

SUBLIMATION: FROM **ZERO** TO **HIGH SPEED** SUCCESS

BY MATT WOODHOUSE

How to add sublimation to your business while avoiding the pitfalls.

Sublimation: the perfect add-on to your business or one of the most frustrating things you have ever attempted. Which side of the coin will you be on when you get ready to try?

Over the years, I have helped countless business owners attempt to incorporate new technologies, specifically sublimation, into their business mix. I have been able to witness the rising success of many, and have seen the struggling of others. While the technology may seem like magic, taking a few logical steps before jumping in is not. This just goes back to the old adage “plan, or be planned”.



Figure 1: Team sports module

IDENTIFY LOGICAL TARGET MARKETS AND PRODUCTS

So often when speaking to someone looking to begin a sublimation business, I hear, “I want to be able to sell everything to everybody.” Having the ability to sell any product to any customer can seem desirable and certainly sounds attractive; however, in the beginning, this is rarely the best thing to do. The typical result

is, because a huge variety of products are offered, sales suffer due to lack of focus. How do you change this? It is actually very easy.

First, identify logical products for sublimation that can be leveraged against your current customer base. These synergistic opportunities exist all over the place. The customer, who may want a sign, may also be looking for name badges for the employees, and also have a desire to spruce up the conference room with décor items that display the company logo. Don't be afraid to ask what else your customer may be looking for.

Second, identify new potential markets. If you are struggling with this, there are a couple of different roads to take. Unisub has created three target-marketing modules to help identify groups likely to buy sublimated products (Fig. 1).

These modules focus on groups such as pay-per-play youth athletics, religious groups, and schools. A second way to find new customers is to choose something you are interested in, or better yet, passionate about—car clubs, church groups, civic organizations, just to name a few.

With some good planning, you can leverage your leisure time or volunteer time into dollars, while providing something your peers will enjoy.

CHOOSING A DISTRIBUTOR

One of the most important decisions you will need to make is selecting the distributor you will use as your primary supply source. The process is often difficult, but essential, as your sublimation distributor should be thought of as a partner. This is the partner that will help ensure the promises you make to your customer can and will be met. This then begs the question, what makes for a good distributor to partner with?

There are several companies that sell heat presses, printers, ink systems, and other equipment for sublimation. However, there are fewer who offer the imprintable supplies. I would recommend using a company who offers both equipment and supplies, because a company that wants to sell you the products that you will sublimate has a far greater interest in your long-term success than those that do not. Depth and breadth of product line, having product in stock, and order turnaround time are important things to consider. Do they have what you need and can they provide it to you in the time you need it?

Another, and absolutely one of the biggest factors to consider when making a decision about distributors, is technical support. Do they offer technical support in-house, or do they simply ask you to call various manufacturers to get questions answered? Does the distributor offer training? Does the distributor participate in industry support programs (The Sublimation Network, Project

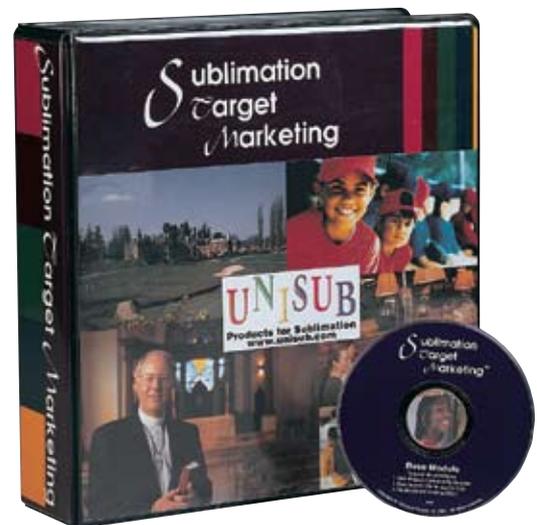


Figure 3: Sublimation Target Marketing Base Module



Figure 2: Professional vs. Consumer Printers



Sublimation training seminars, etc.)? The thinking here is the more your supplier is connected to the industry, the more likely it is they have the resources to help you achieve your goal.

One of the final considerations in choosing a distributor should be how close they are to you. Several of the items we can sublimate can be quite heavy (especially ceramic items), and as such, freight can become an expensive issue, fast! Look to see where companies ship from. Do they have multiple shipping locations, or just one? If just one, what are some sample freight costs you might incur? Don't be afraid to ask questions like these when doing your research. A couple of questions up front might prevent a big surprise later.

EQUIPMENT

By now, you should have an idea of what items you are going to start to produce, and who you are going to sell them to. Based upon those items, your distributor partner can make some recommendations as to which equipment will best serve your needs.

Printers: Of the various pieces of equipment we will need to purchase, none seems more confusing than the printer. While we exclusively use Epson printers for sublimation (due to the print head not using heat to fire the ink out), there are several options available today that were not available in the past. What makes one better than the other? Does it make sense to start with a small and inexpensive printer versus the larger professional printing systems? While the answer may be different for each business out there, there are a few fundamentals that should be considered.

Size of print area, print speed, cost per print, and reliability are the primary differences between the different printer models available today. The important questions concerning printer performance can usually be answered by simply asking yourself and your supplier what the machine was built to do.

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS CONSUMER LINE PRINTERS

Professional versus Consumer line printers (Fig 2): Consumer printers (ones you can find at your local office supply store) were generally intended for light-duty use, typically to print out items at home. Though this kind of printer was never designed for making money for people, they can be appropriate in some applications. The primary advantage of entry-level printers is the price of these printers.

You should find the consumer line printers ranging from \$79 to \$550 depending on the model (C-88+ or the R1800). These can offer some very beautiful prints, but typically have a fairly slow print speed (4 plus minutes to print an 8 1/2" x 11" sheet). They also have very high imaging costs when using cartridges; however, bulk-feed ink systems are frequently available to help reduce costs. Further, as we are using a printer outside of the scope of what it was designed to do, the printer will require more maintenance to ensure it works correctly.

Finally, consumer printers typically do not last all that long. The extra stress that is put on the print head due to the thicker inks we use just tends to wear these printers out. I would expect to get anywhere between six months to no more than two years with these models with light to medium use.

Professional model printers are the polar opposite, as the manufacturer intended the printer to be used in a commercial setting. As such, we typically get increased print area size, considerably greater speed, reduced imaging costs, greater reliability, and longer operating life. The models 4000/4800, 7800 and 9800 fit in this category.

Depending on the level of sublimation volume, and the size of the products you intend to produce, it might make sense to start small and inexpensive. Of course, volume and product size might also suggest starting out with performance equipment. As mentioned earlier, this is one of the important decisions you will need to make, and your supplier partner can be a great help in making this decision.

HEAT PRESSES

There is quite a bit more latitude when it comes to purchasing a press than a printer. We need a press to do three things for us in sublimation.

First, it has to be able to get to 400 degrees.

Second, it needs to be able to close flat, with equal pressure front-to-back when pressing one-inch thick items.

Third, it needs to be fairly consistent in the heat it delivers across the platen (no more than 35 degrees variance). If you already have a press that can accomplish these three goals, then it will likely work, and you are already well underway to having a sublimation system. If you feel it best to purchase one, I would recommend discussing your needs with your distributor.

PRODUCTION

Dedicate some space for sublimation in your shop. The good news here is that not a lot of space is required—about 100 square feet. That should provide plenty of room for production, space for heat presses, printers, and some inventory.

Having this “business within a business” feel can help to keep you focused on the new technology and not be in conflict with your core business.

PRICING/BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS

Here, again, is another one of the great opportunities to stumble. The biggest thing I see get in the way of people pricing their products is they know what it cost them to make it, but they don't know what the perceived value of the product is. Your customers have no idea what it cost you to produce an item; they only care if they like it. If you can sell a product at 75 percent gross margin (four times markup), and it is a great value that makes the customer happy, why only sell it at 30 percent?

To help answer these questions, the good people at Unisub have created a guide with the answers, which I feel is a must for all. It is called the Sublimation Target

Marketing Base Module (Fig 3). This is a comprehensive overview of how to make money selling sublimation products. Your distributor will likely either include this with an equipment package or with a starter kit of products. It will answer your pricing questions before you show the first item to a prospective customer.

Finding out that you have priced an item too low, and will perhaps have to live with it with ongoing orders is not one of the things you want to deal with when starting out. Having figured these questions out before being in front of a customer can not only reduce some stress, but it can instill confidence that the product you are offering will make you money!

So, a little recap: Plan or be planned! Identify products, and target customers to sell these products to, before going any further. Do research on and ask questions of prospective distributors. Select one that you feel confident will be there for

you when you need them most. Choose equipment that can manufacture the items you have chosen to produce, and will offer you the performance you require.

Dedicate some space to the process. Establish product pricing and volume discounts before offering items to your customers. Doing a little legwork on the front end will not only allow you to keep from pulling your hair out, but will help get the money coming in faster! SA



Matt Woodhouse is the Western Regional Sublimation Sales Specialist for Johnson Plastics. Matt has spent the last five years helping his customers integrate

sublimation into their businesses around the country. Matt can be reached at 866-869-7829 or via email at mattw@johnsonplastics.com.

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