

## Digital Direct Opportunities

*Tips for starting a web-based business*

I launched my first web-based business in 1997. Since then, I have been involved in developing a multitude of sites that offer decorated apparel. One thing I have learned is that digital direct-to-substrate printing is an ideal process for a web-based business. In fact, I might even venture to say it is the *best* vehicle for print-on-demand technology.

Having learned how to be successful through the school of hard knocks, there are many tips and tricks to ensuring a website is profitable. Here, I offer some advice on how to navigate through some of the pitfalls.

### CHOOSE A NICHE

If you Google “T-shirt printers,” the search results will come up in hundreds of pages. How can anyone stand out in those results? The answer is to choose a market where it’s possible to get more recognition in search results and where there are fewer result pages to browse through.

Take preprinted and custom apparel for sororities for example. Consider building an ecommerce site around keywords such as “custom sorority T-shirts” or “sorority T-shirt designs.” Even using a domain that incorporates it, i.e. XYZ.sororityteeshirts.com, will help land that business in more targeted search results.

### CAREFULLY CHOOSE BLANKS

With digital printing, most want to accommodate every customer request. But I recommend sticking with shirt brands and styles with which you have experience in digitally printing instead of offering every single blank in a supplier’s catalog for your buyers.

**Kevin Kelly** is president of Blue Heron Industries in Little Falls, N.J., a full-service decorator offering screen printing, embroidery and digital printing. Kelly owns two Kornit digital printers and is known for digital printing on darks.



It may be the case that you offer other types of decorating or an expanded range of apparel to non-Internet customers. In this case, you may want to note on the website that these selections are your best-sellers, but that a more extensive range of styles is available. Invite customers to contact you for more information if they are looking for something they can’t find on the website.

Size ranges are another element to keep in mind. Offer only what can your equipment can accommodate. For example, those without a small enough platen to print infant onsies may be better off sticking with styles that are easily done on their system.

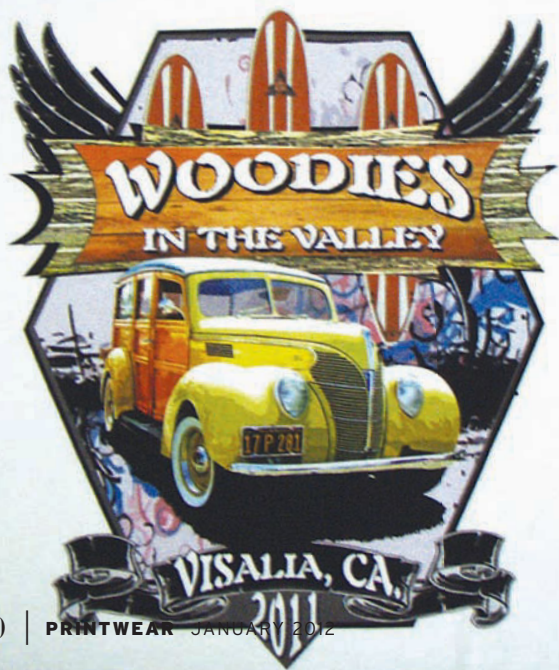
### DESIGN SELECTION IS KEY

As far as designs go, it’s best to offer an extensive catalog of preprint designs. Online customers love to shop and will scroll through design options for as long as it takes to find the one they love. Offer as many design choices as possible.

An advantage to selling decorated garments online is the ability to display designs by simply overlaying the image of on top of a T-shirt. There’s no need to print samples as is usually required in a store setting.

In terms of the size and display of designs, a standard display that shows up on the home page should contain images that are approximately 175 X 175 pixels to create a nice visual. While the average thumbnail on a lot of sites is 150 X 150

When shopping for a service provider, think about future expansion. You may want to open multiple stores within one website. This customer, who scans in a client’s vehicle and creates a custom T-shirt using a template background, is an example of an affiliate. His page is hosted on the author’s company’s server, who then fulfills all orders. (All images courtesy Blue Heron)



# The Digital Workstation

pixels, you don't want people straining to see what you are selling. We can't know at what resolution the potential customer is viewing the site; it may be 1280 X 1024 or only 600 X 800.

Or, another option that many subscription-based services offer is thumbnail roll-over zoom. When visitors put their mouse over an image, it becomes enlarged. This allows more images to be placed in a centralized location without making the page too big.

Also, clearly mark the types of products offered. And, it's important to keep the page size adequate to keep from visitors having to scroll from side to side. Everything should be front-and-center on the monitor.

## FLAT VERSUS MODEL PHOTOGRAPHY

Whether or not designs should be presented on models is a budgetary issue. It is a good idea to have some model shots as graphical elements for the home page and some other areas of the site. But, live model photos incur a lot of fees that can get into thousands of dollars depending on the amount of designs. It also requires the creation of real samples.

The most common way designs are displayed is on a blank overlay. The right templates will create overlays that are natural and work great from the customer's point of view. Just be confident that the printing method can match the design that is portrayed to the customer.

## LIMIT THE FLASH

Shoppers go to websites for one objective—to purchase a custom or preprinted item. They do not need to see flashing advertisements above, below, next to, or popping out from the product they're trying to learn about. The objective is to get customers to focus on the product so they can view as many options as clearly as possible, which will encourage them to commit to a choice and their purchase.

## ARTWORK CONSIDERATIONS

All online designs for preprints should be accessible as Portable Network Graphics (PNG) files. PNG was developed as a replacement for the GIF standard, partly because of GIF's many limitations.

PNG is superior to GIF in many ways. One of the most important is that PNG files allow for transparency, allowing users to accurately portray and layout designs in software without a background. This is paramount for digital printing. The PNG file resolution is also much higher, so the files are a bit larger than other formats.

Get high-resolution graphic files that are workable in your specific digital printing software. Many of the online T-shirt software subscriptions allow users to control the types of files customers can upload to your site. They also can convert their files to PNG format (removing any background to the design) and maintain the high-quality resolution of the customer's original artwork.

No matter the precautions, it is going to be the case in some instances that you'll get bad artwork. Determine whether or not you will edit bad art and, if so, what fees you will charge for the extra work required to make the artwork useable.

## SET HIGH CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

While one major benefit to online storefronts is that it cuts out much of the customer interaction involved with brick-and-mortar stores, it doesn't mean online businesses can skimp on customer service.

One step in that direction—communicate upfront to those ordering custom items through your site as to what file types they can submit for custom designs, and what quality your shop requires the image file to be. Make a "Quick Tips" pop-up window that spells out this information clearly. But also be prepared for customers who do not follow directions.

For example, when bad artwork comes in, or a design is infringing on a license, or some other scenario that infringes on the job, the best practice is to send the customer a simple email that clarifies any issues for the job request. This puts it back in the customer's hands to find a fix.

This high level of customer service on anonymous web-based purchase instills trust. In addition, to keep clients happy, set up a policy on store returns. Unhappy customers who cannot make a return stand to tarnish your reputation through negative online reviews.

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

For those adding an Internet business to an established business, the first step in promoting a site is through direct contact with existing clientele. This will work especially well for smaller orders that many decorators turn away. The addition of a custom-order website accommodates these small-volume buyers.

But this is only one example of the markets one can serve through an online T-shirt business. Though it takes thorough research, and careful design and planning, it can be a profitable and sustainable business leap. **pw**