

Road to Sublimation Success: Introducing New Sawgrass Sublimation Printers and Solutions

By David Gross



David Gross is the president of Condé Systems, Inc. For more than 25 years he has developed and built the Mobile, Alabama based company into the

premier source for printers, substrates, and consumables serving the graphic art, photography, prepress, and desktop publishing industries.

Our journey on the road to sublimation success continues to pick up speed. With thousands of products to decorate and more constantly being introduced, there is a corresponding need to improve the sublimation process with better production equipment such as printers and heat presses.

Late last year, we saw the introduction of Epson's F570 24-inch sublimation printer (see my article in the December

2019 issue of *A&E*, page 20). Now, built on the road-tested SG400 and SG800 printers, Sawgrass is introducing the new the Virtuoso SG500 and SG1000 printers.

Sawgrass' solutions have matured to be much more than just printers and ink; that's what makes this introduction so exciting. The company's approach offers an interesting, high-value, and holistic solution that benefits the beginner as well as the experienced sublimator. Let's take a look.



The new printers from Sawgrass, the SG500 and SG1000, support four-color printing with individual CMYK ink cartridges.

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To support the new printers, Sawgrass is offering its next generation Ultra HD Sublijet ink.

NEW MUSCLE FOR THE ROAD

Sawgrass is perhaps the best-known name in the industry since it was one of the earliest pioneers to create a desktop ink solution for sublimation decorating. At first, Sawgrass' ink production was focused on Epson printers with piezo print heads. About 16 years ago, however, the company began building a partnership with Ricoh (the copier/printer company) since it, too, had developed a piezo print head.

Their first desktop inkjet printers were known as GELJET printers because they included standard ink that was thicker (making them more efficient) than inks used in other printers. These GELJET printers, along with sublimation gel inks developed by Sawgrass, quickly became the standard for turnkey desktop sublimation printers.

Sawgrass' partnership with Ricoh ultimately led to designing sublimation printers from the ground up, and this partnership (in my opinion) has allowed desktop sublimation to go viral. Now the revolution gets an exciting makeover.

THE SAWGRASS SG500 AND SG1000 PRINTERS

Sawgrass has continued its strategy of offering two printer sizes: one with up to 8 1/2-inch media width and the other with up to 11.7-inch media width (13 inches with its optional multi-bypass tray).

Except for print size, both printers are built from a chassis that includes a next generation Ricoh print head and an upgraded print engine for increased performance and improved image quality. Both are CMYK printers and use a new state-of-the-art sublimation ink. The built-in tray for both printers is flexible and accommodates smaller, specially cut sizes of paper including those for 10- and 15-ounce mugs.

Virtuoso SG500

The SG500's smaller size and low cost make it an ideal choice for folks that are new to sublimation, only want to produce small-sized substrates, or want portability for producing products at remote events. The SG500's built-in paper tray supports a maximum paper size of 8 1/2 by 14 inches, making it uniquely qualified to be a drinkware transfer workhorse.

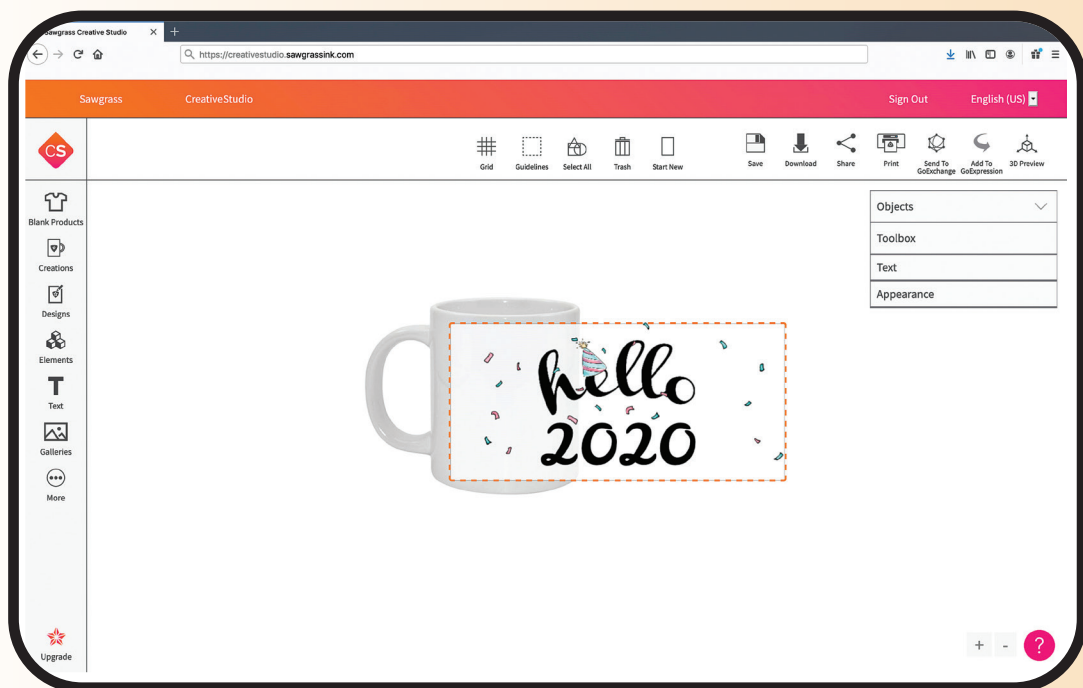
Add an optional bypass tray to gain an additional paper source and the ability to print on extended length paper sizes. There is an 8 1/2-by-21-inch paper size that is great for printing transfers for socks and other long substrates.

Virtuoso SG1000

Since its print size accommodates the vast majority of substrates, the SG1000 is the ideal sublimation printer for most shops. The larger of the two printers, the SG1000 can print up to 11 3/4-by-17-inch paper from the bottom built-in tray and up to 13 by 21 inches from its optional multi-bypass tray (the existing bypass tray for the SG800 is compatible with the SG1000). The 13-by-21-inch paper size is versatile since it maximizes the transfer area of heat presses like Geo Knight's 16-by-20-inch DK20S, and therefore increases the number of products that can be produced.

FUEL: INKS AND INK SYSTEM

The SG500 and SG1000 support four-color printing with individual CMYK ink cartridges. While the SG500 only supports standard ink cartridges, the



For those unfamiliar with design software such as Photoshop or CorelDRAW, CreativeStudio is a simple solution to design work.

SG1000 supports both standard size and extended capacity (double capacity) ink cartridges (you can mix and match sizes as needed).

To support the new printers, Sawgrass is offering its next generation Ultra HD SubliJet ink that provides excellent color gamut, runnability, and image durability. The inks were designed for both hard and soft (fabric) substrates and are matched to the Ricoh piezo print head using a higher viscosity formula. By my testing, 1 ml of this gel type ink is the equivalent of 3 ml of other brands of sublimation ink.

SUBLIMATION RELEASE PAPER

The purpose of sublimation paper is to carry the ink from the printer to the heat press and then let go of the ink as it turns into a gas and diffuses into the substrate. Be sure to only use papers that are supported by the printer as some generic papers dry too slowly and create moisture and streak issues.

Another bonus of the many generations of these printers is the outstanding family of sublimation release papers supported by them. I recommend the

DyeTrans SPP paper as it has minimal dot gain, superior release characteristics, and is available in many different sizes.

CONNECTING TO YOUR COMPUTER

Sawgrass provides a full-featured driver for both Mac (check for supported versions) and Windows (10 and up). Both printers support three ways to hook your computer to them: USB, ethernet, and Wi-Fi. Sawgrass includes a USB cable. I am suspicious of using Wi-Fi as many networks tend to have erratic data flow and might cause printing to stop and start, resulting in horizontal banding and poor performance.

GETTING READY FOR THE ROAD

Printer setup is similar to most printers: unpack, install ink cartridges, and turn on. Each printer takes about six minutes to charge its ink system. Your ink cartridges will show reduced levels as ink has been moved from the cartridge into the ink tubes and print head. One of my favorite new features is the backlit display – it's quite helpful.

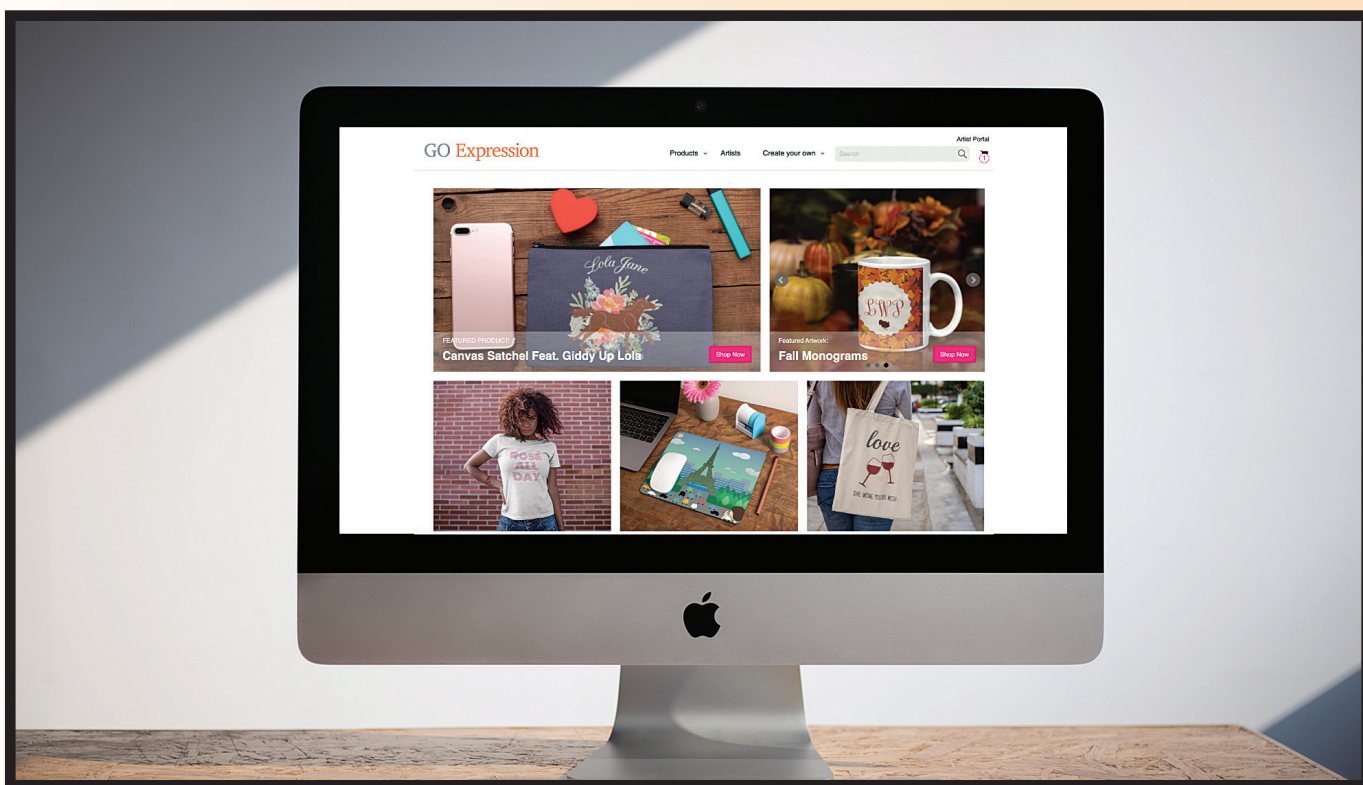
After the ink lines have been charged, it's time to install the printer software.

Learn more about CreativeStudio
Check out the article by Cheryl Kuchek in the January issue of A&E, page 42.

Driver software is downloaded from the internet, but I recommend you call your sublimation distributor and let them remote in and set everything up. This may seem odd, but it's important to optimize the setup for whatever applications you are using.

Paper is loaded with the print side face-down for the built-in tray and any additional bottom trays. For the bypass tray, it's loaded face-up. I do recommend using the bottom trays when possible.

Also, don't panic when your first prints look dull and faded. The dyes become vibrant once activated in the heat press. I do recommend hooking the printer up to a UPS/surge protector and leaving the printer turned on all the time. I also recommend doing a test print every few days if you are not using the printer.



Go Expression is essentially an internet platform for connecting Sawgrass users together to create a global fulfillment network.

GROW WITH MORE PAPER TRAYS

Both printers can be expanded with optional paper trays to provide convenience and cost savings. Two extra bottom trays and a bypass tray can be added to each printer for minimal cost. This expandability is right out of the Ricoh copier play book with a maxed-out printer having a total of four paper sources.

As an unexpected bonus, all existing extra trays for the older SG400 and SG800 are compatible with their replacements. Access to multiple paper sizes allows the user to select a size that reduces waste and production time. No need to cut paper for drinkware or swap back and forth between paper sizes.

WARRANTY AND SUPPORT

Both printers include a two-year warranty and lifetime support. In the event of an issue with the printer that can't be solved through troubleshooting, Sawgrass will ship a replacement to you. Keep in mind that Sawgrass sells these printers through their authorized distributor network, and your distributor should assist you with setup and installation and be your

first point of contact with support. Choose a distributor that specializes in sublimation and provides an A-Z approach for sublimation, not one that is just a box mover.

Sublimation issues can occur in three places: computer, printer, and heat press (oven), so great support is critical to troubleshooting issues, especially for beginners. To help our clients be successful, I have placed a large collection of sublimation videos on www.condetv.com to help with what I call best practices for sublimation success.

COTTON DECORATING

One of the hottest topics in sublimation is decorating dark cotton shirts. Although today's traditional sublimation technology will not decorate cotton directly, Sawgrass provides support for heat-applied sublimation vinyl. There are currently at least two products on the market that I like: Forever Sublifix 202 and Siser EasySubli heat-applied vinyl. Both are similar in that you print directly onto them, use a contour cutter to weed away the printed parts, and then press them onto any color cotton shirt.

HEAT PRESSES

To be successful with sublimation, you must make the computer, printer, and heat press/oven work together correctly. Often, the weak link is the heat press. Many folks buy a cheap Chinese-made press. Don't do it!

These presses all too often provide uneven heat, poor temperature regulation, and a short life. I strongly recommend investing in a made-in-the-USA swing-away press, such as one built by Geo Knight. It has over 130 years' experience, and many of the presses it makes come with a lifetime warranty on the heat platen.

CREATIVESTUDIO DESIGN SOFTWARE

These printers, like the last generation, are good to go with programs such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, CorelDRAW, and Silhouette Studio. In fact, I don't know of any program that you can't use.

Don't own or know how to use these programs? Sawgrass' CreativeStudio is the answer. Several years ago, Sawgrass noticed that folks wanted to get into sublimation but lacked experience with

graphics software. Its solution was CreativeStudio. CreativeStudio is a cloud-based design software that is accessed through your Chrome browser (so you must have internet) and allows you to create great-looking designs within minutes.

Now on version 4, CreativeStudio has added a lot of new features like the ability to import fonts and post to social platforms. Each Sawgrass printer comes with a free lifetime license to CreativeStudio, and a premium subscription was recently added that provides a wealth of clipart designs. If you are a Corel, Adobe, or Silhouette user, I recommend staying the course. But for folks that lack design skills, CreativeStudio is the ticket.

GPS: SAWGRASS' GO EXPRESSION NETWORK

Perhaps the most exciting and surprising addition applies to both new

and older Sawgrass printer owners: Sawgrass' Go Expression Network. Essentially, it's an internet platform for connecting Sawgrass users together to create a global fulfillment network.

It looks a bit like a ride sharing feature of the printer where you make money by printing and potentially pressing for other Sawgrass owners. Maybe you sub out doing mugs to someone else or you need to print bigger but have the smaller printer. Or maybe you're on vacation and just need to hand off some order fulfillment.

WHY DO YOU NEED MORE QUALITY?

Sawgrass is promoting that these new printers support a high-quality mode. Because most substrates' viewing distance is a few feet, this mode is pretty much a waste of time due to the slow print speed. For a few substrates like

jewelry, however, this new mode is magic. For those products with a short viewing distance, Sawgrass' new high-quality mode produces sharp results that are sure to impress your clients and put a smile on your bottom line.

Based on my 25-plus years of sublimation experience, I am impressed with these next-generation printers. Both Ricoh and Sawgrass have delivered a quality, user-friendly solution that produces excellent color and image quality. I will be doing a lot of informative videos on these printers, so check out my YouTube channel and/or you can email me at dgross@conde.com with your comments and questions. SR

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