

RIDING THE WAVE OF SUBLIMATION DECORATING

► DAVID GROSS | CONDÉ SYSTEMS

Though it has long been considered a specialty decorating technique, technology breakthroughs including exciting new substrate options are pushing dye sublimation further into the spotlight.

For the last 26 years, I have had the privilege of witnessing the viral growth of the sublimation decorating industry. A profitable complement to other processes such as photography, embroidery, engraving, and screen printing, sublimation has provided small and large shop owners a way to diversify their traditional product offerings to include a fresh and exciting selection of full-color, photo-quality gifts, awards, wearables, and signage. If you, like others, have already added a sublimation printer and heat press to your shop, it only makes sense to maximize your profits by stepping out of your comfort zone with additional decorated products and pursuing new profitable markets. In this article, I'll highlight four recent substrate trends that can help you cash in on this exciting wave of sublimation decorating.

SEE THE LIGHT

Perhaps the best-kept secret in the world of sublimation decorating is that you can sublimation to light-colored fabrics with jaw-dropping results. Possibly because white shirts have been heavily favored for accurate color reproduction, some sublimation decorators believe that only white polyester fabrics can be used. (Even I once believed this to be true.) Today, companies such as Vapor Apparel have “shown us the light” by offering a large line of sublimation-certified apparel in an array of colors, some with UV-blocking and moisture-wicking properties. The best news? Light-colored shirts often sell at a higher price than white ones. Be aware that not all brands are designed for the heat of sublimation and may discolor when pressed. That's why it's important to use sublimation-certified shirts.

BOTTOMS UP

Practically everyone wants or needs a custom decorated mug – especially when it's adorned with full-color text and images. Drinkware is a high-volume category dominated by a broad selection of 11- and 15-ounce ceramic mugs. Recently, however, brand-new styles of drinkware have become available, including polymer-based coffee and travel cups, stainless steel camp mugs, tapered cups and water bottles, and stemless wine



New substrate options continue to push the limits of what can be decorated with dye sublimation. Glass photo panels [top] provide new ways to display favorite images; weatherable metal panels [above] bring the brilliance of sublimation to the great outdoors; tapered bottles [right] are among the many new options in sublimatable drinkware. Courtesy of Condé Systems.

glasses. Depending on the size and style, the drinkware can be produced in an oven using a wrap or in a traditional or tapered mug press. Don't forget to bundle a mug sale with a sublimated glass, acrylic, slate, or sandstone drink coaster.

GO OUTDOORS

Some years ago, ChromaLuxe changed the sublimation market with their HD-quality sublimation metal. Ever since, sublimation metal has been in high demand and often sells at ultra-premium prices. Once primarily limited to indoor use, recent advances in coating technology have pushed sublimation outdoors with the introduction of extended-life metal photo panels and signage. This opens up many new opportunities for photographic-quality displays and signage. The metal provides the lasting, vibrant colors you'd expect from high-definition metal panels with UV resistance that can stand up to outdoor elements for at least three years. As a bonus, these panels also deliver scratch-, graffiti-, and chemical-resistant finishes rivaling other decorating technologies. If you are not producing metal prints, you should be.

A TOUCH OF GLASS

Following the success of metal panels, other hard substrates have emerged such as sublimation glass, which offers another way to add appeal and value to your product lineup. Sublimation



glass photo panels are available in sizes from 5 x 7 inches to 20 x 30 inches, and serve as a unique and frameless way to display favorite images and photographs on a shelf, desk, or wall. The new tempered-glass photo panels give depth and brilliance to transferred images while the white imprintable coating on the backside provides excellent image clarity and color reproduction, including the ability to deliver bright whites and deep blacks. Sublimation glass provides a high-end, museum-quality look that creates a lot of margin potential.

SURF'S UP

The sublimation wave shows no sign of leveling off.

Consumers increasingly expect personalized products with exceptional graphics, a trend that plays directly into sublimation's strengths. Worldwide, sublimation technology is expected to grow at a clip of 10.2 percent annually through 2023 according to a recent study by Smithers Pira. (See pg. 24.) The continued expansion of sublimation into new substrates and applications will drive that growth, creating a wealth of new opportunities for print service providers like you. [▶](#)

David Gross is the president of Condé Systems, providing printers, substrates, and consumables for the graphic arts, photography, prepress, and desktop publishing industries. He is a frequent speaker and author on sublimation technology and management strategies.

TOP 5 MISTAKES MADE BY SUBLIMATION DECORATORS

➤ 01. UNDERPRICING PRODUCTS

Perhaps the biggest mistake that digital decorators make is underestimating the value of what they're selling. Often, this is because they use some type of volume/mark-up formula to set their prices. Don't use these antiquated pricing sheets with sublimation. Instead, set your prices based on the value you deliver, comparable with pricing in your market.

➤ 02. NOT LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Many years ago, a client of ours told me that she had a great way of learning from her mistakes: Whenever she made one, like pressing something upside down, she would hang the misprint on her "wall of shame" located next to her heat press. The goal was to remind her not to make the same mistake again. This advice has turned out to be a game changer for many of our clients. It only works, of course, if you know

what caused the mistake. Investigate the failure and then document it so you and your employees won't make the same error again.

➤ 03. NOT FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

Sublimation is a lot like cooking: Starting with the right ingredients and heating at the time and temperature listed in the recipe should produce consistent results. Guessing at the proper technique simply won't work. Consult your product literature, online educational videos, and other instructional materials. When you have your technique dialed in, be sure to document what works for you. And when you do have issues, call your supplier sooner rather than later.

➤ 04. NOT INCLUDING REFERRAL INFO

Every product you sell should have your company

information on it so that the ultimate end user will know where to buy more of your great merchandise. For shirts, you can sublimation your information on the bottom tail of the garment. For other products, sublimation the backside or place a label in an inconspicuous spot. This method can also include a job code to expedite reorders.

➤ 05. LETTING OPINIONS GET IN THE WAY OF MAKING MONEY

You personally may not like a product, but that has nothing to do with what your clients want. Show your customers new products. Sell complementary items. If you are selling shirts, sell socks and sleeves. For drinkware, sell coasters. Expand into new markets such as weddings. Remember, once you have your client's artwork, it's easy to put it on a different product. Follow the money!