



Nickelodeon teamed up with YR Store to launch a live decoration customer experience in Topman featuring SpongeBob SquarePants clothing. (Image courtesy of YR.)

How Live Garment Decoration Became Big Business

I first heard about live screen printing in 2008 when a friend told me about the individuals behind the infamous Hit + Run live screen printing experience. Originally based out of Los Angeles, they had successfully franchised their business model in the United Kingdom just a year or so prior. It was a very novel concept at the time, and I cherished the T-shirt that had been made right in front of me at an event using the various bits of artwork I chose from a piece of paper. Around this time, my business partner, Tom, and I were on the verge of starting our own business based on our invention, the digital graffiti wall.

Our business grew, and a small part of what we did was live printing on the digital graffiti wall at events using designs created by the guests. We primarily printed onto stickers and mugs and some T-shirts — all of which was created via inkjet transfer. The problem, however, was unless the person creating the art was an artist, the

T-shirts, stickers or mugs rarely looked very good. And, of course, inkjet transfer was never a high-end print solution!

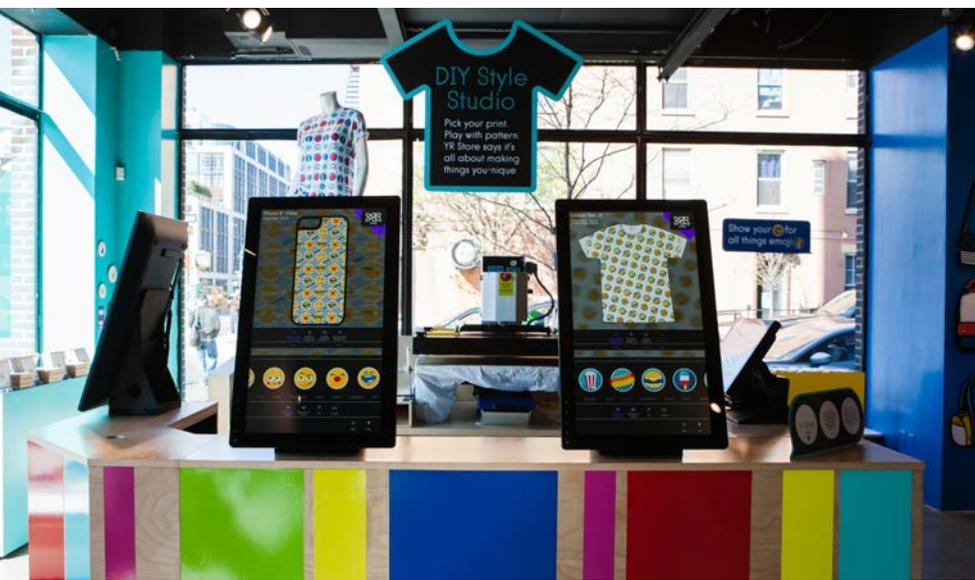
Fast forward to 2018, where live garment decoration at events is a growing industry in almost every country. Though many of the principles and basics date back to when we first started, our business has continued to change and pivot. The market for live decoration has transitioned dramatically from small screen printing events, and providers spanning the globe now offer a variety of techniques on a huge range of products.

For event organizers, the big selling point of these services usually centers around the experience — it's a new, interactive opportunity for people. Combined with software, the services tap into event goers' understanding and love of using apps as well as their desire to see something different and new. Whether it's a retail store opening, conference, expo or anything in between, a live,

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By Tim Williams, CEO and Co-Founder, YR Store



in making live on-site production a truly sustainable market.

A Lucrative Opportunity and Market

The promotional merchandise market is worth \$22 billion in the United States alone — that's everything from pens to mugs to teddy bears and, of course, T-shirts. While that's a big number, often the cost of producing a non-customized item in advance is about 10 to 100 times less than producing it at an event. Let's look at a T-shirt as an example. A bulk T-shirt printed with a brand's message for its expo can be sold to 1,000 attendees for \$3 each. Produce them live on-site, and the cost skyrockets to a minimum of around \$15 each. This clearly will not appeal or make sense to every promotional merchandise buyer.

Despite the costs, there are many providers now offering an array of services for live activations, such as engraving luggage tags, embroidering bags and printing tote bags with names. This has driven a new excitement in all parts of the garment decoration industry. There are now compelling reasons why equipment should be smaller and cheaper, inks better and blank products higher quality.

And it doesn't stop there. Suddenly, all these parts comprising the live decoration service are visible to the consumer or event attendee. How many times have you seen a cheap heat press at a retail store or at an event? It's really exciting seeing the new wave of current and upcoming technology that not only looks great but gets the job done better. Who knew just how much people's desire to add their own custom touch to T-shirts could impact and drive change across the entire industry?

This concept is not just limited to events. Retail stores and malls all over the world — particularly in the United States and Europe — are suffering. Toys R Us is a prime example of how no business is too big to fail. Physical retail stores are changing as consumers opt to buy more on mobile or online, but it's not all bad news and actually presents unique opportunities.

Consumers expect more when they visit stores — they want the whole brand experience. Some brands have mastered this, and a great example is Nike. Its stores have always been places to visit and enjoy — buying things is almost secondary to having a great experience with the brand. Consumers will even get on their mobile devices while in the store to compare prices and make purchases to avoid carrying anything home with them.



on-site garment decoration activation means guests have fun, more interaction and something unique, which they have designed, to take home. There are many keys to success with live activation, and with such a huge range of options and providers, quality will undoubtedly vary in terms of end product and experience.

Creating a Memorable Experience

It's important to get the experience right the whole way through. This means starting with easy-to-use design software on tablets or bigger touch screens and ensuring the team running the activation are friendly and knowledgeable. It also means creating a seamless, understandable process for guests to create designs and ensuring the item they receive looks great and is high-quality.

Growing demand means the live print industry is always looking for what's new — new products, new print or embellishment techniques and new, fun ways to create designs. At YR, we are seeing the conversation shift from a cutting-edge, fun event activity to a sustainable way of producing merchandise that has the added benefit of being a unique experience.

However, the growth in demand for live, on-site design and print has created unique challenges for service providers like my company, YR, and Family Industries. For example, some customers insist on printing on cotton garments, and if event organizers also require high volumes, a screen printing service might be a better option. That said, many event organizers simply do not know this industry even exists. Therefore, we still have work to do



YR's live activation setups including the (from top) YR x STORY in New York City, Star Wars custom print station at Selfridges in London and New York City Macy's Ralph Lauren department offer customers the unique opportunity to customize garments and products. (Images courtesy of YR.)

This retail revolution has opened new opportunities for live garment decoration. Why not enable a consumer to customize the new Nike jersey he/she is buying? It's not exactly new, but integrated into the store in the right way, live activation creates a unique piece in a seamless, exciting experience that brings retail shopping to life. That integration can be achieved by having the same software experience in store as available online or capitalizing on the fact that since this is a special event or location, the software can be less web-based and more exciting to use.

Mass Appeal

When implemented at events and retail stores, live garment decoration has been acknowledged as exciting, innovative and providing a great experience. However, with the financials involved, this will tend to be a marketing exercise for companies that have large enough budgets. In other words, it's nice to have, but the event or retail store will survive without live design and print or design and embroidery.

But that's not where the story ends. Nobody wants to order 3,000 pre-printed T-shirts with a company or event logo for

an expo and then have to trash 2,000 due to overestimating numbers. In retail, having massive overstock is a constant concern. Last year, H&M famously announced they had \$3.8 billion worth of products in inventory, some of which would be printed or embroidered "standard" products. So why not print on demand? Why not wait until the customer orders a design to print or embroider rather than buy thousands of units of one design in advance?

Of course, some companies have been doing this for some time. Amazon is one, but also lesser-known brands, such as the sportswear brand Champion. The benefit of not having massive overstocks and featuring both an online/mobile and store experience could be huge. And that same principle of viewing customization as "print-on-demand" to reduce inventory and an opportunity to engage with guests or consumers in a more meaningful way also works for events. Suddenly, that price differential of pre-printed vs. live print starts to make sense: Why have 10,000 \$3 T-shirts no one wants when you could offer 2,000 \$15 T-shirts that people love creating, would tell all their friends about and continue to wear

because of the personal value they have invested in making it their own?

Right now, the garment decoration industry is shifting. Though there is still a place for large-volume print runs, there is a new frontier in print-on-demand, and it's happening now. It might be at an event or in a store, or you might not even know about it when you go on your mobile device to order a printed Levi's T-shirt. Either way, it's happening, and the change will be rapid. And that is exactly how live garment decoration became big business.

Tim Williams studied Retail Management at the University of Surrey. In 2013, he created YR Store with his business partner, Tom, after coming up with a great concept capitalizing on the trend for large, bold prints on T-shirts and other items. YR Store is a custom fashion brand where consumers can create designs quickly and easily using large touchscreens in store or at events which are then printed live. YR has collaborated with brands and retailers including Nike, Google, Bathing Ape and Star Wars and runs its own stores in London and New York inside the flagship Topman and Topshop stores.

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