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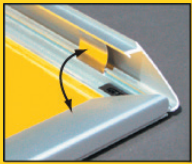
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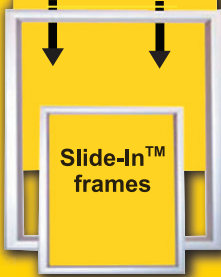
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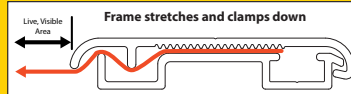
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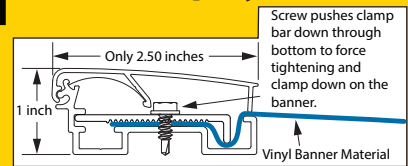


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Marie Fennema is the managing editor at GRAPHICS PRO magazine. She can be reached at mfennema@cahabamedia.com

Keep doing good

As our small-but-mighty team works to wrap up this issue and get it sent to the printer, I realize that I'll soon be coming up on my five-year anniversary with GRAPHICS PRO. It's hard to believe that amount of time has passed since I started in 2021!

A lot has changed in the industry within that time frame, including decoration technologies, overall trends, business practices, and software, to name a few. But there's one aspect of the industry that hasn't changed — and I hope never does: graphics shops and manufacturers coming together to do good.

Over the years, I've found that some of my favorite stories aren't impressive projects or big clientele, but those that show the industry supporting nonprofits, charities, and other such organizations. Not to mention when everyone comes together to help local communities impacted by natural disasters or other such tragedies.

Whether it's donating hats to women's shelters, printing tees to raise money for wildfire relief, sponsoring a litter of service dogs, or wrapping a skin cancer screening bus — these philanthropic acts help better our communities, improve lives, and bring the industry closer together.

So, as we round out the rest of the year (and look toward the future), let's focus on continuing to do good. Maybe it's through donating during National Giving Month in December. Maybe your shop, like our parent company Cahaba Media Group, gives employees days off to volunteer at organizations of their choice. Or, if you run out of ideas, keep an eye on our "Giving back" section of Industry Updates every month.

If you know of a shop or company that's making a difference — tell us about them at gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com.

Cheers,

Marie Fennema
Managing Editor

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We want to know what you think and how we can serve you better. Send your comments and feedback to Editor-in-Chief James Anderson at janderson@cahabamedia.com. We'd love to hear from you!

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INDUSTRY UPDATES

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Edward Baiden

Nazdar

Nazdar has appointed **Edward (Ed) Baiden** as president and CEO. Baiden succeeds **Richard Bowles**, who is retiring after more than 23 years of dedicated leadership and service to the company. Baiden brings more than 25 years of global leadership experience across industrial and specialty materials businesses. He joins Nazdar from W. R. Grace, where he served as senior vice president, strategy, planning, and transformation. Prior to Grace, he led PPG's global Traffic Solutions business, experience that aligns closely with Nazdar's focus on manufacturing.



Josh Culverhouse

JDS Sign Supply

Josh Culverhouse joined **JDS Industries** as the sales director for its **Sign Supply Division**. Culverhouse brings more than 20 years of experience across the sign, graphics, materials, and digital commerce industries. His career includes experience with SquareOne Graphics, Gauge Interactive, ORAFOL Americas, and most recently UPM Metamark. In his new role, Culverhouse will lead JDS Industries' Sign Supply Division, focusing on strengthening customer and vendor relationships, expanding market opportunities, and supporting continued growth.



Steve Mullinax

SanMar

SanMar Corporation announced **Steve Mullinax** as vice president, IT operations, infrastructure, and security. Mullinax has expertise in help-desk and field systems, enterprise infrastructure, and database and technical administration, providing a durable foundation for growth. Mullinax's focus will be to ensure technology is resilient, reliable, and responds to business challenges quickly to support continuous improvement.

GIVING BACK

Avery Dennison & FASTSIGNS help Painesville, Ohio, schools deliver summer meals

When the last school bell rang for Painesville City Local Schools, the joyful clanging also signaled the beginning of another busy season for the Lunch Box, a 30' trailer that delivers free summer meals to children throughout the city that's located 30 miles east of Cleveland. But those deliveries almost didn't happen this year.

The vehicle experienced severe wind damage in 2025: The awning was ripped away, and the trailer's body panels and vinyl wrap were damaged. Initial repair estimates were higher than the district could afford. Avery Dennison immediately volunteered to donate vinyl materials to rewrap the entire trailer. Wolf Designs of Painesville, Ohio, which created the artwork for the original wrap, also reprised its role. Students at Auburn Career Center, a local vocational school, helped with the trailer repairs. And FASTSIGNS of Mentor, Ohio, printed and installed the vinyl.

"The kids were excited to see the Lunch Box," said Michelle Papic, director of nutrition services, Painesville City Local Schools. "It's back to business as usual, which is what we wanted all along. We're beyond grateful. Without the support of the community and all our partners, this would've been a big expense for the district. We're grateful to have the opportunity to keep it running."


Q-Tees & AZ Textiles support employee well-being

Through its long-standing manufacturing partnership with AZ Textiles, Q-Tees is reaffirming its commitment to responsible manufacturing by investing in programs that support the well-being of more than 500 factory employees in Pakistan.

Throughout the year, every factory employee receives a daily lunch, emergency assistance is available for workers facing unexpected hardships, and major holidays

are celebrated with special breakfast gatherings and lucky draws featuring electronic appliances and other gifts.

The companies work together to foster a workplace built on respect, safety, and appreciation, recognizing that a strong manufacturing operation begins with supporting the people behind it.

UPDATES



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Pukka joined brands from across the team sports industry for Team Insight's Team Headwear Vendor Roundtable, where manufacturers discussed the trends, challenges, and opportunities shaping the future of team headwear.

Koozie Group released its sixth-annual Keep It. Give It. Social Impact and Sustainability Report, marking another year of meaningful strides toward its goals.

FASTSIGNS has welcomed three new franchise centers across the New York City region, including the co-branding of two respected family-owned businesses that have served their communities for more than 50 years.

Vantage Apparel has successfully completed a comprehensive company-wide professional development initiative, reinforcing its long-standing commitment to investing in its people and building one of the industry's best workplace cultures.

DCC, a global printing technology company, has opened a new DCC EXPERIENCE CENTER in Sanford, Florida. This marks the company's first center in North America as well as its 48-year journey of engineering technologies and solutions.



Have news to share?

Email gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com.



iPROMOTEu has been recognized among the largest promotional products distributors in North America, maintaining its No. 8 ranking on the 2026 ASI Counselor Top 40 Distributors List.

Ken Holloway has doubled his President's Club success, earning the distinction for both of his **Minuteman Press** franchise centers in **Columbia and Myrtle Beach**, South Carolina.

Propelled Brands, a multibrand franchising platform, announced that Franchise Business Review named **FASTSIGNS** among its Most Profitable Franchises for 2026.

Sarah Davis and **Joe Davis** of **Minuteman Press** in Danbury earned recognition as members of the President's Club.

PARTNERSHIPS



Atlantis Headwear collaborated with **Thru Hiking** for Trail Days Europe 2026. Developed for Europe's largest gathering of long-distance hiking enthusiasts, the collaboration centered on creating headwear that would serve hikers well beyond the event itself.

Epson and **National / AZON**, a distributor of solutions for the printing industry, announced a distributor partnership for Epson's Professional Imaging Printing Solutions.

GIVING BACK



Infinity Product Group supports University of Alabama Student Pantry

Infinity Product Group, the parent company of **Infinity Her**, is proud to once again support the University of Alabama Student Pantry by donating licensed University of Alabama merchandise to the 2026 Family Weekend Jazz Brunch Silent Auction. This marks the fourth consecutive year the company has contributed to the event, reinforcing its commitment to giving back to the university communities it serves.

Hosted by Bama Dining during the University of Alabama's annual Family Weekend, the Jazz Brunch Silent Auction raises funds for the UA Student Pantry, which provides food and essential items to students experiencing food insecurity. Over the past four years, the event has raised more than \$30,000 through the generosity of corporate partners and local businesses.

FEATURED AWARDS



Chadds Ford Minuteman Press named Minority Business of the Year

Minuteman Press in **Chadds Ford**, Pennsylvania, owned by **Jyoti Arora** since January of 2025, has been named the Minority Business of the Year by the Chester County Chamber of Business & Industry (CCCB) as part of its Business Excellence Awards. Arora accepted the award at the CCCBI Awards Dinner. The award recognizes businesses that demonstrate excellence, community involvement, and a strong commitment to serving Chester County.

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JOURNEY LAND

Keen Signs & Graphics' wall wrap & wayfinding signage project for Journey Community Church

By Marie Fennema



The team at Keen Signs & Graphics in Augusta, Georgia, recently completed an extensive wall mural and signage project for Journey Community Church's Journey Land. The project, which was printed on their Roland DG TrueVis XP-640 64-inch eco-solvent printer, showcases rich, vibrant colors along each wall as well as bold wayfinding signage. We chatted with Lane Keen, president and owner, and Elizabeth Agostino, senior account manager, to find out what went into this project.

Q: How did this project come about?

Keen: We were referred for this project by another company that wasn't able to take it on. The project comprised producing and installing



interior graphics as part of a complete renovation of the children's area at Journey Community Church.

Q: Can you walk us through the design process?

Agostino: The client worked with a marketing company, and I met with both the owner and the marketing company to discuss the project. I provided the marketing company with exact measurements so that they could design the graphics for each area of the building.

Q: What about the fabrication process?

Keen: This was the job that forced us to buy a new Roland DG printer. We have had Roland DG equipment since we started the business 16 years ago.

We looked at the whole market, including different ink types, and decided that eco-solvent printing was still the best option for our product mix. We purchased the Roland DG TrueVis XP-640 high-speed eco-solvent printer because we were familiar with Roland DG's reliability and quality. In addition to printing at incredibly fast speeds with outstanding image quality, the new XP-640 also has a wider color gamut, which helped us hit the vibrant shades in this project.

In total, we printed a little under 2,200 square feet of graphics.

Q: What can you tell us about the installation process?

Agostino: The installation process



went pretty smoothly. Our new printer printed accurately, so the panels lined up well, and the inks were smooth and dried well for lamination.

In total, we applied graphics to aluminum composite material, wayfinding signs attached to a central beam, and then installed wall murals downstairs throughout the classrooms and hallways. We also applied graphics to the stairwell, elevator doors, the upstairs lobby, and the upstairs hallways. We were able to do the work with a two-person installation crew.

Q: What was the timetable, and what did it take to complete the signage/mural?

Agostino: Once we got the proof approved, it took us about four weeks to produce and install the graphics. The construction crews were working on the renovation in three phases, and as each phase was completed and its walls were prepped, we'd come in for two days to install the graphics.

Q: What were some of the major challenges?

Agostino: The stairwell was definitely the most challenging area because the graphics had to line up perfectly. Our new XP-640 printer helped ensure that the prints lined up well, and once we got those prints installed, the rest of the installation went pretty smoothly.

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

Keen: The sheer size of this project was probably the most unique aspect of it. We touched almost every wall with graphics and even wrapped the elevator doors and the stairs.

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

Agostino: The clients absolutely loved the way the project came out. The students came in when it was finished and couldn't believe it — they had no idea what to expect, and they were so excited to see all the colorful graphics. **GP**



Marie Fennema is the managing editor at GRAPHICS PRO magazine. She can be reached at mfennema@cahabamedia.com

Navigating the scale

The executive playbook for campus signage & wayfinding systems

By Paul Ingle

In the commercial sign and visual communications industry, few opportunities offer the sheer volume, margin potential, and long-term account value of a master campus project. Whether serving a major university, a regional healthcare system, an industrial business park, or a corporate headquarters, sign shops that secure campus contracts aren't just selling fabricated aluminum, acrylic, or LEDs; they provide the master architectural blueprint for how human beings navigate complex environments.

Yet, campus signage projects are notoriously complex. Unlike a single-site retail storefront where the scope is localized and straightforward (and where the biggest hazard is usually

a landlord with a tape measure), a campus environment demands a multitiered informational hierarchy, rigorous site auditing, complex municipal compliance, and a seamless blend of heavy exterior fabrication with refined interior architectural elements.

For sign shop owners, production managers, and enterprise sales leaders, executing a multibuilding campus rollout requires bridging the gap between high-level architectural strategy and shop floor manufacturing realities. When executed correctly, a master campus project establishes an annuity-like client relationship that generates recurring revenue through facility expansions, retrofits, and ongoing maintenance for years to come — long after the initial ribbon cutting.

PHASE 1

The psychology of wayfinding (& human panic)

To sell and design an effective campus system, a sign professional must first understand the psychological journey of the end user. When a visitor, patient, student, or vendor enters a campus, they experience varying levels of spatial anxiety. If wayfinding fails, the brand experience breaks down immediately, leading to missed medical appointments, frustrated clients, and administrative staff spending half their workday acting as human lighthouses giving directions.

Wayfinding is not merely about mounting directional arrows on posts; it is the strategic management of progressive information disclosure. A successful wayfinding system relies on four distinct sign typologies:

- 1. Identification signs:** The primary “anchor” markers (monuments, main entrance pylons, and building name plaques) that confirm, “Yes, you are finally in the right place.”
- 2. Directional signs:** The transitional markers (vehicular directional pylons and pedestrian wayfinding posts) that keep traffic moving fluidly at key decision points.
- 3. Orientation signs:** Macro-level maps and directories (freestanding map kiosks and main lobby directories) that allow users to visually plot their route before they start wandering aimlessly.
- 4. Regulatory and functional signs:** Essential operational markers (ADA



Images courtesy of Steve Savoy, Best Signs



room numbers, fire exit pathways, delivery dock rules, and parking restrictions) that keep the lawyers happy and enforce compliance.

The golden rule of wayfinding: Give the user only the information they need for the next 50 feet. Overloading a single vehicular pylon with twelve building names forces drivers to slam on their brakes, creating traffic hazards and immediate road rage. The art of campus wayfinding lies in establishing a clean visual hand-off from 35 mph down to pedestrian foot traffic.

The multistakeholder matrix:
Wearing one hat or four?

On any major campus project, half the battle isn't fabrication — it's dynamic stakeholder management. Depending on the client's budget, timeline, and internal resources, your shop will typically operate in one of two environments:

1. The traditional construction ecosystem (collaborative execution)

In large-scale new developments, you'll find yourself sitting at a table surrounded by environmental graphic designers, project architects, general contractors (GCs), and the end user's facility team.

Reality: The architect cares about aesthetic harmony; the designer cares about typography; the GC cares strictly about the construction schedule; and the end user cares about budget and operational clarity.

Your role: You are the pragmatic voice of manufacturing reality. You

are the one who looks at a custom concept and politely points out that while a specific sign design looks gorgeous in a 3D rendering, it won't survive a 70-mph wind load or fit through a standard doorway during installation.

2. The design-build alternative (doing it all yourself)

For existing campus retrofits, expansions, or mid-tier institutional clients, there usually isn't a third-party architectural firm in the mix. The client simply comes to you and says, "We have 15 buildings, nobody can find the clinic, and our budget is X."

Your role: You become the architect, the environmental designer, the wayfinding consultant, and the contractor wrapped in one.

The opportunity: While this requires more upfront heavy lifting during the site audit and design phases, it is often the most profitable way to execute a campus program. By offering true turnkey design-build services, you eliminate middleman friction, control the material specifications from day one, and establish your shop as an indispensable, long-term strategic advisor to the institution.

PHASE 2 Conducting the comprehensive site audit (or: expect the unexpected)

Before a single design proof is drawn or a sheet of aluminum is placed on the CNC router, the project's success is

determined in the field during the site audit. A superficial site survey is the single fastest way to turn a profitable job into an expensive learning experience.

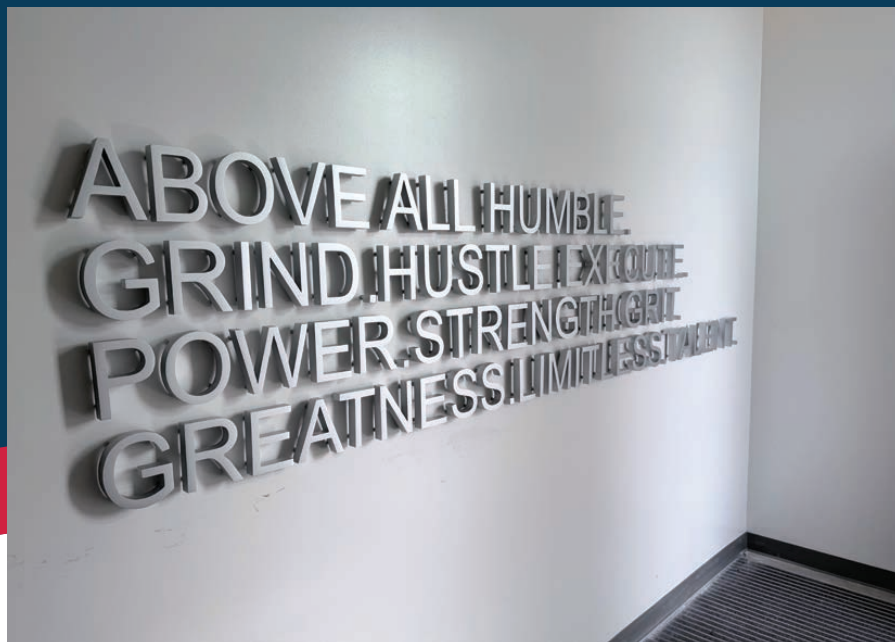
1. Vehicular sightline mapping

Begin the audit half a mile outside the campus perimeter. Analyze approach speeds, traffic density, seasonal vegetation growth, and street lighting. Identify key "decision nodes," the exact intersections where a driver must make a split-second turn. Measure sightlines from the driver's perspective at real-world travel speeds, ensuring monument placement provides adequate reaction time before they miss the turn and end up in the faculty delivery dock.

2. Infrastructure & environmental reality checks

Never assume ground conditions are uniform across a multiacre footprint. **Underground utilities:** Murphy's Law dictates that the absolute best visual spot for a main monument





sign is located directly above an unmapped fiber-optic line or a 50-year-old water main. Locate utilities early.

Grade variations: Nature rarely builds perfectly flat plots. A monument sign designed for a level pad will require custom-engineered concrete footings or stepped reveals if installed on a sloped grade.

Lighting power: Determine whether electrical service is readily accessible at proposed exterior sign locations or, if you need to, budget for solar options or expensive high-voltage trenching.

3. Interior architectural audit

For interior wayfinding rollouts across historic or modern campus buildings, inspect wall substrates (sheetrock, historic brick, poured concrete, or textured wood paneling), stud placement, ceiling

heights, and lighting conditions. Pay strict attention to ADA compliance pathing, ensuring tactile and Braille elements are positioned within mandatory height windows (48 to 60 inches from the finished floor to the baseline of the raised characters) and unobstructed by door swings or architectural trim.

PHASE 3 Materiality, fabrication & modular engineering

A campus environment subjects signage to heavy wear and tear — from hot summer sun to overzealous lawnmower crews. Exterior components must withstand extreme weather and physical abuse, while interior elements must endure high-volume foot traffic and aggressive daily cleaning routines. From a manufacturing standpoint, standardization and modularity are the keys to protecting your shop's sanity and margins.

1. Exterior substrates & finishing

Aluminum extrusions: Utilizing modular aluminum extrusion systems for exterior directional signs allows for clean, hidden fasteners and easy panel replacement when a department inevitably renames itself next semester.

Coatings & paint systems:

Specify two-component industrial polyurethane paint systems (such as Matthews Paint or AkzoNobel) with premium clear coats containing UV

inhibitors. This prevents chalking and fading, keeping brand colors vibrant long after the warranty expires.

Illumination: Transition all campus lighting specifications to energy-efficient LED modules. Internal LED illumination reduces long-term maintenance calls and allows for slim, modern cabinet profiles.

2. Interior modular systems

In dynamic campus environments — such as universities with constantly shifting faculty offices or medical centers with evolving clinics — custom, one-off interior signs are a nightmare for facility managers. But they are really attractive and eye-catching!

Modular frame systems:

Recommend extruded aluminum or injection-molded modular sign systems with interchangeable insert slots. This allows the client's administrative team to update room occupant names internally while keeping the permanent ADA tactile frames intact.

Tactile & Braille production:

Utilize raster Braille insertion or direct thermoforming (or direct material print) methods for ADA compliance. High-precision CNC routing and UV-cured tactile printing ensure uniform raised lettering that meets strict federal standards without looking like an afterthought.

PHASE 4 Navigating permitting, codes & accessibility

A master campus project can stall instantly if local zoning boards or fire marshals pull out the yellow tape. Integrating code compliance into your early design phase isn't just good practice; it's self-preservation.

1. Municipal zoning & variance strategies

Campuses located within dense commercial or residential districts often face strict square-footage limits on exterior signage. Work with the local municipality to



establish an “institutional master sign plan.” This legal framework treats the entire campus under a unified set of custom height, setback, and square-footage allowances, bypassing the torture of applying for individual variances for every single sign.

2. Life safety & emergency wayfinding

Collaborate directly with the local fire marshal. Campus emergency wayfinding requires highly visible secondary building identifiers, standardized entrance numbering for first responders, and clear exit pathing that remains readable during power outages or emergencies.

PHASE 5 Project management & critical-path execution

Managing a multiphase campus rollout demands military-grade organization. Fabrication delays on a primary monument can stall secondary directional installations, leaving an install crew standing around waiting on concrete to cure.

1. The master sign schedule

Create a centralized database (the master sign schedule) tracking every single sign location, sign type code, message text, mounting substrate, illumination status, and installation phase. This document serves as the single source of truth for sales, estimating, drafting, production, and installation teams.

2. Phased field installation

Phase I: Site preparation:

Excavation, underground electrical trenching, rebar cage placement, and concrete footing pours for major exterior monuments. Giving the concrete time to cure properly — patience here saves structural headaches later.

Phase II: Exterior primary & directional: Erecting main identification monuments, gateway pylons, and primary vehicular directionals.

Phase III: Interior architectural & ADA: Room-by-room installation

of ADA plaques, floor directories, overhead wayfinding blades, and emergency evacuation maps.

PHASE 6 Turning a campus rollout into an annual revenue engine

Winning a campus contract shouldn't be viewed as a one-time transaction. A completed campus installation is a living asset that requires continuous upkeep, updates, and expansions.

1. Digital asset binders: Deliver a comprehensive digital closeout binder to the client upon project completion. Include exact paint formulas, font families, CAD drawings, electrical schematics, and GIS map locations for every installed sign.

2. Preventative maintenance agreements: Offer structured annual service contracts covering scheduled pressure washing, LED driver inspections, paint touch-ups, and storm-damage emergency repairs. This is an overlooked revenue stream.

3. Internal updating portals: Set up a dedicated web portal or simplified ordering sheet for the client's facility team to quickly request those pesky replacement room plaques or updated

directional slats as campus personnel changes. Churn is your friend.

Mastering the art of campus transformation

Executing a master campus wayfinding project requires a sign provider to operate at the absolute top of their game. By combining spatial psychology, rigorous site auditing, durable material selection, strict regulatory compliance, and disciplined project management, your shop transitions from a simple sign maker to an indispensable strategic partner.

When you master the scale of campus signage, you don't just transform physical spaces, you build a highly profitable, scalable manufacturing engine that drives long-term value for your business. **GP**



Paul Ingle's career has spanned sales, marketing, and business ownership since 1973. Ingle is a past president of the Texas Sign Association and its regional chapter, the Greater DFW Sign Association. Contact him at paul.ingle,jr@gmail.com.





A drive to win

How John Duever built his career in wrapping • By David Korvah



John Duever, president of Vinyl Images, has been a leader in the graphics and wraps industry for over 20 years. He became an Avery Dennison wrap instructor in 2017 and currently teaches the new dry-apply color paint protection film class for the company.

Entrepreneurs tend to be driven and results-focused people. But spend just a few minutes with John Duever, president of Vinyl Images, and you'll realize he takes that to a different level.

From a modest upbringing in the Midwest, Duever has helped build Vinyl Images into one of the country's premier designers and manufacturers of fleet wraps. He started the Wrap IQ podcast to share his hard-earned insights with other entrepreneurs. And having developed a close partnership with Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions, Duever is part of the team of talented vinyl wrappers that leads our commercial training classes.

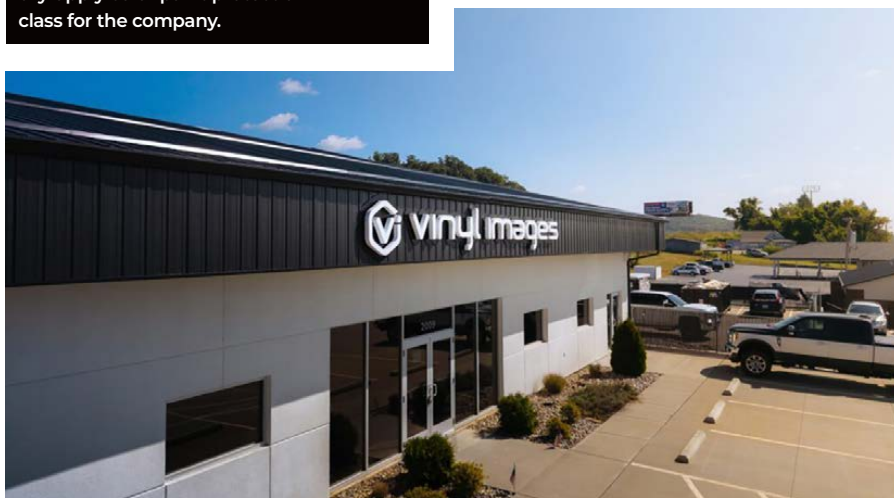
Forging the mind of a competitor

Duever grew up in a small town near St. Louis, sharing a single-wide trailer with his family, including sister, Destiny, and brother, Joe. In school he competed as a wrestler, which helped incubate his drive to win. After high school, wrestling transitioned to mixed martial arts, where Duever fought at an elite level for the next decade. "I worked very hard and was good at it," said Duever. "To me, it's a sweet science. But if you lose focus, or you don't have the fire inside, you get knocked down hard. So you learn very quickly."

At age 19, when not training or fighting, Duever aspired to go to chiropractic school. To earn some money, he got a job at a local wrap shop where Destiny worked. There, he took out trash, washed vehicles, and did a lot of the unglamorous work that kept installers on task.

Opportunity knocked when the business went bankrupt and the owner sold it for pennies on the dollar to Destiny, John, and Joe. The siblings reopened the shop, changed its name to Vinyl Images and began a journey that's lasted a quarter of a century.

"I was very naïve," Duever said. "I thought that I was going to be a millionaire on day one. I didn't realize just how difficult it is to be an entrepreneur. But I've learned over the last 23 years!"



Vinyl Images recently purchased a 15,000-square-foot building in the St. Louis suburb of Pacific, Missouri. Equipment includes two HP 3000-series printers, each capable of producing around 50,000 square feet of print per week without overtime. Duever manages 24 employees at this location.



Here Duever demonstrates the trimming technique during a PrismaPro dry-apply color paint protection film class.

An education in the sweet science of wrapping

Duever approached the sweet science of wrapping with the competitiveness that defined his combat-sports career. He would go to trade shows with vehicle wrapping competitions and watch closely for hours on end. “I might see 30 competitors wrap the same door panel in 30 different ways, using different tools and techniques,” he said. “I’d pull ‘little nuggets’ from each, adapting them into my own set of techniques.”

That learning paid off when Duever started winning those competitions. And once the winning began, he never looked back. “I won every wrap competition around the world that was worthwhile to win,” he said. “And those competitions are really what made me learn about the industry, expand my network, and meet lifelong friends.”

How wrap universe divine intervention led to a long partnership

It was while walking to dinner after

a WRAPSCON event in 2017 that Duever was flagged down by Justin Pate. Pate had recently been “given the keys” by Avery Dennison to build out the company’s commercial vinyl wrap training program. Duever’s interest was piqued.

“We had met before,” said Duever. “But we hadn’t really gotten to know each other. We weren’t buddies, OK? This was Justin Pate, you know, the ‘Wrap God.’ I was just some nobody.”

The two had a long conversation over dinner. It was only after the fact that Duever realized it was a quasi-interview. The role: Become the first Avery Dennison trainer to work for Pate in North America. Duever was hired and has been a member of the training team to this day.

Vinyl Images today

Duever also continues to lead Vinyl Images’ operations. Destiny and Joe remain involved as well, as head of marketing and head of sales, respectively. The siblings have seen the business become one of the country’s

go-to producers of custom vinyl wraps.

They recently purchased a 15,000-square-foot building in the St. Louis suburb of Pacific, Missouri. Equipment includes two HP 3000-series printers, each capable of producing around 50,000 square feet of print per week without overtime, plus an HP 570 for smaller jobs.

A staff of 24 keeps those printers humming, producing up to 4,500 wraps and graphic packages per year. Most of the wraps are for fleets, based all over the country. Duever said that about 75% of the business is print-and-ship, while a nationwide network of more than 350 independent contractors handle installations on Vinyl Images’ behalf.

“It’s organized chaos at times, but it’s a lot of fun.”

The shop typically relies on Avery Dennison MPI 1105 Easy Apply RS, and has since the early 2010s. They pair the film with either the DOL 1360Z or DOL 1360 Max overlamine, depending on where in the country a wrap is headed.

“There’s nothing better,” said Duever.



Vinyl Images is known for its fleet work. Here, Duever's team sets up the printed graphic panels for installation on this West County Roofing work truck.



In addition to in-person instruction, you can find Duever online as one of the instructors for the Avery Dennison Online Business Bootcamp, where he shares his wrap business acumen with participants.

"The optical clarity of the DOL 1360 is unsurpassed. The self-healing properties are unsurpassed. The overall glossiness is unsurpassed. Then, pair that with the Easy Apply RS technology of the adhesive on the MPI 1105? It's just an unbeatable combination."

WrapIQ: Sharing hard-earned lessons with the next generation of vehicle wrappers

Duever has seen a lot in his two decades as an entrepreneur. And despite his competitive nature, he's embraced the opportunity to share what he's learned through WrapIQ. The podcast and website offer guidance

and perspective to vinyl wrapping professionals at any stage of their careers.

"It's taken me 23 years to get here," said Duever. "But I think now, people could get here in just 10 years with all the technology and available classes. When I first started wrapping, there was one class per year. Now, there's a class every day somewhere with some manufacturer."

We're not here to just participate

When asked what makes an entrepreneur successful, Duever's response is that of someone who knows

what it's like to get up and keep going after being knocked down.

"I made every single mistake you can imagine," he said. "But every time, I learned from it, took notes on it, and made sure that mistake was not made again. It was hard, really hard. I wanted to quit a lot, but I didn't. I listened, got smarter, made some painful changes, and began to dominate my life and my industry."

He continued, "Look, I'm not here to just participate, and I'm not here to 'play.' I've been poor, and I'm not going back. I'm here to create a wonderful company and make my clients look good. And at the end of the day, my job is that simple." **GP**



David Korvah is marketing manager for Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions in Mentor, Ohio. An industry expert with more than two decades of professional

experience, Korvah manages the company's North American marketing and communications strategy for its automotive and fleet segments. A graduate of Kent State University, Korvah is a recognized leader in global product launches, brand positioning, and integrated industrial campaigns.

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The sublimation process:

A practical guide for decorators

By Jackie Faeth

Trends come and go,

but bold, long-lasting designs are never going out of style, especially when those prints can be easily replicated, personalized, and affordably produced.

Sublimation printing allows decorators to reproduce vivid, full-color images that resist scratching, chipping, peeling, and fading when properly produced. The process is also remarkably inexpensive, with ink and paper costs running around a penny per square inch for most standard prints.

It's a versatile print solution that can produce custom prints, even photographs, on everything from mugs and apparel to photo panels, puzzles, glass blocks, and home decor. For many decorators, a single breakout product is

all it takes to build a profitable business around sublimation.

Before you invest in equipment or start promising custom orders to clients, it helps to understand what sublimation is, how it works, what you need to get started, and its limitations.

What is sublimation?

Sublimation, sometimes called dye-sub or dye-sublimation, is a decorating technique that uses heat and pressure to transfer a special sublimation ink directly into a gas, bypassing the liquid phase entirely. That gas penetrates polyester fibers or polyester-coated surfaces and then cools back into a solid, making the image a permanent part of the substrate rather than sitting on top of it.

This scientific bond is what sets sublimation apart from methods like heat-transfer vinyl, UV-LED printing, or screen printing, which apply ink or material to the surface of a product. Sublimated designs are infused into the material itself, which is why they hold up so well over time and why the finished prints feel smooth to the touch with no raised texture.

Understanding the sublimation process

Sublimation is a big word for a straightforward process! After printing your design on special sublimation paper, the process begins with the application of heat and pressure to your sublimation blank. Here's a detailed breakdown of the steps:

STEP

1

Create the design

Everything starts with a digital file. Whether it's a logo, photograph, or original artwork, the design should be crafted or prepared using graphic design software like Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator. For optimal color accuracy, ensure the file is in CMYK color mode, and remember to mirror the image before printing to guarantee proper transfer.

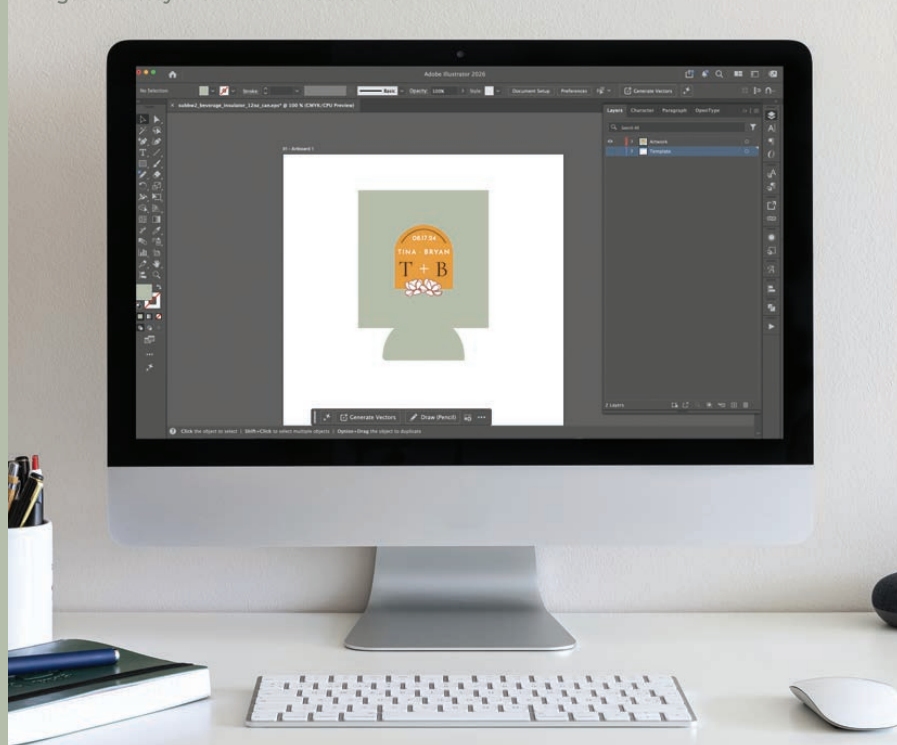
STEP

2

Print onto sublimation transfer paper

Utilize a dedicated sublimation printer, like an Epson SureColor F170 or a Sawgrass SubliJet SG1000, equipped with specialized sublimation dye inks, to print the mirrored design onto coated sublimation transfer paper. You will need sublimation-specific papers, as it's designed to hold the dye until heat is applied, at which point the dye transforms into gas.

Images courtesy of Johnson Plastics Plus





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What you need to get started

Sublimation has a relatively low barrier to entry with a high rate of return. A functional setup can be assembled for as little as \$1,500, depending on the quality and capacity of the equipment.

Here's the full checklist of what you'll need to start sublimating:

- **Sublimation printer:** Epson and Sawgrass are popular options.
- **A way to apply heat and pressure:** This could be a heat press, a convection oven, or a mug press.
- **Sublimation ink:** You'll need special sublimation inks. These will often come with your printer.
- **Sublimation transfer paper:** You need special sublimation-specific transfer paper.
- **Blow-out paper:** If you're using a heat press, this will help protect your platen from any ink that has off-gassed.
- **Heat-resistant tape:** Since sublimation requires high temperatures, you'll need a heat-resistant tape to avoid melting.
- **Polyester-coated blanks:** Sublimation requires a polyester-coated blank that is light colored or white.
- **Design software:** You'll need to create your designs using design software. Certain models and printers offer this as part of the printer package.
- **We also recommend scissors, heat gloves, and a computer to run your printer.**

Workspace basics

Sublimation requires a flat, heat-safe surface for the press, adequate ventilation, and storage for blanks and supplies. You can easily set up a sublimation station without sacrificing a lot of square footage!

What can you make with sublimation?

The product versatility is one of sublimation's strongest selling points. JPPlus.com offers hundreds of sublimation-ready blanks. Some examples are listed below:

STEP

3

Prepare the blank

Once you have your print ready, it's time to press!

Whether your substrate is a polyester T-shirt, a polyester-coated mug, or a metal photo panel, you'll want to ensure the item is clean, dry, and free from lint or moisture. For fabrics, a lint roll and a brief pre-press of five to 10 seconds removes wrinkles and any moisture that might interfere with the transfer. A simple wipe-down is typically adequate for hard goods to remove any dust or debris. You'll also want to ensure any protective masking is removed before you press.

STEP

4

Position & secure the transfer

Place the printed transfer paper ink-side down against the substrate, securing it with heat-resistant tape around all edges. This prevents any shifting during pressing, which could result in ghosting or blurred edges in the final image.

STEP

5

Apply heat & pressure

Insert the substrate and transfer into a heat press, convection oven, or mug press. You can find details about time, temperatures, and pressure for specific blanks on jpplus.com under "Tech Tips and Downloads." Follow the instructions for your specific item, and during this phase, the heat converts the solid dye into gas, allowing it to penetrate the polyester fibers or coating and bond at a molecular level.

STEP

6

Peel, cool & inspect

After pressing, carefully remove the transfer paper (be careful, it's hot!). Allow the item to cool, as the dye solidifies within the substrate, embedding the design permanently. Conduct a quick quality check for color saturation, complete coverage, and clean edges to confirm the print is ready for packaging or delivery.



Soft goods

- T-shirts, scarves, hats, and visors
- Tote bags, pouches, and garden flags
- Mouse pads and polyester technology accessories

Hard goods

- Ceramic mugs, tumblers, and water bottles
- Metal photo panels, license plates, and signs
- Glass blocks, ornaments, and decorative tiles
- Puzzles, coasters, and wind spinners
- Pet tags, keychains, and luggage tags

Personalization & custom orders

Sublimation offers a unique opportunity for personalization because each print is produced digitally from a design file; there is no setup cost per design. That makes it ideal for one-off custom orders, small-batch runs, names and numbers on team jerseys,

photo gifts, and seasonal or event-based merchandise.

Limitations of sublimation

Sublimation is powerful, but it's not a universal solution. Understanding its constraints upfront prevents costly mistakes and disappointed customers.

No white ink

Sublimation ink is transparent, which means there is no way to print true white. Designs rely on the substrate's own color for any white areas in the image. This is why sublimation blanks are almost always white or very light colored.

Polyester or polymer coating required

Sublimation bonds only with polyester fibers or polymer-coated surfaces. It does not work on 100% cotton, uncoated wood, bare metal, or natural fiber fabrics like silk. For



cotton garments, alternative methods like direct-to-film or heat-transfer vinyl are better suited.

Light-colored substrates only

Because the dye is transparent, it only shows up vibrantly on white or light-colored surfaces. Dark or black substrates will not display the design properly. If dark garment printing is a core part of your business, sublimation alone will not cover it.



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UV sensitivity

Sublimated prints can fade over time if permanently exposed to direct sunlight. For outdoor applications or items left in sun-exposed windows, this is worth noting both for your own production decisions and for setting customer expectations.

Print size limitations

The maximum printable area is constrained by the size of your heat press platen and your printer's width. Large-format sublimation requires larger, more expensive equipment, so product size is something to factor into your initial investment decision.

Should you invest in sublimation?

Sublimation offers a rare combination in the decorating world: professional-quality output, low startup costs, minimal per-print expense, and genuine versatility across both hard and soft goods.

For businesses looking to add personalization capabilities, launch a product line, or expand an existing decoration operation, it's one of the most accessible entry points available.

The smartest way to begin is simple: pick one product category, invest in a solid entry-level setup from a reliable vendor, learn the process thoroughly on that substrate, and let demand guide your expansion. The equipment is affordable, the learning curve is manageable, and the market for personalized, full-color products is not slowing down. **GP**



■ Jackie Faeth

has been with The Rowmark Group since 2018 and currently works as marketing coordinator with a focus

on content development.

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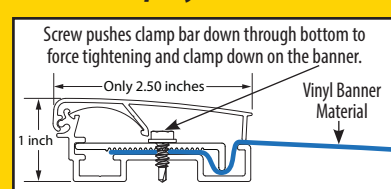
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The margin isn't in the ink

Four premium-margin applications for short-run UV printing

By Lon Riley

A customer asks

a shop with a UV printer to produce 24 pieces, each with a different name, title, or image. The blank products are inexpensive, the selling price looks strong, and the deadline is close enough to support a rush charge. On the surface, it looks like an ideal short-run order. Then the files arrive in three formats. Two names change after approval. Every item has to be positioned by hand, and one damaged piece requires the entire setup to be rebuilt.

That is the tension inside short-run UV printing. Customers will pay more for something personal, exclusive, or urgently needed, but a premium selling price does not guarantee a premium margin. The real math is in file preparation, setup, proofing, repeated handling, operator attention, waste, reprints, and the other work the order may displace.

The opportunity is not simply to print a small quantity. It is to choose applications in which customization creates meaningful value, then control the variation well enough to keep that value from being consumed by production complexity.

Why does UV printing fit short-run customization?

UV printing is well suited to short runs because a digital file can move into production without creating screens or plates for every design. Names, numbers, images, and messages can change from one item to the next, while UV light cures the ink during printing so many products can move directly to inspection, finishing, or packing. That supports low quantities, quick artwork changes, and products created for a specific person, team, event, location, or customer.

Depending on the UV printer, ink set, and preparation process, shops can print directly on properly tested acrylic, wood, coated metal, plastic, glass, and other rigid or specialty materials. White ink can support designs on dark or transparent products. Clear ink or varnish can add selective gloss, contrast, or texture. Those capabilities can make a small batch feel more distinctive without requiring a large production run.

Versatility alone does not create margin. The right application combines high perceived value with a stable product, proven print settings, and a repeatable way to position, print, inspect, and replace each item. Four categories illustrate that balance particularly well.

1 Awards, recognition & donor programs

Recognition products command a premium because the buyer is purchasing meaning, presentation, and a deadline — not simply a printed object. Personalized acrylic awards, milestone pieces, donor-recognition elements, commemorative plaques,

and employee awards can use white ink, clear effects, or layered artwork to create visual depth on relatively small quantities.

The production base can stay stable: the blank, print area, fixture, design system, and approved settings remain the same. Names, titles, dates, achievement levels, or donor categories change. Margin is threatened when data arrives late, spelling is not formally approved, presentation packaging is underestimated, or one replacement piece cannot be reproduced without rebuilding the job. A controlled proofing process is as important as the print itself.

2 Sports, tournaments & event merchandise

Sports and event products gain value from identity and timing. Team awards, player gifts, sponsor pieces, tournament signage, commemorative items, and event-specific merchandise can be produced in low quantities with different names, numbers, teams, sponsors, or dates. The customer may pay a premium because the product belongs to one event and loses much of





its value after that moment passes.

Wedding-related products follow the same pattern: personalization and a fixed event date increase the value of a small run, while approval can often be streamlined through one decision-maker.

A profitable program limits the moving parts. Approved templates, standard product sizes, and fixtures remain fixed while controlled fields change. The biggest margin risks are rushed data, last-minute sponsor revisions, one-off layouts, and a schedule with no room for proofing or replacement. For deadline-driven work, reliability, and recovery time matter as much as print speed.

3 Corporate kits & promotional products

Corporate buyers may need fewer, more relevant pieces or thousands of identical items. Short-run ultra-personalized jobs can complement larger, more generic product runs, and vice versa. Recipient-specific sales kits, executive gifts, onboarding materials, branded samples, nameplates, and small-batch promotional products can be customized by person, office, territory, campaign, or customer. Unusual substrates, white ink, and selective clear effects can make the offer harder to compare with a standard catalog item.

Corporate gift boxes can be especially strong-margin applications when the same box, product mix, placement, and packaging system can be reused for different recipients, campaigns, or occasions.

The shop can standardize the product family, dimensions, print areas, packaging, and core artwork while

changing names, roles, messages, or approved logos. The hidden risk often comes after printing: sorting, matching multiple components, individual packaging and shipping. Those services create value, but they must be designed and priced as part of the application rather than treated as free finishing work.

4 Limited-edition & location-specific retail

Short-run UV printing also supports numbered collections, seasonal products, museum or destination merchandise, local collaborations, and location-specific retail goods. The premium comes from exclusivity and relevance. A retailer can test a concept or serve a narrow audience without committing to a large quantity of finished inventory.

The repeatable base might be one proven blank, fixture, and print recipe used across several approved designs. Artwork, numbering, location, or season changes. Margin disappears when the shop offers too many untested products, changes materials between batches, or creates so many variations that setup and inventory become difficult to manage. A limited collection should feel expansive to the customer while remaining narrow enough to produce predictably.

Find the customization sweet spot

These applications share the same economic pattern: meaningful variation on top of a stable production base. To the customer, the result feels personal or scarce. To the shop, the product, dimensions, fixture, print settings, and most of the artwork remain repeatable.

The strongest offer is often not unlimited customization. It is a defined menu that gives the buyer valuable choices inside a system the shop knows how to produce. Three product sizes, two finish options, and several variable fields may deliver more reliable margins than an open-ended promise to change any element at any time. Low volume should not mean low discipline.

Count the cost of attention

One of the easiest costs to overlook is attention. A task that takes 30 seconds may feel insignificant until it is repeated 200 times. That is 100 minutes of labor before interruptions, fatigue, or mistakes. Manual positioning, alignment checks, opening individual files, copying data, and monitoring an unstable process all take pieces of the premium back.

This is why advertised UV printer speed alone is a poor measure of short-run profitability. The relevant speed includes file preparation, white or clear layers, loading, unloading, inspection, packaging, and the operator time required to keep work moving. An order can also make money on paper and still be a poor use of capacity if it occupies a critical machine, depends on one experienced operator, and delays more repeatable work.

Build the UV print workflow around the application

Profitable short-run customization begins before the order reaches the UV printer. A shop should decide what stays fixed, what may vary, and how each variable will move through approval and production. Several practices protect margin across all four application categories:



- Standardize UV-printable product families, substrates, and print areas so proven settings, adhesion methods, and handling procedures can be reused.
- Build templates that separate fixed artwork from variable names, numbers, images, or messages, then batch variable data through the design or RIP workflow when possible.
- Use reusable fixtures or jigs that make placement repeatable and allow one damaged item to be reproduced without restarting the entire job.
- Create a UV print preflight for final size, image quality, fonts, color settings, and any white, clear, varnish, or texture layers required by the production system.
- Test the actual substrate for adhesion, scratch resistance, cleaning, and intended use; document any primer or pretreatment required.
- Make the customer responsible for approving spelling, dates, images, and variable data before production begins.
- Document the process clearly enough that more than one trained operator can run it with confidence.

Price the complexity, not only the printed object

A low-cost blank can create the illusion of a huge margin. To understand what an order actually contributes, subtract more than materials and ink:

Order contribution = selling price
- blanks and materials - consumables

- file and data preparation - setup and fixtures - operator labor - waste and reprints - packaging and fulfillment.

That figure is not final profit because the shop still has overhead, equipment costs, and a required return. But it is more useful than subtracting only the cost of the blank and the ink. Dividing contribution by the production hours the order occupies also helps compare custom work with other jobs competing for the same capacity.

Substrate testing can change the economics at any run length. In one large-quantity plastics project, preliminary testing showed that the selected material required three separate pretreatment steps to meet the customer's adhesion requirements. Identifying that process before production allowed the job to be priced to account for the additional labor, materials, and time.

Setup, artwork, variable data, rush service, special handling, individual packaging, and fulfillment may warrant separate fees or clear pricing tiers. A name change across 50 pieces is not the same service as 50 different images with individual shipping addresses. The quote should make that distinction visible.

A profitability preflight for short-run UV printing

Before quoting a premium-margin UV printing application, ask:

- Why will the customer pay a premium: personalization, urgency, exclusivity, special effects, low quantity, or reduced inventory risk?
- Which product, artwork, and

production elements remain fixed, and which elements change?

- Has the actual substrate been tested, and can the item be positioned consistently in a reusable fixture?
- Can variable information be received, approved, and processed as a batch?
- How many operator touches does each piece require before it is packed or fulfilled?
- Can one damaged item be reproduced without rebuilding the entire setup?
- Does the schedule allow for proofing, corrections, and possible reprints?
- What other production will this order delay or displace?

Make uniqueness repeatable

The most profitable shops do not treat every custom order as a new experiment. They build repeatable systems capable of producing something unique. When the application creates real customer value, the workflow controls variation, and the price reflects the full job, short-run UV printing can make each piece matter more without allowing complexity to consume the margin. **GP**



Lon Riley is an engineer and printing industry veteran, and the founder and CEO of DPI Laboratory, a digital print innovation company headquartered in St.

Petersburg, Florida. DPI Laboratory develops UV printing systems, inks, specialty coatings, and workflow consulting solutions.

Gear up for the holiday season with *custom gift options*

By Cheryl Loban

As new gift items

arrive each year, the months before the holiday shopping season are the perfect time to refresh your showroom or website and make sure memorable gift options are readily available to your customers. From practical pieces to higher-end keepsakes, personalized products are meaningful, memorable, and available at many price points, giving customers useful options for almost any recipient.

Blanks

If you offer UV printing, you can choose from a wide range of blanks in multiple sizes, including double- and single-sided pieces, to create vibrant full-color photo reproductions, art prints, and keepsakes. Family photos, vacation memories, special-event images, and even children's artwork can all be preserved and shared as thoughtful gifts. Smaller UV-print blanks, such as dog tags, luggage tags, and business cards, are also well suited for employee or customer appreciation gifts, promotional pieces, or holiday giveaways for businesses and organizations.

Aluminum blanks resist rust and corrosion, and white UV-cured inks create a durable, scratch-resistant surface. Flexible PVC plastic blanks with nearly full-coverage magnetic backing offer strong holding power and are available in multiple sizes. Customized magnets work well as promotional gifts, employee incentives, and customizable retail items for gift shops, souvenir shops, or fundraisers.

These versatile blanks are compatible with UV, screen, inkjet, and flatbed digital printing, as well as decals and vinyl graphics, giving you several decorating options.

Canvas bags

Personalized canvas tote bags are another practical choice for customers who need multiple gifts or want something useful. Available in several sizes and styles, canvas bags can be decorated with full-color direct-to-film (DTF) printing. They are budget-friendly for businesses and organizations, and they can also

become thoughtful hosting gifts when filled with smaller items such as food, coasters, mugs, kitchen towels, or personal gifts. For children, they can be filled with craft supplies, books, small toys, or clothing for a personalized surprise. With so many ways to customize and fill them, canvas tote bags offer strong potential for both personal and promotional gifting. They also make ideal swag bags for conventions or corporate events.

Trays, coasters & cutting boards

For customers who prefer a more refined, home-inspired gift, serving



Images courtesy of JDS Industries



trays and coasters are a natural fit. These pieces combine the durability and beauty of acacia wood and can be customized with laser engraving for natural contrast, color-filled for a bolder look, or decorated with UV or UV-DTF printing for added color. Rectangle acacia wood trays with gold handles and round trays with raised edges feature blue or white resin accents, making each piece distinct.

If serving trays appeal to your customers, acacia wood cutting boards are an easy companion product. Available in rectangular and paddle shapes in multiple sizes, they include carry handles and either white or blue resin accents or white or black marble accents. Round and square coasters in coordinating finishes can also be personalized. These items make attractive standalone gifts, or they can be paired as matching sets or mixed for a custom presentation. Durable enough for everyday use, they also complement a wide range of decor styles.

Drinkware

Stainless steel, double-wall vacuum-insulated drinkware remains very popular, from tumblers in multiple

sizes to water bottles and travel mugs. Powder coating adds durability and visual appeal, and it works well with laser engraving, UV printing, and UV-DTF printing. A 64-oz. double-wall vacuum-insulated pitcher provides a convenient way to refill coordinating drinkware while offering the same durability, appearance, and temperature-retention benefits. Like the drinkware, the powder-coated finish customizes beautifully with the same decorating methods. Add an optional tea or fruit infuser to the pitcher for even more versatility. Pair these pitchers with coordinating drinkware for a useful, long-lasting gift set, or offer them as a standout gift on their own.

For gifts with higher perceived value, quality glass decanter sets are a classic, polished option for personalized gifts or corporate incentives. With several decanter styles available in sets that include matching rocks glasses, you can offer customers choices in size, style, and customization. Other glassware options can also be decorated with a monogram, logo, or other graphics to create heirloom-quality gifts for personal or corporate giving.

Wind chimes

Wind chimes are another increasingly popular gift and can be personalized to create something truly one-of-a-kind. They can be made from many materials, each with its own sound; wood or bamboo produces an earthy tone, glass or ceramic creates a higher pitch, and brass or copper delivers a rich, gong-like tone. Aluminum wind chimes are especially popular because they are durable and can withstand harsher outdoor conditions. Their hollow tubes create a resonant, deep tone with a relaxing effect. Powder coating adds durability and a beautiful finish for personalization with laser engraving, UV printing, or UV-DTF printing, creating a gift that can be enjoyed year after year.

Holiday sales

By planning early and offering a mix of customizable gifts, you can help your customers find products that feel personal and lasting. Whether you produce items in-house or outsource what you don't have the time or equipment to complete, a well-rounded holiday gift lineup can make seasonal shoppers repeat customers while generating valuable word-of-mouth referrals and boosting year-end sales. **GP**



Cheryl Loban is the Communications Specialist at JDS Industries. She joined JDS in March of 2001 as a customer service rep and worked in various

roles in that capacity over the past 20-plus years. Loban moved into her marketing position in 2019.

childrenswear market insights

Q&A with Stephanie Anzalone, director of merchandising
and design for LAT Apparel/Rabbit Skins

By Marie Fennema

When you think of

decorated apparel, your mind likely goes to adult-sized garments and designs. However, clothing for the younger generations offers an additional segment that your shop can serve — from infants to toddlers and up through the varying sizes of youth. We chatted with Stephanie Anzalone, director of merchandising and design for LAT Apparel/Rabbit Skins, about the current childrenswear market and opportunities decorators can find within it.

Q: How would you describe the current state of the childrenswear market?

A: Currently, I would describe the childrenswear market as resilient. Parents are still spending, but are becoming much more intentional, prioritizing quality, product differentiation, and relevance to the child.

Q: What are you seeing/can we expect to see trending in childrenswear along the lines

of colors, fabrics, fits, and decoration methods?

- 1. Colors:** Nature-inspired tones alongside more intentional pops of color. Earthy neutrals, washed tones, and playful brights. We'll see a big uptick in the color Royal, since a trend forecasting firm named it the color of the year.
- 2. Fabrics/materials:** Comfort and versatility remain key. Growth in elevated basics, sustainable product offerings and fabrics with a lived-in feel.



Images courtesy
of LAT Apparel/
Rabbit Skins



3. Fits: More relaxed, boxy silhouettes continue to grow in the youth category, while younger childrenswear remains focused on comfort and easy-to-move-in silhouettes.

4. Decoration methods: Soft-hand screen prints, embroidery, special dye effects. Texture and dimension are becoming important in creating perceived value.

Q: Have there been any major updates or changes in safety standards?

A: Not any major updates, but compliance and testing requirements continue to be strictly enforced, particularly around flammability and lead/phthalates.

Q: What opportunities might apparel decorators be missing out on in the childrenswear market?

A: Moving beyond the traditional graphic tee and capitalizing on the growing demand for personalization and elevated decoration through embroidery, patches, appliques, and/or tonal graphics. Kids are increasingly influencing their own clothing decisions, creating greater opportunity for products that feel personal.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share about childrenswear with our readers?

A: I think the biggest opportunity in childrenswear is continuing to bridge the gap between what parents value and what kids want. The brands that can deliver quality, comfort, and value while still giving kids a sense of individuality and self-expression will have the strongest opportunity for growth. **GP**



Marie Fennema is the managing editor at GRAPHICS PRO. She can be reached at mfennema@cahabamedia.com



Live & Tell™

BY L.A.T.

A Hoodie Bold Enough to Carry His Confidence.

It started as a last-minute grab on the way out the door – just a simple fleece with a design that felt a bit more “him” than anything else in the closet. But somewhere between 8 a.m. lectures, late-night study sessions, interviews, and coffee runs, that hoodie became the piece he reaches for when he needs to feel like his best self.

Ideal for Modern Brands

Reliable hoodies, crews, and tees for student orgs, micro-brands, recruitment events, and campus stores – keeping color, feel, and fit consistent across the line.

Built for Repeat Wear

Soft interiors and durable exteriors that stand up to backpack straps, library chairs, and endless washes, so your prints stay sharp while the garment breaks in just right.

A Badge of Pride

Comfortable cuts and on-trend colors let you create merch students are proud to wear, turning your work into moving billboards for clubs, causes, and brands all over campus.



Scan to watch
Live & Tell in action.

From prompt to press

AI art has become the new napkin sketch

By Lon Winters

There are times we realize that technology has evolved, but the job really hasn't. A client is proud of something they've created and can't wait to get it on a shirt. Maybe 30 or 40 years ago, it might have been a scribble on a bar napkin or pencil sketch. Five or 10 years ago, it may have been something they found online. Today, many times, it's an image generated

with artificial intelligence. Whether we're AI enthusiasts or skeptics doesn't matter because customers are using these tools. We still aren't sure *how* we feel about it. They don't see compression artifacts, muddy shadows, impossible lighting or infinite color transitions. It's today's digital equivalent of the bar napkin. Our job is not to debate how the art was created.

It is, simply, to make it printable.

Rocky Mountain Honors Camp (RMHC) recently brought us this challenge. RMHC is a faith-based camp for middle and high schoolers filled with Bible study, worship, games, competitions, and lifelong friendships. Every summer they order shirts for campers and staff. Previous designs had been simple and basic. This year,

Prompt...



One Flag, One Country, One Savior - 2026



One Flag, One Country, One Savior - 2026

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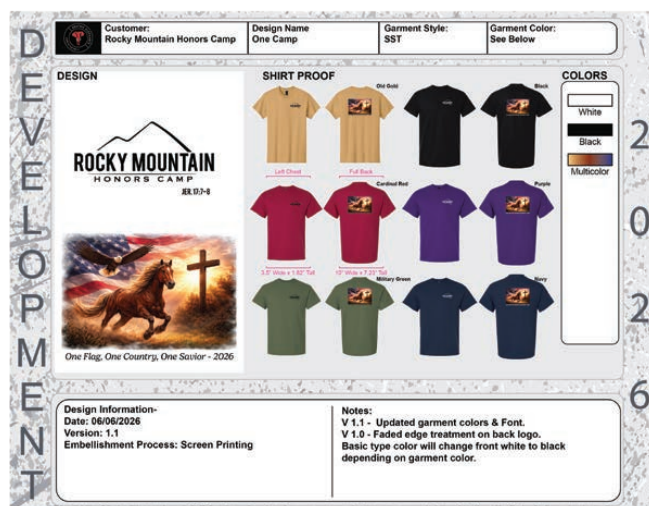
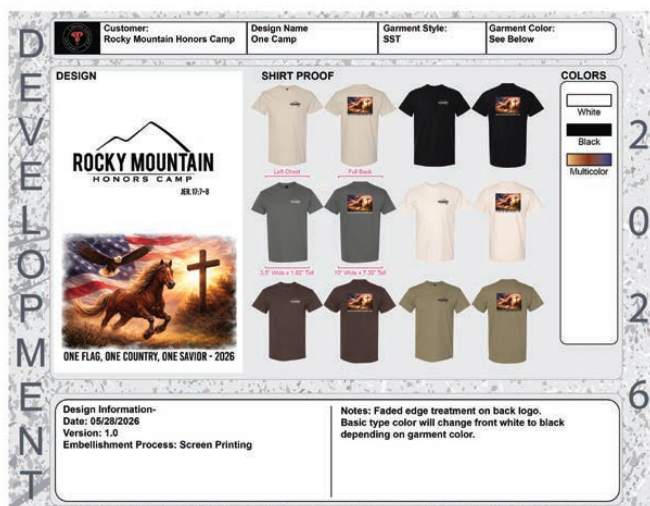
however, someone was playing with AI. They proudly provided a file of an illustration featuring a galloping horse, a flowing American flag, a soaring eagle, and an illuminated cross. Regardless of where the artwork originated, they loved it.

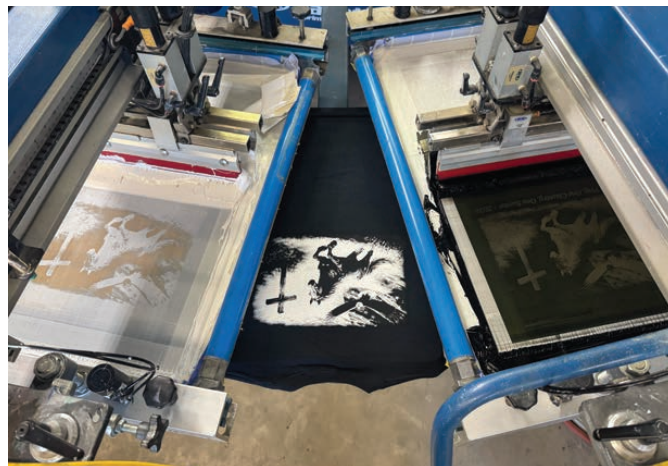
As is often the case with AI artwork, the image looked wonderful but wasn't production ready. It arrived as a simple rectangular composition that looked like a post card. A big rectangle printed on a shirt looks glued, and that's not a great look. After an upscale to size at 300 DPI in Adobe Photoshop, the image underwent a makeover

before we went to separations. To add an edge treatment to break up the shape we used textured brushes for an irregular distressed border to lift the art off the background.

AI illustrations often contain lighting, shadows, highlights, and color transitions that look beautiful

on a monitor, tablet, or phone but become problematic for printing. Using Levels, Curves, and Selective Color adjustments, we tried to maintain depth throughout while preserving the warm brown tones of the horse. The reds in the flag were strengthened while trying not to oversaturate the





entire image, while the blue field behind the eagle was adjusted to delineate it from the darker shadows. We opened up the area around the cross while keeping the brightest highlights. We knew that relying on ink to create light and shadow rather than a backlit monitor would have its limitations. The goal wasn't to make the image better, but rather to make it at least printable.

The line of copy beneath, "One Flag,

One Country, One Savior – 2026," was built in Adobe Illustrator. Rasterized type, particularly from AI, doesn't have crisp edges, but recreating the type as vector remedied that. Rather than attempting to reduce the full-color illustration to left chest size, we created a simple vector type solution that was clean and readable.

Once Photoshop optimization was completed, we moved separation. Simulated process was the choice

because of the continuous tone imagery. Normally, we automatically think black shirts because that's where our sim process printing shines. Super contrast, no black screen needed, predictable transitions, neutral grayscale, and color influence, shadows fade into the black fabric and highlights jump. This project turned our usual assumptions upside down. Out of 300 shirts, only seven were black. Purple, green, cardinal, navy, and gold. The

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black shirt wasn't the resource it normally is. Colored garments have influence on the final print. Transitions behave differently. Color balance shifts. The garment color participates in the image. While separating using channels on black would still be standard operating procedure, we would need to create a black screen — not only for the black areas, but also for the shadows. Almost the reverse of the white printer or base plate. Essentially, we built a gray scale under the colors.

Halftone frequencies and screen angles were selected at 55 LPI and 22.5 degrees. The screens were imaged using computer to screen (CTS) and were all tensioned to 45 N/cm². The

sequence began with a smoothing screen followed by black through an N-228 threads per inch (TPI) mesh, then the white printer on an N-166 before the first flash. Another smoothing station knocked down the fibers on the surface before brown, royal, red, and gold were printed on N-272s. A second flash was followed by the highlight white on an N-228. The most difficult piece on press was the highlight white. We call it a blending white. Too much and the image became pasty. Too little and the stars 'n' stripes and the burst surrounding the cross didn't pop. The ink was reduced 50%, and to get it right, squeegee pressure, speed, angle, and durometer were all adjusted.

AI didn't eliminate any of the technical challenges. In fact, it created a few new ones. Artificial intelligence generated an interesting concept, but it didn't determine how it would work on six different garment colors. Technology continues to change the tools we use, but craftsmanship remains constant. Customers will create AI generated images, but they'll still depend on experienced decorators to transform them into decorated apparel.

When production was complete, 300 shirts were boxed and ready for camp. It may not have been our very best work, but most importantly, the customer loved them. Campers won't care about the highlight white adjustments. They'll remember wearing those shirts during worship, competitions, campfire conversations, and friendships that will last long after the ink has cured. Whether the artwork began as a sketch on a napkin or an AI prompt doesn't matter. The process remains what it's always been. **GP**



Lon Winters is founder and president of Colorado-based Graphic Elephants, an apparel decorating studio and international consulting firm. He was inducted

into the Academy of Screen and Digital Printing Technologies in 2013 and is widely recognized for his contribution to the graphic printing industry. Learn more at graphicelephants.com.

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PROFIT ON DEMAND FOR PROMO DISTRIBUTORS

FREE | OCTOBER 22 | 12 P.M. CENTRAL

As demand for personalized merchandise, employee stores, corporate gifting, and short-run production continues to rise, promotional products distributors need scalable solutions that don't require inventory investment or additional operational complexity. This webinar explores how print-on-demand technology is helping distributors grow revenue, expand product catalogs, and fulfill orders more efficiently.

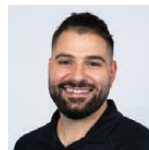
Attendees will learn how to:

- Capitalize on growing demand for personalized and on-demand products
- Launch branded online stores and employee merchandise programs
- Create profitable corporate gifting and holiday merchandise campaigns
- Eliminate inventory risk and reduce manual order management

- Expand product offerings without adding production equipment or staff
- Automate fulfillment workflows and supplier sourcing with Fulfill Engine
- Build scalable, recurring revenue programs that keep customers engaged year-round

Discover how STAHL'S Fulfill Engine helps promotional products distributors simplify fulfillment, streamline operations, and unlock new growth opportunities through print-on-demand merchandising.

SPEAKER



Vince Fiore
*Creative Content
Producer*
STAHL'S



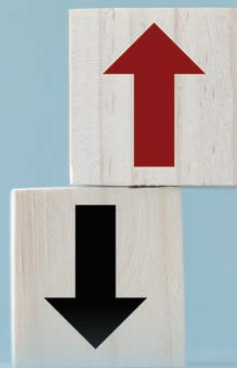
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The highs & lows of chasing fast trends for big money

Just because you can, doesn't mean it's worth it

By Cole Lundstrom



This past spring,

a baby macaque started cuddling with an IKEA plush toy. In that moment, a viral sensation emerged, and businesses rushed to capitalize on it. A simple \$20 toy began reselling on eBay for \$355, and sites like Etsy were flooded with baby monkey merch within 24 hours. For a print shop, the problem isn't whether you can make the item — of course you can. The issue is that the sales window can close as fast as it opened. Entire businesses run on viral trend merch, but how do you make sure the item arrives at a client's door before the meme is dead? It is this issue that makes fast

trend apparel not only lucrative, but the easiest way to be sitting on unsellable inventory.

Make it fast or don't even try

Punch the Monkey is a clean case study in compressed demand. Sellers had product listed roughly two days after the image appeared; no traditional supply chain can handle that sort of turn. With a standard print shop offering 7-10 day turns on bulk orders with no fulfillment options, sellers have no choice but to turn to print on demand. Yes, it greatly reduces their margin, but you can't reference a meme two weeks after people saw it. It's now or never.

Social media platforms have collapsed the distance between attention and purchase intent, and the shops that captured that demand were not the ones with the deepest inventory.

That is a structural change in who gets the big opportunities. DTF transfers, DTG, and stocked blanks let a shop put a design on a shirt the same day it lands, without committing to screens, film, and a minimum run before demand is proven. You need to build a system for success regardless of the meme. It's not about the joke or moment; it is about the infrastructure to actually fulfill the order rapidly.

As Ricky Bobby said, 'I wanna go fast!'

The "Stevie Knicks" shirt is another great example of a stupidly easy idea being a hit with millions. Musician and actress Alana Haim reportedly made it on a Cricut using \$3 Gildan blanks from Michaels. Taylor Swift wore it courtside at the NBA Finals on June 10, and knockoff versions were online within hours. So, while you sit looking at your equipment worth tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, a musician with a Cricut got more eyeballs and earned media impressions than your business will ever see. It kind of stings, but it shows the power of being ready for the right moment.

Can your shop take a design from file to credible sample, photograph the actual product rather than a mockup, and fulfill a small batch without pulling a press off a contract job or missing a paying customer's deadline?

Scrambling to chase a trend needs to be an active business plan, not just a whim because you happen to be scrolling on your phone. Build your system for rapid production and shipping and it allows you to automate trend printing (trend research is something AI excels at) and not end up underwater with too much due and missed deadlines.

Don't chase the trend — plan for it

Not every opportunity is the same. The LABUBU x FIFA World Cup collaboration moved roughly \$150 collectibles that sold out within hours

across 40 countries: explosive, brief, and effectively over before most shops could react. “2026 is the new 2016” is a different animal, a nostalgia frame loose enough to carry dozens of original designs across shirts, totes, and accessories, with a runway measured in months. Kool-Aid pineapples showed how a strange but instantly readable image can travel on legibility alone. America250 is the opposite of a meme entirely: a fixed anniversary you could have been sourcing blanks and building artwork for a year in advance.

Sort trends by how they behave, and schedule accordingly. Surprises can come out of nowhere, but if you somehow made no money during the World Cup, that is entirely your fault. Calendar-focused planning can have you front and center for the hottest events and allow you to grow rapidly. Treating events that have been scheduled the same way you treat a surprise viral moment is a massive missed opportunity I see too often in small shops scrambling to make whatever they can, but running without a clear path.

You are trying to make money, stupid

The only point of running a print shop is to make money. Too often I have seen shops be so proud of the stack of pallets on their Instagram reel that they forget to account for all the costs trend work quietly adds: art time, rush labor, spoilage of blanks, expedited shipping, marketplace fees, and the very high cost of not selling through your inventory in time. This summer I was walking through Manhattan, and I bought a Mexico World Cup jersey for \$8 just a day after they lost. Be extremely careful with excess inventory because interests can change in hours.

I love screen printing as much as almost anyone I know, but DTF and DTG are truly the king here. If you are dealing with multiple garments, sizes, colors, and potential variations of designs, you will likely not scale any one item quickly enough to justify the screen run. But this is not always the case, that one-color Stevie Knicks tee

being the perfect example of an easy win with screen printing.

Don't forget: copyright is a very real thing

Knick-Knacks, a site selling unofficial Knicks championship merchandise, got more than 250,000 visitors before the NBA shut them down. Traffic like that is evidence people wanted their designs. But the dudes were not allowed to sell it, making them basically the best bootleggers on the internet. Even if people love it, you may not have the right to print it, and you do not want to be on the wrong side of a billion-dollar corporation's lawyers because you chased a quick buck.

Team names and logos, league marks, championship phrasing, celebrity names and likenesses, song lyrics, brand identities, character art, and photography are all owned by someone, and so is a good deal of the artwork circulating in trend-design groups. The fact that Etsy or Shopify hasn't taken down your listing is not proof you are safe. Enforcement is usually complaint-driven, which means it arrives after you have already printed. The exposure is not limited to a takedown, either. It can mean chargebacks, a suspended seller account, or a letter from counsel.

You need to straddle the line of reacting quickly to a cultural moment and not infringing on someone else's rights. The first is a design problem. The second is a legal one. When rights are unclear, licensed programs and genuinely original art are the lane that lets you keep selling next month. If you have an amazing opportunity but it's on the line, then it's time to run it past an attorney. And if you can't afford an attorney, then it's not actually that big of an opportunity.

A good example is when my friend ran afoul of the whiskey brand Jack Daniel's with one of his designs. The company not only got his designs pulled instantly, but they came after him for all sales connected to the T-shirt and attorney fees. He lost about \$220,000 by the time it was finally settled. These corporations are not messing around.



AI + data = real opportunities

Set up an automation with Claude or Codex to find the best trending memes and moments in your niche daily.

1. Look at real numbers, not personal enthusiasm: search volume, inbound asks, and competitor listings.
2. Check rights before you produce or promote. Assume someone owns it.
3. Always tell customers the real arrival date for their merchandise. No one wants to buy a trending item today and get it in a month.
4. Create a real sample and photograph the actual product. Buyers don't trust mockups or worse, AI slop.
5. Set a kill date. Remember you must not be stuck with dead inventory; it will destroy any margin you have.
6. Track true margin after fees, labor, spoilage, and shipping.
7. Make sure to capture the customers for future marketing. You can reach out to those NBA fans every season.

The competitive advantage is not predicting every viral moment. Nobody does that reliably. It is running a shop that can recognize a real opportunity, respond to it quickly, and still make a disciplined decision about whether it is worth the press time. **GP**



Cole Lundstrom is the founder of MerchTrop.com, specializing in live event apparel activations for brands and experiential marketing.

With 16 years in the print industry, he's now launching PrintShopCRM.com, a workflow and automation platform built specifically for print shops to scale smarter and operate more profitably.

PRODUCT PICKS

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



OFAY Youth Old Favorite Trucker

Legacy's Youth Old Favorite Trucker hat is constructed of 65% cotton/35% polyester blend in a dirty washed cotton twill crown and mesh style. The unstructured, six-panel, low-profile hat features a precurved recycled visor board and a Kelly green underbill. With a contrasting snapback closure, small fit is sizes 6 3/8 to 7, for ages 5 years to small adult. Available in case packs of 180. [12brands.com](https://www.12brands.com)



Independent Trading Co.'s Women's Midweight Mockneck

The Midweight Mockneck Fleece, IND280MOCK, from Independent Trading Co. is designed to be the perfect complement to shorts, skirts, capris, and leggings. Made of premium 8.5-ounce, 280 gram, three-end fleece, it features a relaxed body fit, dropped shoulders, and a clean mock neckline. Available in three collegiate-inspired colorways: classic navy, ivory, and ash heather. Blends include 80S ringspun cotton and 42% polyester. The 32-singles face yarn offers printability while maximizing surface softness. The fabric is prelaundered to control shrinkage. Sizes range from XS to 2X. [independenttradingco.com](https://www.independenttradingco.com)



Avery Dennison Paint Protection Film

Avery Dennison has announced the launch of Supreme Defense Gloss Lite Paint Protection Film, a 7.5-mil clear PPF engineered to bring high-volume installation versatility and a smarter price

point to the Supreme Defense PPF portfolio of films. Designed specifically to keep the vehicles of daily drivers, leased vehicles, and commercial fleets fully shielded from harsh road hazards, Supreme Defense Gloss Lite is a wet-apply, self-healing, hydrophobic film backed by a 7-year warranty. The film is said to be a dependable choice for shops and installers seeking to expand their paint protection film offering with a competitively priced, optically clear gloss film. [averydennison.com](https://www.averydennison.com)

Vastex 120V Flash Cure Unit

Vastex International has introduced a 120-volt/1,950-watt version of its 18" square RedFlash Infrared Flash Cure Unit, complementing its existing 240-volt/2,600-watt model of the same size. The RD-18-120 features a low-profile 2.75" head, digital temperature control engineered for precise, repeatable settings, an integrated cooling fan, and a heavy-duty floor stand. An optional Auto-Flash upgrade can connect directly to the unit and adds HMI controls that rotate the head into place above the pallet at the touch of a foot pedal, then rotate it away automatically after a user-adjustable dwell time — preventing over- and under-flashing of garments. Also available is a Rotary Pallet Adapter with two vented steel pallets, enabling drying as well as flash curing. [vastex.com](https://www.vastex.com)



STAHL'S expands LIQUID 3D Technology

STAHL'S has expanded its LIQUID 3 heat-applied emblem technology with more than 400 new texture, pattern, and color combinations. The company says this marks the largest enhancement to the customization platform since its launch. The update introduces

additional tactile textures, image fill patterns, and advanced 3D texture designs, designed to give decorators greater flexibility when creating dimensional logos and emblems while maintaining existing pricing, production timelines, and a minimum order quantity of one. [stahls.com](https://www.stahls.com)



🔗 Ninja Transfers 3D Glitter Puff Transfers

Ninja Transfers has released 3D Glitter Puff Transfers, a bold, dimensional transfer designed to help creators elevate apparel with texture, sparkle, and a premium raised look. 3D Glitter Puff Transfers combine a heat-activated puff effect with embedded

glitter, creating a standout raised finish developed to be soft, flexible, and durable. The transfers are for use in high-impact designs for boutique brands, spirit wear, holiday merch, event apparel, and limited-run drops, and can be pressed in seconds with a standard heat press. ninjatransfers.com

🔗 General Formulations Quick-Split Scored Liner

General Formulations has introduced Quick-Split Scored Liner. Designed for speed, precision, and efficiency, Quick-Split Scored Liner is engineered to streamline installation and application workflows, enabling faster and more efficient application of stickers, decals, window graphics, and point-of-purchase displays. Quick-Split Scored Liner with universal 1.25" spacing is designed to easily "crack" for quick release and smooth, seamless application. The liner is compatible across multiple print platforms and ink technologies, making it well-suited for short run, high-volume environments, and multiplatform workflows. Quick-Split Scored Liner is available in wide-format media, Narrow Format Digital and Screen & Offset sheets. Stocked wide format digital media includes GF 201QS and GF 302QS, matte white vinyl constructions with permanent or removable clear adhesive options, available in 54" and 60" x 150' rolls. Custom sizes are also available in sheets and rolls. generalformulations.com



🔗 Epson SureColor G9070 Direct-to-Film printer

Epson's SureColor G9070 is a recent addition to its SureColor G-Series wide-format DTFilm printer line. The SureColor G9070 is designed to help garment decorators and print shop owners maximize productivity

while minimizing downtime. The 64" printer delivers high-speed output, twin-roll flexibility and automated maintenance features. Built to support demanding production environments, the SureColor G9070 delivers print speeds up to 350 square feet per hour and offers twin-roll functionality for simultaneous printing on two media rolls. Featuring a user-replaceable PrecisionCore Micro TFP printhead, Nozzle Verification Technology and UltraChrome DF inks, the printer is designed to produce consistent, repeatable color with minimal operator intervention. epson.com

PRODUCT PICKS



🔗 Q-Tees full-length apron with pockets

The full-length aprons from Q-Tees are constructed of 55% cotton/45% polyester blend. Available with adjustable neck straps and buckles, the aprons feature waist side ties as well as two patch pockets. Aprons are 22" wide by 30" high. Available in case pack quantities of 72. Colors include black, forest green, navy, red, royal, and white. qtees.com



🔗 InnoPrinter heat presses and roll slitters

InnoPrinter MK semiautomatic industrial heat presses and roll slitters are available to the North American market through a partnership with Supply55. InnoPrinter presses are designed to streamline workflow by eliminating cutting, and sorting, from the heat application process. The heat presses are fully compatible with direct-to-film, sublimation, heat transfer vinyl, screen printed transfers, and HP Indigo transfers. InnoPrinters are engineered to eliminate manual handling of transfers and increase production efficiency by utilizing a continuous roll-to-roll transfer delivery system, enabling manufacturers and decorators to increase throughput, improve consistency, and lower operating costs.

supply55.com

The holiday rush should not be a surprise

By Aaron Montgomery

Christmas has been remarkably consistent about showing up in December. The fourth quarter is always the last three months of the year. Yet every year, plenty of print shops seem surprised when the phones start ringing, customers suddenly need gifts for 75 employees, suppliers run low on popular sizes, and everyone wants their order delivered in time for Christmas, yet the shipping companies are in complete shambles.

You know how this story goes. One minute you are feeling pretty good about Q4. The orders are coming in, sales look strong, and the shop is humming. A few weeks later, you are answering emails at 10:30 p.m., somebody is waiting on black XL hoodies that apparently no longer exist anywhere in North America, and your production team is giving you that look.

You know the look. The one that says, "Please stop selling things."

Plan to plan ahead

The holiday season can be one of the strongest revenue periods of the year for an apparel decorator. It can also expose every weak spot in your business and push you and your employees to the limit.

The difference usually comes down to whether you planned for the rush or simply reacted to it. Holiday planning does not need to be complicated. You

just need to make a few decisions before everyone else starts making decisions for you. It is possible to keep control of your business in the fourth quarter, but it requires planning now. Not reacting in late November.

How much business do you expect? This can be the start of your planning, and honestly, answering this question could change everything about your holiday season. If you were open during the holidays last year, begin there. What did you sell in October, November, and December? How difficult was it to produce that volume? Did you have room for more business, or were you already hanging on by a thread? Did you turn away orders because you were overloaded? Those numbers give you a starting point.

If you have several years of history, look for patterns. Are holiday sales growing? Staying flat? Dropping? Then decide what you believe is realistic this year. Maybe you think you can grow 10% because you have better marketing and a stronger customer base. Maybe you are dealing with a softer economy and would be happy maintaining last year's numbers. Either answer is fine. Pick a number.

A projection is simply your best guess about what you believe the business can accomplish. It will not be perfect. That is okay. Even if this is your first year, give it your best guess. Your best guess is still better than no guess at all.

And the longer you track your sales and production numbers, the better those guesses become.

Know your limits

Once you have a sales target, ask the harder question. Can your shop actually produce it? Not what the perfect world says you can produce, but what is a real number when things break, employees don't show up, or your shop is shut down for three days due to a freak snowstorm. We tend to think about capacity in perfect-world terms.

Once you know your real capacity, take inventory of what supports it. Start with your equipment. Does anything need maintenance? Are there worn parts you have been meaning to replace? Is there equipment you have been considering purchasing? You do not want the week before your biggest deadline to be the moment your favorite heat press decides it has given everything it has to give.

Check your supplies too. Then look at blank goods. Have actual phone conversations with your most important vendors. Everyone else is planning for holiday orders too. If you intend to sell Christmas stockings, blankets, hoodies, or other seasonal items, make sure you can actually get them. A shipment of stockings arriving Jan. 7 makes for a very exclusive and expensive post-holiday promotion. Ask me how I know ...

You also need a backup plan if your sales target is higher than your current production capacity. That may mean contract decorators. Start those conversations early. Contract shops are planning for the same holiday rush as you are. Their schedules fill up too. Look for partners who have capacity when you need it. There may even be niche decorators whose normal market slows down during the holidays.

The co-host of my podcast, Terry Combs, ran a production shop that was nearly exclusive in the fraternity and sorority market. Their production slowed between Thanksgiving and New Year's, and they took on holiday contract work to keep their employees working and presses running.

Whatever contractor you consider, check their work. Ask for samples and references when appropriate. A cheaper production partner is not much of a bargain if the order shows up late or the quality does not match what your customer expects.

Get help

Temporary labor can also help. College students may have several weeks off during the holiday season. High school students may be available after school and during winter break. Parents who stay home during the day may want some seasonal work. Someone with a full-time job might happily work a Saturday shift for extra holiday money.

You may already have an employee who could lead that extra shift. Give them the responsibility and see what happens. You might discover someone capable of taking more leadership inside the shop year-round. The trick is hiring before you desperately need the help. Training someone when the shop is calm is much easier than shouting instructions while six rush orders are waiting to be boxed. I have seen very good production shops get this wrong. Then they have a temporary employee with one day of experience training other temporary employees.

Know when to stop

Finally, one of the most important decisions of the entire season. When



will you stop accepting holiday orders? Your customers do not know your production schedule. They do not know how long blanks take to arrive. They do not know what orders are already sitting in your queue. Set a standard holiday cutoff date and stick to it. Work backward from the date your customer needs the finished product. Allow time for blanks to arrive. Allow production time. Allow shipping or delivery time. If USPS says the cutoff date is the 21st for orders to arrive by Christmas, then plan to ship by the 18th or 19th. Again, ask me how I know. If you are new and unsure how much time you need, pad the deadline. It is much better to stop accepting guaranteed Christmas delivery a little early than to explain why Grandma needs to accept getting her gift in the mail a week after the holiday. I have had these conversations, and they are not fun.

Tell your regular customers about those deadlines before the rush. Send an email, put the dates on quotes, post them on social media, and mention them when customers call. You can even use your deadline as part of your marketing. "Get your gift order in now and move to the front of the holiday production line." That creates urgency and helps you spread work across more weeks.

Protect your people

One more thing deserves your attention: protect the people doing the work. That includes you. You do not have to accept every order. You can say no. You can charge more for rush work. You can tell a customer that the earliest delivery date is January. You

can decide that one extra order is not worth pushing your staff into another 12-hour day. You can also do something nice for your team.

Your holiday season does not need to feel like something that happens to you. Protect your team and your own sanity along the way, as I have seen way too many good garment decorators detest their best time of the year. The rush is coming. You already know when. Christmas is still on the 25th of December in 2026. This year, you can make sure your business is ready when it arrives.

If you work backward by forecasting your sales, being honest about capacity, preparing your equipment and supplies, lining up extra help, and setting firm deadlines, you give yourself a much better chance at a profitable fourth quarter without sacrificing your team or your sanity to get there. The goal is to finish the year proud of what you accomplished and still have enough energy left to enjoy Christmas when it actually arrives. And if the season goes really well, feel free to send me a gift next year. I will gladly provide the mailing address. **GP**



Aaron Montgomery

is a business facilitator and author of "The FUNDamentals of Business Success" and "The Gratitude Shift: A Simple Path to Find

More Peace and Joy." With nearly 30 years of experience guiding small businesses, Aaron helps people fall back in love with what they do each day. For more visit consultaaron.com.



Behind the mask

From a simple selection to a complex smart filter, masks are a big part of the digital workflow

By Stephen Romaniello

Isolating elements on a picture is an essential image editing skill. Accurate selections determine the quality of an edited image and can be among the factors that make or break the credibility of a manipulated picture. This article explores the types of masks available in mainstream image-editing software packages including Corel Paintshop Pro, Gimp, (a free, open-source package), Adobe Lightroom, Adobe Photoshop, and a few AI solutions. The techniques produce similar results from one package to the other. Only the interfaces are different. The software you choose will depend on what you are most comfortable with. I'll be demonstrating masking

techniques that assure seamless editing for accuracy and believability using Adobe Photoshop 2026.

What's a mask?

According to my online dictionary, the first and most obvious definition of the word mask is "a form of disguise or concealment usually worn over or in front of the face to hide a person's identity." Of course, this term's meaning has evolved to include several different applications, but as far as graphic software is concerned, masks cover two important functions; they hide or reveal image content, and they protect or expose areas of the image to editing processes.

Masks before computers

In the old days, before computers, a mask was a piece of semitransparent red film called *Rubylith*, (**Fig. 1**) designed to conceal portions of an image from the process camera's light. Another type of mask was a sheet of frisket film used to shield a photo from the over-spray of an airbrush. These masks were cut by an expert hand wielding a razor-sharp X-Acto knife to ensure the exposed areas were precise. Though the process was time and labor intensive, believe it or not, all sorts of interesting effects could be achieved this way, including sharpening, blurring, increased contrast, solarization, and many other creative effects.

All things considered, *Rubylith* and frisket performed well in the realm of analog images, but compared to the digital masks of today, *Rubylith* and frisket are limited in their capabilities.

Software

Among image editing software's mask-making features are a group of selection tools, channel-based masks to store selections, layer-based masks that conceal and reveal layer content, vector masks that are composed of paths or shapes, type masks that create character-based selection outlines, and filter masks that reveal and conceal the effects of filters. In addition, in some of the programs, there are AI features that perform automatic masking with a text prompt and the click of a mouse.

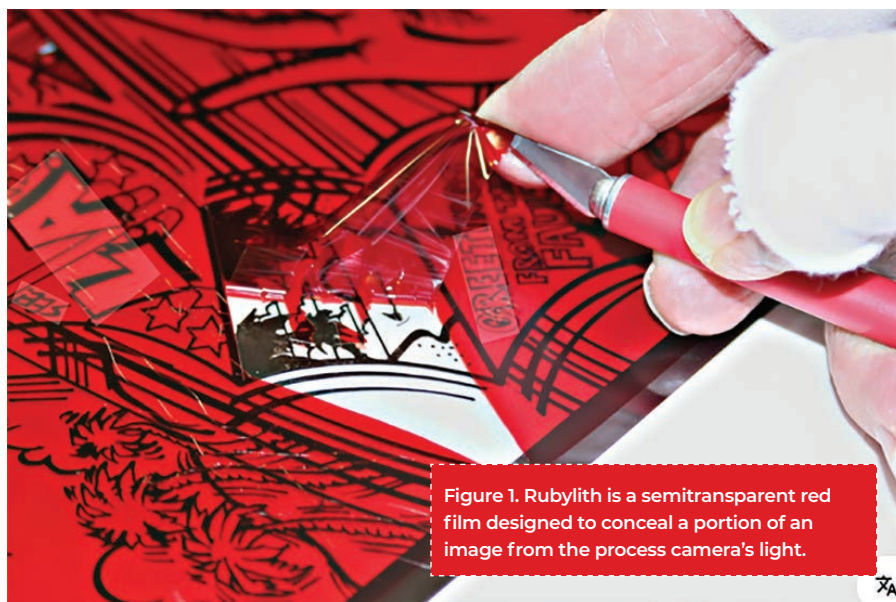


Figure 1. Rubylith is a semitransparent red film designed to conceal a portion of an image from the process camera's light.

Mask basics

Digital masks share similar characteristics depending on the type of mask and the current viewing mode. Most are displayed as either a black and white thumbnail in one of the panels, or as a colored overlay on the image (Fig. 2).

Masks can be modified with specific tools or commands. Each image can present a different set of selection and editing problems. Consequently, masking techniques are designed to cover any imaginable situation. Masking can be quite complex and labor-intensive and sometimes situations arise where one masking technique is not quite sufficient and must be combined with other masking techniques.

Fortunately for the current generation of graphic artists and technicians, software has streamlined the masking process. Isolating image elements is now much faster, easier, and more precise. Each opened image can present a different set of selection and editing problems, consequently, built-in masking techniques are designed to cover any imaginable situation.



Figure 2. Most masks are displayed as either a black and white thumbnail in one of the panels, or as a colored overlay on the image.

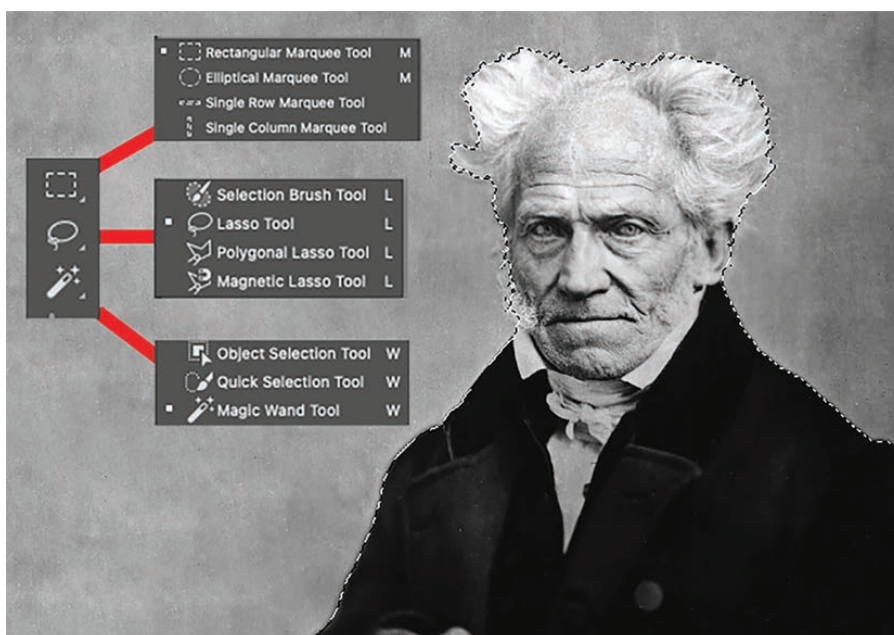


Figure 3. A selection outline is made with one of the selection tools found in the Tools panel.

The ants go marching

The most basic masks are temporary selections that define an area for instant editing. These selection outlines are sometimes called *marching ants* because the animated marquee looks like a column of tiny insects encircling the selected region. A selection outline is made with one of the selection tools found in the Tools panel (Fig. 3). These outlines enable the region within their boundaries to be edited by a tool or command. The area outside the outline remains protected from editing.

The 11 selection tools in Photoshop can be manual, requiring the hand encircling of a specific region, or automatic, requiring only the click of a mouse on a specific region. There are also AI text prompts that automatically select a subject or background.

Edges

One primary advantage of digital masking is the ability to control the edge of an affected area. The edge can be modified in several ways including *feather*: the softening of the outermost edge to gradually fade to transparency; *border*: modifying the selection edge to a specific width; *smooth*: the softening of stair-stepped pixels; *expand*: made bigger by a specific number of pixels; or *contract*: made smaller. When a selection is active, these options are found in the *Select/Modify* menu.

The *Select and Mask* feature (Fig. 4) provides even more precise control over the mask's boundaries. *Select and Mask* works on both newly made selections and existing masks. It has a series of tools that refine the edges of an existing selection or mask

akin to the *Modify* menu but with on-the-fly visual control. The most minute details such as the hair or fur can be included or excluded in the edge with these tools. There are also two AI controls: *Select Subject* and *Refine Hair*, that automatically simplify making difficult selections of ambiguous edges.

Quick mask

The selection tools are not by any means the only way to make selections. Sometimes they are not precise enough to do the job and need to be "custom refined" even before entering the *Select and Mask* workspace. *Quick Mask* is a fast and reliable way to refine a selection on the fly that takes advantage of the versatility of the *Brush* tool. After the initial selection is created, click the *Quick Mask* icon at

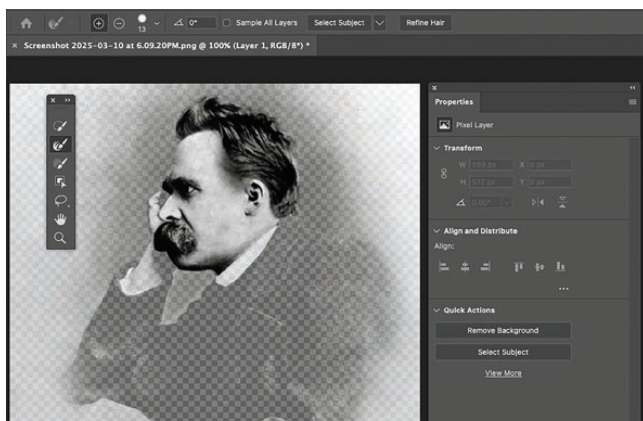


Figure 4. The Select and Mask feature provides precise control over the mask's edges.

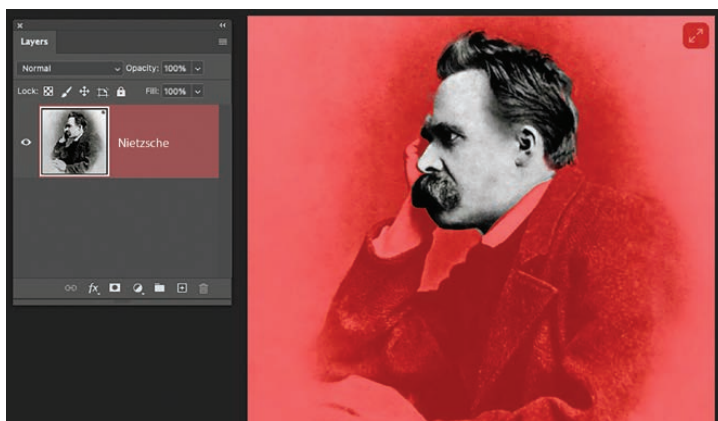


Figure 5. The areas surrounding the marching ants are converted to a red colored, semitransparent field that, incidentally, resembles Rubylith.

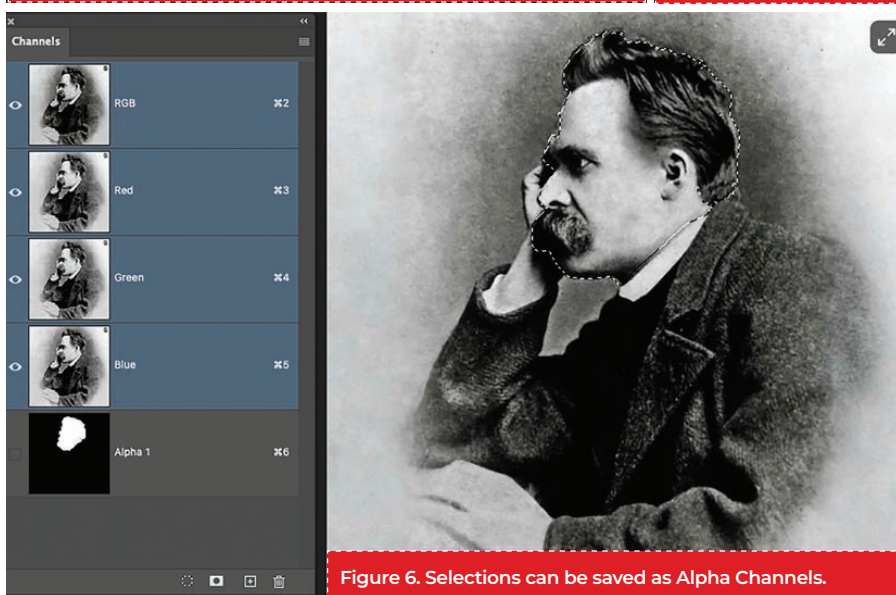


Figure 6. Selections can be saved as Alpha Channels.

the bottom of the Tools panel or press the Q key. The areas surrounding the marching ants are converted to a red colored, semitransparent field that, incidentally, resembles Rubylith (Fig. 5). This mask can be manipulated

with the paintbrush and all the numerous brush characteristics that the software provides. Painting with black applies the red mask color to the selection. Painting with white, erases the mask color. Painting with any shade

of gray produces semitransparent areas of the selection, depending on how dark or light the shade is. When the icon is clicked again (or the Q key is pressed) the quick mask is displayed as marching ants complete with revisions, ready for effects to be applied.

Alpha channels

Creating masks can be a labor-intensive process in the image editing workflow and therefore, it is important to save the selection mask after it's been drawn and refined. Completed masks can be saved as Alpha Channels (Fig. 6). Display the Channels panel and Click the *Save Selection as Alpha Channel* icon at the bottom of the panel. The selection is saved within the document and named *Alpha 1*. To load the selection press Command (Mac) or Control (Windows) and click the channel thumbnail. The marching ants appear, and the area is ready for editing.

Alpha channels are used far less frequently than in the past. Layer masks, vector masks, smart filter masks and layer styles have replaced many of the alpha channel techniques. Still, there are times when they can be quite useful in combining and duplicating selection marques.

Layer mask

The other types of masks that are commonly used in the nonlinear workflow are *Layer masks*. Where a selection marquee isolates a region for editing, layer and vector masks conceal and reveal areas of the image. Layer masks can be made by encircling

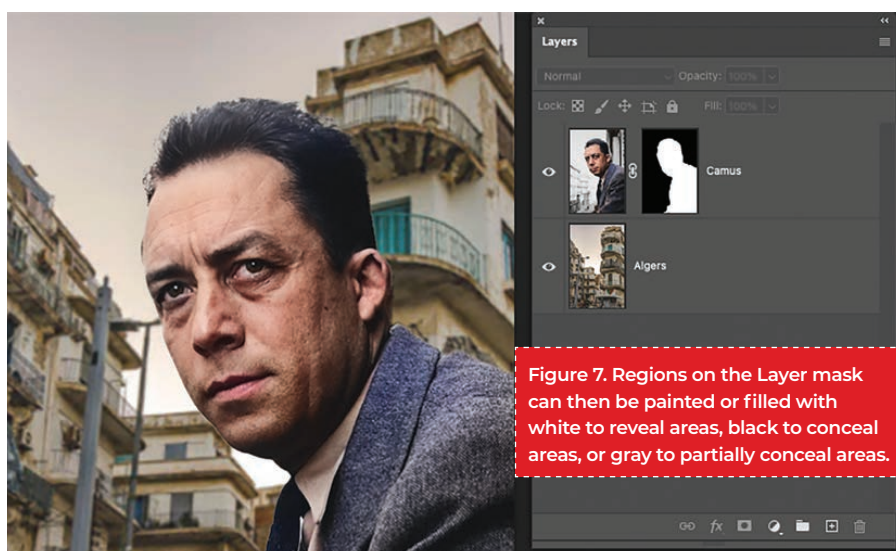


Figure 7. Regions on the Layer mask can then be painted or filled with white to reveal areas, black to conceal areas, or gray to partially conceal areas.



Figure 8. With a vector mask, the layer displays a gray and white mask thumbnail. Gray represents the area that is concealed and white represents area that is revealed.



Figure 9. Areas of white on the mask are where the filter is applied. Areas of black are protected.

a region of an image with a selection marquee and then clicking the Add Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. The Layer mask can then be painted or filled with white to reveal areas, or black to conceal areas (Fig. 7). If gray is painted on the mask, the area will be partially concealed or revealed depending on how dark the shade is.

Vector masks

The difference between layer and vector masks is how they are made and edited. Vector masks are made with the *Path* tools and edited with the *Path Selection* or the *Direct Selection* tool. The layer displays a gray and white mask thumbnail. Gray represents the area that is concealed and white

represents area that is revealed. The path is the boundary between what is seen and what is concealed (Fig. 8).

Smart Filters

When a Smart Filter is applied to a layer, a mask is created. First, convert the layer to a smart object by choosing *Convert to Smart Object* from the *Layer Options* menu. Select an area where you want the filter to be applied. Then choose a filter from the Filters menu. Areas of white on the mask are where the filter is applied. Areas of black are protected, (Fig. 9) and areas of gray are partially protected. Refinements can be made by selecting the mask and painting with black, white, or gray.

AI masking

I would be remiss if I were to not mention the new AI masking technique that accelerate the workflow. When you open an image, the *Contextual Task Bar* (CTB) displays a prompt: *Select Subject* (Fig. 10). When clicked, the main subject in the image is automatically selected. If there is more than one object in the image the feature selects all the prominent subjects in the image and the selection will require editing to eliminate unwanted areas. Still, this may be a good place to start the masking process. The selections made by the *CTB* are based on the contrast of edge pixels in the image and have nothing to do with any intuitive understanding of the subject by the artificial intelligence.



Figure 10.

Important skill

Masking is possibly the most important skill to learn in the image editing workflow. It certainly can be the most hands on. Thankfully, gone are the days of Rubylith, frisket, X-Acto knives, and process cameras. Instead, masks are available at your fingertips in image editing software packages. Learning to make accurate masks can be challenging because there are so many variables that determine what techniques to use. Of course, experimentation with the many mask features will get the perfect results you want. I hope this article has helped declaw creative masking. Naturally, using these tools and techniques will greatly enhance your ability to create amazing credible pictures, so give them a try. **GP**



■ Stephen Romaniello

is an artist and educator who has taught graphics software for over 30 years. He is a certified instructor in several graphics and video ap-

plications and the author of numerous books and articles on creative image manipulation, illustration and media programs. Stephen is the founder and CEO of GlobalEye Systems, a company that offers training and consulting in graphics software. He is also the founder of Fire Boy Productions, an art-book publishing company.

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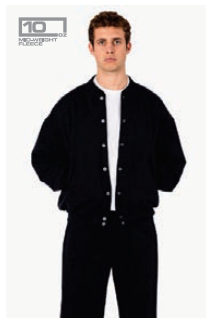
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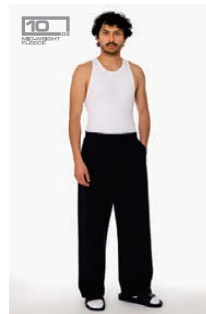
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