

Ink or Thread? How to choose the right garment decoration process for your business.

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Synopsis: Brief discussion of screenprinting vs. embroidery for business garments.

Perhaps nothing is more important than the image that customers have of your business. Often times, the first impression that is made is the friendly employee who greets customers that walk in the door. How that employee is dressed can make a big impact on your customer and the impression they have of your business. Most companies will eventually screenprint or embroider their logo on apparel for their employees and customers. The goal of this article is to help you understand the qualities of each decoration method and to be able to pick the right decoration method for your project. Rather than bore you with the details of how each manufacturing process works I'm going to describe each one and then compare and contrast them. Hopefully I caught your attention when I said manufacturing. That is the first and most important distinction that people often forget. As I told my banker when asked what we do, "We are a short apparel manufacturer that specializes in making short runs of custom garments using screenprinting or embroidery." Most companies in this business are good enough at it that we make it look like ordering a dozen cookies. That is how it should be. Nonetheless, it's important to realize that you are having something manufactured to your specification. The only difference between a convenience store and Wal-Mart is the quantity of the goods being made for their employee uniforms.

Screenprinting is really the older of the two manufacturing processes for putting an image on a garment. Commercially, it's been viable since the late 60's or early 70's. About 10 years ago computers got a hold of it and it went into fast-forward. The prime advantage has been that costs were driven down by computerizing many steps in the process, and techniques that had been reserved for Target or Wal-Mart running 500,000 pieces are now available to groups as small as 30 people. The basic concept is that you are using a stencil to squeeze ink onto a garment in a pattern that you want. Screenprinting is sometimes referred to as silk-screening, screening, t-shirt printing, etc. It excels at finer details and can often print photographic images onto t-shirts. Images can be created in any number of formats including MS-Word, Powerpoint, Publisher, Photoshop, Corel Draw, and Adobe Illustrator. Some of the less obvious formats need to be converted into PDF's before some printers can work with them. Namely, MS-Word and Powerpoint. One really important detail to keep in mind is that rounded edges or fuzzy edges will turn out as fuzzy prints. Rounded edges look really cool on your computer screen, but they don't print so well on a t-shirt. In fact, this brings up a really good point that you should remember about t-shirts: The effective resolution is around 60 lines per inch. A typical black and white newspaper operates at about this resolution.

Although advances in paper printing have unlocked pandora's box of resolution in recent years which has allowed small papers to publish at mindblowing resolutions. The name of the game with screenprinting is clean, crisp lines. It's very versatile and can be used on most apparel and fabric items. Screenprinting is usually priced based on two factors. The first factor is the number of colors and locations on the shirt. Each color is applied separately and each location is done separately. The second factor is the quantity of shirts. Modern automatic textile presses can print at 600 to 900 shirts per hour. It's not at all unusual to spend 30 or 45 minutes setting a job up and 15 minutes running it. Screenprinting excels at doing large volumes of garments inexpensively.

Embroidery, or industrial embroidery has only really been around since the mid 1970's. In the last 10 years the evolution and power of the PC has made an astounding impact on what is accessible to the average decorator and their customer. Embroidery excels at bold, big, and simple. Always remember that you are tying (sewing) knots in a shirt. Printing a copyright in 1/8" text will probably not look good and probably drive your embroiderer crazy. An important part of embroidery is the programming. Sometimes this is called digitizing. What is really happening is a expert is using a special piece of software to create a program that allows the embroidery machine to stitch your logo or design. The more complicated the logo, the longer it takes. As a practical matter, you should avoid lettering smaller than 1/4". Technically the needle is 3/4 of a mm (everything in embroidery is metric). 1/4" is about 5 mm and that means you have 4 knots to work with. You're going to get a pretty crappy letter with anything less then 4 knots. Remember, simple, bold, beautiful..... tiny, detailed, ugly. Embroidery is almost always priced by machine time. Usually this translates out as thousands of stitches, and sometimes companies will use flat rate pricing to try and make things simpler.

Now that you know a little bit about each process I'd like to point out some of the things to think about for your project.

- 1. What is it for? This seems like such an obvious question. But knowing the answer can help your decorator help you with garment selection. You also want to think about how durable you want it to be. It's a lot like buying fertilizer for your yard in a way. Do you want the 6 week or 6 month version? If you have a lot of employee turnover or it's a giveaway, then the 6 week version is a better fit. If you are a Real Estate or Insurance broker and your employees are more or less permanent, then the nicer, more expensive garment that lasts longer is a better fit. As a general rule, t-shirts are designed to be washed 52 times. Before you scream, realize that you probably don't wear it more then once a week. All garments have a life-span and knowing what it is supposed to be can help.**
- 2. Are you selling it or giving it away? This one is a little easier to figure out. But it's an important question. If you are selling it and you are using the cheapest t-shirt you probably won't get \$20 for it. On the other hand, if you**

- are a non-profit, you might very well because people are buying it to support you, not because it's a great deal.
3. **Upscale or Commonplace?** This can be a great way to differentiate between screenprinting and embroidery. Often times price makes the choice, but when it doesn't this is another factor. Screenprinting is commonplace and great for kitchen staff and service staff. Embroidery is fancier and looks nicer. Embroidery is almost a must for sales and professional staff. If you have a collar on the shirt, embroidery is probably better.
 4. **How many are you doing?** Embroidery really loves small runs. If you only have 2 employees you really will want embroidery. Embroidery can do up to 16 colors on as few as 6 shirts. Screenprinting by contrast is limited to 6 colors in most shops and more than a few decorators would laugh at you if you asked to do 6 shirts with a 6 color print. Those that wouldn't laugh would make you laugh when they gave you the price for that much time and effort.
 5. **How many colors are in your logo and how complex is it?** A good business logo is a whole other article.... If you have a 7 color logo you probably want to look at embroidery. On the other hand, if you are running 5,000 shirts, it will be cheaper to screenprint them.
 6. **Do you want to mix merchandise?** Mixing merchandise means you have totebags, t-shirts, hats, towels, etc. Embroidery can handle this with few problems. Hats are challenging to say the least because of the shape. Screenprinting does not lend itself well to mixing merchandise in an order and it can significantly complicate the job. In screenprinting the decoration process is often tailored to what's being decorated. For example, towels use water based ink, totebags print upside down, hats have a special one color press, and t-shirts use a different ink and stencil material than towels. Embroidery on the other hand couldn't care less what is under the needle. There are some settings to adjust for each type of item, but it's quick and easy to do.

A successful custom apparel project can do wonders for making your staff have a consistent look, or for ensuring that your logo is seen out and about by customers who have one of your t-shirts. Hopefully, I've helped expose some of the critical decision points that occur in the decoration process. Nearly every business buys customized apparel. It's one of the simplest ways to make a small company look like a big company. That's not always important, but we do always want to be professional.

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Texas Shirt Company is a web-based apparel decorator located in the Heights.
Texas Shirt Company is also proud to be a gay owned and gay operated business with 16 employees.