feature keeps pricing consistent, while facilitating faster, more accurate turnarounds — and an improved customer experience from start to finish.

Since Covid, Malanga at ShopWorks says more companies of all sizes are embracing automation. In fact, recent data shows approximately 67% of companies currently use business process automation



Sample store products page. (Image courtesy of Webstores Simple)

to streamline and automate their day-to-day repeatable tasks, while 31% of companies have fully automated at least one of their major functions.

He says a chosen software platform should not only match business size and product/service selection, but also have the ability to *scale up* for growth.

These are important factors to consider, company representatives agree, especially since a majority of decorators are still a one or two-person operation with limited labor and fiscal resources.

“In truth, small decorators really don’t need all the fluff with 300-plus solutions,” Dauer adds. “Webstores Simple is an engine for your business — affordable, easy to use, and efficient, with training and support provided to customers throughout.”

With advanced reporting functionality, business owners can create custom documents for sales, fundraising campaigns, order summaries and more, all with the ability to sort, tally, and export to Excel for easy and efficient data control. A simple but time-consuming task, like manually accounting for all the small hoodies in a system by various color, becomes automatic and therefore easier to manage, Dauer explains.

Hunt notes there is a “synergy” among the product lines at Inktavo that, together, provide customers with effective tools to manage daily operations.

Traditionally, Printavo was geared toward start-up decorators and small to medium-sized shops, helping their teams get organized, cut down on mistakes and encourage free-flow communication with

clients. It provides a simple but proven way to schedule and manage production, plus handle invoicing.

With sister-company InkSoft, customers can build online stores with ease, but also wrangle the pesky backend business tasks like proposals, transactions, payment management, invoicing, and reporting to track profitability.

Hunt says all three solutions, including GraphicsFlow, are tiered based on needs, including business size, number of users, desired storage levels, and projected usage, so businesses can choose the right fit and make adjustments in the plan.

In addition to no transaction fees, Hunt says customers also needn’t worry about “nerdy things” like web servers, maintenance or updates. They simply “log in and use the product,” he adds.

Decisions through data

Informed decision-making is vital for business growth, according to company representatives. Carsten notes that shops are increasingly reliant on data analytics to gain insights into their operations and customer preferences. At shopVOX, for example, robust analytics and reporting features provide actionable insights, helping businesses identify trends, internal strengths, and areas for improvement.

“This enables data-driven strategies that align with customer expectations and market trends,” she says.

At ShopWorks, Onsite serves as an all-inclusive business management solution, tackling traditional daily activities as well as customer relationship management and accounting. The self-service platform also allows clients to log in, process and pay for orders and check on fulfillment statuses. For Malanga, however, the true value proposition lies in the software’s practical automation and data insights.

“Data is entered once and flows through the entire system, facilitating major benefits in streamlining, reduction of labor, and cost savings, resulting in more efficient operations and better communication with customers,” he explains.



Click here to view the
E-Commerce/Webstores
Source List on our website.

As a result, shops can view production, profitability, and total sales metrics per job or job type at the click of a button. Additionally, if they wish to complete tasks or reporting outside the software's scope, Malanga says the company provides access to raw data so their customers can export to other programs or even build out personal analytical tools.

Comprehensive insights are key, he stresses, and with ShopWorks business software, owners and managers not only chuck the paper systems, but also learn to better understand their capacity and ramp up (or pull back) production based on real-time data points.

"When we're training, we talk policies, procedures, and documentation," he adds. "It's a super flexible system, but it's *how* the software is implemented and utilized that produces the real magic."

ShopWorks is preparing for even greater functionality, as it is in the process of actively rewriting its code from scratch. Malanga says doing so creates "a brand new and improved product," featuring a more modern aesthetic, improved user interface, and more features such as easier product sourcing, multi-window functionality, plus easier setup and configuration.

In addition, at ShopWorks, shopVOX, Inktavo, and SAGE, an open API (Application Programming Interface) allows shops to integrate with other third-party platforms to post or retrieve data.

Industry colleagues agree that data — along with the insights gleaned from it and how that knowledge is applied — are critical to a business's success in the current market. In Evans' opinion, it does not matter if a business has a website or client-facing portal, "if the data is incorrect, then it's no good."

"In our industry, we have so many different variables; accurate data is so important in the world we live in today," he says. "Where SAGE really succeeds is that it's at the forefront of accurate data and direct connection with manufacturers. This is better for our clients, overall service and fulfillment because it also

impacts inventory control for suppliers and up-to-date pricing."

At SAGE, Total Access serves as the company's flagship offering. Comprised of SAGE Online, SAGE Web, and SAGE Mobile, the software offers customers an all-inclusive research and business management solution for one low per-user price.

From product research, project management, and a virtual design studio to payment processing, order management, and more, Evans highlights SAGE Total Access as the "a total package" experience for business owners in the promotional products industry.

Among its many features, customers can utilize 60-plus unique search fields to browse the industry's largest database, which houses more than one million products across 4,300 suppliers. Drilldown options and filters allow users to efficiently find a desired product, while customized preference groups help users narrow the search even further by focusing on select products from a preferred supplier.

Through its presentation publisher tool, SAGE customers can not only add products to a showroom on their SAGE website or company webstore, but also include virtual samples and even pull client information from the CRM. In addition, users can quickly and easily create professional sales presentations, then share them through a convenient link whereby clients can provide real-time feedback.

Recently, the company introduced live inventory and real-time order status updates in SAGE Web, in addition to SAGE Online. The feature enables distributors to see the actual status of their orders at any given time, as well as receive notifications and alerts anytime the order status changes.

The company's position on proper data management, along with the company's PPAI partnership as the exclusive technology provider for members, also keeps it uniquely tapped into market pressures and

trends, industry best practices, and new tools — like AI.

In fact, SAGE recently launched new AI functionality in its research and business management services platforms, which allows distributors to instantly leverage the technology's power to provide fresh product and promotional ideas, improve efficiency during drafting and effortlessly create dynamic content for their customers — from customized thank you notes tailored to a specific client to custom homepage text in multiple languages and dialects.

Looking ahead, company representatives are closely watching AI development but remaining hyper-focused on advancing their own feature-rich software solutions, from advanced SMS notification and new website development to more sophisticated data analytics. **GP**

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WEBSTORES

IN THE FIELD

BY KRISTINE SHREVE

Word from the street on using webstores effectively and profitably



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 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 it comes to webstores and e-commerce sites, sometimes the terminology can get a bit confusing. E-commerce sites are forward-facing sites that businesses or organizations use to sell products or services. The entity that created the site owns and runs the site, uses the business-specific branding and fulfills orders that come through the site.

A webstore, by contrast, is run by a garment decoration company on behalf of some other business or organization. The branding will be that of the client, not the garment decoration business. The

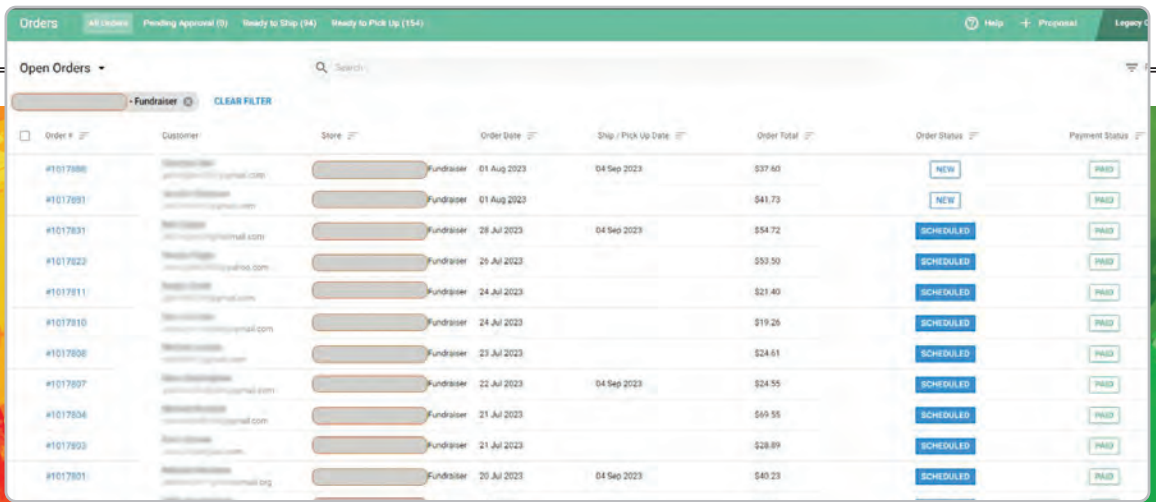
fulfillment will be by the garment decorator, but none of the recipients of the merchandise may be aware of the garment decoration company's name, or that they even exist.

So why would a garment decoration shop choose to run a webstore, or multiple webstores? Especially if they're already running an e-commerce website of their own.

Paperless trail

One reason was to upgrade the technology used to create fundraisers for clients.



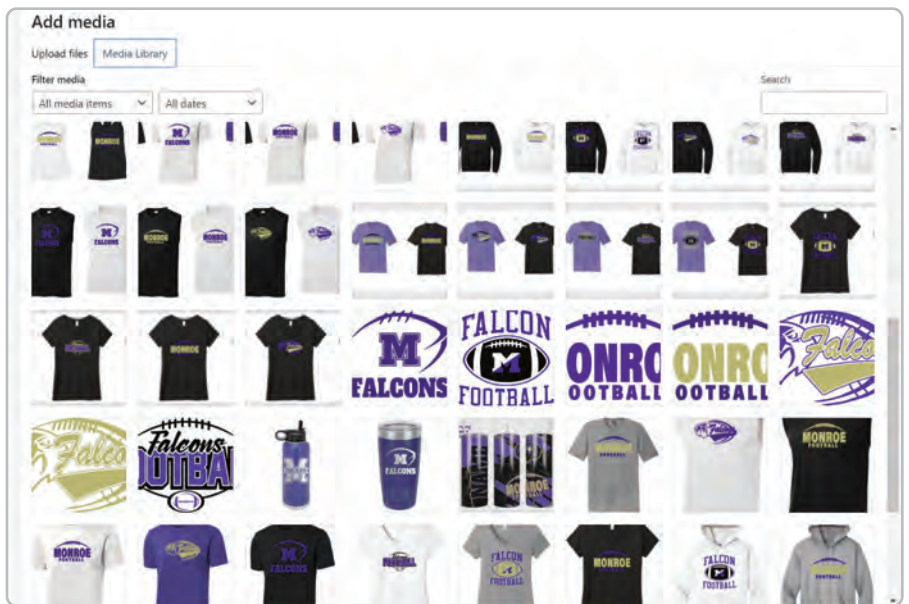


The backend of the store where all the items are set up. (Image courtesy of InkSoft)

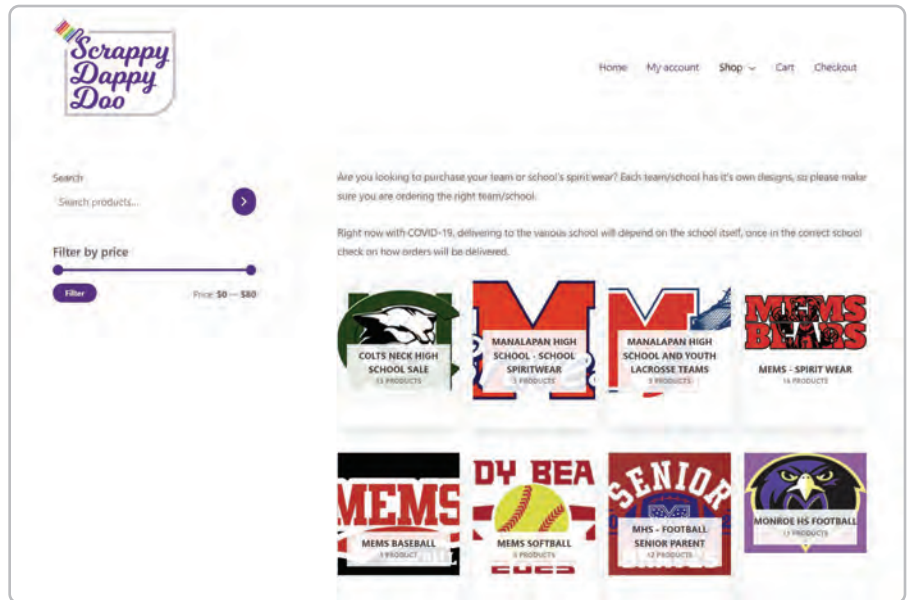
David Kazler of Zone Z in Athens, Ohio, started using webstores for his customers because it eliminated tracking things on paper. “Prior to offering webstores our fundraisers were all paper form based,” he says. “Webstores automate the entire process from collecting the payment to blank order summaries to packing receipts.” Lisa Lemonick of Manalapan, New Jersey-based Scrapy Dappy Doo echoes Kazler’s comments, saying, “Most of our clients are school PTAs and teams. In our local school district, they are required to have their fundraising, especially spirit wear online, and not taking cash/checks. By going online, it also gives the end user the opportunity to purchase more with a credit card and get their points. We have found that since going online sales have increased.”

E-commerce sites do offer the same ability to go online, and to make purchases using credit cards, but the burden of creating, maintaining and tracking the orders is on the organization or business. They are also tasked with finding a company to create the merchandise and then have the responsibility of getting that merchandise to those who purchased it.

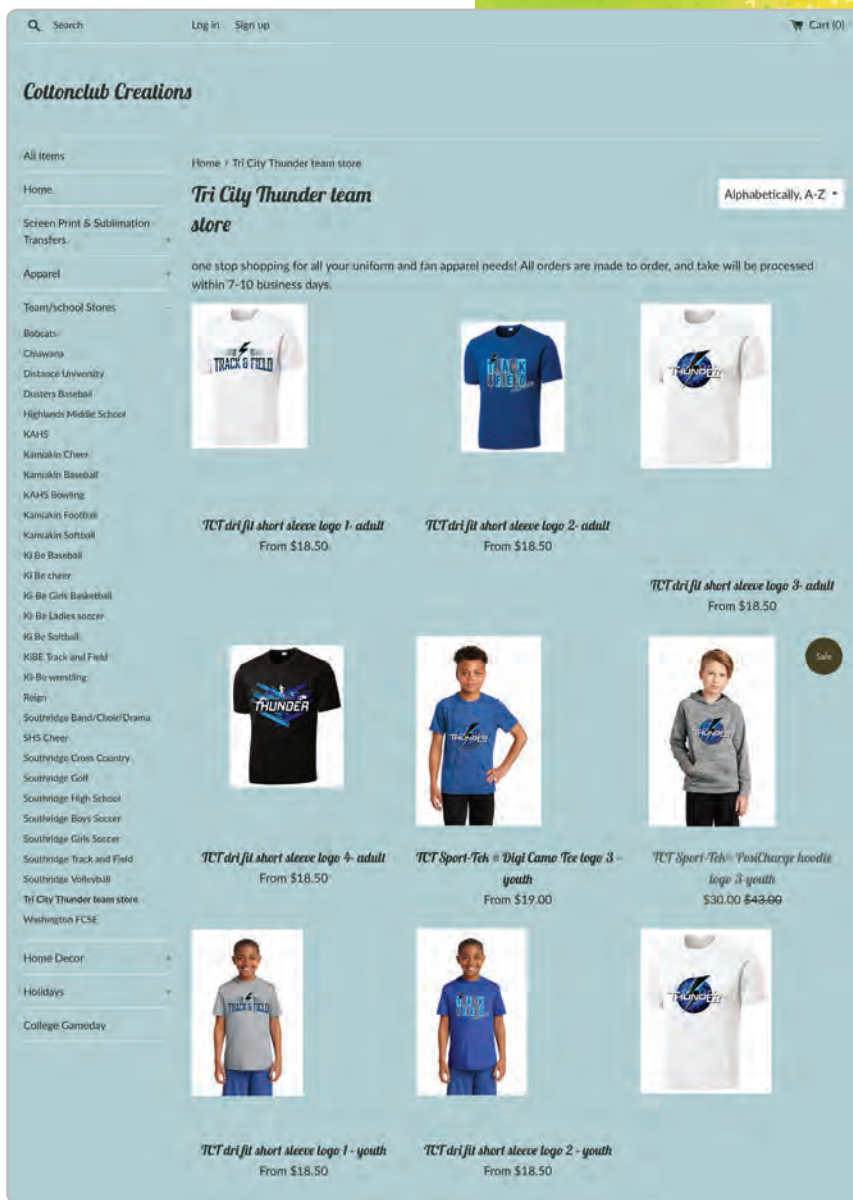
While this may be easily accomplished for some organizations, for many, handing off all the hassle to someone else is an attractive prospect. As Jennie Livezey, owner of Z Shirts Custom Printing of Shelbyville, Indiana, tells us, “They [customers] like that they don’t have to take orders, deal with collecting money, and making sure they have the correct sizes/quantities.”



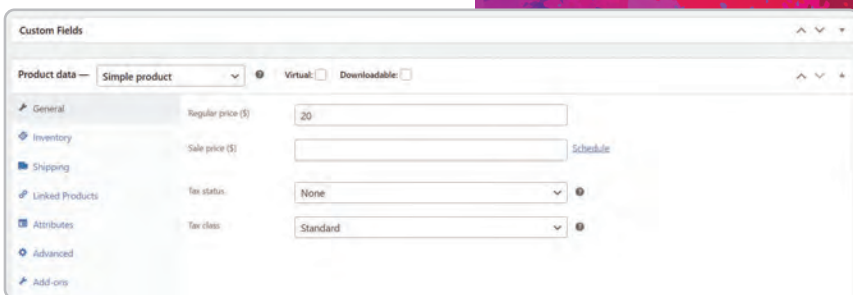
(Image courtesy of Scrapy Dappy Doo)



(Image courtesy of Scrapy Dappy Doo)



This is what the customer sees when going to their link. (Image courtesy of Z Shirts Custom Printing)



Custom fields.

All that work can be offloaded to a garment decoration company, and the organization simply receives a paycheck for items sold.

Another difference between an e-commerce site and a webstore is that the setup for webstores can become easier over time. You can make the case that if one sets up enough websites, that setup should become easier too, but it really has to do with duplication. Too much duplication when setting up a website can get you banned by Google.

Webstores, on the other hand, can all operate off the same basic template, with only things like logos and product offerings being changed. Lemonick, of Scrappy Dappy Doo, says, “I have a format which I use on the backend, which makes creating them fairly easy and quick.”

Although, as Jennie Livesey from Z Shirts reminds us, the setup of a webstore can be complicated by customer needs and wants. As she says, “Some want a bunch of different designs on a bunch of different options. Others just want one or two designs on a few items, which takes considerably less time to create.”

Millions and billions

Convincing customers they don't need a million items in their webstore, or a million different options for the same item, can be one challenge that shops that provide webstores face.

The team at Lewisville Lettering in Lewisville, Texas, discovered that the “biggest challenge is getting clients to understand that having seven or eight different designs doesn't mean they are going to sell more product. It never fails that if a customer has eight designs, there will always be one or two that only have one or two pieces ordered.”

Any garment decoration shop, whether running webstores or their own e-commerce site, knows the pain of creating screens or designs, or ordering and stocking garments or hardgoods for an item that doesn't sell well. Excess inventory and wasted time are never profitable for any business, regardless of how they're selling online.

A webstore is run by a garment decoration company on behalf of some other business or organization.

One of the advantages of offering webstores to clients is that, because of the economies of scale that come with creating these types of sites, shops can create them more quickly and offer them to more customers, which then leads, if all goes well, to more profit.

Lewisville Lettering currently manages nine stores, with five more in the process of creation. Zone Z in Athens, Ohio, manages 20 stores at present. Kennewick, Washington-based Cottonclub Creations has 24 ongoing stores and two more in the works. Scrappy Dappy Doo currently runs 17 stores, as well as its own e-commerce website. Z Shirts Custom Printing runs nine, with five more in creation.

Once the process of creation has been set into place, creating the next store in line becomes that much easier and takes that much less time. And, of course, the greater the number of webstores a shop has running, the greater the revenue received.

Smooth setup

When setting up that first webstore, the template for all those that may follow, it's a good idea to have a clear vision of what you want to offer. As the owner of Cottonclub Creations, Heather Cotton, notes, "Know what the service is that you want to offer and come up with a model you will use for all stores. For example, knowing what your terms of service will be, how many items you are willing to mock up and post, are you willing to ship or only do local teams, and figuring out what your baseline price will be for items in your stores."

Having a solid set of policies in place will make dealing with prospective customers easy and will also provide the economies of scale that can make webstores so profitable. Knowing your policies and setting them ahead of time is also common sense for building a website, not necessarily for economies of scale, but so you can clearly communicate those policies to customers who visit the site to learn more about what your shop offers and how you do business.

When it comes to finding customers for the webstore model, don't think the

customer base is limited to just teams or schools. While team gear, or gear for booster clubs or school organizations, can sell well when offered through a webstore, many other types of businesses and organizations are also finding the webstore model works for them.

Zone Z runs nine government stores. There are corporate stores where employees can buy gear. Internet influencers or personalities who want to sell merchandise to their followers can also be a good source of work. Many people and organizations want the ability to sell merchandise and



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generate revenue, but either don't have the knowledge or the capability, or even the desire, to make that happen themselves. Making the process easy and stress-free using a webstore can be a win-win both for the shop creating and running the store, and for the client.

Choosing a software solution is always a question, whether you're building the first in a long line of webstores, or building your own e-commerce website. For websites, options like Shopify, Square, WooCommerce, Wix and Ecwid, along

with a host of others are probably the names that come to mind. When choosing a webstore, take some tips from our panel of experts ... David Kasler of Zone Z recommends, "Choose a software vendor that provides after the purchase support."

It is also wise not to assume that all your customers will know that creating webstores is a service you offer. As Jennie Livezey of Z Shirts Custom Printing notes: "Make sure you advertise this service so customers can take advantage of it."

Once that advertising brings in new customers, you need a site that can handle the order volume generated. As Lisa Lemonick of Scrapy Dappy Doo advises, "Make sure your host can handle the volume of orders that are coming in, and make sure they have technical assistance to help you if something goes wrong once the store is open."

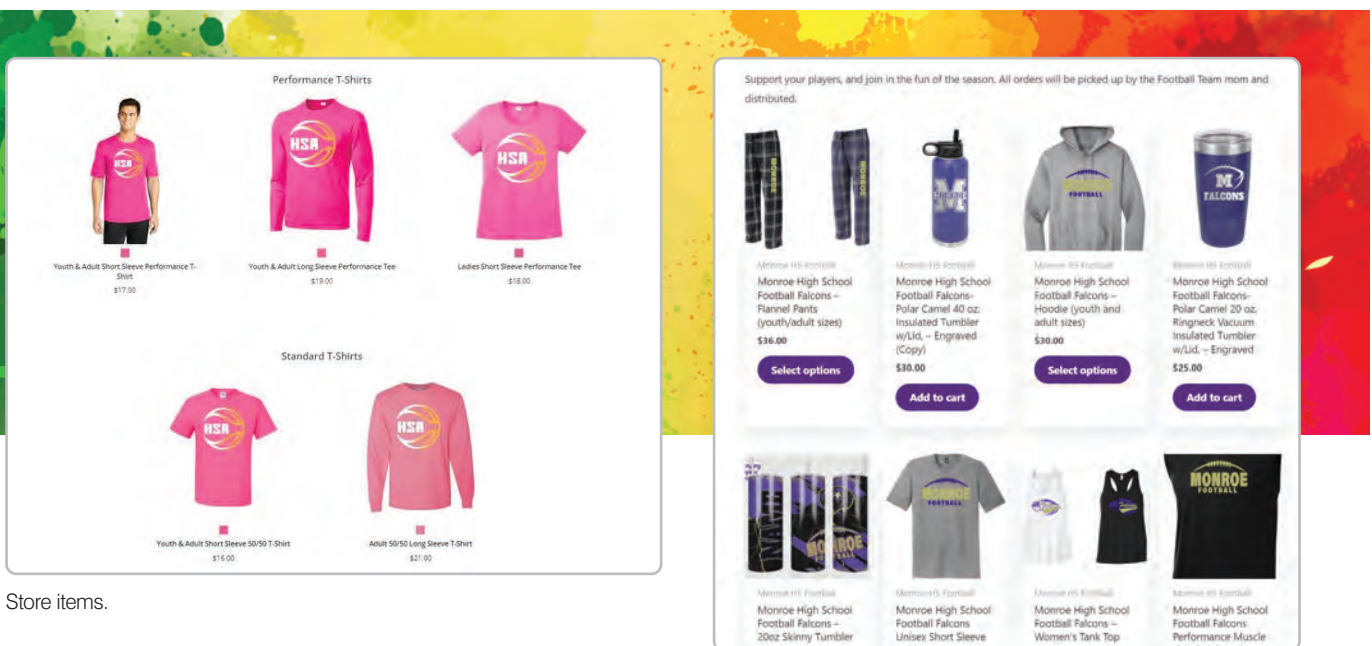
Finally, there's the question of what webstore software or program you might want to choose. You might, as Cottonclub Creations did, choose to run all your webstores through your main store website, which in their case is Shopify.

Lewisville Lettering and Zone Z both use Webstores Simple, both for the customer and technical support and because the process of setting up new stores is simple and easy to use. Scrapy Dappy Doo uses Coolmodesigns.com, which is based upon Wordpress.

For Z Shirts Custom Printing, the webstore software of choice is InkSoft. As with choosing an e-commerce software, you want to make sure to find an option that provides adequate technical support, is robust enough to scale up as traffic and sales grow and provides solutions that allow for easy setup and management of stores. **GP**



Product description.



Store items.

Specific store.

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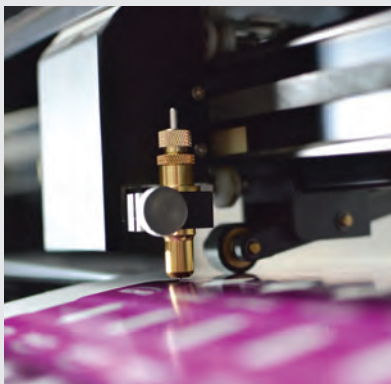
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