



Heat print technology delivers textures and effects. Image courtesy of Stahls'.

Heat Printing: When and Why?

Why a not-so-new technology is enjoying a comeback

When choosing a decorating method, it's important to consider the substrate, what finish is necessary, placement of the decoration, the quantity required and how quickly the job needs to be turned around. Heat printing, also known as "heat transfer printing," offers advantages in these key areas over other methods like screen printing or embroidery.

Although heat printing has been around for decades, innovations in heat-applied materials and heat application machinery are making it more popular. Add to that a low starting investment and an easy learning curve, and heat printing is now the method of choice for many decorators.

Get Creative with Placement

Heat printing goes where other decorating methods can't with heat transfer materials designed for application on a variety of items and special platens designed for unique placements. Heat press platens are available for hats, hat

bills, shoes, pant legs and sleeves, enabling decorators to get creative with placements, including wrap-around designs. The more places that can be decorated on a garment, the more premium items can be created — and that means higher profit potential.

More Fabrics, Fewer Issues

Some fabrics are difficult to decorate with other methods. It could be a matter of a fabric requiring the level of heat that heat printing offers or the weight of embroidery making a garment uncomfortable to wear. Heat printing provides solutions to many common challenging fabrics.

One market that's growing is performance wear, where a soft hand and stretchiness are key to a comfortable final product. Heat printing offers several solutions for application on these kinds of fabrics. There's heat transfer vinyl, designed for lower-temperature application to avoid scorching and inhibiting dye migration, and screen printed transfers formulated to give maximum stretch and a light

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By Debra Romalia, Vice President of Content Marketing, GroupeSTAHL North America



Decorate at events with a heat press and transfers like the Hotronix® Heat Press + CAD-CUT® Templates. Image courtesy of Stahls'.

feel on garments. Heated lower platens are another option to properly decorate polyester, polyester blends or even nylon without scorching.

Apparel and Beyond

With the right equipment and materials, heat printing allows decorators to go beyond apparel and decorate canopies, umbrellas, bags and even hard goods like phone covers and mugs. Heat transfer vinyl is available for most materials for application on nylon, rip-stop and canvas. Sublimation transfers apply on mugs, name badges and phone covers with a polyester resin coating, and these transfers give full-color results with only a heat press. Pressure-sensitive sign vinyl is another decorating solution for application on hard goods like tumblers and signs.

Quantities as Low as One

The cost of setting up a screen printing job makes it not cost-effective when the job involves fewer than 100 - 200 pieces.

The on-demand nature of heat printing means decorators can take on any size job at a profit with no wasted inventory. Customers are willing to pay a premium for apparel and accessories unique to them, so personalizing items with names, monograms or additional graphics can lead to a greater profit margin.

A Sport for Every Season

With participation in team sports from Little League to the major leagues in the millions, the market for sports uniforms is undeniable — and highly profitable — year-round. Heat transfer vinyl is ideal for the sport uniform market. In fact, that's where it originally gained popularity. Full contact sports uniforms require durable, abrasion-resistant decoration that can take a beating, and heat transfer materials are the ideal pair.

There are several important considerations when selecting heat transfer materials for sports uniforms, including:

- Is it abrasion resistant? This is

essential when decorating for contact sports such as football, hockey, lacrosse, and in some cases, baseball or softball. Decorators need to ensure the application is durable and can withstand the rigors of the sport.

- Does it block or inhibit dye migration? Sublimated garments and patterns continue to gain popularity in the sports market. There are also garments that are highly dye saturated, which can affect applications. Decorators want the white number on a red jersey to stay white and not turn pink. Typically, these highly dye saturated jerseys are used in volleyball, soccer, basketball, baseball or softball.
- Does it have stretch and rebound characteristics? Performance wear uniforms will be made from stretch fabric, so what is being

applied to them also needs to have this property.

- Soccer, volleyball and basketball uniforms tend to be made from lighter-weight fabrics, so ensure the material they are applying has a soft hand. Athletes prefer an applied material that does not affect the comfort of the fabric, so if a thicker material is applied, they will notice the difference.
- Can the material be applied at a lower temperature? This is important to consider when applying to lightweight performance fabric or heat-sensitive uniforms to avoid scorching.

Offering athletes and their fans various apparel and non-apparel items to show their team pride is a great way to expand team spirit — and a decorator's team business. Items such as hoodies, T-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, window decals, performance wear and outerwear, decorators drive more business with heat printing.

Textures and Effects

With options ranging from glitter and reflective materials to full-color digital prints, heat printing is anything but flat or monochromatic. Heat printing is also great for mixed-media applications combining full-color transfers and textured vinyl all on the same garment. The extensive material and finishing options available include the following:

Special Effects

Glitter and glow, neon colors and patterns in a variety of colorways, and finishes unavailable in other decorating methods mean heat printing provides plenty of several decorating options for everything from spirit wear to fashion. Use heat transfer vinyl that glows to give Halloween treat bags an extra touch or decorate cheer uniforms with popular glitter finishes in a wide range of colors. Using foil with heat transfer adhesive gives foil accents a long life on apparel compared to screen printing foils, which are temporary.

Reflective

Reflective apparel is on trend for sportswear and the market is expected to grow at a rate of 5.16% between 2018-2022¹. Big athleisure brands are already running with this trend, adding reflective accents to athleisure apparel, lifestyle apparel and even the runway. Heat-applied reflective materials come in a variety of reflective levels for safety markets, along with colors for fashion accents.

Emblems

Emblems are a premium product ideal for application on garments, hats, bags and other items. They're a lightweight alternative to embroidery with high-definition color, texture and detail, all with only a heat press. Emblems have no backing, which makes for soft wearability on the inside of garments, and they can be applied on demand, so there's no need to stock inventory for quick-turn jobs and one-off pieces.

Full Color

Applying more than one or two colors using screen printing can be costly and time consuming. Heat printing offers several solutions for full-color applications on a variety of substrates. For designs with two to three colors, heat transfer vinyl can be layered for a multi-color finish. Screen printed transfers are another solution for these applications. And full-color digital transfers offer high-definition details, gradients and unlimited colors in a single layer for a soft hand on even the thinnest garments. These transfers are easy to heat apply on a variety of fabrics and in a variety of locations, from a six-panel hat to a left chest logo with all the color customers want.

Appliques

There are heat-applied materials that give the look of embroidery without the expense and labor of direct embroidery. Heat printing also allows for decorating items like hats, which are difficult with regular embroidery. Offering heat-applied embroidery and appliques gives customers budget-friendly options for the look of embroidery with fewer stitches — without devaluing traditional embroidery as a premium product.

Heat printing is fast and flexible, easy to learn, and allows apparel decorators to get creative with placements, finishes and applications not possible with other decorating methods. When deciding what decorating method to choose, consider the fabric, item, quantity, desired finish and placement required to determine if heat printing is the right choice for the job.

¹Market Study Report 2019. [marketwatch.com/press-release/reflective-sportswear-market-size-status-top-players-trends-and-forecast-to-2022-2018-12-16](https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/reflective-sportswear-market-size-status-top-players-trends-and-forecast-to-2022-2018-12-16)

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