DECEMBER 2026

GRAPHICS PRO

APPAREL DECORATION • AWARDS & CUSTOMIZATION • SIGNAGE • WIDE-FORMAT PRINTING • WRAPS

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+

The 2026 Supplier Spotlight

How to perfectly execute a company rebrand

Textile history to fiber art in one NC focal wall project

Wayfinding 101: Get people where they need to go

What's trending in headwear for 2027

Your guide to the most popular styles on the market, from dad hats to rope hats, camo & more


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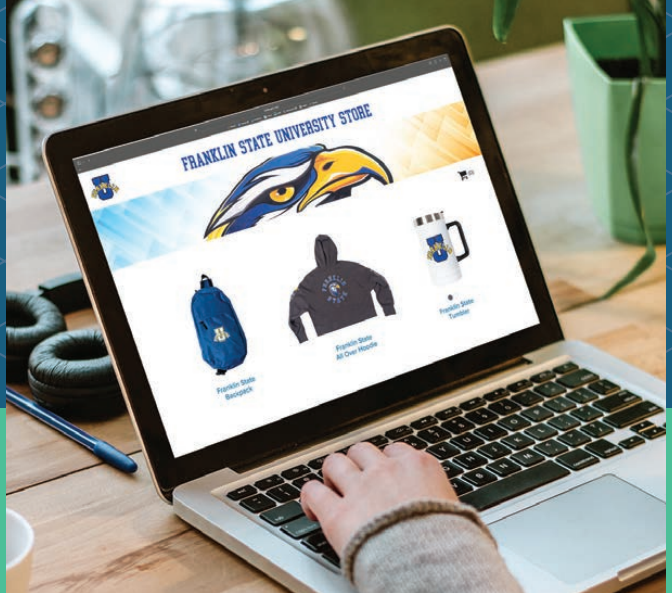

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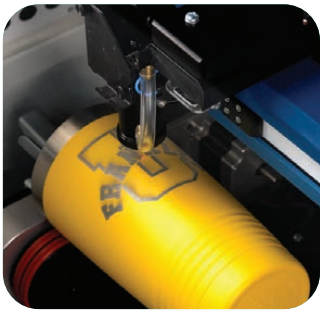

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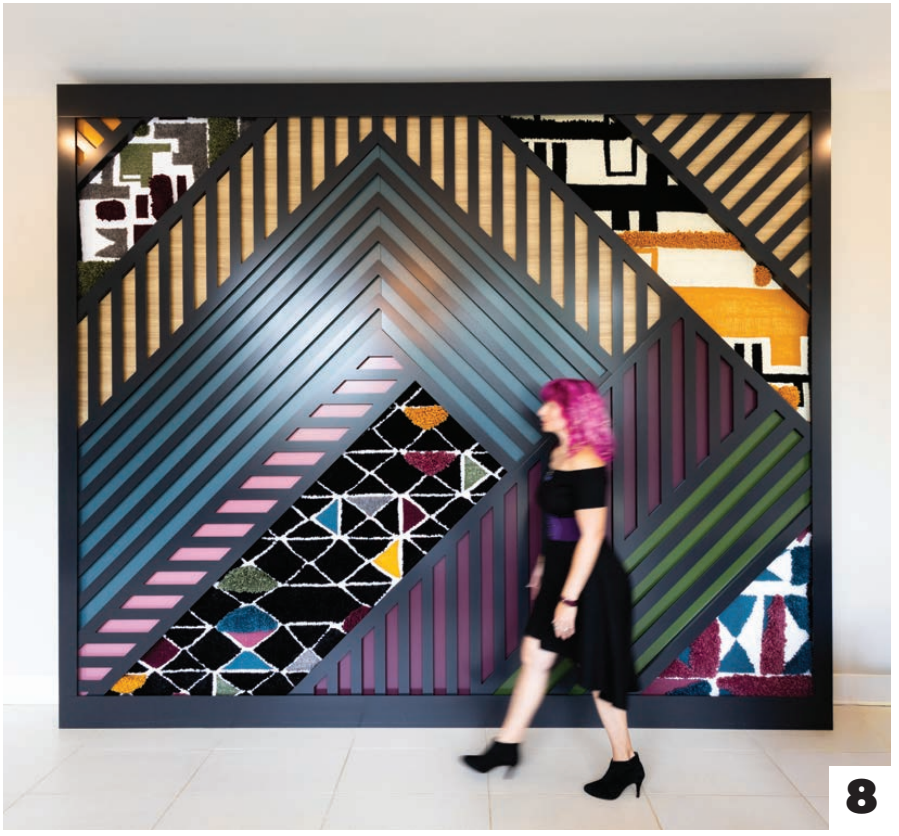

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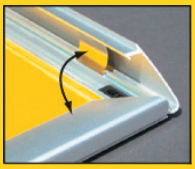

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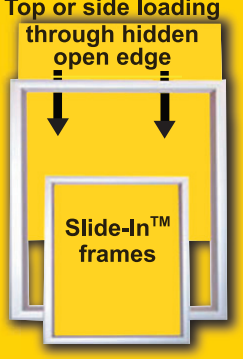

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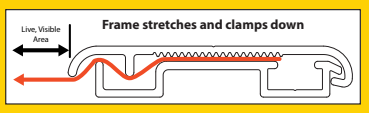





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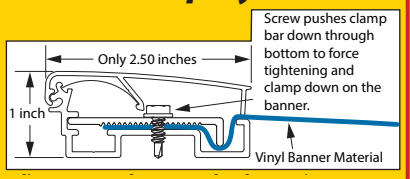

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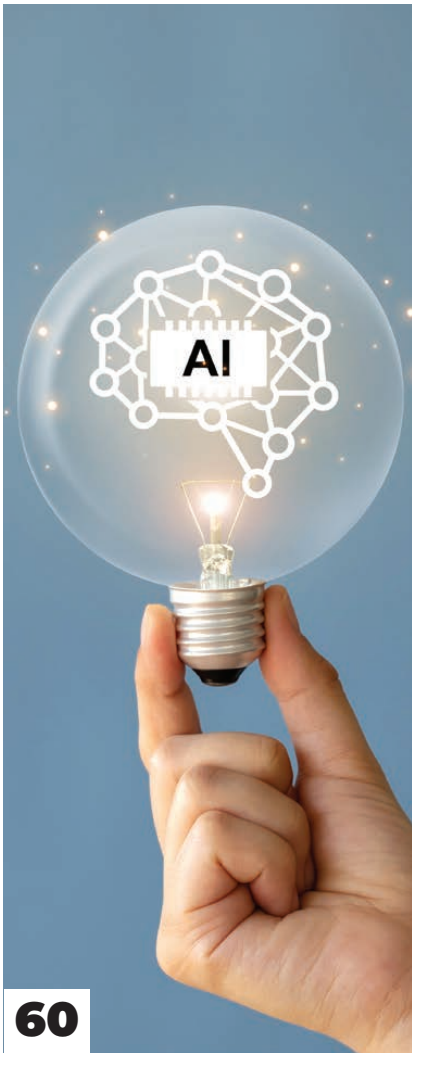

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Resources you need for growth in 2027

Whether you're a seasoned business owner with high-volume, long-term clients, a crafter building your business from the ground up, or somewhere in between, you likely know that an important marker of success is being able to quickly alter production, add new products, and gain efficiency when the customers demand it.

A study commissioned by the Promotional Products Association International earlier this year reported that in the United States, $174 billion was spent on branded merchandise in 2025, including $50 billion in promotional products and $124 billion in licensed merchandise.

In another report from STAHLS' titled "The 2026 Print on Demand Industry Report," analysts estimated that the print-on-demand market for apparel decoration and promotional products could grow to more than $57 billion by 2033 with annual growth rates at or above 23%. This growth marks a shift in the industry from historical bulk production to a more fluid approach to the design and creation of the finished product.

In PRINTING United Alliance's "Wide-format Printing Report, Spring 2026," 71.1% of survey respondents reported clients requesting faster job turns, 60% reported a request for shortened project lead times, and 28.9% of those respondents reported clients moving to shorter runs.

Maybe you are already integrating the newest technology and automation processes into your business. But more likely than not — and like many of your industry peers — you are in the midst of determining what products and solutions are right for both your team and your customers and how they will work best in your business in order to move into this new era for the apparel decor, awards and customization, and signage and printing industries.

Our 2026 Supplier Spotlight section is here to help. Beginning on page 16, this year's section features 19 companies from across the industry offering products and services that will help you gain efficiency in your workflows, expand your product lineup, and grow your knowledge base in the coming year.

And while automation and AI can help your team achieve some of the growth expected in the coming years, it can't be done well without human oversight. In Alliance Insights' 2025 report titled "AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage," 46% of AI leaders responding to the survey had a clear road map for using AI in their businesses. On page 42 and page 60, industry veterans Daniel Tobon and Marshall Atkinson discuss the safeguards you need to have in place as you integrate AI into your processes, as well as how the conversation around automation and AI has changed in just one short year.

Whatever your current challenge, we want to be your partner in finding a solution. Reach out to the team at gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com to connect with us on the topics you would like to see covered in 2027, industry leaders you want to hear from more often, and the data you need to help your team strategize for future success.



Elizabeth Manning
Director of Content

INDUSTRY UPDATES

NEW HIRES & PROMOTIONS



Blake Bozeman
SAGE

SAGE, a provider of software and technology solutions for the promotional products industry, promoted **Blake Bozeman** to chief business officer. In this newly created role, Bozeman will help lead SAGE's business operations and strategic initiatives as the company continues to grow and expand its solutions for the promotional products industry. Bozeman brings 25 years of promotional products industry experience to the position. Bozeman joined SAGE in 2014 and most recently served as vice president of sales. He will be responsible for overseeing key facets of SAGE's business and working across departments to support company-wide strategy, collaboration, and growth.



Milissa Gibson
Lane Seven Apparel

Lane Seven Apparel announced the promotion of **Milissa Gibson** to senior vice president of sales. Having played a key role in building the company's national sales organization since joining in 2021, Gibson will now lead its sales strategy at the executive level. Previously serving as director of sales, Gibson has helped strengthen how Lane Seven reaches and supports customers across the decorated apparel industry. Gibson will oversee Lane Seven's national sales operations, with responsibility for revenue planning and strategic account relationships.



Shanann Heaton
Cotton Heritage

Cotton Heritage, a supplier of blank apparel, appointed **Shanann Heaton** as chief operating officer. With more than 25 years of executive leadership experience, Heaton brings extensive expertise in business operations, supply chain management, distribution, and organizational development. In her new role, Heaton will focus on strengthening Cotton Heritage's operational infrastructure, optimizing processes, and supporting scalable growth. Known for her hands-on, people-first leadership approach, Heaton emphasizes collaboration, accountability, and continuous improvement to drive meaningful results.

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

Kirkwood acquired **Cadwell Design + Sign**, a custom signage, environmental graphics, and large-format branded visual solutions provider based in Holliston, Massachusetts.

Electronics for Imaging Inc. (EFI), an industrial inkjet business and portfolio company of Siris, and **Agfa-Gevaert** (Agfa) announced a definitive agreement to combine Agfa's Digital Printing Solutions business with EFI.

Highpoint Signs announced the acquisition of **Wakefield Sign Service**, a commercial signage company with a 40-year legacy. The acquisition also includes the company's **YESCO Central Texas** franchise operation.

EVENTS

ASI Show
Jan. 5-7, 2027
Orlando, FL
asishow.com

PPAI Expo
Jan. 12-14, 2027
Las Vegas, NV
ppai.org/expo

Impressions Expo
Jan. 21-23, 2027
Long Beach, CA
impressionsexpo.com

DAX Show
Feb. 19-20, 2027
Kansas City, MO
daxshow.com

APA International Personalization Expo
Feb. 23-26, 2027
Las Vegas, NV
personalizationpros.org

GIVING BACK

Pukka is proud to support the **West Palm Beach Fishing Club** and its efforts to introduce the next generation to fishing, conservation, and the outdoors. As part of the partnership, Pukka provided hats for junior members of the West Palm Beach Fishing Club, supporting an organization that has spent decades protecting the resources, access, and traditions that make fishing possible for future generations.

GRAPHICS|PRO WEBINARS

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UPDATES

S&S plans to open a new 500,000-square-foot distribution center in the Phoenix, Arizona, metropolitan area, marking the latest step in the company's ongoing investment to expand and modernize its North American footprint.

Branded Merch Network named **PromoPilot** the presenting partner for Automate & Elevate 2026.

Image360 Middle River, a provider of custom signage and graphic solutions for businesses and organizations in the Baltimore, Maryland, area, has relocated to a new facility and is now operating as **Image360 Baltimore East**.

In recognition of Sign Manufacturing Day 2026, **FASTSIGNS** launched a national awareness initiative to highlight sign industry careers and career opportunities in visual communications across its network of locally owned centers.

Legacy was recently featured on ABC's "Good Morning America" as part of a segment highlighting the latest game-day gear for football season.

INX International Ink Co. released the INX 2025 Sustainability Report, which highlights significant progress across key strategic sustainability areas for product innovation, operational performance, climate action, circularity, and responsible business practices.

Embellishr expanded its preowned screenprinting equipment resale platform with the official launch of **Embellishr Marketplace**, introducing a new way for garment decorators across the United States to buy and sell used production equipment.



Have news to share?

Email gpeditorial@cahabamedia.com.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

Orbus has been recognized as one of the 2026 Best & Brightest Companies to Work For by the National Association for Business Resources — marking the company's 12th consecutive year receiving the honor.

Ryan Johnson and Jana Johnson, owners of **International Minute Press in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho**, have joined the Minuteman Press International President's Club after a period of significant growth that included an acquisition, increased marketing efforts, and a continued focus on customer service and operational efficiency.

Texas-based **Image360 Katy** has been named Best in Katy by the Katy Area Chamber of Commerce for the second consecutive year, an honor determined entirely through community nominations and voting.

PARTNERSHIPS

Gemline entered a new partnership with **Hydro Flask**. The introduction includes 83 Hydro Flask products across drinkware, coolers, and food storage.

Flexfit teamed up with professional racer **Hailie Deegan** to introduce the latest additions to the nu series line.

LogoJET announced a strategic partnership with **Roland DGA** to bring Roland DG VersaStudio and VersaObject UV flatbed printers and RC-300 Series cylindrical printers to its customers.

Atlantis Headwear collaborated with **BigRock**, a computer graphics and digital arts school, for its 2026 BigTour across the United States. As part of the collaboration, Atlantis created custom caps for students participating in the BigTour.

Charles River Apparel and the **New England Patriots** are kicking off the second season of their partnership with a new exclusive co-branded collection celebrating New England style, spirit, and versatility.

SRG partnered with **Corkcicle** to launch the brand's drinkware and lifestyle products on its platform. In addition, it also added the **Citizen Watch America** brands to its platform. Citizen Watch's portfolio of brands includes Bulova, Caravelle, Alpina, Frederique, and Constant.

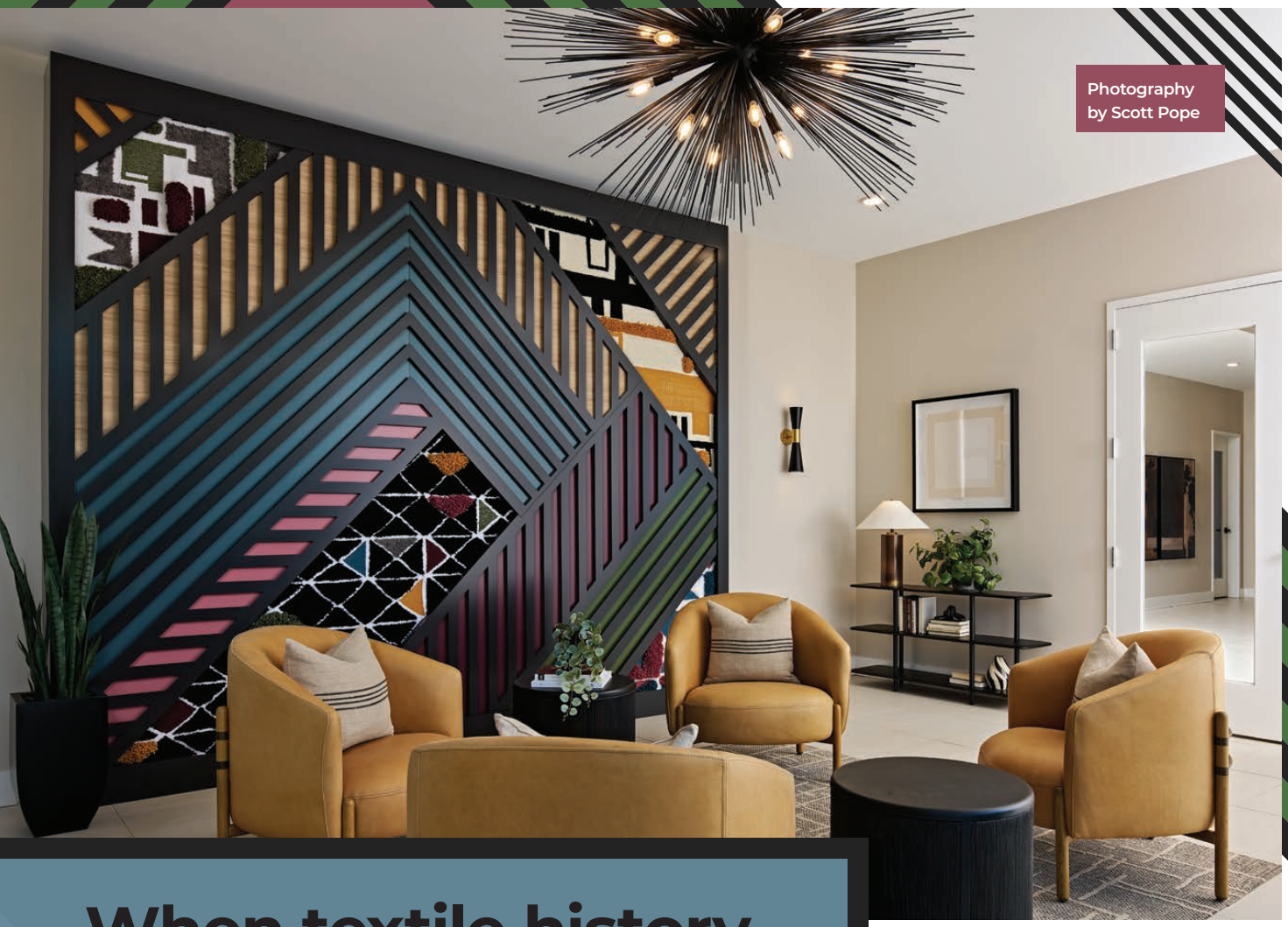
Nazdar SourceOne entered into a partnership with **HP**, adding HP Latex technology to its lineup of digital printing equipment.

Koozie Group added **ICEMULE** to its growing portfolio of retail brand partnerships.

Fujifilm announced a global strategic alliance with **ePac Flexible Packaging**, an international provider of flexible packaging solutions.

STAHLS' has entered into a five-year agreement with the **University Co-op** in Austin to expand its licensed apparel and personalized merchandise program.

SAGE, a provider of software and marketing solutions for the promotional products industry, announced a new integration with **Kaeser & Blair**, a promotional products distributor.



Photography by Scott Pope

When textile history becomes fiber art

Weaving the past into the present: bringing textile history, branding & design together

By Lauren Stern

SIGNAGE & PRINTING

What happens when textile history becomes a large-scale work of fiber art? At The Adler, a luxury multifamily community in Charlotte, North Carolina, the answer is a custom focal wall that brings together patterns inspired by textile designer Ruth Adler, contemporary branding, and more than 160 hours of hands-on weaving and fabrication.

Commissioned by Taft Development Group, the focal wall project gave me an opportunity to explore how history can inspire something entirely new. Named after Ruth Adler, The Adler offered a meaningful starting point: how could I bring her textile legacy into a modern residential space in a way that felt fresh, tactile, and connected to the building itself?

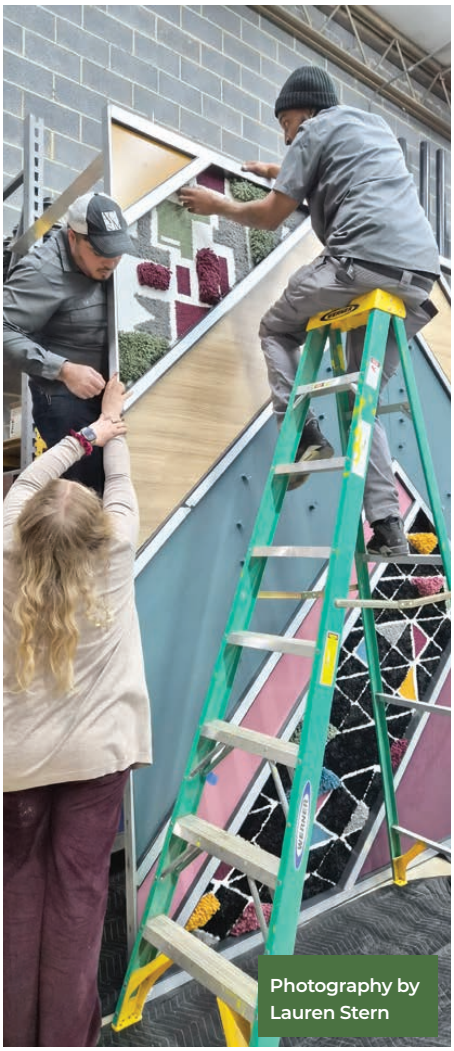
As the owner and experiential designer at Studio 618, I love finding ways to turn ordinary spaces into meaningful experiences. For this project, that meant translating patterns inspired by Adler's textile designs into four oversized woven sections, then bringing them together with custom metalwork, contemporary branding, and the interior palette.

The project pushed me far beyond my usual approach to fiber art. It required experimentation, close collaboration with the fabricator, and a willingness to rethink my process along the way. But that was part of what made it so rewarding as well: taking inspiration from the past and weaving it into something new.

Finding the right mix of history, branding & interior design

The inspiration came from three places: Ruth Adler's textile patterns, Yellow Duck Marketing's branding, and the interior design by SouthPark Interiors. Each played a different role in shaping the final piece.

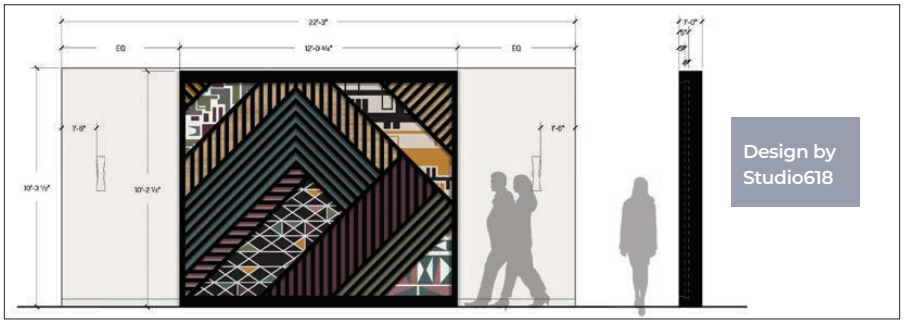
Adler's textile designs provided the historical connection and geometric patterns that guided the four fiber



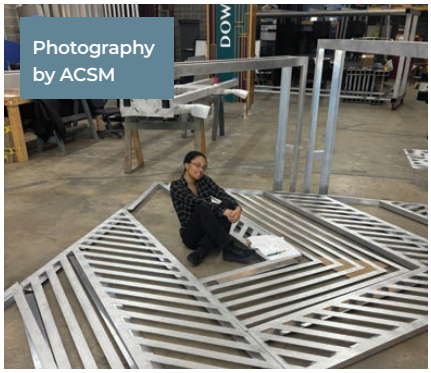
Photography by Lauren Stern



Ruth Adler's textile patterns



Design by Studio618



Photography by ACSM



Photography by Lauren Stern

art sections. Yellow Duck Marketing's clean, modern branding brought in a contemporary perspective, with angular motifs that helped inform the metal surround. SouthPark Interiors' palette of warm wood tones, dark metals, jewel tones, and natural grays, tans, and whites helped tie the entire project together.

The challenge was finding a way to make all these influences work together without letting any one of them take over. I wanted the artwork to feel like it belonged in the space, but I also wanted the woven sections to have their own personality.

The textile patterns became the link between the different elements. They connected the artwork to Adler's legacy, while the colors, materials, and metalwork brought that inspiration into the present. Instead of treating the historical references, branding, and interiors as separate layers, I wanted them to feel like parts of one story.

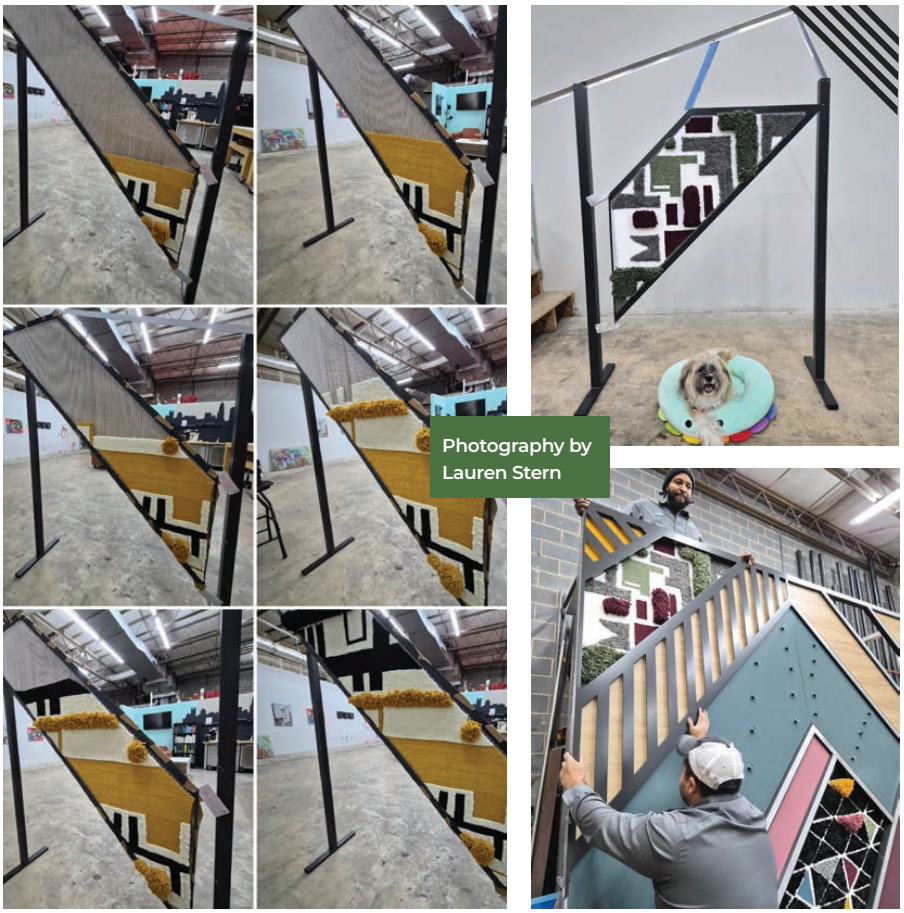
Molly Holland, senior account manager at Yellow Duck Marketing, described how the branding and textile history came together in the finished piece: "The focal wall at Adler Montford Park translates the brand's signature patterning into a dimensional, tactile experience. Drawing from the abstract, modern prints of mid-century designer Ruth Adler, Yellow Duck Marketing developed a brand pattern built on deep jewel tones, which Studio 618 then wove into a custom fiber art installation. Color, pattern, and texture carry the identity from the page to the wall, creating a bold yet refined statement that honors artistic legacy while grounding the space in contemporary design."

Turning textile patterns into fiber art

One of the most interesting parts of this focal wall was figuring out how to translate textile patterns into a large-scale, three-dimensional piece. A pattern can look very different when you move it from a flat reference drawing into fiber art. Yarn has its own texture, movement, and personality, and those qualities become part of the finished design.

Rather than simply reproducing the patterns as graphics, I wanted to interpret them through the weaving itself. The yarn added depth and softness, creating an interesting contrast with the metal frame and the more structured elements of the space.

Each section featured a geometric composition inspired by Adler's textile designs. This was a departure from my previous commercial fiber art projects, which tended to be more organic, free-flowing, and textural. Here, the shapes needed to be much more precise, and the patterns had to remain recognizable across a much larger surface.



Photography by Lauren Stern

I used full-size stencils taped behind the looms to help guide the weaving. It was a little like drawing with yarn, except every line and shape had to be built row by row. I had to pay close attention to the patterns while also working with materials that naturally shift as you weave.

That balance between structure and spontaneity was a big part of the process. I wanted to stay true to the inspiration while allowing the fiber art to bring something new to the designs. The finished work wasn't meant to be an exact reproduction of a textile pattern. It was my interpretation of those shapes through a different material and a very different scale.

Designing a custom loom system

The artwork was much larger and more complex than my previous commercial fiber art installations, so I knew my usual approach to weaving wasn't going to be enough. Each section needed its own support system, and everything had to fit precisely within the surrounding metal structure.

I brought a prototype from an earlier focal wall project, Spinning Mill Lofts, to help work through the materials, attachment points, and support legs. That project had been a single-panel logo focal wall, while The Adler was roughly four times the size and complexity. It gave us a helpful starting point, but we still had plenty of details to figure out.

Working with ACSM, we developed custom aluminum frames using a CNC router. The frames had carefully positioned holes that allowed me to weave each section separately before attaching it to the larger structure. We also adapted the warp system based on what I had learned from Spinning Mill because the scale and angular geometry wouldn't work with a traditional notched loom.

It was a great example of how a project can combine very different kinds of making. The fiber art required a hands-on weaving process, while the frames involved digital design, precision machining, and custom fabrication. Both had to work together to bring the textile-inspired designs into an architectural setting.

Working together to bring the idea to life

The collaboration with ACSM was a big part of making the project possible. Even though the fiber sections and metal frames were created separately, they couldn't be designed in isolation. The frames needed to accommodate the weaving, and the weaving had to fit the finished structure.

As ACSM's Lead Production Artist Dykia Holland explained, "One of the coolest parts of my job as lead production artist is getting to create one-of-a-kind pieces that bring traditional and technical design together. This was our first fiber art project, so figuring out how to break the sculpture into sections that Lauren could weave separately and we could later reassemble was an exciting challenge. We created small sections of the actual frame and did dry fits to make sure everything would come together before welding, painting, and preparing the pieces for on-site assembly. Working together as designer and fabricator allowed us to bring an ambitious idea to life and create something that makes the space feel warm and inviting."

Having that back-and-forth throughout the process helped us work through details before they became bigger problems. We could test the frame, see how the woven sections fit, and adjust along the way. It took a lot of communication, but that collaboration helped turn a complicated idea into something that we could actually build.

It also reinforced how important it is to think about the artwork and its structure as one piece. The weaving brought the patterns to life, but the custom fabrication made it possible for those patterns to become part of the larger architectural installation.

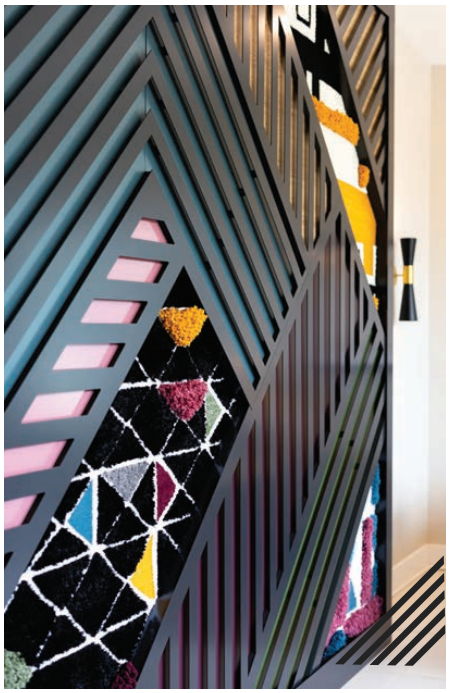
Learning as we built

Of course, not everything went according to plan. With a project this large, there was plenty of trial and error, and some of the best solutions



Photography by Megan Morales





came from seeing how the materials behaved in real life.

The irregular geometry and size of the metal frames caused some warping, which we addressed by reattaching the frames to their legs and adding extra stability bars. After completing the first fiber section, we also made changes to the frame's rounded corners, weight, and positioning. The outer frame was adjusted to help conceal gaps along the edges of the weaving, and shifting it forward improved the spacing at the bottom.

The weaving came with its own learning curve. In the top right section, I developed a small notebook template for cutting the fringe consistently. It ended up cutting the time needed for that step in half. I also had to repair gaps caused by the materials and weaving tension, using a needle and thin thread to bring the fibers back together.

The top left section was a tougher lesson. The yarn that I chose was too thin for the coverage that I needed, leaving visible gaps throughout the weaving. After about 15 hours of work, I ended up removing roughly 75% of that section and salvaging what I could by adapting the warp system.

It was frustrating to undo so much work, but it taught me a lot about testing materials before committing to a large area. With fiber art, the yarn can look completely different once it's woven, especially at this scale. The materials affect not only the texture and coverage, but also how clearly the patterns come through.

Pushing beyond my comfort zone

My earlier commercial fiber art focal wall projects were much more organic and free flowing. The Adler called for a different kind of precision, with geometric patterns that needed to stay true to their references.

The largest section measured about 7' X 7' and took around 60 hours to complete. Keeping the white angled lines aligned while working across such a large surface was challenging, especially with fluffy yarn that made it difficult to keep track of individual rows.

I spent long stretches working from a step stool or ladder to reach the upper portions, then moved to the floor for the lower areas. Taking regular breaks to stretch and reset became important, too. It was physically demanding work, but I enjoyed seeing the patterns gradually take shape.

Looking back, I would have woven the entire white portion before adding the other shapes. That would have made it easier to keep everything aligned and avoid working around sections that were already finished.

Projects like this always teach me something, and The Adler pushed me to rethink parts of my process. It also gave me more confidence in taking on large and complex fiber art installations. I came away with a better understanding of how to plan for intricate patterns, choose materials that work best for their environment, and adapt traditional weaving techniques to an unconventional format.

Why the full dry fit was so important

Before installation, we assembled the full piece vertically for a dry fit. This gave us a chance to attach and detach the woven sections, check the alignment, and look for any visible gaps before everything went on site.

Seeing the four sections together was especially helpful. Each one had its own pattern, but they also needed to work as part of one larger composition.

The dry fit also let us see how the woven patterns interacted with the metal frame and the space around them. We could make final adjustments before installation rather than trying to solve those issues on-site.

It was an extra step, but one that made a real difference in getting the details right. After so many hours of weaving, it was rewarding to see the individual sections come together as one cohesive piece.



Photography by Megan Morales

What this project taught me about pricing custom fiber art

The Adler also changed how I approach pricing large-scale fiber art. When I first estimated the project, I used Spinning Mill Lofts as a reference for the time and effort involved. But The Adler was roughly four times the size and more complex, with four separate woven sections, intricate patterns, and a much more involved fabrication process.

The total weaving and fabrication effort exceeded 160 hours. And that doesn't tell the whole story. There was also the time spent sourcing materials, troubleshooting, refining techniques, coordinating with the fabricator, and preparing the sections for installation.

Those behind-the-scenes steps are easy to underestimate when you're first planning a project. But they're a big part of what makes custom work successful, and they need to be reflected in the price.

Going forward, I'll be more mindful of the difference between a relatively simple, single-panel logo focal wall and a large, multisection installation like The Adler. Both have their place, but the time, complexity, and level of collaboration required can be very different.

Why custom focal walls are worth the investment

1. Creating spaces with a story

A focal wall can do much more than fill an empty space. It can give people a sense of place, introduce a property's identity, and create something memorable.

At The Adler, the connection to textile history gave the artwork a story that went beyond its visual impact. Patterns inspired by Ruth Adler's designs became part of a contemporary fiber art installation, connecting the property's name and history to its modern interiors.

2. Bringing history into everyday spaces

I love the idea that people don't have to visit a museum or read a historical display to encounter a connection to the past. Sometimes, art and design can make that connection in a more everyday way.

At The Adler, textile-inspired patterns became part of a shared residential space through color, texture, and material. The artwork doesn't tell the entire story of textile history, but it gives that history a visible, tangible presence within the building.

3. Finding the right fit for the space & budget

Custom focal walls can range from a simple logo installation to a large, multimaterial artwork. The right approach depends on the space, the story the client wants to tell, and the available budget.

A successful focal wall doesn't have to be the biggest or most elaborate option. It needs to feel intentional, connect to its surroundings, and give the space something meaningful.

Final thoughts

The Adler was one of those projects that brought together so many things that I love about design: storytelling, materials, collaboration, and the chance to try something new.

Starting with patterns inspired by Ruth Adler's textile designs, I explored how textile history could be interpreted through contemporary fiber art. The weaving gave those patterns a new texture and dimension, while the custom metalwork and collaboration with ACSM made it possible to bring the artwork into an architectural setting.

There were plenty of challenges along the way, from reworking the loom system to undoing sections of weaving and adjusting the frames. But each challenge helped me learn something that I can carry into future projects.

What I love most is that the finished piece feels connected to both the past and the present. It draws inspiration from textile design while becoming something new, made specifically for this space and the people who will experience it.

At Studio 618, I'm always looking for ways to turn ordinary spaces into meaningful, story-driven experiences. The Adler reminded me that some of the strongest designs come from finding a meaningful story, exploring it through materials, and bringing the right people together to make it real. **GP**



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





Images courtesy of Signarama

Wayfinding 101

Designing signage that gets people where they need to go

By Alex Fong

Think about the last time you entered an unfamiliar building. Maybe it was a hospital, corporate office, or university campus. Did you immediately know where to go, or did you find yourself wandering the halls, looking for directions, or stopping someone to ask for help?

That experience illustrates the importance of effective wayfinding. When done well, directional signage is almost invisible in its simplicity. People move naturally through a space, confident in where they're going. When done poorly, even the most visually impressive environment can become a source of frustration.



For sign professionals, creating an effective wayfinding system requires more than producing attractive signs with arrows. It involves understanding how people interact with physical spaces, anticipating their needs, and developing a coordinated visual communication system that balances functionality, accessibility, and aesthetics.

It's also an opportunity for sign shops to expand their role from signage providers to strategic partners, helping businesses improve the experience of everyone who enters their facilities.

Start with the journey, not the sign

One of the most important principles of wayfinding design is understanding that the project begins long before the first sign is designed.

Every environment presents its own navigational challenges. A corporate office may need to guide employees and visitors through multiple departments. A hospital must accommodate patients, visitors, and staff with different levels of familiarity and accessibility needs. A university campus may require a coordinated system spanning multiple buildings and outdoor pathways.

Before developing a signage plan, it's essential to understand who will be using the space, where they're trying to go, and how they will get there.

At Signarama Redmond, we approach these projects by working with clients to conduct a thorough site analysis. This includes mapping traffic patterns, identifying key decision points, and understanding the different audiences navigating the facility.

A few questions can help guide the process:

- Where do visitors typically enter the building?
- What are the most common destinations?
- At what points might someone become confused or uncertain about which direction to take?
- Are there physical obstacles, architectural features, or lighting conditions that affect visibility?
- How might a first-time visitor's needs differ from those of an employee or frequent customer?

Walking the entire property from the perspective of someone unfamiliar with the space can reveal challenges that are not immediately obvious on a floor plan. This assessment provides the foundation for a signage strategy that addresses actual navigational needs, rather than simply filling all of the available wall space.

Build a logical signage hierarchy

Once the user journey is understood, the next step is developing a hierarchy







that delivers the right information at the right time. An effective wayfinding system generally incorporates several layers of communication.

- **Identification signage** establishes where someone is, whether that's a building entrance, a particular department, or an individual room.
- **Directional signage** guides people toward destinations using arrows, symbols, text, or a combination of these elements.
- **Informational signage** provides additional context, such as directories, maps, or building layouts.
- **Reassurance signage** confirms that people are still heading in the right direction, particularly when navigating long corridors or considerable distances between destinations.

That last category is often overlooked. Consider someone walking down a long hospital corridor after following a directional sign. If several minutes pass without another navigational cue, they may begin to question whether they've missed a turn. A simple confirmation sign can eliminate that uncertainty.

The key is establishing a logical progression of information. At the entrance to a large facility, signage might identify major departments or zones. As visitors move closer to their destinations, subsequent signs can provide increasingly specific directions.

This layered approach prevents information overload and allows people to make decisions in manageable steps.

Design for clarity first, creativity second

Wayfinding presents an interesting design challenge: Signage needs to complement its surroundings without sacrificing its primary purpose. Branding, architectural integration, and visual appeal are important, but clarity must always come first.

Typography, contrast, spacing, and placement should be selected based on how signage will actually be viewed and used. A beautifully designed sign loses its value if the text is too small to read from the intended distance or the directional information is difficult to interpret. For example, a sign positioned above a busy corridor may require larger lettering and simpler messaging than one installed at eye level near a reception desk. Lighting conditions can also affect how colors and materials appear, potentially compromising readability.

Color coding can be particularly useful in complex environments. Assigning distinct colors to different floors, departments, or zones gives users another visual reference to follow, reducing their reliance on text alone.

Consistency is equally important. Directional arrows, symbols, terminology, and design elements should remain uniform throughout the facility. If one sign identifies an area as the "Conference Center" and another calls it "Meeting Rooms," visitors may wonder whether they're heading toward the same destination.

For sign shops, understanding the client's brand, culture, and architectural environment is an advantage. The goal is to create a system that feels like a natural extension of the space while remaining intuitive for users.

Placement can make or break the system

Even the most thoughtfully designed sign won't be effective if it's installed in the wrong location.

Sign placement should be driven by the decisions people need to make as they navigate a space. Intersections, elevator banks, stairwells, building entrances, and transitions between departments are all potential locations where directional information may be necessary.

However, identifying these potential locations is only the beginning of the process. Sign professionals must also consider sightlines, traffic flow, visual obstructions, and the surrounding environment.

For example, a directional sign installed too close to an intersection may not give visitors enough time to process the information before making a turn. A sign placed behind a structural column or in poor lighting may go unnoticed entirely.

Installation conditions also deserve attention during planning. High ceilings, curved walls, existing fixtures, and surface materials can affect mounting methods, project costs, and timelines.

We encourage sign shops to invest time in thorough site surveys before finalizing designs or estimates. Understanding these variables early helps avoid costly adjustments during installation and ensures the finished system performs as intended.

Make accessibility part of the plan

Accessibility should never be treated as an afterthought in wayfinding design.

An effective system must consider people with different physical, sensory, and cognitive abilities. Depending on the application, this may include tactile lettering, Braille, appropriate contrast, nonglare finishes, and compliant mounting heights and locations.

For United States projects, Section 703 of the Americans with Disabilities Act standards for Accessible Design is an essential reference. Sign shops should also account for applicable building codes and local regulations.

Importantly, not every sign has the



same requirements. Understanding the distinctions between permanent room identification, directional, and informational signage is critical.

Language accessibility is another consideration, particularly in facilities serving diverse populations. Universal symbols and carefully selected iconography can help communicate information across language barriers, while multilingual signage may be appropriate for specific audiences.

These requirements are best addressed during initial planning rather than retrofitted after designs have been approved.

Know when to incorporate digital wayfinding

Traditional static signage remains the foundation of many effective wayfinding systems, but digital technology can provide additional flexibility when information changes frequently.

For example, we've implemented digital kiosks and screens for property management clients that need to communicate updated information to visitors and tenants.

Interactive displays can provide searchable directories, maps, and location-based navigation. QR codes and near-field communication technology can extend that experience to mobile devices, allowing users to access directions and additional information.

However, digital technology shouldn't be incorporated simply for the sake of innovation.

The decision should be based on operational needs, the frequency of information changes, maintenance requirements, and the people using the space. A static sign may be the most practical solution for a permanent hallway intersection, while a digital directory may better serve a building with regularly changing tenants. In many cases, the strongest approach combines static and digital elements into one cohesive system.

Test, evaluate & refine

A wayfinding project shouldn't necessarily end when the last sign is installed.

Evaluating the completed system can reveal whether it's achieving its intended purpose. Are visitors hesitating at certain intersections? Are they frequently backtracking or stopping to ask for directions?

Receptionists, security personnel, and other frontline employees can be valuable sources of feedback because they regularly interact with people experiencing navigational difficulties.

For larger projects, clients may also consider visitor surveys or time-and-step studies that measure how efficiently people reach their destinations. Digital kiosks may offer additional usage data.

These insights can identify opportunities to improve sign placement, simplify messaging, or introduce additional navigational cues. They also create opportunities for sign shops to maintain ongoing client relationships as facilities evolve and navigational needs change.

Turning wayfinding into a business opportunity

For sign shops looking to expand their capabilities, wayfinding represents an attractive area of growth.

At our Redmond, Washington, location, interior and exterior wayfinding, along with related environmental graphics, account for approximately 15% of our overall business.

We've seen opportunities across technology, corporate offices, education, and property management, where organizations are increasingly focused on improving their physical environments.

Custom wayfinding projects can also command greater value because they require specialized expertise in design, materials, fabrication, and installation. Rather than competing primarily on the price of an individual sign, shops can position themselves as providers of comprehensive solutions.

For shops entering this category, the best starting point may be existing customers. A business that initially needs office identification signs or a lobby directory may benefit from a broader evaluation of its navigational system.

And because buildings and businesses change, wayfinding systems often require updates and expansions, creating opportunities for repeat business and long-term relationships.

Ultimately, the greatest value a sign shop can deliver isn't simply helping a client determine where to install signs. It's helping them make their environment easier to navigate, more accessible, and more welcoming.

When people can confidently find their way without having to think about the signage guiding them, that's a sign of a job well done. **GP**



Alex Fong is the owner of Signarama in Redmond, Washington, where he has spent more than seven years helping businesses strengthen their brands through strategic signage and visual communications. His team specializes in integrated marketing, environmental graphics, and customized signage solutions for small and midsize businesses across diverse industries and markets.

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American Apparel



Inviting makers, dreamers & innovators to ‘craft the culture’

American Apparel is once again redefining the boundaries of blank apparel, evolving beyond timeless styles into a new era of elevated street-inspired pieces and lifestyle staples. With a legacy rooted in culture and creativity, the brand continues to invite makers, dreamers, and innovators to “Craft the Culture,” offering a modern backdrop for bold self-expression.

For 2026, American Apparel introduces a new chapter of premium fabrics and forward silhouettes that reflect how people live, move, and create today. The latest French Terry Collection reimagines comfort with a luxe, contemporary edge. The collection is smooth on the outside and soft within, designed for statement-making versatility. Meanwhile, the return of Baby Rib revives one of the brand’s most iconic textures, merging form and flexibility in sculpted fits that feel as expressive as they look. Completing the lineup, American Apparel’s Heavyweight Collection expands with new, boxier proportions and garment-dyed finishes, celebrating the raw authenticity that has defined American Apparel for decades.

Beyond product, American Apparel’s world continues to collide with music, art, and street culture. Through its creative collaboration with Live Nation, the partnership grew in 2026 with the Ones to Watch program. American Apparel is taking over more stages, elevating more emerging artists, and offering exclusive capsule drops. It’s more than apparel; it’s a shared experience.

Each piece is crafted with intention: premium fabrications, timeless silhouettes, and a design language that honors individuality over imitation. Certified under OEKO-TEX Standard 100 and marked “Made with Respect,” every style reflects a continued commitment to quality, sustainability, and craftsmanship.

In a landscape crowded with the temporary, American Apparel stands firm in what’s timeless. Its 2026 collection reaffirms what has always set the brand apart: uncompromising quality, creative integrity, and a fearless approach to design.

Always iconic. Always evolving. Always American Apparel. **GP**

americanapparel.com

communications@gildan.com





American-made equipment built for performance, consistency & durability

Talk to any successful decorator and you'll hear a common theme: dependable equipment, dependable support, and dependable partners.

That's exactly what STAHLS' has worked to deliver for generations.

From American-made equipment to the people who answer the phone when customers need help, every part of the business is focused on helping decorators operate with confidence. Because when production schedules are tight, deadlines can't move, and customer expectations are high, reliability matters most.

For decades, Hotronix heat presses have earned a reputation for performance, consistency, and durability. Built for businesses that demand results order after order, they're trusted by everyone from entrepreneurs launching their first apparel brand to established decorators managing high-volume production.



Engineered and manufactured in Pennsylvania, Hotronix equipment is designed to be dependable year after year, helping decorators maximize efficiency and keep orders moving. But dependable equipment is only part of the equation.

Lasting partnerships are built through transparency, trust, and collaboration. Customers deserve honest guidance, practical solutions, and support from real people who understand the day-to-day realities of running a decorating business.

That's why STAHLS' remains committed to sharing knowledge, listening to feedback, and developing solutions that address the needs of an evolving industry.

Innovation has always been a driving force, but innovation is most valuable when it helps customers succeed. Whether through new decorating technologies, enhanced equipment, free educational resources, or hands-on training opportunities, the focus remains on helping businesses work smarter, grow stronger, and create with confidence.

That commitment extends beyond the products themselves. Every day, teams across STAHLS' work alongside decorators, distributors, and industry partners to help move apparel decoration forward. By sharing expertise, fostering collaboration, and investing in the future of the industry, STAHLS' helps create new opportunities for businesses of every size to thrive.

As the decorating industry continues to evolve, the principles that guide the company remain unchanged: build quality products, support customers with integrity, share knowledge openly, and earn trust through action.

Approaching 95 years in the decorated apparel industry, STAHLS' continues to be guided by the values that have defined the company since 1932. Those values have helped make STAHLS' a trusted name in apparel decoration, and they continue to shape every product, decision, service, and customer interaction today.

Success is built on more than quality products. It's strengthened by trusted partnerships, meaningful collaboration, and a shared commitment to growth.

The STAHLS' team is proud to support the businesses and communities that drive this industry forward. STAHLS' remains committed to helping more decorators succeed and serving the decorated apparel industry for generations to come. **GP**

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MUTOH America Inc.

Built in Japan for lasting reliability & supported by a nationwide network of authorized dealers



MUTOH America Inc. provides wide-format printing technologies for businesses producing signage, graphics, promotional products, textiles, and specialty applications. Serving customers across the United States, Canada, and Latin America, the company combines printing expertise with an authorized dealer network that connects print providers with equipment, application resources, and local support. The company designs dependable, easy-to-use printers and updates its lineup as industry needs evolve.

Its portfolio spans eco-solvent, UV-LED, dye-sublimation, and water-based UV printing. These technologies address different production requirements, from vehicle graphics and banners to customized objects, fabric displays, and indoor graphics, whether a shop is managing an established production workflow or considering additional applications for its business.

Eco-solvent printing remains an important part of sign and graphics production, particularly for vehicle graphics, decals, banners, and displays. The XpertJet 1641SR Pro II serves this broad range of roll-to-roll work, while the eight-color XpertJet 1681SR Pro uses an expanded color set to produce smoother gradations, richer skin tones, and deeper reds. These examples illustrate how different color configurations can help shops match their equipment to the types of graphics they produce.

UV-LED printing gives print providers another way to approach rigid substrates and specialty objects. Instead of limiting production to flexible media, flatbed printers can handle the rigid materials used for signs, awards, displays, and promotional products. The XpertJet 1462UF, for example, supports larger-format flatbed applications such as signage and display panels.

The newest model, the XpertJet 661UF Pro, debuted at PRINTING United Expo 2026 in Las Vegas as the successor to the compact XpertJet 661UF. It responds to what many shops are seeing right now: steady requests for personalized products, promotional items, and Americans-with-Disabilities-Act-compliant Braille signs. The 661UF Pro expands direct-to-object capabilities for shops building those services in-house. Fabric printing is following a similar shift in demand. Event organizers and retailers increasingly choose soft signage because it folds, ships lighter than rigid displays, and can be reused across seasons. Dye-sublimation printers such as the XpertJet 1642WR Pro and XpertJet 1341WR Pro — offered in two print widths — show how shops can match equipment to their volume, from short sample runs to full production of flags, apparel, and trade-show graphics.

Indoor air quality has become another purchasing factor. Projects for schools, offices, and healthcare facilities often specify low-emission materials, drawing attention to water-based alternatives. The HydrAton 1642 applies water-based UV printing to 64" roll-to-roll production, and its ink carries GREENGUARD Gold certification. For interior projects, that certification gives shops and their clients a recognized standard to reference.

From roll-based graphics to rigid objects and fabric, the portfolio covers much of the work print providers are now asked to produce. Before choosing equipment, shops can request printed samples, attend live or online demonstrations, and review application videos to see how each technology fits their work. Mutoh's goal is to offer technology that meets today's production needs while leaving room to take on new applications as a business grows. **GP**

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Alpina Manufacturing LLC



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Alpina is creating jobs and keeping dollars in America. The company works hard to provide outstanding quality, customer service, and affordable pricing. Alpina is located in a 100,000-square-foot building on 4 acres in Chicago with a dedicated production staff to serve your needs.

The company uses all American-made frame components and lenses. Its aluminum frames are made with an over 30% recycled content, and are produced under environmentally responsible manufacturing processes in the U.S.

Alpina designs, tests, and builds all its products in Chicago. It runs a super-efficient operation to give you the best quality at low costs. Its employees are hard-working Americans, and its goal is to provide a great product at the lowest price.

Alpina makes an array of high-quality frame products:

- Flip-Up (snap) Frames with various rails sizes and colors
- Slide-in Frames are designed to change graphics in 10 seconds
- Banner Grip Frames sized from 4" X 4" to over 100' X 100' (bannergrip.com)
- Banner Grip JR for trucks and buildings
- Banner GripFlip
- Acrylic Frames
- CloudLight LED Frames
- Ban45, a modern engineered, tested, patents pending, pivoting, pole or flat surface mounted banner system. Ban45 means it pivots 45 degrees to either side to deflect and redirect the force of high winds off the banner (ban45.com)
- Gas Pump Frames (gaspumpframes.com)
- Hospital Patient Boards (hospitalpatientboards.com)
- Edge Grip Sign Holders
- SEG Fabric Frames and Fabric Snap Frames
- Storms Snaps (window insulation for exterior or interior windows) at stormsnaps.com

Alpina's president and owner, Darius Augustine, credits Alpina's 34 successful years to its customer service and that every order is custom-made and inspected. **GP**

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Los Angeles Apparel



A bold new standard in American manufacturing

Los Angeles Apparel stands as one of the largest apparel manufacturers in the United States and the G7, yet it's more than just a name in fashion. Founded by industry visionary Dov Charney with a commitment to redefine industry standards, the company operates with a clear mission: to create high-quality, ethically-produced garments while championing sustainability, fair wages, and community investment.

At the heart of this mission is Los Angeles Apparel's unique, vertically-integrated model that ensures every step of the production process happens under one roof in South Central Los Angeles, California, allowing it to maintain precise control over quality and minimize its environmental footprint.

With roots in the cultural mosaic of Los Angeles, the company draws energy and inspiration from a community that is as diverse as it is dynamic. Operations are based in the heart of South Central, where Los Angeles Apparel is committed not only to producing garments but to creating stable, well-paying jobs for local residents.

Its skilled garment workers earn a starting wage of $20 an hour, with opportunities to make up to $35 an hour with productivity bonuses, all in an environment that respects and values the hands behind every piece.

The company's contrarian philosophy extends to sustainable and environmentally-friendly practices. Nearly 100% of its production and shipping byproducts — scrap fabric, paper, boxes, and plastic — are recycled. Los Angeles Apparel leads the charge in ethical production by using environmentally-friendly cotton, upcycled materials, and organic or reclaimed fabrics, and it finishes its textiles in California, where the industry's strictest environmental standards are enforced.

This dedication to sustainability is not just about reducing waste; it's a commitment to eliminating the harmful practices of fast fashion by creating timeless basics designed to last. These quality essentials are not only versatile and functional but built with durability in mind, serving as wardrobe staples for years to come.

A focus on advanced manufacturing and innovation allows Los Angeles Apparel to stay competitive on a global scale without sacrificing ethics. Its fully domestic supply chain, which sources over half of its yarn from U.S. producers, strengthens the local economy and reduces carbon emissions. By supporting U.S. farmers and the domestic yarn industry, the company bolsters the health of the national manufacturing base while contributing to environmental sustainability.

This approach aligns perfectly with the needs of apparel decorators, engravers, and signage experts, providing them with consistent, high-quality garments ready for customization in graphics and digital printing markets.

For businesses seeking a partner dedicated to quality, ethics, and sustainable practices, Los Angeles Apparel offers unparalleled value. Its commitment radiates vision, passion, and innovation, driving the company to challenge industry norms, prioritize local jobs over offshore production, and build a future where sustainability and efficiency drive profitability. That's Los Angeles Apparel: a company that's not just about apparel, but about ideas, values, and a bold new standard in American manufacturing. **GP**

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STAHLS' Fulfill Engine



More opportunity shouldn't mean more complexity

As decorators expand their offerings, launch online stores, and take on more recurring business, managing growth can become just as challenging as creating it. Success depends on finding a way to sell more, offer more, and fulfill more, without creating more work.

STAHLS' Fulfill Engine connects online selling, apparel suppliers, and decoration partners, helping businesses expand their custom merchandise offerings without taking on every production step.

Fulfillment partners decorate and ship incoming orders, while businesses with production equipment can manage work in-house, use partner fulfillment, or combine both approaches.

That flexibility connects what businesses sell with how they fulfill it, supporting growth around their customers, capabilities, and goals.

Build more business with existing customers

Turn individual orders into ongoing employee apparel, team merchandise, and corporate programs. Fulfill Engine's online stores provide a convenient place for customers to purchase branded products and return when it's time to reorder.

Online stores can also support new hires and replacement purchases without collecting sizes or organizing group orders each time. Businesses can create stores through Fulfill Engine or connect compatible e-commerce platforms, including Shopify, OrderMyGear, and Chiply.

Offer the brands, styles & decoration customers want

Fulfill Engine connects apparel suppliers, brands, and decoration partners through a growing network that makes it easier to expand offerings while reducing inventory requirements. With access to trusted suppliers and preferred brands, businesses can build collections that align with how their customers buy.



Decoration options include direct-to-film printing, direct-to-garment printing, embroidery, sublimation, laser engraving, UV printing, and raised LIQUID 3D emblems, with no minimum quantity requirements. Screen printing is also available for larger orders.

The network extends beyond apparel to drinkware, hard goods, and branded accessories, making it possible to meet customer demand without investing in equipment for every decoration method. It's a practical way to respond to evolving customer needs while participating in the future of branded merchandise.

Fulfill demand without stocking finished inventory

With on-demand fulfillment, products are decorated after purchase. Partners handle production and shipping for individual purchases and repeat orders, helping businesses maintain programs while adapting to changing customer needs.

Because orders are produced as they're placed, businesses can reduce the risk and expense of carrying finished inventory while creating greater flexibility for both themselves and their customers.

Connect in-house production

Businesses with production equipment don't have to choose between making products themselves and leveraging outside fulfillment. Fulfill Engine supports both, making it possible to combine e-commerce, in-house production, and partner fulfillment within a connected workflow.

Build the business you want to run

As part of STAHLS', Fulfill Engine brings software, suppliers, and decoration partners together to give owners more choices in how they grow.

Say yes to more customer needs. Build relationships that bring repeat business. Keep control of the work you want to do, with support for the rest.

Explore what's next for your business at fulfillengine.com. **GP**

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ColDesi





A comprehensive equipment supplier serving the customization market

ColDesi is a leading provider of production equipment, software, and support solutions for the custom printing, promotional products, and decorated apparel industries. With more than 25 years of experience, the company has built its reputation by delivering practical, production-ready technology to businesses of all sizes.

Founded as an embroidery business, ColDesi has evolved into a comprehensive equipment supplier serving multiple segments of the customization market. Its portfolio spans direct-to-film (DTF) printing systems, UV flatbed printers, UV/DTF printers, embroidery machines, white toner printers, print-and-cut systems, embellishment equipment, and professional-grade heat presses. ColDesi also supplies workflow software, consumables, and automation tools, providing customers with an end-to-end solution that reduces integration challenges and improves production efficiency.

At the core of ColDesi's mission is its commitment to advancing production capabilities through innovation. The company holds numerous patents and continues to invest in automation, digital workflow integration, and equipment engineering. These advancements are designed to optimize throughput, minimize material waste, and maintain consistent output quality — essential factors for manufacturers operating in today's on-demand production environment. ColDesi's technology enables decorators, print providers, and fulfillment operations to meet shorter lead times, accommodate variable order sizes, and diversify product offerings without compromising precision or profitability.

Customer support and training are critical components of the company's value proposition. Every purchase includes a structured onboarding process, led by a customer care representative who ensures that new equipment is fully integrated into existing workflows. ColDesi's online training platform offers detailed, self-paced instruction on setup, operation, and maintenance, while live virtual and in-person training options provide deeper technical guidance. This multitiered approach is designed to shorten ramp-up time and equip production teams with the skills necessary to maximize machine performance from day one.

Ongoing support is delivered by an in-house technical team with direct access to every piece of equipment sold. This approach allows ColDesi to deliver fast, informed solutions to operational issues, including troubleshooting and application-specific assistance. With no outsourced call centers, customers receive direct, knowledgeable support from specialists who understand the realities of a production floor.

Beyond equipment and service, ColDesi acts as an educational resource for the industry. Its resource center offers articles, videos, and podcasts focused on production techniques, workflow optimization, business strategy, and market trends. Virtual and on-site demonstrations provide an opportunity to see equipment in action under real production conditions.

Today, thousands of businesses worldwide rely on ColDesi's technology and expertise to power their customization operations. Through continuous innovation, reliable equipment, and comprehensive support, ColDesi enables decorators, manufacturers, and fulfillment providers to scale their capabilities, improve efficiency, and compete more effectively in an ever-evolving marketplace. **GP**

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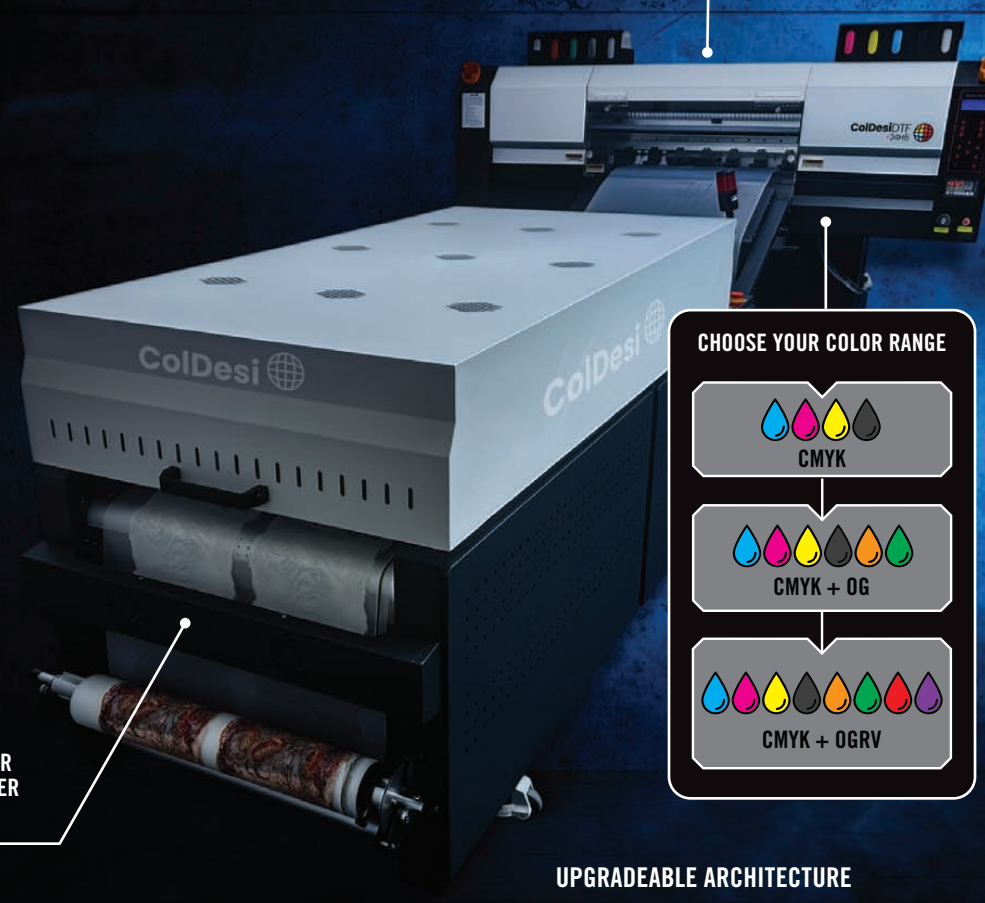


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L.A.T. Apparel

A legacy woven with purpose

For more than 40 years, one Georgia company has been crafting apparel for the moments, memories, and stories worth telling, from a baby's first steps to a dog's first game day.

Every great story begins with a single thread. For L.A.T. Apparel, that thread was a father's search for clothing good enough for his daughter. When he couldn't find it, he set out to make it himself. More than four decades later, that personal mission has grown into one of the industry's most trusted names, built on a simple belief: families deserve better fabrics, better fits, and better values.

L.A.T. treats partnership as the heart of its business. Distributors, decorators, and retail partners all help bring each garment to life, and every brand in the L.A.T. family is designed to be decorator-friendly, dependable, and ready to personalize. Today, three brands carry the company's story forward, each written for a different chapter of life.

Rabbit Skins: Fit for any tale

Rabbit Skins is an uncompromising brand made for the earliest stages of life, because tiny humans deserve clothes that meet big standards. Rooted in safety, comfort, and durability, every piece supports real movement and everyday moments, from first steps to first milestones.

The brand is soft by nature and secure by design, pairing comfortable fabrics with SnapEase closures that make dressing easier while helping garments stay securely in place. Each piece is tested for safety and quality, meeting the high standards parents expect and the reliability decorators depend on from L.A.T. Apparel.

Live & Tell: Where great stories begin

Live & Tell is there for every chapter, from youth to adult. This premium brand delivers everyday style with a distinct fashion point of view, thoughtful details, and quality designed to stay relevant beyond the trend cycle.

What sets Live & Tell apart is a fit you can trust. Every style is informed by real-world body measurements and backed by quality manufacturing for a consistent, reliable fit that builds buyer confidence and reduces fit-related returns.

Soft, durable, and decorator-friendly, Live & Tell apparel is made to live in and built to tell, becoming part of the moments, memories, and stories people share for years to come.

Doggie Skins: Made for every tail-wagging story

Because pets aren't just along for the journey; they're part of the story. Doggie Skins brings L.A.T.'s commitment to quality to four-legged family members with thoughtfully-fitted apparel inspired by the special bond between people and their pets.

Whether it's game day, a family photo, a community event, or everyday life together, Doggie Skins makes it easy to bring dogs into the experiences people love most. Its soft, dependable styles are designed for everyday wear, movement, and tail-wagging adventures, and they're ready to personalize for brands, teams, events, and pet lovers.

A legacy that keeps growing

In a world of fast fashion and fleeting trends, L.A.T. stands apart by staying true to its roots: putting people first and making apparel that lasts in quality and in meaning. Whether it's a newborn's first onesie, a favorite tee that fits just right, or a matching shirt for the family pup, L.A.T. Apparel is there, weaving care into every thread and every story. **GP**

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OTTO CAP

Where quality, reliability & partnership meet



For more than three decades, OTTO CAP has been recognized as America's largest source for custom headwear and blank caps. As a dedicated B2B one-stop shop, OTTO CAP focuses exclusively on providing businesses with premium-quality headwear solutions that deliver craftsmanship, consistency, and value. Our mission is simple — to help distributors, decorators, and brands bring their ideas to life with high-quality products and exceptional service.

The team at OTTO CAP knows that every detail matters. From fit and fabric to structure and stitching, our commitment to quality is reflected in every cap we produce. The brand's extensive lineup includes classic baseball caps, stylish truckers, performance-driven golf hats, warm and comfortable winter beanies, and premium lifestyle designs — all crafted to meet the diverse needs of its B2B customers across industries such as promotional products, corporate apparel, retail, and private-label manufacturing.

To ensure fast, reliable delivery, OTTO CAP operates three strategically located warehouses in California, Georgia, and Texas. This nationwide network allows the team to fulfill orders efficiently and minimize lead times, ensuring that its customers receive their products quickly and reliably. The company also provides free ground shipping on eligible orders, making it easier and more affordable for businesses to stock up on bestselling styles.

Quality and convenience are at the heart of everything we do. The company offers free blank samples, giving customers the opportunity to feel and evaluate the quality of our products before committing to large orders. Every embroidery order includes free digitizing, ensuring logos and artwork are optimized for clean, professional stitching. For eligible headwear orders, OTTO CAP also provides free backing, ready for instant production right out of the box — all at no extra cost. The business is built on trust, partnership, and long-term relationships. When you choose OTTO CAP, you're not just selecting a supplier — you're partnering with a team dedicated to your success. Whether you need custom-decorated headwear or blank stock, our experienced staff works closely with each client to provide tailored solutions, consistent product quality, and responsive service from start to finish.

As OTTO CAP continues to grow, its goal remains the same: to be the No. 1 headwear partner for businesses across the country. With innovation, craftsmanship, and customer commitment at our core, OTTO CAP continues to set the industry standard as your one-stop solution for custom headwear and blank caps — built for business, trusted by professionals, and worn with pride.

OTTO CAP — where quality, reliability, and partnership meet. **GP**

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S&S



How S&S is building its business around customer growth

S&S stopped asking, "How do we fill a customer's order?" and started asking, "How can we fuel their success?" Here's what that shift means for customers and the industry.

The branded merchandise industry has changed significantly over the past four decades, and so have the businesses S&S serves.

PPDs and decorators today are navigating greater complexity and higher expectations. They don't just need suppliers; they need true partners who can help them grow. To meet these changing needs, S&S has evolved alongside them.

What began as an apparel distributor has grown into a partner that brings together a broad product portfolio, nationwide distribution, technology, and business solutions designed to help customers compete and grow. That evolution is why S&S Activewear has rebranded to become S&S — a name and identity that better reflects the company's expanded scope and services.

"While our look may have changed, our customers remain at the heart of who we are," S&S CEO Frank Myers said. "Our customers are ambitious about where they want to take their businesses, and our job is to help them get there."

That's the idea behind S&S's new brand and tagline: "Take Your Vision Further."

What's changed for customers

Behind the new identity are real changes in what S&S offers and how it operates. S&S rebuilt its sales organization around regionally-focused teams for deeper, more local relationships. It invested more than $200 million in robotic fulfillment across a network that reaches 99% of the United States and Canada within two days. And it built S&S Business Solutions to make it easier for customers to do business with S&S — and with their own customers.

The new S&S experience

When S&S brought the brand to life digitally in September, it put its customers at the center of the story, highlighting how the company's evolution is showing up in their businesses.

For Michelle Diaz, co-owner of Natural Tease Sportswear, that means having the product breadth, pricing, and speed to confidently pursue new opportunities.

"S&S products help me serve a wide range of customers, from resorts to construction workers to landscapers," Diaz said. "Working with S&S gives us the confidence to go after larger accounts because we know we can count on competitive pricing and quick turnaround."

For Blake Burroughs, founder and chief sales officer at TopShelf Printers, it's about having a partner alongside his business as it grows.

"S&S is right beside us in every growth opportunity we see," Burroughs said. "They listen to us as the customer and allow us to grow alongside them."

Those experiences are what "Take Your Vision Further" is intended to represent: understanding where customers want to go and continuing to build the capabilities that can help them get there.

Next up: Trade-show season

Since September, customers have experienced the new S&S primarily through the company's website, digital channels, and communications. In January, S&S will bring the brand to life in person at industry trade shows, giving customers the opportunity to experience firsthand what the new S&S is all about.

And while S&S continues to evolve, what's at the center hasn't changed: listening to customers, understanding where they want to go — and helping them take their vision further. **GP**

The new S&S at a glance

- 80+ brands in North America — the industry's largest inventory
- S&S Business Solutions helps customers run faster, leaner, and more profitably
- 4x faster order processing through automation
- 120,000 customers served in 2025
- >99.9% order accuracy

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BUILT FOR GROWTH. YOURS.

S&S is a leading distributor of apparel and accessories, but what we deliver goes far beyond products. We rebuilt our sales organization to allow for deeper understanding of your business and more frequent touchpoints. We invested in the technology and distribution network it takes to deliver what you need, rapidly and reliably. And we developed solutions to make running your business easier.

This is the future of branded merchandise.
This is the new S&S.

Scan to see what's new at ssactivewear.com

THE NEW

S&S

TAKE YOUR VISION FURTHER

Unisub

The trusted foundation for product personalization

In today's competitive graphics and personalization markets, success requires more than creative design. Businesses need dependable products, consistent quality, and trusted supplier relationships that help them expand into new applications and revenue opportunities. For decades, Unisub has been a leading resource for decorators, print providers, promotional product professionals, and makers seeking high-quality substrates engineered for customization.

Unisub manufactures premium sublimation-ready products across a variety of coated substrates, delivering image quality, durability, and consistency professionals expect. Designed specifically for sublimation, Unisub products help businesses create vibrant, high-impact graphics across a broad range of applications.

A key differentiator is the breadth and versatility of the Unisub product portfolio. The lineup includes many of the most popular categories in product personalization, including ornaments, name badges, signage, awards, photo panels, coasters, key chains, magnets, bag tags, and home decor products. With hundreds of SKUs available, businesses can broaden their offerings and reach new customer segments without investing in additional decorating technologies.

For many graphics professionals, diversification is an important growth strategy. Consumers and organizations increasingly seek personalized products that celebrate milestones, recognize achievements, strengthen brands, and create memorable experiences. Unisub products support a wide variety of end markets, including photography, youth sports, awards and recognition, promotional products, retail gift shops, tourism destinations, schools, fundraising programs, special events, and personalized home decor.

Consistency remains critical for businesses that rely on repeat customers and strong reputations. Whether producing a single personalized gift or fulfilling a large commercial order, decorators need confidence that every product will perform as expected. Unisub's coatings are engineered to deliver exceptional image transfer, color vibrancy, and detail reproduction, helping businesses achieve professional results with confidence.

Durability is equally important. Many Unisub products are designed to maintain their appearance through everyday use, making them well-suited for signage, identification products, awards, photo gifts, and display applications where both aesthetics and longevity are essential.

Beyond the products themselves, Unisub helps businesses identify new ways to grow. Companies already utilizing sublimation technology can often expand into additional product categories with minimal capital investment. For example, a shop producing decorated apparel can leverage existing equipment and workflows to add photo gifts, awards, decor, signage, and promotional products, creating new revenue streams from the same decorating platform.

That flexibility is one reason Unisub continues to be a trusted supplier throughout the graphics industry. Manufactured in the United States and supported by a European office in Belgium, Unisub serves customers worldwide through an extensive network of distributors and resellers, providing access to products, technical support, and dependable supply.

As part of Apogee Enterprises' Performance Surfaces division, Unisub collaborates with industry-leading brands including ChromaLuxe, RDC Coatings, and Tru Vue. Together, these brands leverage advanced coating technologies and manufacturing expertise to develop high-performance surface solutions.

From personalized keepsakes to branded promotional products, Unisub continues to provide the foundation that helps graphics professionals grow, diversify, and succeed. **GP**



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Rounded Tag Ornament

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2-Sided Aluminum



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Gloss White
2-Sided Aluminum



Scalloped Oval Ornament

3” x 4”
Gloss White
2-Sided Aluminum



Wavy Rectangle Ornament

2.83” x 4”
Gloss White
2-Sided Aluminum

Gemini



Built to help your brand stand out

For more than 60 years, Gemini has helped sign professionals bring brands and environments to life through high-quality signage. With a broad portfolio of products and manufacturing capabilities, Gemini serves as a trusted partner for projects ranging from dimensional letters and logos to plaques, plates, wayfinding solutions, and illuminated signage.

For graphics professionals, every customer project can be an opportunity to offer more. The same customers looking for printed graphics, wraps, displays, and branded environments may also need dimensional letters, logos, wayfinding, or illuminated signage to complete their space. Gemini can help graphics professionals expand their portfolio into dimensional signage, creating opportunities to provide more complete solutions and capture more of each project.

With Gemini as a manufacturing partner, you can broaden what you offer without having to add new production capabilities on-site. Whether a project calls for dimensional letters, wayfinding signs, or an illuminated solution, Gemini offers a range of products and manufacturing capabilities to help turn your customer's vision into reality.

Whether you're helping a customer refresh a space, strengthen their brand presence, or create something entirely new, Gemini can help you take the project beyond graphics and turn it into a complete signage solution.

See what's possible with Gemini. **GP**

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GEMINI



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Like partnering with the best retail brands. Developing exclusive labels that offer quality, comfort, performance, and value. Innovating and investing in industry-leading technologies and logistics. Taking care of one customer at a time. And staying committed to two simple values: Be nice and tell the truth.

Anyone can sell you a T-shirt. But Sanmar is not just another T-shirt company. Sanmar is here to be your partner. The one you rely on. The one that helps take you from where you are today to where you dream of being.

That's SanMar — still here after more than 50 years to help you do business better. **GP**



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AWDis



Providing decorators with reliable, high-quality styles that deliver on comfort & printability

With a strong reputation as a leading apparel brand in the United Kingdom, AWDis brings years of experience in quality, design, and innovation to the United States wholesale apparel market. Built around the needs of the decoration industry, AWDis offers an extensive range of blank apparel that combines quality, versatility, and an impressive selection of colors, providing decorators with the perfect canvas for creativity.

Since entering the U.S. market, AWDis has continued to strengthen its offering, providing decorators with reliable, high-quality styles that deliver on both comfort and printability. From everyday essentials to standout pieces, the brand combines thoughtful design with the versatility needed to bring creative ideas to life. Color has always been at the heart of AWDis.

With more than 50 colors available in its bestselling JHA001 College Hoodie and JHA030 College Sweat, decorators have the freedom to create for teams, schools, businesses, and beyond. Coordinating adult and youth styles make it even easier to achieve a consistent look across collections, while an extensive range of fleece, T-shirts, and performance apparel offers options for every occasion.

Beyond its impressive color selection, AWDis prioritizes the details that matter most to decorators. Cotton-faced fleece, tear-away labels, and quality construction help provide dependable results across a variety of decoration methods. The brand's T-shirt offering also includes the AWDis 150 T range, featuring innovative PurePrint fabric engineered to deliver a smooth, reliable surface for exceptional print results.

With a commitment to quality, value, and versatility, AWDis continues to build on its presence in the U.S. while staying true to its Scottish roots. Available through a growing network of U.S. distributors, AWDis gives decorators access to the styles, colors, and dependable quality they need to bring every project to life. **GP**

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800-229-1240

Advertising Specialty Institute (ASI)

Helping screen printers expand beyond apparel to become complete branding partners

Screen printers already help brands make an impression. Adding promotional products offers a natural way to extend that impact while creating new revenue opportunities.

Today's customers want more than apparel. They're looking for branded drinkware, bags, event merchandise, recognition items, corporate gifts, and countless other products that help their brands stay visible long after an event, campaign, or purchase.

For many decorators, success in promotional products starts with a simple shift in mindset.

"We were already putting logos on things, so why not offer more of what our customers are already asking for?" said Lee Stuart, president of Rogue Lab (asi/170093).

By leveraging trusted supplier relationships to offer a broader range of branded merchandise, you'll become a more valuable resource to your customers while pocketing additional revenue — no new equipment or production capabilities necessary. That's where ASI comes in.

ASI provides access to thousands of trusted suppliers, more than a million promotional products, industry-leading technology, and business resources designed to help companies grow.

ESP+, ASI's all-in-one solution, allows you to efficiently run your business from one place. Members can find the products they need with lightning-quick search, access the Client Portal, create presentations and curated collections, verify human-audited tech specs, and manage your end-to-end workflow — all without leaving the platform.

Becoming a promotional products distributor with ASI gives you same-day access to the tools, suppliers, and wholesale pricing you need to start selling immediately. Whether you're exploring promo the first time or looking to expand an existing program, ASI has you covered. **GP**



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Canon USA Inc.



The next evolution in large-format graphics

Experience the next evolution in large-format graphics: the Canon Colorado XL-Series. Engineered to enhance productivity and creative versatility, this 3.4-meter (11') hybrid printer serves as a powerful growth engine for print service providers.

Powered by Canon's UVgel technology, the Colorado XL-Series delivers consistent, vibrant color across both flexible roll media and rigid boards up to 2" thick. It handles high-volume demands efficiently while maintaining high image quality across a diverse range of premium applications.

The Colorado XL-Series is built around a smart, scalable design. The modular platform allows you to upgrade your system in the field as your business expands. Furthermore, it unlocks new creative applications for your clients.

Offer premium options using FLXfinish+ to combine matte and gloss effects in a single pass, and — in the future — utilize FLXture to create tactile, textured prints like woodgrain and leather without the need for extra varnish.

Designed with sustainability in mind, the UVgel inks provide instant-dry prints with low-temperature curing. They are engineered for low volatile organic compound emissions, making them suitable for sensitive indoor environments.

The Canon Colorado XL-Series is a strategic investment designed to support your long-term goals. Step into a new era of wide-format printing and scale your business with confidence. GP



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Crystal by Design

Timeless styles that put the emphasis where it belongs: On the achievement being recognized



Crystal by Design is a family-owned wholesale supplier of crystal and glass awards, gifts, and recognition products. Crystal by Design's founder, Eric Chen, started the company in 1996 with a focus on thoughtful design, dependable quality, and genuine service. Thirty years later, those priorities haven't changed.

Chen helped pioneer many of the designs that have become familiar throughout the awards industry. The company still favors clean, timeless styles that put the emphasis where it belongs: on the achievement being recognized. You will find crisp lines, balanced shapes, and plenty of room for engraving throughout the collection. Whether the occasion calls for a simple thank you or a major achievement award, Crystal by Design's team believes the finished piece should feel special.

It also understands what it's like to work on a deadline. Your customer has an event coming up, and you need a supplier you can count on. That's why Crystal by Design offers same-day shipping on in-stock items. The company also handles engraving in-house, allowing its team to pay close attention to the details and quality of the finished piece.

Because it's a small, family-run company, every order is important to Crystal by Design. The team takes the time to answer questions, help customers find the right products, and make the ordering process as straightforward as possible. With a broad selection of awards and gifts at competitive wholesale prices, the team aims to offer something for different tastes, occasions, and budgets. Crystal by Design works hard to maintain reliable inventory, too, so its customers can order with confidence.

And because crystal and glass require extra care, the team puts thought into how orders are packed and shipped. Protecting each piece in transit is just as important as getting it out the door on time.

Being a good supplier isn't just about having beautiful products. It's about being easy to work with, following through on its commitments, and treating customers the way they would want to be treated. The Crystal by Design team is grateful for the distributors and retailers who have trusted it over the years. If you haven't worked with Crystal by Design yet, visit the website, explore the collection, and see what the company has to offer. **GP**



crystalbydesign.com
customer.service@crystalbydesign.com
888-358-8298

Infinity Her

Headwear designed specifically for women



Infinity Her found a gap in the branded merchandise headwear market and made it the company's mission to fill it by creating the perfect women's baseball cap engineered specifically for their needs. Women are over half the population, and their buying power and influence continues to increase.

Female buyers are more intentional than ever, opting for functional, high-quality products that actually get used. A recent survey showed that the top two reasons women keep branded merchandise are due to their utility and quality.

Infinity Her is proof that designing for women leads to lasting impact. The brand's success comes from listening to real feedback and solving overlooked pain points. Each style has the brand's patented Evolve Concealed Ponytail Opening, which looks like a regular cap when hair is worn down, or accommodates a high ponytail when hair is up. The included Elude patented makeup resistant sweatband is breathable and moisture wicking. All styles are made with the perfect fit in beautiful colors and patterns. These features make both a functional and fashionable cap that women love to wear.

Infinity Product Group has been designing headwear since 1997 and has sold over 50 million women's baseball caps in the last 10 years.

The company is located in Lowell, Arkansas. The Infinity Her line is carried by Sportsman Cap and Bag wholesalers: S&S, McCreary's Tees, SLC Activewear, Kati Sportcap & Bag, and Carolina Made. **GP**



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Siser – North America

A global leader in heat-transfer vinyl manufacturing



For more than 40 years, Siser has been helping creators turn ideas into reality through premium-quality decoration materials, innovative technology, and a commitment to excellence rooted in the brand's Italian heritage. As a leading heat-transfer vinyl manufacturer, Siser has built its reputation on delivering reliable, high-performance products that empower businesses, makers, decorators, and hobbyists alike.

Headquartered in Italy with branches serving customers around the globe, Siser offers a comprehensive portfolio that spans heat transfer vinyl, pressure-sensitive vinyl, digital media, sublimation solutions, and the tools and accessories needed to bring creative visions to life. Every product is developed with a focus on quality, consistency, and ease of use, helping customers create with confidence whether they are producing a single custom item or managing large-scale production.

Innovation has always been at the heart of the Siser story. In recent years, Siser expanded beyond materials with the introduction of its cutting machine lineup, including the award-winning Romeo and Juliet cutters. Designed to work seamlessly with a wide range of materials, these machines reflect the company's ongoing mission to provide complete creative solutions for makers at every level.

Today, Siser's presence extends across North America and four additional international branches, supporting a global community of creators who share a passion for craftsmanship, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Together with STAHLS', Siser is helping shape the future of apparel decoration through innovative products, education, and production solutions designed to help businesses thrive. From premium materials to advanced cutting technology, Siser remains committed to empowering creators at every stage of their journey. **GP**



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Image courtesy of DPI Laboratory

Why you should always check the file with AI-generated art

Artwork may need cleanup, file setup & a proof — the shop needs to account for that work

Daniel Tobon

Customers bring print shops AI-generated images and ask if they can be printed. The picture may look finished on a screen, but the file still has to match the job. Final size, material, print process, finish, and any other details must be exact.

An image generator follows instructions about subject, color, and style; it does not automatically supply every production specification. The gap becomes clear when the image is a mockup rather than print-ready art. Prompting can refine an image's aspect ratio, lighting, or texture, but it does not create the separate files and production instructions a shop may need for production.

At one event, a customer used an AI image generator to create a realistic, 45-degree view of several name badges, complete with names and a textured finish meant to mimic embroidery. The image showed the desired result, but it was a single angled composition, not individual files for each badge. It was also a flat raster image with no separate information for the texture effect, such as alpha channels or spot-color swatches. A designer rebuilt the composition as separate badge files, prepared the effect data, and created a file for each name. The customer's reaction was, "See what I've designed!" The image captured the concept, but only the rebuilt files could be used to print the badges with the requested textured look.

That kind of conversion takes more than a quick cleanup. It requires design and prepress work to turn the appearance in a mockup into instructions a printer and raster image processing can use.

Prepare the file for the job

Start by checking the image at the size it will be printed. A file can look sharp on a phone and lose detail when enlarged. Upscaling may help, but it cannot guarantee that fine lines or small details will hold up. Set the resolution target from the final size, viewing distance, material, and output



provider's specifications. A shop may recommend 300 dpi for many items, but while large graphics viewed from farther away may work at a lower resolution; 300 dpi is not a universal rule. Additionally, Adobe's commercial-print guidance also recommends following the prepress provider's requirements and managing color for the intended output.

Next, inspect the details the customer expects to be exact. Generated lettering can be misspelled or inconsistent. A logo may look close without matching the approved mark. AI-generated images are usually raster files made of pixels; logos, type, and brand elements often need vector artwork or approved source files to reproduce reliably. Use the original artwork or rebuild those elements separately.

Ask the customer which parts of the image can change and which must remain exact. A background or decorative texture may be flexible; a licensed logo, product label, team mark, or required copy needs approved source artwork. Getting the assets and approval criteria up front saves time spent repairing details that should have been supplied correctly.

Then set up the file for the chosen process. The job may need specific page dimensions, bleed, safe margins, working links and fonts, or color settings. RGB, CMYK, or a print-ready PDF may be appropriate depending on the provider's workflow, so do not convert files by habit. Adobe advises checking output conditions before conversion and preflighting links, fonts, bleed, and color before sending a file to a commercial printer.

Some UV jobs require separate artwork or spot-color data for white ink, texture, or a clear coating. A flattened image does not automatically contain those instructions. Depending on the printer and RIP, a white-ink or varnish layer may be built from grayscale values, but the shop should confirm how the effect needs to be prepared. Dark materials often need a white underbase for color to show as intended.

Shaped or uneven objects add another check: the distance between the printhead and the surface. Printhead clearance and placement need to be checked for the specific object. Some spherical objects, such as golf balls, can be printed with the right technique and adjustments, but the product and method should be tested before a full run.

A proof or test print is the final check. A screen preview cannot show exactly how ink will look on a particular surface or how placement will work on a shaped item. Reviewing the image on the material, at the intended size and with the planned finish gives the customer and shop a chance to catch problems before the full run. For curved, textured, or dark surfaces, test on a representative blank and material before approving production.

AI beyond the image

AI also appears in print-shop operations. A 2025 PRINTING United Alliance study found that 57% of the 201 respondents who answered the applications question used generative AI for copy or design. The report also describes uses involving estimating, prepress, and connections among business systems.

It helps to distinguish using AI to build a workflow from using AI within one. A coding assistant might help write a script; if that script routes jobs by fixed rules, the routing step is automation. An AI-based tool may interpret or classify input and recommend an action, but shops still need to know what the model does and check the result.

Examples being explored include sorting images, arranging them on a print layout to reduce material waste, and normalizing color across a group of images. These are possibilities to test, not tasks every shop has already automated. The professionals in the printing industry are still investigating prepress and postproduction uses; for now, the most common use of generative tools is for sketches, concept graphics, and individual design elements that can be incorporated into a larger composition.

Whatever the application, a person still needs to inspect output and approve production. A tool can help prepare a file or suggest a layout, but it does not take responsibility for brand accuracy, color acceptance, placement, or the customer's final approval.

Make file preparation part of the conversation

Ask these questions at intake and before quoting: What is the customer making? What are the finished size, material, print process, and finishing requirements? Does the file include exact logos, type, or colors? Who will approve the proof? The answers show whether the supplied image is usable as is or needs more work.

At intake, spell out what file preparation covers. A crop and preflight may fit the standard setup; rebuilding a logo, correcting copy, preparing spot layers for white ink or varnish, or resizing artwork for several product sizes can add labor. Shops can set a cleanup allowance or quote the work separately. Agreeing on scope before proof approval makes the cost and responsibility clearer.

Generative tools can shorten the trip from idea to image. They do not remove the production decisions that determine how well it prints. When shops review the file, check a proof, and price cleanup before approval, customers can see what prepress covers, and production has a clearer path to the result they expect. **GP**



Daniel Tobon is the chief operating officer of Catalyst Printers, bringing more than 20 years of global experience in technical leadership, product development, and strategic operations. With extensive expertise in UV printing technology, digital printing systems, and workflow optimization, he specializes in advancing printing innovation, improving operational efficiency, and developing solutions that help businesses maximize productivity and profitability. Tobon plays a key role in driving DPI Laboratory's technical innovation and global growth. Visit dpi-lab.com.

The perfectly executed rebrand

From new logo to full rollout, here's how to help your clients navigate a brand overhaul

By Fernando Bertero

When a company announces a rebrand, the conversation often starts with a new logo, colors, and fonts. But for graphics professionals, that's only the beginning. The real work is helping clients translate a new visual identity into tangible products that represent their business consistently and professionally.

That requires more than taking an order. It means understanding why the company is rebranding, identifying potential production challenges, and helping clients prioritize their investments. Whether you're working with a 10-person HVAC company or a corporation with thousands of employees, your role is to bridge the gap between a new brand concept and its execution.

Start with the why

Companies rebrand for different reasons. Two businesses may merge and need a unified identity. A family-owned company may want to modernize a logo that's been around for 50 years. An organization that has acquired multiple brands may be trying to determine how those identities should coexist. Understanding the motivation behind a rebrand helps determine the project's scope and what the client needs from you.

With smaller businesses, we sometimes work directly with the owner and our graphic designer to develop the visual identity. Ask questions such as:

- What are you trying to convey?
- Who is your audience?
- What colors or imagery do you envision?
- What do you want people to think or feel when they see your brand?

Sometimes, the client has a clear direction. Other times, the answer is, "I'll know it when I see it." That's when asking the right questions and working collaboratively becomes especially important.

Larger organizations typically have an internal marketing team or an outside agency leading the rebrand. They provide brand guidelines that outline everything from approved colors and fonts to how logos should be used. Those guidelines are invaluable because they tell us not only what to do, but also what not to do.

Regardless of a client's size, it's important to understand the bigger picture before discussing individual products. Why are they making this change? How extensive will it be? What is their budget? And how long do they expect the new brand to last?

A rebrand can be expensive. Helping clients think through these questions before they start spending money can prevent costly missteps.

Make sure the brand works in the real world

One of the most common challenges we encounter is that clients don't always think through how their new visual identity will translate into physical products.

A logo that looks impressive on a computer screen may not reproduce well on a polo shirt, hat, or other embroidered item. Intricate details, excessive colors, and complicated imagery can make a design difficult to execute. The same principle applies across different decoration and production methods: Artwork that works well for one application may need adjustments for another.

We have had clients bring us logos created by relatives using graphic design software or generated with AI. They love the result, but the artwork isn't necessarily production ready. In one case, a client wanted a detailed, photo-like design reproduced through embroidery. The number of strokes, colors, and images made it impractical for that application.



Images courtesy of Fully Promoted





Sometimes, we have to explain that a design needs to be simplified or reworked before it can be reproduced successfully. Those conversations can be delicate, particularly when someone the client knows created the artwork. The key is to explain the practical limitations without dismissing the idea behind the design. Our job is to help clients achieve the look they want in a way that will actually work.

The same principle applies to brand consistency. Occasionally, someone within an organization wants to change the approved colors or modify a logo for a particular department. Even if that person is a decision-maker, we direct them back to the established guidelines and the appropriate marketing team for approval.

A rebrand is an investment in a new identity. If everyone interprets that identity differently, the result is a fragmented brand rather than a cohesive one.

Prioritize the products that make an impact

Once the visual identity is established and the artwork is ready for production, the next question is where to begin.

My recommendation is to prioritize the people and products that customers encounter most often. For many businesses, that means branded apparel for customer-facing employees, along with the promotional items those employees distribute.

Consider a home services company. Its technicians may be the only representatives of the brand a customer ever meets in person. A clean, professional uniform featuring the new logo helps establish credibility before the work even begins. Sales representatives and other customer-facing employees should also be equipped to represent the updated identity.

Branded apparel might include polos, T-shirts, hats, quarter-zips, and other garments appropriate for the job and the company's image. The right selection depends on the work environment, how many employees interact with customers, and how the business wants to be perceived.

Promotional products also deserve attention. Pens, drinkware, bags, and other giveaways can continue circulating long after a customer interaction. Business cards and printed marketing materials can do the same. If those items carry an outdated identity, they create confusion about which brand the company is presenting.

Depending on the business, a rebrand may also involve banners, signage, trade show displays, table covers, name badges, awards, personalized gifts, or other materials used to represent the organization. The specific priorities will vary, but the objective is consistent: Identify the places where the brand is most visible and make sure those touchpoints reflect the new identity.

Photography and video are another important consideration. If a company plans to use new images for its website, social media, marketing materials, or sales presentations, employees should be wearing the updated apparel during those shoots.

Trade-show materials are another frequent oversight. We've seen companies get close to an event only to realize they have forgotten to update their canopies, table throws, or other display materials. These products may not be a part of the first conversation about a rebrand, but they are highly visible touchpoints and should be included in the planning process.

Before placing orders, help clients map out where their brand appears. Think about employee apparel, promotional giveaways, event displays, printed materials, and marketing photography. The more comprehensive the inventory, the less likely an important item will be forgotten.



Build a rollout that fits the budget

Ideally, a company would update everything at once. But not every business has the budget to replace every branded item immediately.

That doesn't mean it can't execute a successful rebrand. It just means it needs a plan.

Rather than following a fixed list of products, help clients prioritize according to four factors: customer visibility, urgency, employee use, and overall budget.

Start by identifying the employees and materials with the greatest customer impact. A home services business might begin with its technicians and sales team before updating apparel for in-office administrative employees. A company with an upcoming trade show may need to prioritize event materials. Another business may find that updating its most frequently distributed promotional items is the best place to start.

Budget constraints also create an opportunity to educate clients about their options. Branded apparel comes at a wide range of price points, and the most expensive garment isn't necessarily the right choice. A well-selected, professional-looking polo shirt may meet the company's needs without the cost of a premium alternative.

Help clients distinguish between what they want and what they actually need. Establishing priorities allows them to allocate their budget where it will make the greatest difference, then phase in the remaining products as resources allow.

However, a phased rollout requires discipline. One of the biggest mistakes companies make is continuing to use old, branded merchandise simply because they've already paid for it.

That closet full of pens, T-shirts, and promotional items can seem like perfectly good inventory. But once the company has committed to a new identity, those products may work against the change it is trying to communicate. An outdated giveaway can leave a customer wondering whether the company has actually rebranded.

Encourage clients to audit their existing inventory before ordering new products. Determine what needs to be replaced, what can be repurposed appropriately, and what should be retired. If an item carries an obsolete logo or no longer aligns with the approved brand, don't let sunk costs dictate the rollout.



The objective is consistency, not simply getting rid of inventory for its own sake.

Remember the emotional side of branding

There's a human element to branded apparel and promotional products that can be easy to overlook when we're focused on specifications, materials, and production schedules.

People can develop a genuine attachment to the brands they represent. When employees receive apparel featuring a new company identity, a well-executed rollout can generate excitement and pride. We've even seen employees purchase company-branded apparel with their own money because they genuinely enjoy wearing it.

That response doesn't happen automatically. Communication matters. Employees should understand why the company is rebranding, what the change represents, and how they fit into the next chapter of the business.

When a company communicates that effectively, branded apparel becomes more than a uniform. It gives employees a tangible way to identify with the organization and feel part of its evolution.

For customer-facing employees, consistent, professional apparel also helps customers recognize who represents the business. The right products support both the company's image and the experience it wants to deliver to its customers.

Be the partner who thinks ahead

Rebranding can be a complicated process, particularly for larger organizations with multiple stakeholders, departments, and locations. Even when the creative work is complete, execution can involve more decisions than clients initially anticipate.

As graphics professionals, we don't necessarily need to lead every creative decision. We do need to understand the client's objectives, recognize what is feasible, uphold brand standards, and help translate new identity into products that serve a purpose.

Start by asking why the company is rebranding and what it hopes to accomplish. Help establish priorities, identify overlooked touchpoints, and recommend products that fit both the brand and the budget. Be candid when a design won't translate well to a particular application, and make sure the client understands the importance of consistency through the rollout.

Most importantly, think beyond the initial order. A rebrand isn't complete when a new logo is approved, or the first batch of apparel arrives. It's successful when the new identity is implemented consistently across the places where employees, customers, and prospects encounter the business.

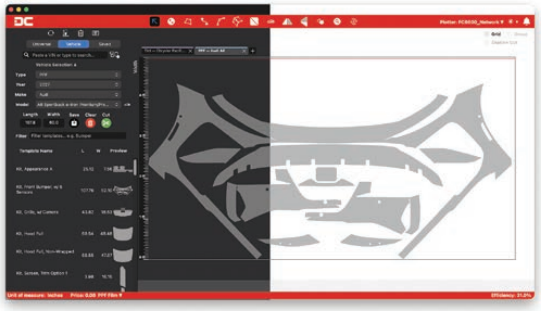
That's an opportunity to demonstrate your value as more than a distributor or supplier. By bringing production knowledge, practical guidance, and a strategic perspective to the rebranding process, you can become a trusted partner in helping clients bring their new brand to life. **GP**



Fernando Bertero is the CEO of Fully Promoted Cleveland (East) and Fully Promoted Cleveland (West), two independently owned and operated franchises in Ohio. He and his wife, Cristina, provide the local destination for businesses seeking to elevate their brand presence through branded apparel, promotional products, and comprehensive marketing services.

PRODUCT PICKS

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



DigiCut Version 3.0

DigiCut has introduced its Version 3.0, featuring enhanced workflow tools, faster navigation, and a completely refreshed user experience. Update have been developed to deliver improvements to workflow efficiency, navigation, editing precision, and overall user experience across both Windows and macOS platforms. DigiCut 3.0 introduces a cleaner, more modern workspace with additions such as Dark Mode, allowing users to choose between Light, Dark, or System display settings for a more comfortable experience. A faster vehicle search enhancement streamlines template selection through improved vehicle lookup, VIN search capabilities, recent vehicle history, and a redesigned vehicle picker. DigiCut 3.0 also introduces a new Multi-Tab Workspace, enabling users to work with multiple vehicles and film types simultaneously, quickly switch between projects, and restore previous sessions without disrupting their workflow. **digicut.com**



STAHLS' Patch Selector Tool

STAHLS' introduced its online Patch Selector Tool, giving customers a faster way to find the right patch for their design and discover options they may not have considered. With one artwork upload, customers can check compatibility across 18 patch types, including embroidered, woven, PVC, debossed leather, FlexStyle, Liquid 3D, and more. The tool quickly shows which options are ready to order, which need artwork adjustments and which are not compatible with the submitted design. Customers can explore multiple possibilities without submitting their artwork for each patch type. Fine details, colors and other design elements can translate differently across materials and production methods. The tool helps customers understand those differences early, making it easier to choose a patch that works with their artwork and the look they want to achieve. **stahls.com/patch-selector-pr**



Canon & Digitech's Texas ST2/X1 UV LED Flatbed Printer

Canon U.S.A. Inc. announced with DigiTech the launch of the Texas ST2/X1 UV LED flatbed printer — a high-performance solution engineered to bring heavy-duty, high-volume production to compact print environments. The Texas ST2/X1 draws on the same structural engineering as the larger LT3 series, giving space-constrained shops access to industrial-grade stability and reliability once reserved for far larger investments with a 50" X 100" bed size optimized for space-conscious shop floors. Using 2-Pass Coro Sign Mode, the Texas ST2/X1 achieves maximum production speeds of up to 2,024 square feet per hour. A zoned 50" X 100" flatbed vacuum table enables rapid media setup, and a 1.75-liter reservoir capacity per color reduces the frequency and labor required for ink replenishment. The Texas ST2/X1 features a six-color channel configuration, standard CMYK with the flexibility to add white, orange, gray, or varnish. **usa.canon.com**



UxPrint US-150 Promotional Weight T-shirt

UxPRINT USA announced the release of the new US-150 tubular promotional weight T-shirt for the apparel decorating market. The US-150 is a 145 gsm single jersey knit shirt with tear-away labels and a light enzyme treatment creating a super soft and great printing surface for any embellishment process. The first initial colors are black and white in sizes adult small to 4X. **uxprint.us**



FUJIFILM HX1024 Printbar System

FUJIFILM Integrated Inkjet Solutions announced the introduction of the FUJIFILM HX1024 Printbar System, designed to support customized printing using the company's advanced inkjet printing technologies. Developed as part of Fujifilm's comprehensive approach to print solutions, the system delivers high-quality, high-speed, full-color digital inkjet printing for a variety of construction products, including house wrap, sandpaper, drywall, laminates, and much more. **fujifilm.com/us/en**

What's trending in headwear for 2027

A guide to the most popular styles on the market, from dad hats to rope caps, camo & more

By Shelley Widhalm



Images courtesy of Sportsman Cap & Bag

When it comes to hats, caps, and designs, headwear is transitioning from a basic giveaway into a personal statement piece.

"End users are heavily prioritizing retail-inspired designs and premium quality," said Jeffrey Trinh, head of growth for OTTO International, a promotional products supplier in Ontario, California. "While we are seeing a slight decrease in the volume of some orders, the value of merchandise is actually going up."

In line with that value, a few current trends popular in 2026 are expected to continue growing strongly into 2027, particularly dad hats, rope caps, and camo.

Dad hats

OTTO International's sales of the dad hats expanded by double digits in the first eight months of 2026, even with a rise in manufacturing costs, because they are universal and something every demographic can wear, Trinh said.

Dad hats feature a timeless design and an unstructured, relaxed silhouette that remains a versatile and universally wearable style, appealing across generations from boomers to Generation Z. Customers report they are comfortable and have ease of everyday wear.

"The dad hat is uniquely well-positioned to perform strongly in this period of rising costs, because it functions equally well across the spectrum: from basic use cases such as souvenirs, event giveaways, and employee uniforms to more premium uses like sports merch, fashion retail, and lifestyle branding," Trinh said. "The stronger programs we're seeing treat headwear less like a commodity promo item and more like curated, retail-adjacent apparel that people choose to wear and keep for a long time."



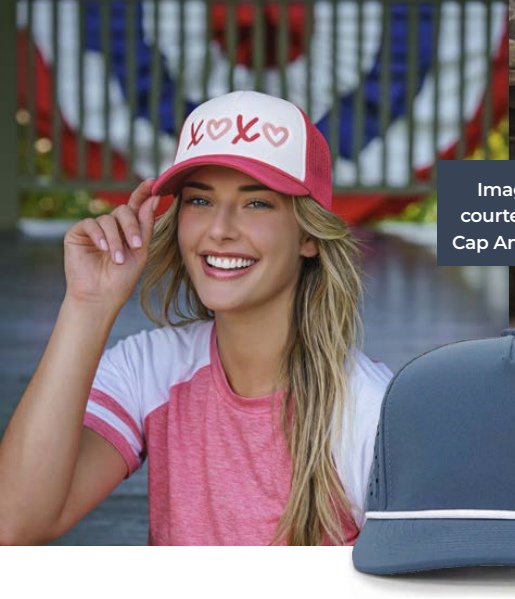
Image courtesy of Cap America

Rope caps

Retro-inspired rope caps are trending this year and into 2027, especially the five-panel and performance-style caps as fashion pieces. The caps are a nostalgic, baseball-style cap with a thin, decorative braided cord or rope stitched across the base of the front panel. The caps perform well in several sectors, such as golf, outdoor, and lifestyle, as well as in premium corporate merchandise and corporate gift programs.



Images courtesy of OTTO International







"We're seeing a continued shift toward retail-inspired styles, particularly five-panel, A-frame constructions, relaxed fits, and vintage looks," said Carter Newman, vice president of product development for Cap America. "We're also seeing more interest in customization beyond traditional decoration."

For example, Cap America's "Anyrope" collection allows customers to change out the rope at the base of the rim, choose from five core colors, and create different looks using the same cap base, Newman said.

"Change your rope; change your style with Anyrope," Newman said. "We have two different cap styles and over 200 cap-and-rope combinations, so customers can easily mix and match to create a look that fits their brand or team colors."

Trucker & golf hats

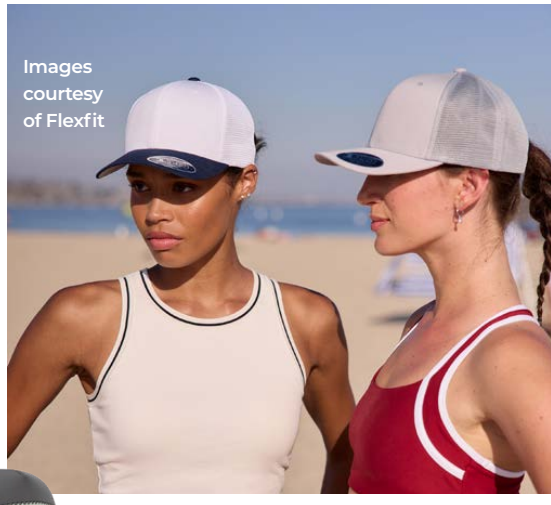
Another high performer is the foam trucker hat, popular for branding and representing the top one to two styles for souvenir shops.

"That one hat is our No. 1 bestseller," Trinh said. "The thing about foam trucker hats is the front of it is made of foam, so it's soft, and the back is mesh, so it's very breathable. It's good for promotion and can be decorated easily."

"The trucker trend will continue to remain strong; one-front laser cut styles will keep their momentum for 2027," said Richard Lee, sales manager of Flexfit. "We are seeing some diversity such as golf hats and leisure hats, but they fall under the 'baseball caps' category."

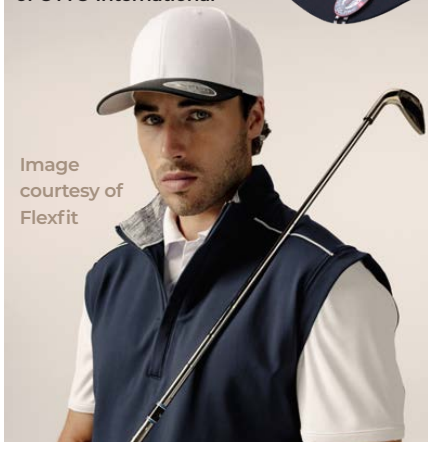
Five- and six-panel golf hats are another high seller, often serving as premium corporate employee merchandise and part of corporate gifting programs.

"We are seeing renewed popularity of the dad hat, fitted caps, and the continued popularity of rope accents on a variety of styles," said Bruce Blackman, vice president of merchandising and inventory for Sportsman Cap & Bag.





Images courtesy of OTTO International









Images courtesy of Cap America

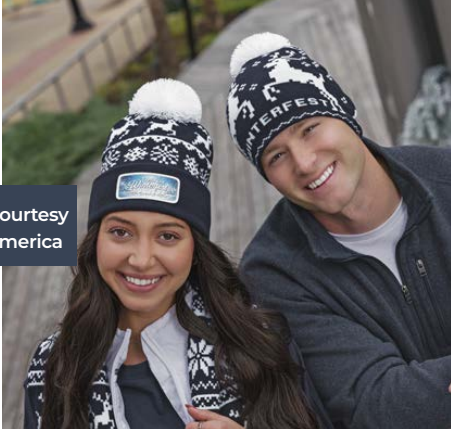




Image courtesy of Sportsman Cap & Bag

Knitted

Another strong branded headwear category is that of knitted headwear, especially during the fall and winter months. Decorators can use knits to expand their business, particularly by promoting to schools, sports teams, and businesses and around seasonal events.

"We see beanies and fashion knit styles that add variety to the category outside of traditional caps," Blackman said, adding that the trucker and A-frame hats continue to be popular. "It's a five-panel, solid cap with a natural-colored crown and a contrasting-colored visor and top button."

Women's headwear

Decorators also should distinguish between women's headwear and men's or unisex, especially when considering fit and styling.

"Women's headwear typically leans toward smaller profiles, softer fabrics, and more relaxed constructions," Newman said. "We also see interest in different color palettes, including softer neutrals and fun fashion colors. That said, the lines between men's and women's headwear continue to overlap, with many of the same styles appealing to both. It's important for decorators to understand their audience and offer a variety of options rather than assuming one style will work for everyone."

The relaxed constructions are like those of the dad hats, and the color options tend to be bright and colorful, Trinh said.

"Proper women's headwear is actually sized to fit an average woman's head, so brands like Infinity Her are growing rapidly in the marketplace, because they are designed specifically for women and include patented features such as the Evolve hidden ponytail opening and the Elude makeup-resistant sweatband," Blackman said.

The headwear market

"One of the biggest drivers is how headwear has evolved from a basic promotional item into something people wear every day," Newman said. "Businesses, schools, and organizations are recognizing the value of offering headwear that people actually want to wear, making it an increasingly effective way to promote their brand."

Apparel and promo product shops wanting to add custom headwear to their offerings ideally should segment customer needs based on order quantity and turnaround time, Trinh said. He recommends employing domestic custom orders with quick turns and simpler decorations but at a higher cost, or overseas orders with lower costs and a wider selection of decorations but that require more upfront planning.

Colors & patterns

Other popular aspects of headwear are the colors and fabrics, able to be changed out among multiple hat types. Popular are washed fabrics, earthy colors, and two-tone color combinations with contrasting visors and buttons. On the performance side, lightweight materials, laser perforations, and moisture management features continue to grow.

Camo is also trending, no longer just for traditional hunting and outdoor purposes, but as an everyday fashion statement. Camo patterns are worn year-round, even at concerts and music festivals, serving as fashion and lifestyle pieces rather than purely seasonal items.



Image courtesy of Flexfit

Image courtesy of Sportsman Cap & Bag



Image courtesy of Cap America



Images courtesy of Flexfit





Image courtesy of Cap America

"The key to winning is to prep their clients ahead of time, inspire them with overseas custom options and attractive pricing, and understand when their clients may need headwear so they can pitch ahead of time," Trinh said.

OTTO International offers more than 24 different industry sales flyers on various hat styles and color selections based on end-user needs. The flyers list key selling points for each industry to help distributors become headwear "experts."

"There's a real opportunity for decorators to be more proactive when selling headwear," Newman said. "A customer may walk in asking for a basic trucker with their logo, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the best option for what they're trying to accomplish. Showing them a few different styles, decoration techniques, or price points can make a big difference."

Lee recommends decorators choose from a few core, top proven and budget-friendly styles before expanding into more premium options and being sure not to over-purchase inventory.

"The promo industry is iterative," Lee said. "Set up multiple accounts and utilize each channel accordingly. Each supplier has its own unique strongpoint, and you'll reap the benefits of each once you've learned to distinguish them."

Newman encourages decorators to find a supplier that can provide both product selection and decoration.

"With our domestic decoration capabilities, quick turnaround times, and low order minimums, we're able to help decorators offer a much broader assortment without having to carry all that inventory themselves. That can be a big advantage, especially for shops looking to grow their headwear business," Newman said.

With that assortment, Cap America gives decorators more options and helps them stand out, but if they're new to the game, they can start with a focused assortment of proven styles and build from there, Neman said. A classic trucker, a performance cap, and an unstructured dad cap would cover a lot of customer needs, he said.

"Having decorated samples available is also extremely important. Customers want to see the finished product, not just a blank cap," Newman said.



Image courtesy of Cap America

Headwear year-round

Regardless, headwear is one of those markets that remains stable throughout the year, especially due to year-round custom headwear programs.

"Headwear is actually a lot easier to sell than many other promo product categories, and we have seen distributors making at least 15% to 20% more in revenues when they start adding headwear to their offerings and portfolio," Trinh said.

The year-round aspect is a recent phenomenon, extending beyond summer for baseball hats and knitted headwear for the colder months.

"In the past, it would fluctuate a lot by season, but more recently, in the last few years, it has been fairly stable throughout the year, aside from knits, which remain seasonal," Blackman said. "Headwear tends to be a very stable segment of the market and is affected less by economic fluctuations than more expensive apparel options due to being cost effective, wearable across various sizes and fits, and decoration-friendly."

Newman agrees that headwear is a strong, year-round category, but he also sees seasonal shifts.

"Spring and summer bring increased demand for truckers, performance caps, and other warm-weather styles, especially around outdoor activities and sports-related events," Newman said. "Fall and winter create more opportunities for knits and cold-weather headwear. We also see demand tied to school schedules, team sports, corporate events, and promotional campaigns throughout the year."

At Flexfit, the peak season is spring and summer, and the off-peak season is the colder, winter months.

"People opt for knits instead of traditional ball caps," Lee said. "Also, since we cater to the promotional industry, our busy season aligns with corporate and marketing spending timelines." GP



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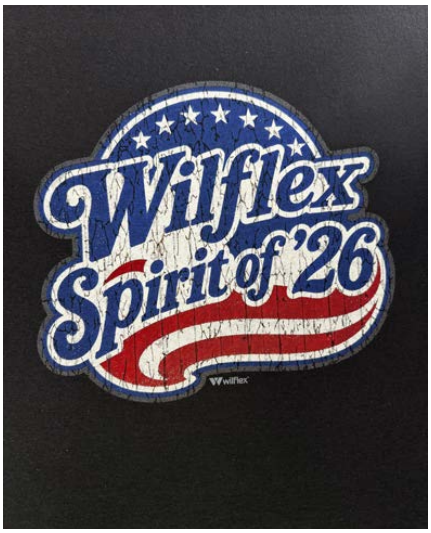
Spirit of '26:

A new spin on the old design

A nostalgic trip back to 1976 bicentennial designs inspires a patriotic project in 2026

By Lon Winters

In 1976, America turned 200 and we celebrated everything patriotic. The red, white, and blue color scheme was everywhere, including on apparel. Those old-school transfer T-shirts with now-vintage and weathered Americana graphics were popular. That style became the identity of the bicentennial. They were bold, a little cheesy, and perfect for the celebration. Fifty years later, America celebrates its 250th anniversary, and what better way to celebrate than with the "Spirit of '26." This was the inspiration behind a collaboration with Wilflex and Avient Specialty Inks. The idea was to take a nostalgic trip back to the look of the 1976 bicentennial and put a new spin on an old favorite. We looked at hand-painted lettering and vintage signs for inspiration that paid homage to traditional graphics.

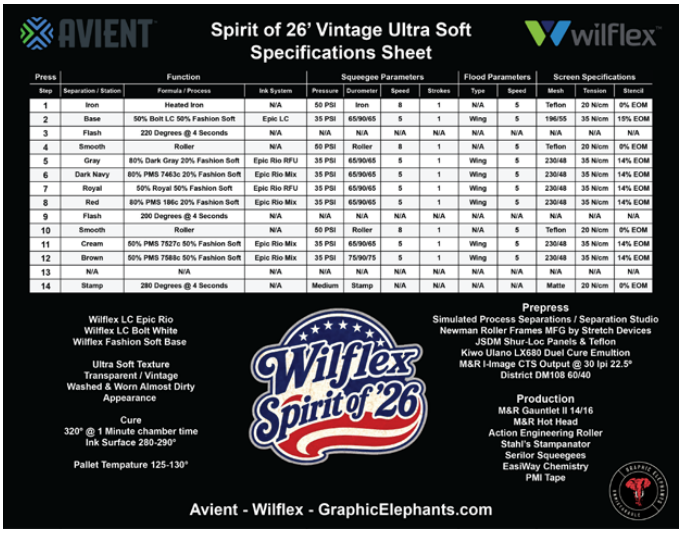


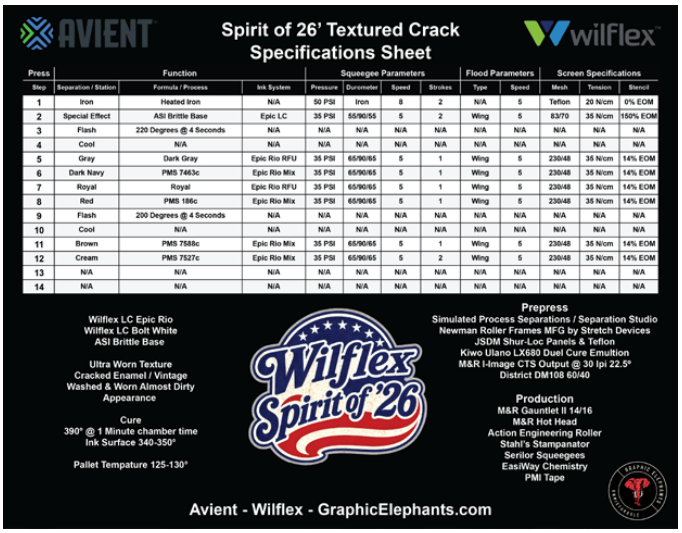
We developed a series of samples over the coming months that would showcase different Wilflex and Avient Specialty Inks products. For the first installment, we landed on the Spirit of '26. The brand manager supplied an image she created using artificial intelligence (AI).

At first glance, it had exactly what we needed. It looked like it may have hung in a gas station somewhere between 1976 and yesterday. There was just one little — extra — detail. The word "spirit" had acquired an extra "i" in it. AI can do some remarkable things, but spelling still requires adult supervision.



Images courtesy of Lon Winters



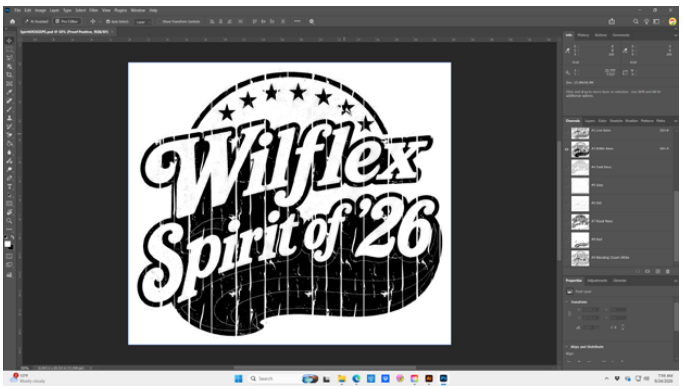


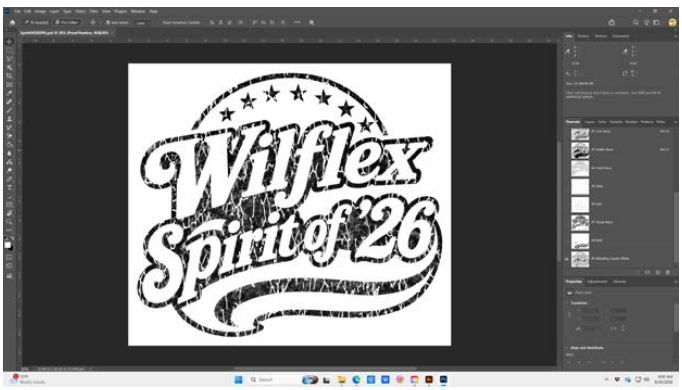
The image was upscaled to a resolution of 300 dpi in Photoshop. This was built on a white background, so the art needed to be lifted off. The vintage style contained irregular edges, worn out areas, scratches, and distressed openings that were part of its character. We eliminated background information, taking care not to clean it up so much that it lost that feel.

We wanted to preserve the distressed look while making sure the information would be translated into reliable separations. We went with a simulated process channel separation approach rather than assigning solid red, white, and blue spot colors. The graphic contained aged cream lettering with brownish dirty colors, multiple shades of blue and red accents, darker gray and shadow outlines, and plenty of texture. We needed the separations to retain this complexity while giving the specialty inks room to do their jobs. Individual color values were adjusted. Curves and Levels provided adjustment to tonal ranges. We wanted the wear and tear to remain visible. The black of the garment became part of the equation and the intended coloring. White printer or base considerations, highlight detail, opacity, and the relationship between the garment and the transparent inks all played their part. The black shirt would intentionally influence the final print.

Once the separations were completed, Adobe Illustrator became part of the workflow. Photoshop handled the channel seps, while Illustrator provided the production environment for print layout and prep for output. The placement, dimensions, and production elements were included on the artboard or template. Computer-to-screen output

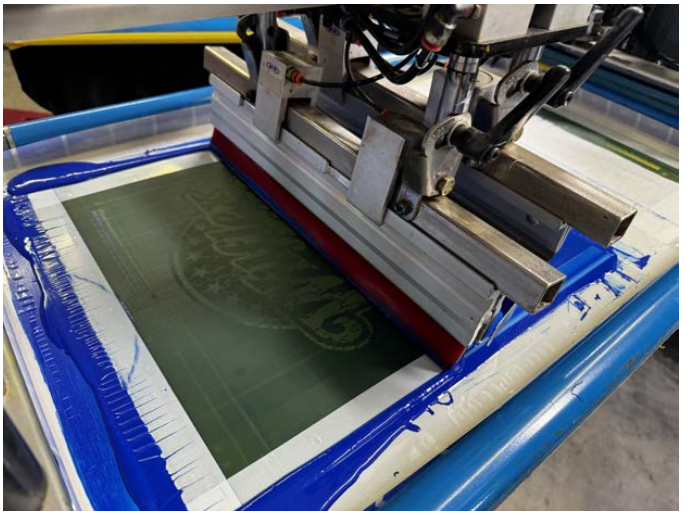


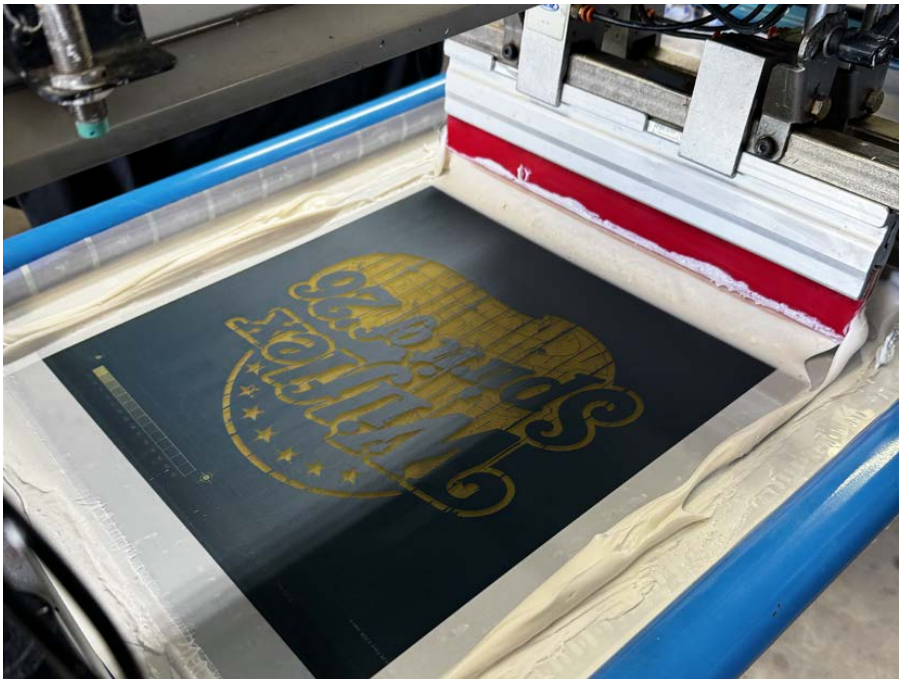














at 45 lpi @ 22.5 degrees was used. The screens would all be N-272 tpi mesh tensioned to 45 N/cm^2. Each screen was properly exposed, developed, and inspected for production.

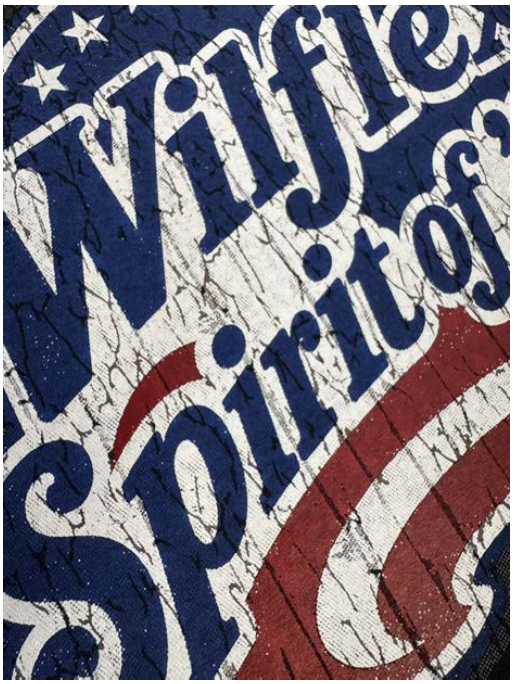
The project became even more interesting from this point. As the team discussed the printing approach, we realized that this vintage graphic was begging for a couple different finishes. We initially planned an ultra-soft, transparent, vintage treatment using Fashion Soft.

Then we recognized an opportunity to take the same artwork in an entirely different direction using Brittle Base where the final print is almost crunchy and can be post-cracked. This equaled one design with two different personalities.

The first version looked and felt like a favorite shirt that had been washed a thousand times in less-than-ideal conditions, worn on countless excursions, and somehow survived the decades. The second would have a more aggressively weathered, cracked, and textured surface, resembling an old painted sign that had spent decades exposed to the elements.

For the ultra-soft, transparent, washed approach, the inks were reduced considerably at varying percentages, ranging from approximately 20% to 80%. The base was a 50/50 combination of white and Fashion Soft. This made the ink feel softer and smoother, gave it more transparency, and allowed more of the garment to show through. The inks took on a faded, aged quality.



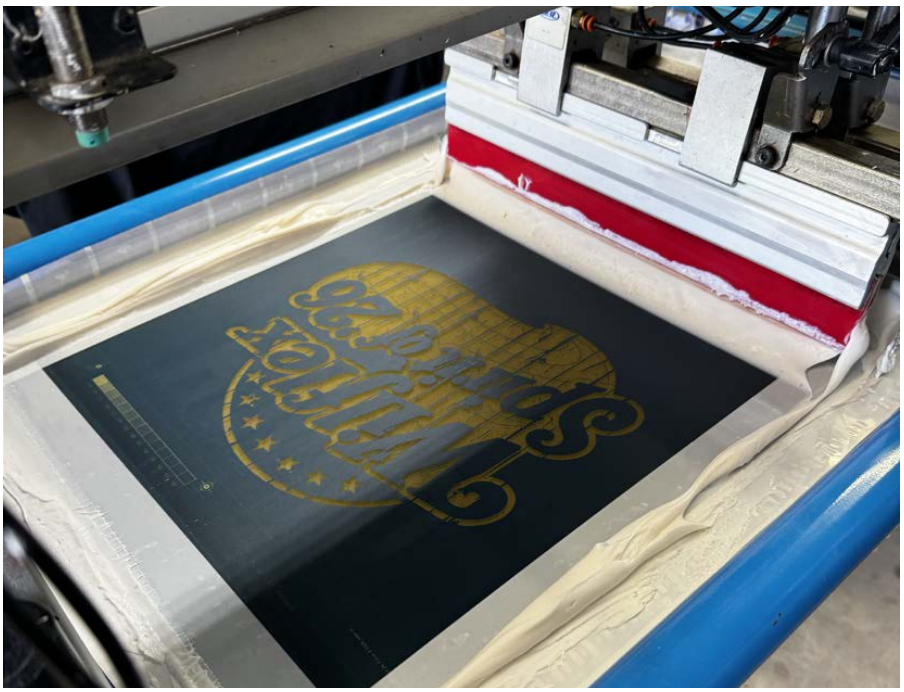






The second version took the same artwork and headed in another direction. For the Brittle Base version, the original white printer base plate was eliminated and replaced with a custom screen. We added intentionally cracked negative space throughout the design. That screen was a N-102 tpi with a 200 micron stencil. The same color palette was retained, but the inks were printed at full strength. That change produced a much stronger appearance. The Brittle Base treatment added another dimension entirely. After printing and curing, the image can be physically split, creating a surface texture that goes beyond the distressing in the art. Instead of simply printing the appearance of age, we were introducing actual physical texture. The art suggested a weathered surface. The ink application gave it one.

Looking at the finished shirts side by side tells the story better than any technical explanation. The Fashion Soft version is subdued, transparent, and comfortably worn. The image feels relaxed, faded, and has the personality of a treasured favorite shirt. The Brittle Base version looks like an old road sign. The visual impact is more pronounced, and the surface texture introduces a genuine physical element. Both began with the same art, the same color palette, and the same inspiration. The finished results are remarkably different, though. One suggests years of washing and wearing. The other suggests years of exposure to the elements.



The Spirit of '26 began by looking backward and borrowing a little inspiration from the bicentennial. We took that familiar personality and pushed it. The goal was to create something that looked like it had history with a little American spirit. **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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Ambient content is the element you're missing

Your guide to setting the mood & adding visual interest to your projects with lighting techniques

By Stephen Romaniello

One thing you can count on is that graphic software products will change over time. With each new version, they evolve to meet the needs of their users. Sometimes certain features are simplified to make them easier to use or more efficient. More often, they are enhanced to provide more power. Unfortunately, occasionally they are changed simply for the sake of change and, in doing so, are made more complex — with no apparent advantage to the end user. Often a feature will remain unchanged through several versions of the program, and as other features are upgraded, its interface will seem primitive in comparison until finally, at some point, a version comes along with the long-awaited upgrade. Conversely, and unfortunately, sometimes a feature is removed without notice. Alas! The specific feature I'm referring to is the "Lighting Effects" filter.

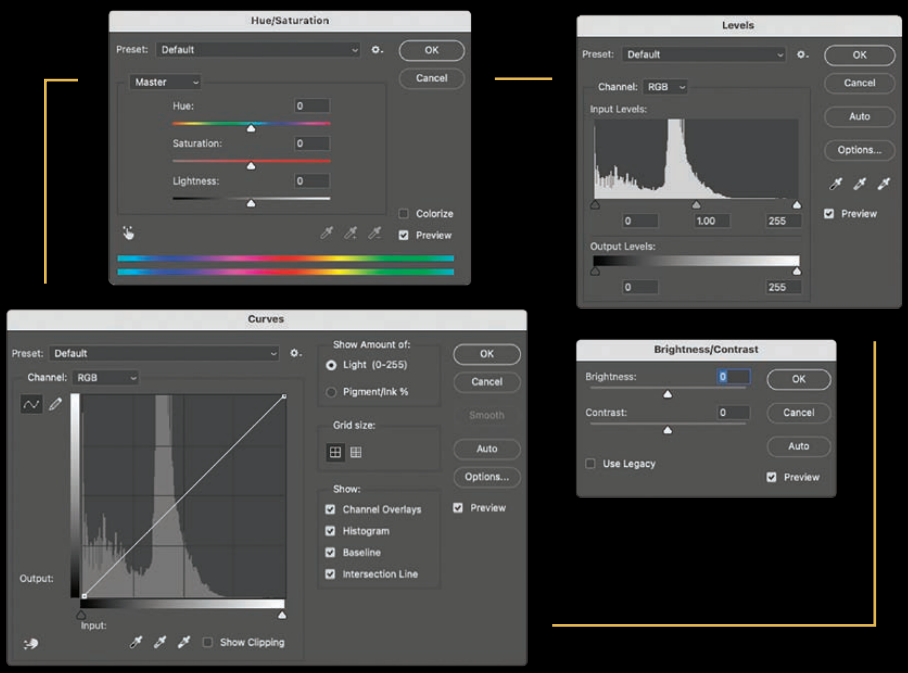

Figure 1. HSB, Brightness and Contrast, Levels, and Curves are the basic adjustment features that readily revise color, lighten, darken, and modify contrast.

Lighting effects

In older versions of Photoshop, Lighting Effects was a popular filter for adding spotlights, directional lighting, and point lights to an image. In newer versions, its availability depends on your Photoshop version, graphics processor, and performance settings. The reason why it is no longer available in latest version Photoshop 2026 is that Adobe phased out Photoshop's older 3D engine because of compatibility problems with modern operating systems and graphics technology. The Lighting Effects filter depended on the 3D engine, so it disappeared from the new release. To get something close to the filter, the user has two choices: install an earlier version of the program or cook up a workaround to achieve similar results.

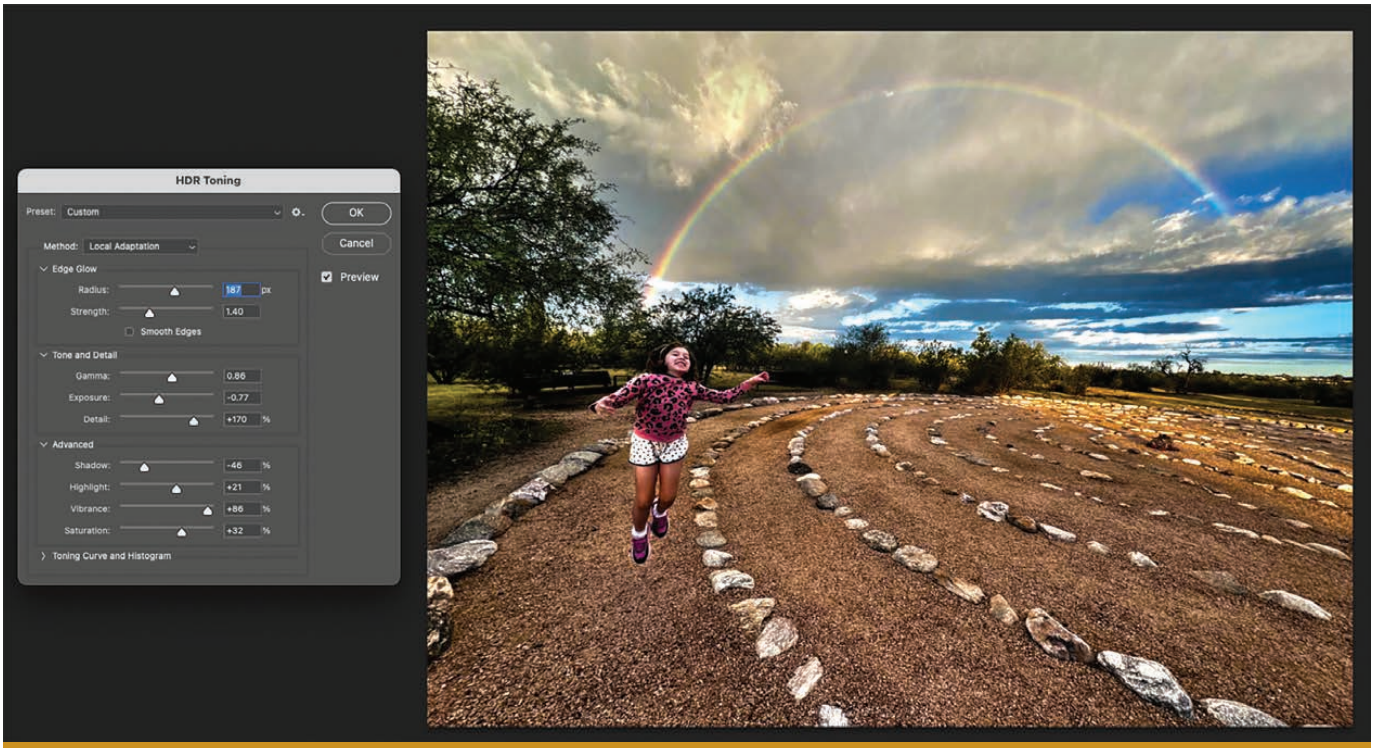

Figure 2. The HDR Toning dialog box, found under Image > Adjustments, is a cluster of tonal and color controls that globally enhance the color and contrast of an image so that there is more overall detail.

The workaround techniques are the ones that I'll explore in this article.

Digital light

The way lighting is handled can make or break an image. Of course, it all starts at the initial photoshoot where the picture is captured, but post-capture digital techniques are frequently employed to enhance and dramatize the image content. Light manifests in three forms on a digital image: the visible spectrum of color, the color's intensity, and the tonal range. These characteristics are referred to as the hue, saturation, and brightness (HSB).

Hue, saturation & brightness

By manipulating HSB characteristics globally or locally, an image can be dramatically altered to improve color and tonal relationships. In Photoshop or any image-altering software, there are basic adjustment tools that readily perform this task, such as HSB, Brightness and Contrast, Levels, and Curves **(Figure 1)**. These tools revise color, lighten or darken, and increase or decrease contrast. These features are essential for a generalized quick fix that can improve the overall tonality of an image. Furthermore, there are additional features more specific to lighting design that provide an extensive tool kit for the instant and precise modeling of light.

HDR

You see a lot of high dynamic range (HDR) images these days, as the technique is quite fashionable for its extreme grainy dystopian look. The HDR toning dialog box **(Figure 2)**, found under Image > Adjustments, is a cluster of tonal and color controls that globally enhance the color and contrast of an image so that there is more overall detail in the highlight, midtone, and shadow areas. From this panel, color vibrancy, saturation, and sharpness can also be spiked. There is even a brightness curve that precisely controls the specific range of contrast.

The results have a look that can be edgy and dramatic. HDR works particularly well to improve lackluster landscapes, but I've seen it used to the extreme, and it's questionable whether this treatment is desirable. On the other hand, if applied with restraint, HDR can vastly improve image lighting. People do tend to go overboard with it, especially with the detail slider, and it

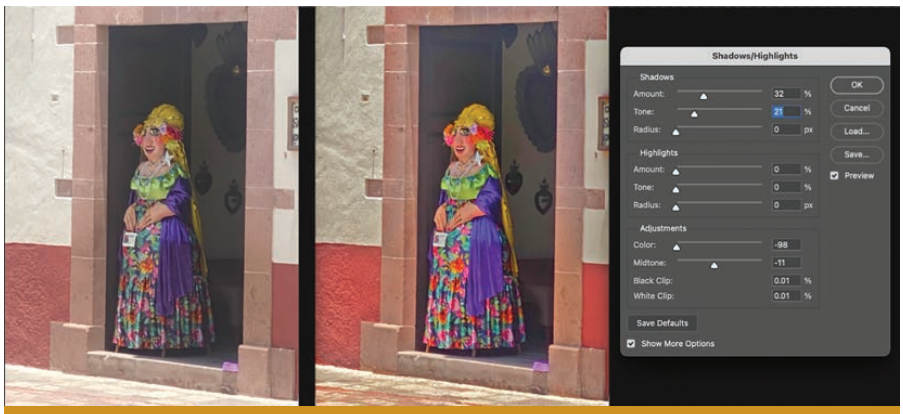

Figure 3. The Shadow/Highlight controls individually target and control light and dark image areas.

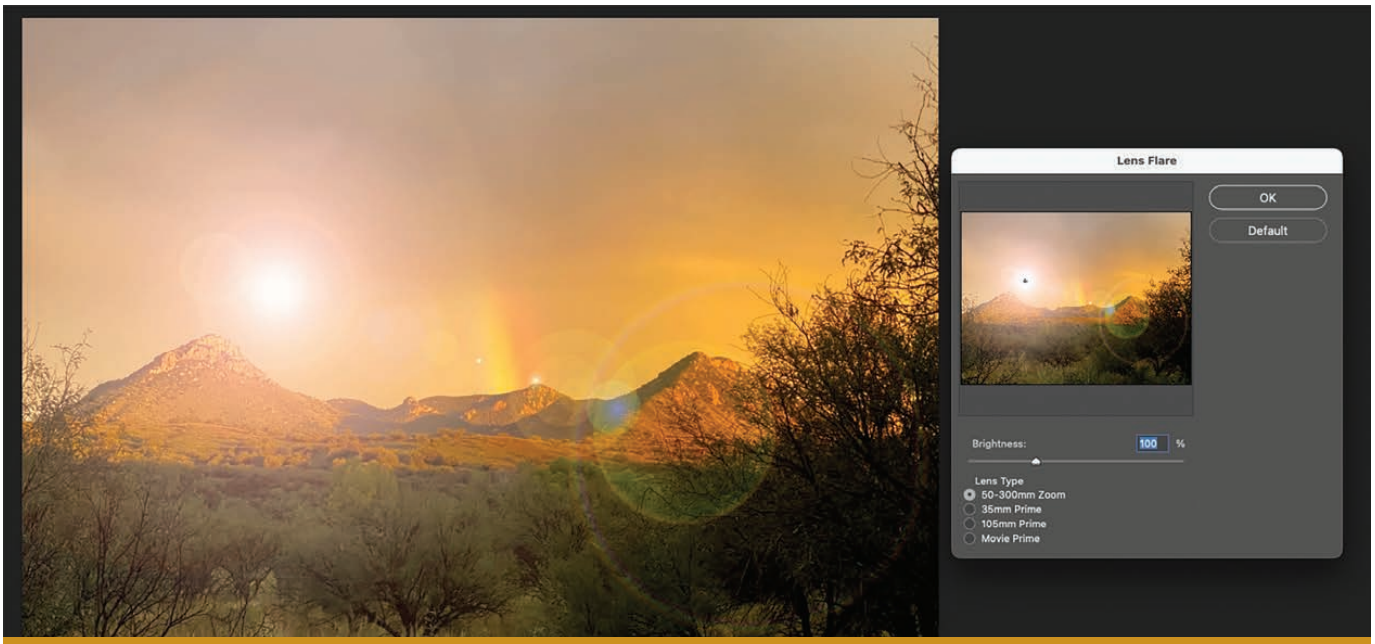

Figure 4. The Lens Flare dialog box where you choose a specific type of lens to produce a solar reflection.

can be particularly unkind when over-applied to a portrait.

Shadows/highlights

When shooting a picture, the camera's automatic exposure meter measures the light intensity of a specific area and bases the exposure on that measurement. If the meter measures darker areas and compensates to reveal more detail, then the lighter areas can become blown out.

Conversely, when the meter measures lighter areas, the darker areas become darker and lose visible detail. Thus, the foreground of a backlit image can become severely compromised. If some detail exists in the highlight areas and it's not completely blown out or the shadow areas aren't completely filled, there is a miracle technique for perfectly balancing the darks and lights.

The solution is the Shadows/Highlights adjustment found under Image > Adjustments. The controls **(Figure 3)** individually target the light and dark image areas. To apply it, balance the dark-light relationships by dragging the sliders to the right to strengthen the effect or to the left to weaken it.

Similar to HDR, there are color adjustments to saturate colors or to adjust the contrast of the midtones, and they are nicely clustered in a single interface. Shadows/Highlights is an ideal solution for enhancing detail in filled or blown-out areas and spiking overall tonality.

Lens flare

When a lens is pointed directly at a light source, there is often a reflection of the light on the glass. This is called a lens flare that at one time was considered an undesirable effect to be avoided by photographers and filmmakers. Nowadays, though, lens flare is a technique found in still pictures, film, and video that is used to dramatize the intensity of a light source.

When using any filter, it's always a good idea to duplicate the layer and convert it to a smart object so that adjustments can be made at any time. The operation takes place in the Lens Flare dialog box **(Figure 4)** (Filter > Render > Lens Flare), where you choose one of four lens options.

Control the brightness of the flare with the slider and the position of the flare by dragging the little cross in the preview box. There is no live preview on the image with this filter. You'll have to view the edits in the rather small preview box. Clicking OK applies the filter to the image.



Figure 5. A Blend Mode Gradient Background illuminates a specific area of an image to draw the viewer's attention. The gradient is positioned above the image in the layer stack .

Lighting effects workarounds

Photoshop's filter, Lighting Effects, had the capability of generating innumerable realistic effects to

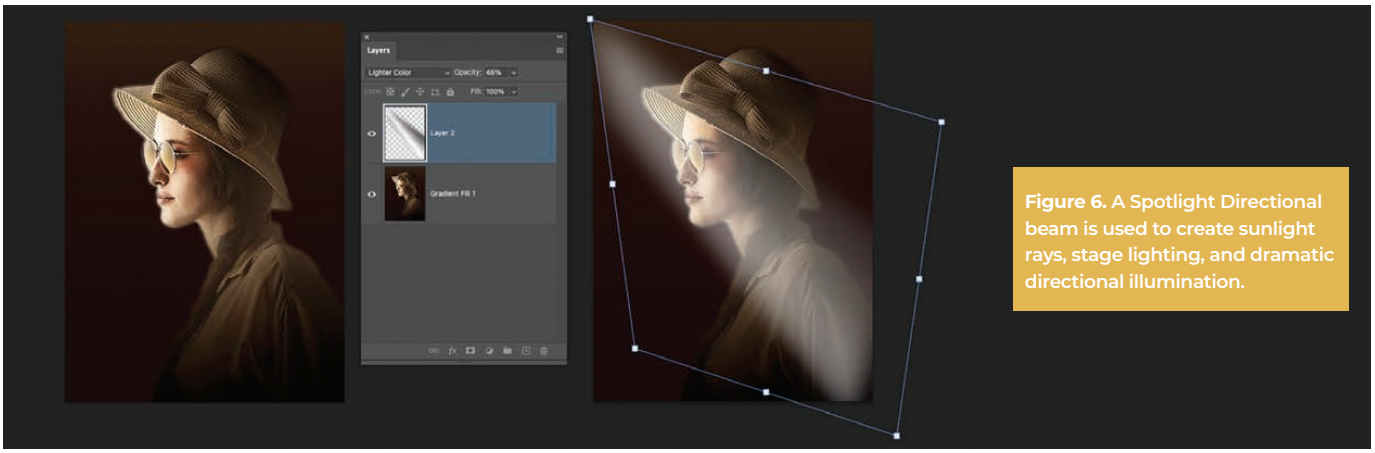

Figure 6. A Spotlight Directional beam is used to create sunlight rays, stage lighting, and dramatic directional illumination.

illuminate your image. Lighting Effects was a Smart Object compatible filter, so after it was initially applied, you could use it nondestructively. Since the Lighting Effects filter is no longer available, the following are a few workarounds to achieve similar results using layer-based operations with gradients and blend modes.

These techniques can approximate the visual result, but they do not provide the same interactive 3D lighting controls. Follow these steps on a photograph. They are relatively simple and nondestructive, so you can modify the effect at any time during the process.



Figure 7. Layer Style techniques are useful for creating metallic surfaces, lettering, dimensional graphics, and simulated 3D lighting.

Blend mode gradient background

A gradient background illuminates a specific area of an image to draw the viewer's attention. They are usually soft-edged areas of diffused light and are created using layers, gradients, and blend modes. They are used for illuminating faces, backgrounds, and selected areas of a photograph.

The first step is to create a new radial gradient layer with a warm or white color. The gradient is positioned above the image in the layer stack **(Figure 5)**. Experiment with blend modes that lighten, such as Overlay, Soft Light, Screen, or Lighter Color, and adjust the layer's opacity to modify its intensity.

Spotlight directional beams

A spotlight directional beam is used to create sunlight rays, stage lighting, and dramatic directional illumination. First, create a linear gradient layer. Transform it into a narrow beam. (Edit > Transform > Distort). Position it where it looks best. Apply the Gaussian blur filter to soften the edges. Set the blending mode to Screen, Overlay, Lighter Color, or Soft Light (whatever produces the best result) **(Figure 6)**.

Layer styles

By double-clicking on a layer, the Layer Styles dialog box is displayed. There are several lighting options that control Bevel and Emboss, Color, Direction, Inner and Outer Glow, and Shadows. Although they can't be applied to the overall image, these techniques are useful for creating metallic surfaces, lettering, dimensional graphics, and simulated 3D lighting **(Figure 7)**.

Set the mood

Lighting is an essential feature in any image. It is "ambient content," which means that it is very much present but not noticed except subliminally, where it makes a big impact. Lighting sets the mood and tells a big part of the story. Since the Lighting Effects filter has been eliminated from the latest versions of Photoshop, these simple workarounds can substitute in producing dramatic lighting effects.

Creating and altering lighting using these techniques increases your ability to enhance detail, spike contrast, and produce eye-popping results. Consider the brilliant effects that combining these techniques could potentially deliver. If you want to push the creative envelope and open the door to exciting new pictures, experiment with lighting techniques. GP



Stephen Romaniello is an artist and educator. He has taught digital art at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona, for over 28 years. He is a certified instructor in Adobe Photoshop and the author of numerous books and articles on the creative use of digital graphics software. Romaniello is the founder of GlobalEye Systems, a company that offers training and consulting in digital graphics software and creative imaging.



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2026 in review:

6 AI questions to consider for your workflows

The year shops stopped thinking about AI & started using it

By Marshall Atkinson

I want you to think back to how you felt about artificial intelligence (AI) at the beginning of 2026. In January, if I was talking to anyone in the industry, a good number of the people I spoke with felt that AI was somewhat important, but they couldn't quite put their finger on how to use it. The return on investment was unclear, and the best way to start using it felt confusing and maybe even a little intimidating.

If anyone was actually using it, it was mainly applied to writing an email or a social media post.

Fast forward 11 months, and it feels like we have progressed a decade in usage and adoption. Conversations sound different. Shop owners are building their own shop software or online store platforms. They have constructed automations and connected AI agents, so their team can spend time doing more valuable tasks. Nerding out over key performance indicators (KPIs) and graphing data is cool again, as the ability to access and visualize that data to accelerate decision-making is easier than ever. But hey, maybe all of that wasn't you. You are still on the fence. You've dabbled a bit, but nothing has fully been built, tested, and deployed. You are not wrong to be careful or cynical. This article is for you.

Let's take a stab at examining six areas where AI has impacted our industry this year. For each one, I'll note what people told me in January, and we'll compare it with the current thought process.

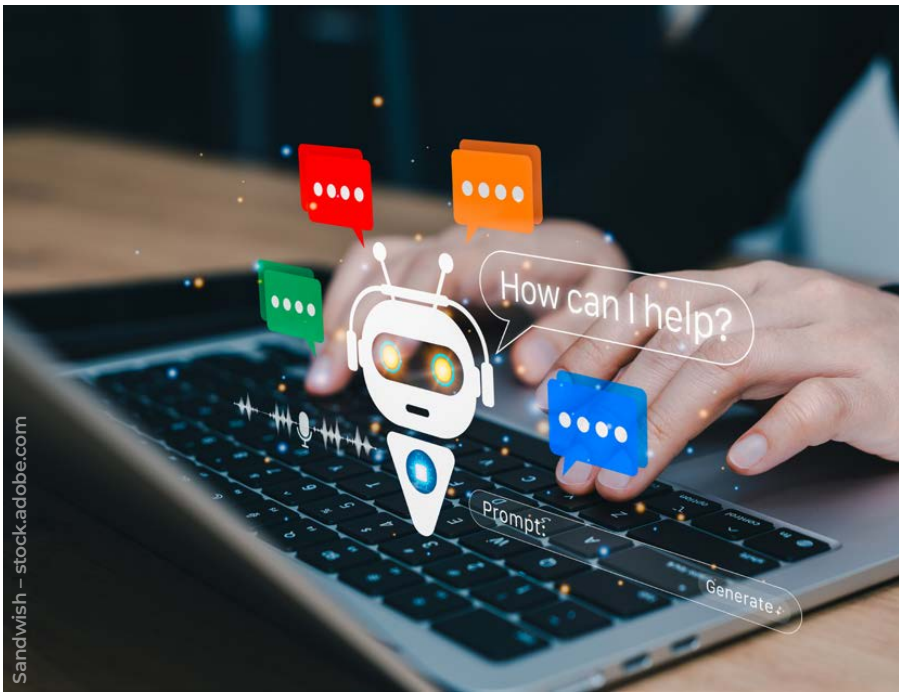
Why haven't you made more progress with AI?

The January question for shop owners was, "Should I be using AI?" The December question I'll present you with is, "What is it costing me to not use AI in my workflows?"

This viewpoint shift matters. In the past year, I have had hundreds of conversations about AI across all facets of the industry. I still have those. Back in January, AI usage felt like some sort of novelty tab to try out. Now it is embedded within businesses through process automation, ordering platforms, and data hubs, and is actually part of how the business runs.

But if you haven't made much progress yet, I would bet the reason isn't a lack of interest. For many of you, it is likely time. To build AI tools that help you save time, you must spend time building them. For many shop owners, they can only move at the pace of open slots on their calendars. No time available? Haven't started using AI in the shop? That tracks.

Shop owners who have made progress in integrating AI into their businesses have done the one thing necessary for success: they made time for it. There are plenty of folks out there (maybe that's you) who feel that the talk about "AI is coming for your job" is the reason to avoid, ignore, or disregard it. What I know is that there is a tremendous wave of businesses in the industry that are fully embracing this technology. And those businesses are your competition. The following article lists six areas where you could deploy AI in your business. Consider how you might use them to your benefit.



1 What should you automate first?

The January question was, "What can I automate using AI?" The December question is, "Which repetitive task is costing me the most?" From my discussions with shop owners, that seems like a better question, as it is rooted in monetary pain.

This year, AI users have automated order entry, data entry, answering the phone, inventory control, production scheduling, data and KPI gathering, email writing, and marketing. They went from having teams of people handle these low-value tasks to teams of people concentrating on higher-value tasks because their time is freed up.

Imagine how many more customers you can have solid conversations with if your team's time isn't bound to doing things the old way. What will you have more of when you remove part of the friction of doing business?

Sales has evolved using AI, too. From lead generation to outbound messaging, quoting, and customer follow-up, AI is involved. This means sales teams can focus on more conversations with buyers and spend less time on administrative work.

Customers want speedy, frictionless partners to help them solve their challenges. Shops that successfully deploy AI-built tools for front-of-house tasks are winning.

2 How did AI change the art department?

The January question was, "Can AI make a design for me?" Millions of people started using AI tools to create images. Image generation started the year almost like a toy. People are still using it, which is why our customers are sending images they have created to shops as finished work for printing.

I'm sure you have received your share of those. Some shops and people have rebelled against AI image generation and publicly expressed their negative feelings about it. A few have posted that they will not produce work created by AI image generators.

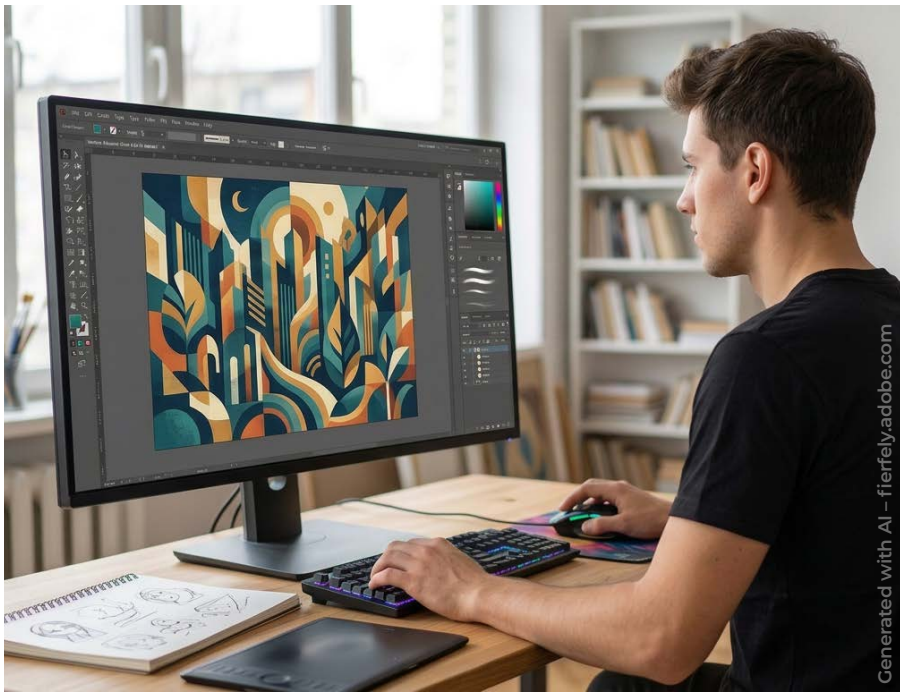
Others have swung the other way on the AI image pendulum. Fully embracing the power, they began building workflows, automations, and experiments to create images and to send art approvals, mockups, videos, animations, and lookbooks, all using available AI tools.

In the spring and late summer, the Adobe suite of tools connected to ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini. Now, it is even easier to get production-ready images using AI, but you must know how to collaborate with AI tools.

Now, at the end of the year, the December question is, "Can AI automate or handle repetitive art tasks to free up artists so they have more time to create?"

Because of the connectivity, AI tools can now create, edit, transform, upscale, reduce color counts, create mockups and proofs, generate lifestyle images and videos, and separate files for screen-printing and digital-print application production. AI tools can even complete extremely difficult tasks, such as simulated process separations.

That's a much bigger deal than simply generating a cool picture.





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Think about how much of your art department's day is involved in work that isn't creative. It's spent fixing a low-resolution logo a client sent, or reducing the color count for an image from millions down to three. Resizing a corporate logo to go on four different products and mocking those up for approval. This is where AI earns its keep, as it can handle those tasks faster than a person.

There is a catch, though. To set that up, the shops using these tools had to define the process and set the guardrails. They documented the steps first. They defined what a "print-ready" file looks like, the necessary outcomes, and what constitutes success or failure. What must be checked before a proof goes out? And they are tracking the data behind the art process to learn to get better.

Now, at the end of the year, the shops that invested the time and built out the rules have a strong, robust, and lightning-quick art department.

3 What is your data trying to tell you?

For years, shop owners have tried to make sense of their business using their own data. In January, the question was, "How do I connect things to make sense of my numbers?"

Shops have a Frankenstein assembly of different software that runs their business, including a shop system, an accounting system, a marketing system, an online store system, and others. And they often don't talk to each other. Getting a real answer out of your entire ecosystem of tools meant waiting for your accountant or an employee to find time to dig through them to find answers to questions you didn't even know to ask.

By December, shop owners are singing a different tune. Now, they are either connecting their existing platforms via an API or building their own tools and dumping their legacy industry software.

These owners are saying, "What has my data been trying to tell me?" With AI, people can ask questions about their sales history, pricing, production, and customer patterns and get actionable insights in a few moments.

One owner I spoke with earlier this year used AI to build a tool to analyze his pricing. He found a gap he had been living with for years. He always felt something was wrong. It worked because he needed to see what his real numbers meant and do something with that information. The software tools he'd been paying for all these years never did that.

But here's a caveat: AI is only as good as the data it is fed. If job records are incomplete, customer names are inconsistent, and everyone in the shop enters orders into the system differently, the answers could be problematic. AI works best with clean, consistent data. If you give it messy data, you'll get back a confident answer that could be incorrect.

4 Should you buy software or build it?

At the beginning of the year, the question many newer businesses in the industry asked was, "What industry software subscription should I use?" Now, in December, the biggest surprise of the year is the question, "What software tools should I build myself?"

Vibe coding has taken this industry by storm. This is where you describe what you want to an AI tool in plain language, and it writes the code for you. Now, completely custom shop tools are accessible to everyone in the industry, and you don't have to know how to write code.

For shops taking on this task, when I ask why they started, it was almost


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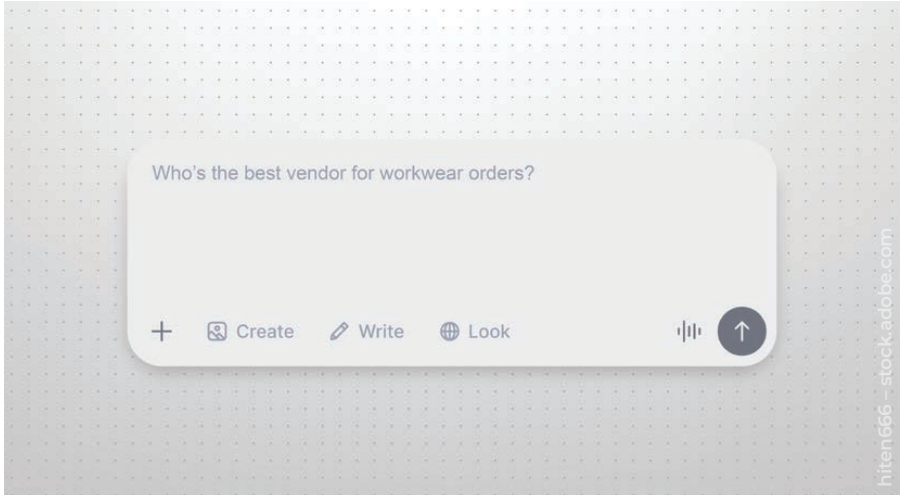
always due to frustration with the software tools they were using. Whether it was because of credit card fees, unresponsive customer service, frustration with tools that didn't fit how they work, or the incompatibility of the legacy software they needed to connect to, these issues motivated them to build their own platform.

They built websites, production tracking tools, pricing tools, online store platforms, customer relationship management tools, and even full shop management systems.

Someone told me the other day that they just started with one small tool. By starting with one tool and solving one problem, they learned how to build, test, deploy, and iterate on it until it works as intended. The important part was working until it was finished, and that was usually the hardest part.

So, what are you unhappy with enough to warrant building the replacement yourself? It's easier than you might think.



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5 Does AI know your business exists?

Not too long ago, the January question asked was, "How do I get my website to rank on Google?" Now, in December, that question has morphed into, "How do I get AI to recommend me to potential customers?"

More buyers are asking ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini questions instead of a search engine like Google.

Google rewards keywords. AI rewards reputation. Sure, it might crawl your website and look for key points, but what matters more is what other people think. This includes your Google reviews, articles about you, or awards you've won. Does your company show up on other websites or lists?

More often than not, an AI tool is picking the vendor. When someone asks ChatGPT, "Who is the best resource to handle my workwear order for my business [or whatever you do]," does your company come up?

You can test this easily by asking different AI platforms the same question as one of your customers might. Use an incognito window, start a temporary chat, or turn off your chat memory for a bit. Take whatever you find, copy and paste it into your favorite AI tool, and ask it to help you rank with AI search. Prioritize the steps and do the work.


Diego – stock.adobe.com

6 What job can you hand off to an agent?

Back in January, the question was, "What's an AI agent?" Now, here we are in December, and the question is, "What job can an AI agent handle end to end?"

An AI agent is set up and deployed to complete tasks on its own, rather than simply answering a question. In the span of a year, we went from doing basic work chatting with AI to assigning it real work — from customer support and order management to invoicing, purchasing, and research.

Plenty of shops have built and deployed agents in their businesses. When I speak with those who have these working in their shops, they all tell me the one rule they can't skip.

The AI does the work, but you own the result. If an AI agent builds the quote incorrectly and it goes to a customer, that's not the agent's fault. It's the shop's mistake. A human is accountable for the AI agent's work.

And these people are crystal clear on the fact that the agent is only as good as the standard operating procedures (SOPs) and the rules that define it. The AI agent needs guardrails in place for the intended outcome, what the limits are, and when it should stop and ask a human how to proceed.



Set up for 2027

If any of the above intrigues you, don't try to do all of that at once. Begin with one simple step.

Ask an AI tool to do the research and describe your business. See what it gets wrong. It costs nothing and will help you understand how AI sees your business. Then, give it more information so it truly understands your business. Then, pick one more:

- **Art** — Connect ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini to the Adobe Creative Cloud. Start experimenting with ways to handle repetitive art tasks.
- **Automations** — List your top three repetitive shop tasks ranked by time and labor. Pick one and see how AI could help.
- **Data** — Ask AI one question about your own numbers that you have never been able to answer.
- **Tools** — Try vibe coding a small tool that can help you not only solve a problem but also understand how to build your own software.
- **AI agents** — Write one SOP clear enough for an AI agent to follow and test it. Name the — human — staff member that edits, fact-checks, and owns the result.

Remember, you won't get very far with implementing AI in your business if you aren't working on it. Put some time on your calendar in repeating blocks, like a customer meeting. Do it a few times a week if you can.

And if you don't have an AI usage policy for your staff yet, write one. Your team should know which tools they can use, what information stays out of them, and who to ask if they are not sure.

These AI tools are constantly evolving and getting better. If you aren't testing and experimenting, you should be.

It isn't your job to keep up with every new tool or idea. Instead, ask questions about how these tools can help you improve something you are struggling with today. Work the problem and solve one thing at a time. GP



Marshall Atkinson is an expert in the decorated apparel industry, renowned for delivering practical education that drives effective change. His coaching spans artificial intelligence adoption, workflow optimization, cost management, business strategies, and marketing tactics, making a profitable impact on shops worldwide. You can find more information about him at marshallatkinson.com.

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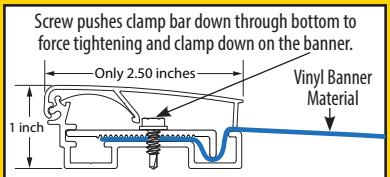

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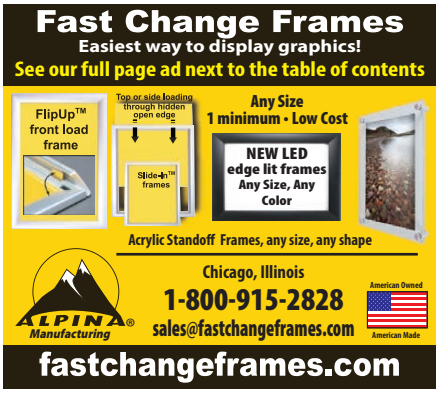

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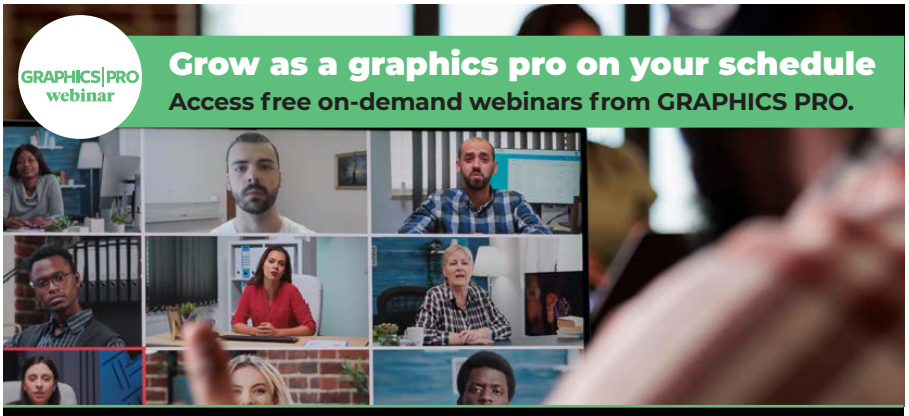

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43005
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Crew Neck Tee
XS–2XL



43007
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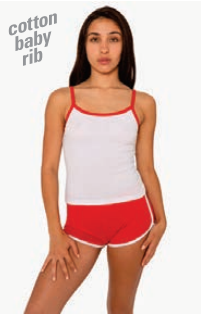
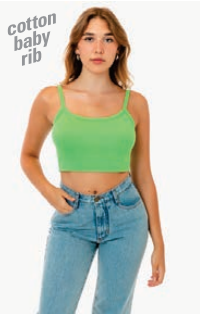
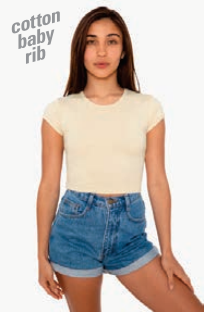
Long Sleeve Crew
XS–2XL



43011
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Spaghetti Tank
XS–2XL



43016
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Spaghetti Crop Tank
S–L



43035
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Cap Sleeve Crop Top
XS–2XL

...& 10 More!



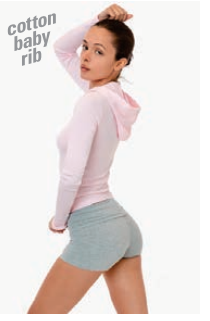
43053
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Long Sleeve Raglan
XS–2XL

...& More!



43077
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Cropped Raglan
XS–XL

...& More!



43098
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Long Sleeve Hoodie
XS–2XL

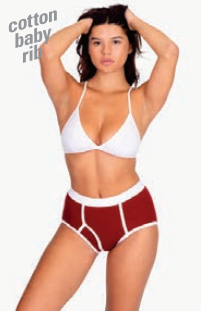


4400
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Unisex Fitted T-Shirt
XS–XL



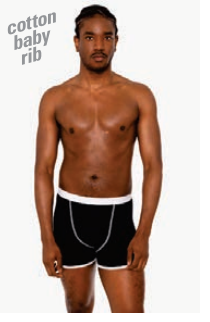
43013
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Thong
XS–XL

...& 15 More!



44015
4.3 oz Baby Rib
Men's Brief
XS–XL

...& 10+ More!



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