

THE BINDING Stitch

With sales primed for a rebound, now is an ideal time to maximize your knowledge about the apparel decoration market. Here's an inside look at one successful embroidery shop, as well as simple tips on improving your business with decorators.



By Dave Vagnoni

about 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia, in the one-traffic-light town of Topton, PA, Rockland Embroidery appears out of place. From this rural location in the shadow of Blue Mountain, Rockland has grown into a successful operation that has done work for end-users as varied as MTV, President Bush, UPS, Sean John (yes, that's Diddy's apparel line) and Comedy Central. Ultimately, though, Rockland focuses its efforts on its main customers: distributors.

"We think of ourselves as a supplier," says Rockland General Manager Andy Shuman, his BlackBerry in hand. "Almost all of our work is for distributors, so we're not competing with them at all. We work with them."

Serving roughly 1,500 distributors nationwide, including many in the *Counselor* Top 40, Rockland generates roughly \$3 million a year in revenues. And, with a staff of about 50 workers, the company has a history of producing several

million pieces annually, with items ranging from basic T-shirts to custom clothing for famous clients. "It's pretty amazing what work comes through little Topton," Shuman says about Rockland, which began in a basement and now operates from a 20,000-square-foot facility.

While Rockland has posted profits nearly every year since it was opened in 1991, its managers admit they must confront an ever-expanding list of challenges. Because Rockland handles



Andy Shuman, right, general manager of Rockland Embroidery, along with Mike Wagaman, the company's head of sales.

projects for so many distributors of varying sizes and backgrounds, one of Shuman's most trying tasks is to help his customers understand the considerable role of decoration in promotional products sales. "This is an industry where one keystroke can make the difference between red and purple," Shuman says. "We definitely encourage distributors to learn about what we do."

Aiming to improve the sometimes uneven relationship between decorators and distributors, *Counselor* recently toured Rockland's vast facility, stopping to speak with managers, machine operators and customer service staff. The upshot of the tour: Whether you're a new distributor or a seasoned industry veteran, there's a lot to learn about the decorating business and its effects on your company's bottom line.

The Operation

On the early November day when the New York Yankees clinched their 27th World Series title, Rockland's 240 embroidery heads and six screen-printing presses were running hard. Yet, not one of them was being prepared to produce championship merchandise. "We've just decided that we

have a responsibility to our customers," says Shuman. "We're not going to run our machines day and night for hot markets and push back other orders. That's not what we do."

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ANDY SHUMAN, ROCKLAND EMBROIDERY

Instead, Millie Brobst is carefully watching her 18-head Tajima embroidery machine pound stitches into a row of lab coats. The order, which will eventually be sent to a medical college, is ahead of schedule. "I'm making sure the designs are coming out right," Brobst says with a matter-of-fact tone. "When they're done, I'll change

them and start the next batch."

An experienced machine operator, Brobst essentially pre-programs the necessary design and color scheme with the help of a simple floppy disk. If a needle gets stuck or if a design isn't sharp, Brobst has the sewing background to often fix the problem on the spot. "I used to sew all of my son's clothes when he was growing up," Brobst says. "I really like doing this."

Two rooms away, set on a clean, but still ink-spotted floor, a massive automated screen-printing machine begins its latest job. Spun in a circle from station to station, T-shirts are decorated with very specific colors of ink, then dried at a temperature nearing 400 degrees. "This is our recipe book," says Shuman, gesturing in the direction of a color list. "What we do is take base colors and then mix them to get exact colors. In other words, if you do work for Pepsi, it better have Pepsi's red."

About 100 feet from a distinctive stockpile of screen-printing ink, workers are packing, sorting and organizing a sea of items and boxes. Everyday from 6 a.m. to at least 4 p.m., Sherry Hinkel and Ronnie Rhode team up to receive goods in and see goods out. Using a numbering and lettering system, the pair is known for their rather accomplished tracking skills. "They can find anything in about five minutes," Shuman says, muted a bit by the sound of a nearby train. "Sherry can also embroider, hand-sew and do just about anything else around here."

To go along with embroidery, screen printing and warehousing, Rockland also offers rhinestoning, vinyl cutting, appliqué, garment transfers and PVC emblem work.

"We want to be a full-service decorator," says Shuman. "The market is also moving toward fashion, so we're doing a bit more of what you'd see in stores, like the distressed look."

The Pitch

Wearing his signature colorful clothing that on this day includes very plaid pants, Mike Wagaman has the job of securing business from distributors. Despite a high-profile

Decorating Options

	+ PROS	- CONS
EMBROIDERY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Works well with heavier-weight garments + Very durable so it won't easily wear over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not work well with lightweight garments - Logo reproduction is not 100% accurate
SCREEN-PRINTING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Produces very vivid colors + Quick turnaround time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multiple colors requires multiple screens, driving up cost - Inks aren't always environmentally friendly
GARMENT-PRINTING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Photo-realistic images without the use of screens + Works well on whites and light-colored garments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Colors aren't as vibrant - Slower process compared to screen printing
SUBLIMATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Achieves an all-over print + Uses digital technology, allowing decorator to make changes to individual shirts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires 100% polyester - Requires lighter colors

customer list, Rockland still pushes an aggressive marketing plan, attending several ASI and regional trade shows every year. "We also send e-mail blasts" says Wagaman, Rockland's director of sales. "Really, the key to our success is getting in the door with one sales rep and then having that rep communicate to their colleagues about our work."

In making his pitch, Wagaman stresses Rockland's free digitizing and free pickup and delivery services. "We're in a business where everybody needs things yesterday," says Wagaman, a former *Today* show intern and auctioneer. "I talk about our service here being outstanding."

Rockland also keeps up with technology trends – the shop has a following on Twitter, and has begun selectively offering Webinars for several clients. "We're proud

that we have customers from all over the country," Shuman says. "We don't claim to be the cheapest, but we produce on time, cost-effectively and with quality. If you're going to succeed as a distributor, you need a decorator that's reliable."

The Order

The most sophisticated embroiderers not only offer a Web presence, but provide a site with instructions, explanations and downloads. Rockland's Web site (www.rocklandembroidery.com) includes a detailed decorating orientation for distributors, complete with training about design, color, location and shipping. "Those are the areas we really need to know about," says David Schlier, Rockland's owner. "We're fortunate, too, to have a great software system for our

orders. Without that, it would be much harder."

Included in Rockland's orientation is a sample purchase order that can be downloaded and even reused by a customer. "What we're looking for is as much information up front as possible," says Shuman. "If you're not sure about something, just ask. We have people here that have been doing this for so long that we can walk you through anything."

Most decorators, including Shuman, agree that the purchase order is the key-stone in the ordering process. A detailed and mistake-free purchase order will most often lead to a complete and on-time product shipment. To fill out a basic purchase order, a distributor has to be able to provide desired product colors, sizes, quanti-

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MIKE WAGAMAN, ROCKLAND EMBROIDERY



While Rockland tries to push clients toward higher-quality embroidery decoration, the company's clients have erred on the side of less expensive screen printing techniques lately.

ties, styles and fabrics. Along with sending artwork or a logo, distributors need to determine the exact location of the embellishment on a product.

A thorough purchase order will also include the vendor and carrier information, as well as the intended ship date and any special handling and packaging requests. "A customer might ask for products to be placed in poly bags, which we also offer," Shuman says.

After a design is processed, embroiderers will usually offer a choice of actual or virtual samples. At Rockland, a customer is later asked to approve not only the design, but various order forms to make certain that several elements, including pricing, are correct. "Some people look at this as an added step, but for us this is important," Shuman says.

"We just want the customer to communicate with us during the process," says Kim Soltes, Rockland's general shop manager. "If there's a change, we can use a heads up."

The Service

Staring closely at the designs on her computer screen, Blair Dibler is about to e-mail

an approval notice for an order of T-shirts decorated for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. "It's an order of 300 shirts for the parade staff," Dibler says.

About 10 feet away from Dibler is Jane Rice, who is just finishing a phone call with a customer. "Every client is different and you have to know how to react," she says, twisting in her chair. Sitting at a third desk behind Dibler is Kelly Murray, who specializes in art and design. "Some people don't realize that when it comes to screen printing, you can't send a jpeg," Murray says. "It has to be vector art. I deal with Corel and Adobe Illustrator."

For the last three years, this trio has worked in Rockland's screen printing customer service department, building relationships with thousands of sales reps. "We're really trying to do a lot more electronically, getting away from faxes especially," says Rice. "Once an order is out the door, a customer will receive a system-generated notice with tracking information."

In a separate office, Kelly Eager, Rockland's digitizer, admits her workload has steadily increased in recent days. When asked, she also tries to explain how the

digitizing process works. "I basically draw each design stitch by stitch," she says. "The best advice I can give a distributor is for them to trust their digitizer, especially when it comes to sizing. Sure, a lot can be trial and error, but a digitizer can tell you pretty quickly whether a design is going to work or not."

Surrounding Eager is the rest of Rockland's embroidery-focused customer service team. It includes Lee Zayac, Linda Dupler and Allison Drey. "I'm the one who deals with any complaints," Drey says. "We definitely work to correct any errors and if it's our fault we'll try to figure out same-day turnaround time. The customer deserves to be happy."

The Advice

According to Shuman, distributors most often have questions about application, placing a premium on artwork. "People want to know what is and what's not possible," Shuman says. "For example, a logo must be kept under 2.3 inches tall for the front of a cap. Small text will look better on a woven dress shirt than on a cotton pique golf shirt because of fabric texture."

Rockland accepts seven approved artwork formats that range from simple jpegs to Adobe Illustrator 10. "What we try to explain is that embroidery is not a stamp and it's never going to be exact," Shuman



QUESTIONS TO

Ask A Decorator

When qualifying potential apparel decorator partners to hire, here are three things every ad specialty distributor should ask:

■ **Can I see a sample?** Ask to see an embroidered sewout or a screen-printed shirt so you can get an idea of the quality of the work the decorator is turning out.

■ **What is the scope of your imprinting work?** Some decorators specialize in small, highly customized runs, while others excel at huge orders (think 3,000 embroidered shirts with left-chest logos) and may not be so good at intricate, multimedia work. The smart thing to do is make a short list of two or three decorators whose skills match all of your imprinting needs.

■ **Can I take a tour of your facility?** Check out the decorator's production area. Ask how often they maintain their embroidery machines – a good decorator self-maintains his machine weekly and then calls in a tech periodically for a deep cleaning. Screen-printing screens and film should be stored in a cool, dry place, not left out. And, samples should be stacked neatly on tables. If a decorator hesitates to invite you to see the operation, that's a signal that you may want to call somebody else on your list.

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To help educate distributors and gain client feedback, Rockland hosts tours of its facility and conducts an annual survey. "Distributors are welcome anytime to come in and see what we do and how we do it," Shuman says. "About the survey, we send it out to every company in our database, even to the customers we know had a challenging experience."



The Rockland apparel decoration techniques at work.

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ANDY SHUMAN, ROCKLAND EMBROIDERY

Besides touring an embroidery shop, decorators like Shuman encourage distributors to seek out referrals, gain information about work guarantees and ask for product samples. Decorators also stress that the size of an embroidery shop is not always most important. Instead, the range of services is usually the best indicator of the talents of a decoration staff. "We have great people here who have been in this business for many years," says Randy Haydt, Rockland's embroidery plant manager. "Running the shop is like a chess game. If you match the

right people with the right machines, you get results and efficiency."

Of course, the ultimate result distributors care about is their bottom line. When asked about margins, Shuman believes distributors should be able to secure a solid and consistent return for their work. "Of course every case is different, so I hesitate a bit," Shuman says. "I really think, though, for their time and energy, they should get 35%-40%." ○

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