

WITH SUBLIMATION, HINDSIGHT IS TWENTY-TWENTY

By Kevin Lumberg

We always hear that hindsight is twenty-twenty, but what does this mean to someone that is thinking about getting into the sublimation business? It means that it is easy to see where you made a mistake or wrong choices when you look back at the past. It is usually very clear where you went right, and where you went wrong. So keeping this in mind, wouldn't it be nice to look into the future and know everything that went wrong, or choices that would be made differently if you had the chance to redo them. Maybe use a time machine, so that you could go into the future and ask yourself questions. That way, you would not have to go through the painful and sometimes expensive process of learning through experience. I am going to be your time machine and give you a little twenty-twenty hindsight from my actual experience.

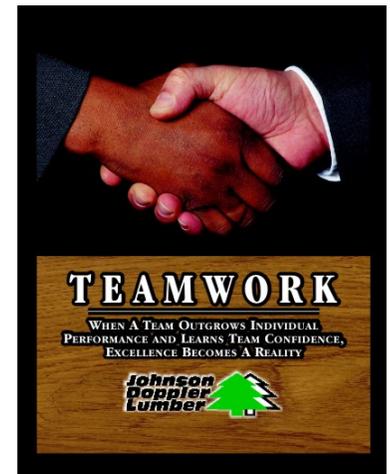
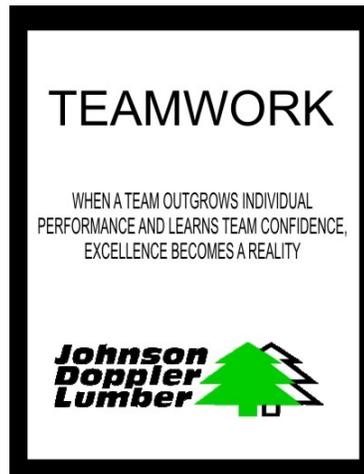
THE IDEA IS BORN

Let's go back in time to November of 2001. My wife and I always wanted to open a business. We constantly talked about it and planned out many different business scenarios. Eventually we decided on a Gift Shop. But we came to the conclusion that we needed some kind of service to add to the basic gift offerings of the shop. A type of service that would bring people into the shop and help create an excitement about the shop. During one of our "brainstorming" sessions, my wife said we should do T-shirts. In my mind I pictured the old style rubbery t-shirt transfers which did not seem appealing to me, but I started to do some research on the internet.

Many hours were spent searching the internet, using many combinations of t-shirt verbiage, until I stumbled across the word sublimation. The more I read about sublimation, the more I was intrigued. Not only could we do T-shirts, but we could do a host of other products as well, in small quantities and quick turn-arounds. Further, we would not need an excessive amount of equipment, and the monetary investment was relatively low compared to other systems of apparel decoration. I was sold.

LEARNING THE PROCESS

An Epson 3000 sublimation printer (which was top of the line at the time), with Artainium Sublimation inks was quickly purchased, along with a Geoknight DC 16 Digital Combo Press, with the attachments for mugs, plates, and hats. I wanted the option to be able to do a lot of products. It is still clear in my mind, when it all arrived. The equipment was quickly set up in my house (we didn't have our retail location yet). I had no idea what I was doing. The press was pre-heated, and an image was printed. The image was pressed onto a shirt, and in my opinion at the time, it turned out great. This sublimation stuff was magic! During the next couple months, many items were pressed, and I mainly used trial and error to figure things out. All the while, I soaked up any further information I found on the internet, and I kept



A great graphic increases the perceived value of the same product

improving my sublimation process. Imagine how silly I felt, when I found out that I should be using a sublimation paper, and not regular copy paper. Quickly I purchased some, and was it was amazing how improved the image quality was.

In hindsight...I would have purchased Sublijet inks instead of Artainium. In my opinion they are easier for a beginner to set up, and use. Further, Sublijet Inks are easier to train multiple employees to use, due to the Powerdriver color correction software that comes with the ink.

I also would have spent a little more money and purchased the 16x20 swing-away heat press instead of the 14x16. It is easier to line up shirts on the larger press, and the 14x16 can be too small for some sublimation products. The DC 16 Digital Combo, is a great choice if you are limited in space, and cannot fit more than one type of press, such as a standalone hat press and mug press into your work area. Heat presses generally last a long time, so it is worth the extra money to buy the larger format right from the beginning, and also the stand alone, application specific press. Further, I would have started out with mug wraps. In my opinion, they are more flexible for production, and are a low cost entry into mugs. You can start with a few of them, and a small table top convection oven, and buy additional mug wraps and an additional or larger oven as your volume increases.

For training, I should have scheduled a Project Sublimation Seminar before I opened the shop (when I was opening my shop they were known as Sublimation U). This seminar is presented by Sawgrass Technologies, and they are sponsored by sublimation distributors. Not only is it a great place to learn the basics of sublimation, pricing, and marketing, it is a great place to network with people. Attendees include people that are thinking about getting into sublimation and others that have been doing sublimation for awhile. There are also sublimation seminars at most the industry trade shows.

The leading distributors put a lot of resources into sublimation training, and they are a good resource to find training. I am now involved with some of these seminars, and I see participants leave with a confidence and excitement about sublimation that carries over to their sublimation sales. You can also subscribe to the applicable publications from NBM. They have many articles like this one that provides a lot of valuable information about sublimation.

SETTING UP SHOP

We finally found a retail location, and not knowing much about renting commercial property, we quickly signed a lease, so that we would not miss out on our opportunity. We set up the shop, and set up our product displays. Not knowing much about proper display techniques, I laid out sample sublimated products on shelves. We got ready to open our doors, and welcome our customers.

In hindsight...I would have contacted a commercial real estate agent to consult with during the leasing process. They will make sure you get the best lease package possible, based on their knowledge of the market.

Further, I would have taken some Corel and Graphics training. I look back at some of my first products, compared to the products I was creating a couple years later, and it was like night and day. You need to be aware that much of the perceived value in the products you create are in the layout and look of the product. A great looking product not only commands more money, but also will drive word of mouth business. Unisubgraphics.com is also a great resource for the "design challenged" people of the world. You can subscribe to the site, and then download completed designs for sublimation products. All you have to do is personalize them as needed. Digital Art Solutions also has a software package, Smart Designer that works with CorelDraw, which makes graphic design a lot easier for the novice.





Display your sublimation products in an appealing manner.

PRODUCTS AND PRICING

It was time to choose product offerings and price the chosen products. This was difficult because I had no idea where to start. I went through a catalog and started to pick out some of this and some of that with no rhyme or reason. If it looked good, I got it. To price the products, I figured out the costs for my products and then I came up with a price that covered my costs, but it really was a stab in the dark. Friends were questioned as to what price they would pay for an item, but it would have been nice to have a network of peers to compare notes.

In hindsight...I would have identified a group of products, and narrowed my focus to get exceptionally good at them. After I mastered those products, I would have analyzed my core customer base and launched more products or groups of products as needed. For pricing, it would have been much easier to use the pricing tools that are available in the Sublimation Target Marketing Module. It would have taken a lot of the guess work out of pricing. Further, I believe that when I started, I under-priced my products. This is an easy trap to fall into. No-one wants to be told “no”, and lose a sale. You may be leaving lots of money on the table by under pricing your products. If your product is under-priced, you may also be sending a message that your product is “cheap”, and nobody wants to give a friend or family member a “cheap” gift. You cannot over-research pricing. The more you know about your target market and your competition, the better you will be at pricing your products. If I had gone to the sublimation seminar, I would have had a network of peers to consult with also.

When you read through my process of starting out in sublimation it would be easy to think that it was a complete disaster, but it was far from a disaster. The sublimation process creates beautiful products that make a great impression on your customers. The colors are absolutely stunning, and word can spread quickly. My business grew tremendously during the three years that I had the shop, and if it were not for a construction project that forced me to close, I would still be there. I still get a charge every time I take something off the press. I am sharing my story with you because I believe so strongly about the sublimation process, and if I would have known this information back in 2001, I would have been much more successful. But as they say...hindsight is twenty-twenty.