




CHOOSING

THE RIGHT

DECORA



Looking for the best
apparel decoration shop
for your distributorship?
Here are nine questions
to guide your search.

By *Shane Dale*

There is no magic formula for picking your perfect match – especially when it comes to apparel decorators. “What’s good for one is not good for all,” says Andy Shuman, general manager of Rockland Embroidery (asi/83089). “You’ve got to align your expectations and ask: What am I looking to accomplish?”

For example, less experienced distributors will have much different decoration goals, Shuman suggests, than more accomplished firms. “If I’m a new distributor, it may be very important that a decorator is local so I can learn the process,” Shuman says. “You may not be looking for someone who can turn a ton of pieces quickly, but someone who has time to stop the machine and talk to you. On the flip side, if you’re an experienced distributor who’s looking to maybe graduate to a larger decorator, you’re looking at almost the opposite.”

Regardless of your situation, taking the right approach can help make your decorator search a success. Keep reading for a list of questions you should ask yourself as your decoration shopping starts.

1 What does my own research tell me?

While it’s great to ask for recommendations, ultimately you have to make the final decision on choosing a decorator. Start your search by doing a little homework. “A great decorator promotes a great reputation, and it shouldn’t be too hard to find a few references,” says Mike Little, president of Team Mates Inc. (asi/90674). “Check ASI supplier ratings and call the Better Business Bureau at the very least.”

TOR

Decoration

Shuman, meanwhile, believes distributors should also scour decorator websites for walkthroughs and details on in-house capabilities. “I’m going to do some basic research on them by seeing whether they have an online tour on their website,” Shuman says. “As the distributor, you’ve got to somehow find a way to familiarize yourself with how they do business.”

2 Can I tour a decorator's shop?

Sure, an online search is fine, but Steve Freeman, managing partner at Qdigitizing (asi/700501), advises requesting an in-person shop tour. “If you go into a facility and everything is dirty and haphazard and unorganized, there’s a good chance that’s how your order is going to be handled,” he says. “But if you go into a facility that’s clean, well-maintained and organized, the odds are better that you’re going to have a good experience.”

3 Should I work with a neighborhood decorator?

While large national decorators may have more machines, there are plenty of advantages to smaller, local shops. “Depending on the nature of the project and budget, you may be able to minimize shipping costs by selecting a decorator closer to your company or event proximity,” says Pat Prosser, senior marketing manager for Boxercraft (asi/41325).

Jennifer Heller, manager at VGM Corporate Specialties, thinks hiring a nearby decorator can give you an edge when pressed for time. “Look for a decorator that you could drive to in a day to darken their doorway if necessary for order issues, or if an order is delayed and you have to pick it up to make an event on a certain date,” she says. “When I’m told a delivery date, they have to keep it because they know I’ll come down and wait in their facility for the order.”

4 Can I trust a decorator?

Not every distributor prefers to work with a local shop. More than a few look a little farther away strictly for strategic reasons. “There are distributors that don’t want somebody in their backyard so they’re not competing for the same customer,” says Shuman.

The trust factor should be a real consideration, although it should only be one element of your decorator search, according

to Shuman. “I think that competitive thing becomes a very big topic, but I sometimes think it becomes too big,” he says. “A bad reputation doesn’t take long to develop, and if they’re successful and they’ve been around for a long time, chances are they’ve found a way to navigate the market ethically.”

5 What is a shop's average turnaround time?

With Web-driven companies like Amazon offering consumers next-day delivery, Freeman sees more distributors expecting quicker turnaround times from decorators. “When I started in this business, I remember when a week was considered a rush order,” he says. “Now, a week is a long time. People will place orders with me today and then, 24 hours later, I’ll get panic e-mails from them telling me they have to have this order out the door.”

Some distributors, according to Freeman, assume that larger decorators will be able to churn out orders faster than smaller shops, but that isn’t always the case. “While high-volume decorators have the ability to turn things the next day because they have the equipment and manpower, to keep their facility running they have to have high-volume orders in there all the time,” he says. “That means if distributors drop something today, they’re getting in line behind a bunch of orders that are already there.”

Steven R. Flaughers, owner of Proforma 3rd Degree Marketing (asi/300094), thinks decorators’ seasonal schedules are also important to consider. “Typically in early spring, decorators are not only running standard orders, but this is a hot time for sporting apparel and vacation Bible school apparel,” he says. “In mid-summer to fall, a lot of additional apparel is being run for the high school and higher-education market, which would make lead times go from five to seven to 10 to 14 days.”

When getting pricing information, Flaughers also recommends asking decorators for their current production schedules. “Get yourself a hard completion date in hand,” he says, “provided you have print-ready art.”

6 What can decorators produce for me today?

Local decorators might be friendly and helpful, but you have to be sure they can commit to daily projects. “A small

embroiderer still has to have the equipment capacity in order to be able to fill an order, regardless of how hungry they might be,” Freeman says. “So a really important question to ask decorators is: What is your daily capacity?”

Here it helps to run through likely order scenarios. “If I drop off 500 shirts to be embroidered with a 10,000-stitch logo to a decorator that only has one four-head machine, they’re going to take a lot longer to produce that order than if I drop it off with a decorator that has 100 heads,” Freeman says.

If your distributorship does a lot of small jobs involving competitive markets, speed will likely matter greatly. “There are a large number of embroidery shops that are not well-suited to handle that kind of business,” Freeman says.

If your company tends to secure larger orders, you don’t need to focus on daily production so much. “Almost all embroidery shops can handle that type of environment,” Freeman says. “Maybe it will become important to define what a small order is, what a medium order is and what a big order is, and ask the provider what they can handle, and what they can handle in agreed timeframes.”

7 What kind of attention do I need?

If you’re not used to selling apparel, you should look for a decorator that will communicate clearly with you throughout the order fulfillment process. “If I were a rookie distributor, I would definitely look for somebody who’s large enough to get my work done in a reasonable amount of time but definitely small enough to have the personal touch,” says Shuman. “I’m going to need somebody to teach me what’s happening.”

Veteran distributors from bigger firms should ditch the hand-holding approach and concentrate on other things, though. “If I’m a larger distributor, I’m probably going to already know a little about that from past experience, and I’m going to look for somebody who can crank it out in plenty of time for me at a decent price,” Shuman says.

Prosser believes all distributors, though, should seek out decorators who take time to understand their project’s overall scope, budget and deadlines. “Will an item be decorated for a one-time event with immediate onsite usage, or is the item intended to be used by company staff, or as customer appreciation gifts?” she asks. “Working with a knowledge-

able apparel decorator who takes the time to understand your project and overall objectives will reap the greatest rewards.”

While smaller decorators may provide a more personalized experience in general, Joanne Worrall, president of JPR Consulting Inc. (asi/232678), has always received excellent service from larger shops. Why? Because she’s put in the time and effort to create healthy working relationships with them.

“When I first set up my business, I went to the larger shops, introduced myself, got to know them and their work process and tested them out on a few small orders,” she says. “Then, I chose a screen printer and a separate embroidery shop, and promised them loyalty and a first shot at all my orders if they would help me look good to my customers and give me decent rates so I could compete with the direct decorators.”

This doesn’t mean that Worrall abuses the leverage she’s gained. “I don’t ask for special favors unless it’s absolutely necessary,” she says. “I make my orders and artwork as seamless as possible, and pay my bills on time. They know if they work with me, I’ll give them all my business. So far, it’s worked

great. But in my opinion, it’s up to the distributor to forge that relationship.”

8 What about logo placement?

No longer is a left-chest logo the only way to grab attention. That’s why a key part of a decorator search should include a discussion about creativity, capabilities and limitations regarding embellishment placements. As a distributor, you should expect to receive advice on what embellishments work best for each type of garment.

“Depending on the apparel item, there are typically standard embellishment placement locations, such as front left chest or back for tops and jackets, secondary imprints along the sleeve, and left leg or backside embellishments for pants, capris and shorts,” Prosser says. “The oversized tops that are so popular today call for impactful, oversized billboard prints, and trendy graphics and colors.”

Think about quizzing decorators to get a sense of their expertise. Good decorators should be able to give you the most appropriate decoration options based on the fabric type and weight of the garments to be embel-

lished. “Certain fabric types such as nylon, cotton/spandex or poly-blends work better with some types of embellishments than others,” Prosser says, “and newer techniques, such as puff print or mixed media imprints, can make a big impact when used on the right garment in the best product placements.”

9 What does a shop’s order process look like?

Before making a final decision on hiring a shop, Freeman suggests taking a close look at how decorators process jobs. “There are decorators that do things by the seat of their pants, and there are decorators that have very regimented processes,” he says. “For me personally, I would rather work with a decorator that’s somewhat in the middle.”

For Freeman, being “in the middle” allows for some give-and-take. “I don’t want a system that’s so disorganized that if you call the decorator and ask about the order, they don’t have a clue,” he says. “But I don’t want a process that’s so inflexible that the decorator is not willing to work with me if something needs special attention.”

– *Shane Dale is an AZ-based freelance writer.*

Do you want to sell your distributorship and **EXIT** for any reason?

Maybe you want to start a new venture, spend more time with family or retire. WE CAN HELP YOU. Most buyers want sellers to remain in the business after the sale for 3-5 years. We represent a buyer who will allow you to exit the business immediately after the sale if that is your desire. Call us today for a confidential conversation.



ENDORSED BY:



Advertising
Specialty
Institute®

Jeff Meyer, John Schimmoller & Jamie Watson

CERTIFIED MARKETING CONSULTANTS, LTD

260. 637. 6643 | info@certifiedmarketing.com
Licensed Merger & Acquisition Specialist of the Advertising Specialty Institute®

www.certifiedmarketing.com
www.facebook.com/certifiedmarketing

ET119-82123-048