



By Jill Malcolm

Controlled Chaos

Andy Shuman has worked in a decorating contract shop for nearly 12 years – and every day he puts out a different fire.

This industry “is driven like a racecar,” says Andy Shuman, general manager of Rockland Embroidery Inc. (asi/734150). “It’s very deadline-driven. My job is to put out fires and to plan for the next fire.” Shuman, who joined Rockland Embroidery in 1999 as a sales rep, handles the rapid-fire day-to-day operations of the 20,000-square-foot contract shop, its 50-plus employees, 255 embroidery heads and six screen-printing presses.



About the Business

Rockland Embroidery Inc.
(asi/734150)

Founded: 1991

Headquarters: Tipton, PA

Customer Demographics:

ASI distributors;
embroiderers and
screen printers

Main Services Offered:

Embroidery and screen
printing

Web Site: www.

rocklandembroidery.com

Contact: andy@

rocklandembroidery.com

Stitches: You’re probably going non-stop on a daily basis. Do you ever get a breather?

Andy Shuman: What I do encompasses about a million things. Day to day though, I really focus on financials, and on being a liaison between our customer service and production departments. Sometimes customer service says that we need an order as soon as possible, and I need to make sure that production can deliver.

Stitches: For a thriving contract shop, Rockland Embroidery had some pretty humble beginnings. How exactly did the company start?

AS: David Schlier, the company president, started the business in 1991, but he has been involved with embroidery for most of his life. He grew up in a rural town in Pennsylvania that was home to, at the time, one of the largest embroidery companies. He started doing odd jobs there as a kid during the summer, befriended the owner and learned how to run the factory’s operations. He literally went from mowing the grass to becoming their general manager of operations.

When David started Rockland Embroidery, everything was done out of his home. He was doing everything

and anything he could get his hands on, from local business and school projects, and even some contract work for larger companies such as Nike and Nautica. When those larger companies began to outsource most of their work overseas, we moved into providing contract services to promotional products distributors, retail resellers and manufacturers.

Stitches: How do you market your services to your contract customers?

AS: In the beginning, we produced samples of our most attractive pieces. One in particular was the bird from the Vlasic Pickle commercials, and we’d send a sample along with a handwritten letter. We still use mailer promotions, but as we’ve grown, we’ve incorporated e-mail promotions and exhibiting at trade shows.

Stitches: Describe a challenge that larger contract shops face – something that smaller shops maybe wouldn’t.

AS: We have anywhere from 40 to 70 employees at any one time – now we have about 53 – and we deal with higher insurance costs, and just the challenges of working a larger number of employees in an industrial setting. We do compete somewhat with smaller shops on some contract orders; we have to keep our prices low and competitive, while still contending with higher overhead.

Stitches: How do you handle a large customer base?

AS: From a contract standpoint we’ve found that our need for customer service representatives is always growing, which can be expensive. It’s consistently our biggest challenge – to maintain a balance between personnel and not get too top-heavy with customer service reps, while still giving clients the service they deserve. We service about 3,000 accounts a year.

Stitches: How do you ensure you provide the best service possible?

AS: We give our reps a lot of autonomy to solve customer problems. If a client can’t get satisfaction from a rep, and then they come to me, they’ll continue to bypass our reps. We don’t want that to happen. For example, if a ship date gets missed, the rep has the authority to say that we’ll deliver to the location or cover freight.

Stitches: What are some of your strategies for staying profitable in a down economy?

AS: Probably the same as any other business – we keep a very close eye on our expenses. It’s easy to get \$100,000 worth of thread on the shelves, and we have to monitor that inventory really closely. We cut wherever possible, so if we’re running a small overtime shift, do we need to have all the lights on in the factory? If we’re ordering thread, can we order smaller cones? If we’re shipping, can we do UPS next-day standard, rather than next-day air?

We had been running two shifts, and we had to lay off our entire second shift of part-time workers. Last year was the first time we had to deal with layoffs. Things do seem to be rebounding, but it’s not quite full-speed-ahead yet.

Stitches: Is there a certain project you’ve done that really stands out?

AS: Back in 2004, when Smarty Jones kept winning races and became a hopeful Triple Crown winner, we’d receive orders from customers for embroidered Smarty Jones caps every time he won. We’d only have the day of and sometimes the day after the race to complete the project and get the hats to the distribution point. ■

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