

How to apply heat applied graphics to difficult substrates

There's nothing worse than having to turn down a job (and the potential profits!), particularly when you know that it was a job you could have fulfilled had you had the right equipment. Nowadays thanks to new heat applied products and the latest heat-seal equipment, it is no longer necessary to turn away work on difficult substrates.

Items that used to cause a shiver down your spine, such as umbrellas, golf bags, swim suits and bags, can all now be decorated quickly and easily with the use of speciality platens and specific types of heat seal presses, which permit positioning for awkward shapes. Now you can say 'Yes' to those once difficult items, which will give you another revenue stream and a competitive edge.

New Technology

Heat applied graphics and heat seal presses have developed dramatically since their beginnings many years ago. Technology has enabled improved quality and durability of heat transfers to the point where they may now be considered equal to, if not better than, screen printing. Likewise, developments with heat seal presses mean that they now range from the basic to incredibly sophisticated machines. Most include once considered advanced features, such as digital pressure gauges, timers, and heat setting, all of which makes them easier and faster to use and more practical to use heat applied graphics.

There have also been advances made with Print and Cut technology, meaning that it is now possible to print a full colour design onto white media, and cut, so that it is ready for application. The benefits are many: for example - it is possible to produce just one individual transfer if so required. There is also no waiting for an order from a contractor, or having to invest in screen printing equipment. It is a clean system – no messy inks or chemicals to deal with. New materials have been developed specifically for that market to give greater decorating opportunities (including sublimation blocking), and enable the ability to decorate water-proof nylon, 100% polyester and the very stretchy materials such as Lycra® and Spandex®.

Get the right tools

The first step is to purchase the right heat seal press. There are three basic types of press: the clamshell, draw press and swing away. A swing away press is particularly suitable for difficult items because it keeps heat away from the work space, making the laying out extremely easy. It will lock down over the centre on thick items, giving a better seal. Swing away presses are available in both manual and pneumatic (powered by an air compressor) styles, the latter allows for automatic opening and closing at the touch of a button. Choose a swing away with an open throat design, which allows for clearance beneath the lower platen – the base of the press is fixed at the rear, not in the centre. This allows a larger item (such as say a golf bag) to let the bag hang off the end. If possible also choose a press with a stand as it allows more space underneath, and make sure that the platen size is at least 40 x 50 cms. Try and



Heat Transfer Presses

find a press with a fully digital controller, including time, temperature and pressure, as this will ensure that you will get precise and consistent settings. If you don't have a swing away press, that doesn't mean it's impossible to decorate difficult items – it just means that you will need to take more time, be more careful and obtain as much clearance underneath as is possible.

Make changes for improvements

Another advantage of the swing away heat seal press is that it enables you to load a shirt onto the lower platen (in much the same way as you would load a shirt onto a screen print pallet). This method (known as 'threading') means that only the top layer of the shirt is on the platen, the rest of the shirt hangs below. This enables a better seal by ensuring that seams, zippers, buckles and other problems are out of the way. If however you can't do this, there are ways of dealing with the problem, such as using pillows, print pads etc.

Another extremely useful feature on a heat press is that of having the ability to use interchangeable platens. To illustrate the point, a 15 x 25 cm platen would be ideal for baby shirts, small jerseys or bags. There are many types of interchangeable platens including round platens and even platens developed especially to print umbrellas! It is also possible to obtain custom made platens to suit a specific requirement – maybe for items such as fold-up chairs, luggage bags, cooler bags, play tents and so on. Most reputable heat press manufacturers will be able to advise on suitability and cost, and may request a sample of the item to be decorated to ensure the correct design is used.

Whatever heat press you use, you should always choose a platen that is best suited to fit the items imprint area. It is simple – better fit means more consistent pressure, which in turn leads to a better looking design which won't peel off!

Consider the benefits!

The greater number of services you can offer both your existing and new customers, the greater amount of loyalty you can expect from them, as they will always come back to you for all of their needs. Thus expanding the range of products you can decorate gives you the opportunity to add onto an existing order, as well as enabling you to branch out into new markets offering new items. These days, with all the advances made in technology and equipment, there are now very few things that can't be decorated with heat applied graphics!

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