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Diversifying With Sublimation

Wouldn't it be nice if every existing customer suddenly decided to spend twice as much money with you? Think of how much more efficient it would be to spend your time filling orders rather than "knocking on doors" in search of new business.

Industry statistics prove this to be true, indicating that it takes approximately six times more energy, time and cost to recruit a new customer versus servicing an existing one. Thus, if you are looking for new revenue sources, perhaps you need to look no further than your existing customer list. By simply diversifying into new products and services through processes like sublimation, you will be in a position to sell more to each and every customer.

Diversification 101

Diversifying your business doesn't mean running out and buying the latest and greatest equipment in hopes you can put it to use. Rather it begins with an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, followed by an in-depth look at procurement trends. What products are customers buying that you can't deliver? How often do they order? What are the expected turn-around times? What are the preferred quantities?

For example, if you are an embroiderer who is focused on corporate accounts, you produce caps, shirts, jackets, etc. items with small embroidered logos for your clients. However those same businesses all have a need for plaques, awards, id products, signage, promotional items, and more. But if you only offer embroidery, or maybe screen printing (or even both) you aren't getting that business because you don't have the capabilities to produce it.

And there is another twist. Since your customers are going to other sources for other things, they may find a shop that can service more of their needs, including the things that you were already supplying. Thus you may lose customers in the long run.

Therefore, if you are a decorator of any kind, you need to pay close attention to the full spectrum of needs that each customer has and focus on getting all of their business rather than just a small portion. The key here is diversification of services so you can produce a much larger range of products on demand and in small runs as needed. And what process will fill that need? Sublimation.

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How Does Sublimation Work?

Sublimation is a digital printing process that allows any business to quickly and easily apply high resolution, full color graphics to a wide variety of hard and soft goods such as plaques, awards, iPhone covers, flip flops, flags, signs, photo panels, clocks, tiles, coasters, mouse pads, mugs, poly performance apparel and a whole lot more.

On the surface, sublimation looks a lot like some of the other digital heat transfer processes, but it's what goes on below the surface that separates sublimation from all other decoration technologies. With sublimation you are actually dyeing the material through molecular bonding rather than printing on the surface. What this means, is that the image is permanently embedded into the surface of the item being decorated, which in turn means no scratching, peeling or cracking. And in the case of apparel, that means no fading either, despite repeated launderings.

A key aspect of the sublimation process is that it only works with polymer based materials. Thus, you can't just sublimate anything that comes in the door. The item must be composed of polymer or polyester materials or have a polymerized surface in order for the sublimation dye to bond properly. Though it might sound like a limiting factor, there are literally hundreds of blank products that have been created for sublimation, so you have a tremendous amount of diverse and unique items to work with.

With sublimation, you are suddenly in a position to offer a lot more to each and every customer.

For example, let's say that a new bed & breakfast inn is coming to town. If you are an apparel decorator, you would have a chance to sell them uniforms, but not much else.

However if you were able to offer sublimation as well as decorated apparel you would greatly expand your range of opportunity. Let's look at the possibilities starting with a hotel room. Here is a list of sublimation substrates market that could be utilized:

- Oval signs – for room numbers
- Door Hangers – for do not disturb
- Towels
- Toothbrush holder
- Soap Dispenser

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- Coffee Mugs
- Serving Tray

That's seven possible items multiplied by the number of guest rooms onsite – 10? 20? 30?

Now think of the lobby area – signs, clocks, name badges for staff, photo panels, plaques, and more. And if they have a restaurant onsite, then it opens the doors to placemats, cloth napkins, plates, mugs, serving trays, etc – multiplied by the capacity of the dining room.

Another possibility to consider is decorative panels or pictures for the walls in the lobby, hallways, common areas and rooms. Sublimation is used extensively for reproduction of high definition images in the professional photography world. If you or the client has a legitimate source of photography, sublimation will give you the means to reproduce it – think local landscapes and skylines.

Expanding Horizons

The same concept can be applied to other markets as well. Suppose you are working with a High School Athletic Director to produce some team apparel, now you can pitch awards, spirit products, sponsor gifts and more. And you can even take it further by helping them organize a fundraiser program that revolves around spirit merchandise. In the world of sublimation there are all kinds of neat spirit products such as stadium seat cushions, flags, pennants, cell phone covers, dog tags, beanies, apparel, water bottles, flip flops, mugs, bag tags, and a whole lot more

If you only do garment printing you are only going to get a small part of the potential revenue. On the other hand, sublimation will make it possible to double or triple your revenue from that one customer – on a routine basis – which will produce an excellent ROI on your sublimation equipment purchase.

Speaking of sports, many uniforms are made of poly-performance materials which are ideal for sublimation. Considering that you can print out a full front image in less than 30 seconds, then press it in another 60 seconds, you can definitely turn out a decent number of shirts per hour. Sure you can do it via screen printing, but with all the setup time required for that process, plus the fact that with typical athletic shirts are customized with names and numbers, a large team order is really multiple single piece orders.

Sublimation is not limited to schools, sports and corporate. It can be used to generate products for virtually any market that you choose to pursue, including such unique niches as

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weddings, funerals, souvenirs, special events, hunting, fishing, cars, photo gifts, personalized products etc, etc, etc. It's really up to you to decide how to apply it.

Not only is sublimation a simple and effective process, it's also quite reasonable in cost with ink averaging less than \$0.01 square inch. For example, the Ricoh 3110 printer has ink costs of \$0.007 square inch, which means an 8" x 10" full color image will run about \$0.56 in ink to produce. Print time will average less than one minute with heat press time clocking in at one minute, thus the full production process for most items is under three minutes.

Start-up costs for a desktop system range from \$500 (entry-level printer and inks only) to about \$2800 (larger printer, inks and heat press) It should be noted that while sublimation printing can be done with specific models of well-known brands of desktop printers such as Ricoh and Epson, you can't simply choose any printer. In reality, sublimation inks are only compatible with certain models, so you need to research before you buy.

At the end of the day, diversification is a significant key to profitability. Your customers are spending money on things you don't produce, money that could be yours if you had the right capabilities. It's not practical to think you can deliver every possible product and service that your clients might be interested in, but sublimation can go a long way in capturing a large percentage of their disposable income.

Learn More

Sawgrass' BusinessBuilder education program offers an entire suite of tools to help you learn more about color management, graphics, design and the programs available to create sublimation-ready images. Visit [Sawgrass' online Resource Center](#) to find videos, guides, white papers, articles and more to help your business grow.