



Courtesy of Vapor Apparel.

## Technology and Business This Year

*Three very different perspectives on 2019 and 2020*

As 2019 wanes, the SGIA Journal wanted to get a sense of where the apparel industry has been, and where it's heading in the coming year. To do that, we reached out to a cadre of experts — our Apparel Decorators Committee. The answers were as unique as the individuals responding — and their companies:

Christopher Bernat is Chief Revenue Officer at Vapor Apparel (Hanahan, S.C.). For 15-plus years, Vapor has made performance and UPF50+ apparel for the print industry. Previously he was Director of Sales at Sawgrass Technologies and held multiple positions in the telecommunications and internet industries. He currently is a member of the Executive Committee of SGIA's Board of Directors.

Justin Lawrence is the owner and operator of Oklahoma Shirt Company (Oklahoma City). With a team of 40 rowdy Oklahomans and whole stable of Workhorse Automatic Presses, the company tackles its multistate Shirt of

the Month products, always busy custom shop and thriving retail line. As industry leaders, Lawrence and Oklahoma Shirt Company are always looking to partner with up-and-coming shops, industry giants and thought leaders in the textile industry.

Ted Pidcock, President, Chillybears (Needham, Mass.), got his start peddling T-shirts door-to-door in student dorms during college. Chillybears, founded in 1988, serves the custom, uniform, promotional and corporate fulfillment market. He's seen a major migration to brands that want print-on-demand (POD) apparel. In 2007, he launched Teddy the Dog, a direct-to-consumer brand; and in 2015, he launched resort brand Beantown. Chillybears' largest T-shirt order ever was for 1.6 million pieces, part of an NFL Pepsi promotion with Reebok in 2006. They made pennies and learned that it was time to walk away from large brands who pound you down because they can.

*The greatest weakness of our industry — or any industry — is being too complacent and not willing to change.*



By Kate Achelpohl, Director of Publications & Public Relations, SGIA

## Apparel Decorators Committee Panel Experts



Christopher Bernat,  
Chief Revenue  
Officer, Vapor  
Apparel



Justin Lawrence,  
owner and operator,  
Oklahoma Shirt  
Company



Ted Pidcock,  
President,  
Chillybears



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“The entire direct-to-consumer space is full on innovation and it’s only getting started.”

**How has your business changed in terms of technology over the past few years?**

**Chris Bernat:** We started out as a manufacturer of sublimation-certified blank apparel. Since that time we have expanded to include apparel for sublimation, screen printing and, more recently, direct-to-garment.

**Justin Lawrence, Oklahoma Shirt Co.:** Using customizable and scalable shop management software. It has kept our team all on the same page and simplified communication. We are trying to email less, and drive all communication (internal and external) through our shop management platform. Going paperless was huge for us also. If hospitals can do it, certainly we can too, right?

**Ted Pidcock, Chillybears:** We are experiencing a continued shift from bulk production to print-on-demand (POD) for many segments of our business. We operate our own brands and operate our customers’ online stores that dump data into our system and ship same- and next-day items one at a time.

**How did your business change in 2019?**

**Bernat:** We implemented lean manufacturing and moved into our new 27,000-square-foot headquarters. Automation was a big part of our 2019 changes. We have upgraded our heat presses (which now upload production statistics to the cloud) and also introduced automated paper cutting into the process.

**Lawrence:** Our teams became more and more focused on being specialists vs.

generalists. The busier we get, the more imperative it is that our teammates crush their specific tasks rather than trying to handle several different portions of a job. This is the most true in our production/warehouse departments. Another big change for us was shifting our focus from primarily retail screen printing to contract printing. We don’t wish to be a full contract shop, but the goal is for it to represent 20% - 30% of our revenue.

**Pidcock:** We have seen a softening in growth of online sales of our Teddy the Dog brand [a direct-to-consumer brand] and a substantial increase in our resort brand Beantown Brand Apparel [sold to resort, destination and gift retailers through independent sales reps]. Our corporate custom and fulfillment business is strong.

**What were the biggest opportunities of 2019?**

**Bernat:** For us it was maximizing our sun protection / UPF50+ apparel and an increased focus on sustainable (recycled) fabrics. We also established a relationship with outdoors brand Mossy Oak, and it is gaining major momentum.

**Lawrence:** Pivoting ourselves to scale and be prepared for our contract customers.

**Pidcock:** We are seeing a substantial increase in sales in some of our unique Beantown Brand products. As a result, we are preparing substantially larger inventory levels to support anticipated demand in 2020.

**What were the biggest challenges of 2019? How did you overcome them?**

**Bernat:** Migrating facilities is never



Courtesy of Vapor Apparel.



Courtesy of Teddy The Dog / Chillybears.

easy but it was rewarding. We had a hurricane too (Hurricane Dorian), but that only helped us implement a two-location strategy that kept us operational through the storm for our customers.

**Lawrence:** Capacity-based scheduling. Adding more presses and staff, scaling, isn't as logically linear as I hoped it would

be. We had to add more support staff (other than press ops, press assistants and catchers) to make things as smooth as they can be. We are still wrestling with this optimization.

**Pidcock:** Due to softening growth in our Teddy the Dog brand, we had to make some tough staff decisions and then redirect human resources to areas that are growing. Continued wage pressure in New England creates cost issues and forces us to continue to focus on better workflow and processes.

#### *What do you have planned for 2020?*

**Bernat:** Major investment into new order management software. We evaluated a number of systems over a six-month period. We are excited to implement it in 2020!

**Lawrence:** More intentional training for our staff. Hiring "extra" team members to accommodate for prospected growth so sick days don't kill us. [Also focusing on] leadership development.

**Pidcock:** New DTS equipment and shop layout changes are planned for Q1. Our warehouse is expanding to accommodate additional finished dyed inventory that we will be carrying to support our Beantown Brand.

#### *What are you interested in learning about in the coming year?*

**Bernat:** How to lower our response time to rush orders and how to lower our turnaround time for mock-ups and production at large.

**Lawrence:** How to schedule/plan/prepare your print shop for the apocalypse. Inspiring and activating mid-level managers. Setting up our primary producers for success and long-term careers.

**Pidcock:** As a student of the industry since 1988, I always enjoy learning about others' successes and changing industry trends.

#### *What do you see as the apparel decorating industry's biggest strength? Weakness?*

**Bernat:** Strengths — Continuing innovation, and more and more people who are "business people" first and "printers" second. Weaknesses? This will not impact us, but I am hearing lots of concerns about tariffs. Thankfully we have duty-free sourcing relationships.

**Lawrence:** Strength: You can create your own path. Big or small, fast or slow, standard or specialty decoration — you can choose your own adventure, and as long as you aren't a moron and you treat customers and employees with kindness and integrity, anyone can be successful.

Weakness: There are loads of distractions, shiny new objects, newest and greatest techniques. I think that we often want to substitute technology and new processes for owners/managers getting

their hands dirty and putting in the right kind of hard work.

**Pidcock:** The decorated apparel companies that move to the POD model will probably come out strongest over the next decade. Those that do will be able to gain more share and become partners with their customers instead of vendors. This will make the relationships more sticky and more predictable for planning and budgeting. The greatest weakness of our industry or any industry is being too complacent and not willing to change. Change or die (eventually).

#### *What's innovative in apparel decoration?*

**Bernat:** The entire direct-to-consumer space is full on innovation and it's only getting started. If you are not starting or growing your own brand, you are late to the party.

**Lawrence:** As the technology in the world around us improves and changes, we are constantly benefiting from it. Be it from printheads, software automation, communicating with customers and employees in new ways, or new types of inks, there is always something new to explore. (I realize this contradicts the weakness above, I think it's a great thing, but can also be a crutch.)

**Pidcock:** For us, it is combining unique dye treatments and decoration techniques on unconventional items.

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