

Creating a streamlined order production process



As an entrepreneur just starting out, I focused primarily on getting orders at my embroidery shop. Our business was reactive rather than proactive. Orders would come in and since we didn't have best practices set for the production process, we were constantly influx with orders at every stage of the process. We had no handle on what was paid for and had trouble locating orders because there wasn't an effective process management system in place.

Feeling a bit underwater, we decided the best way to succeed was to streamline the order process for the shop. Our unorganised way of doing business had resulted in mistakes that we had to fix for customers and we were losing money. To grow the business we needed to land large accounts and that required a smooth production process.

We looked carefully at all steps in our process: from getting the order, managing inventory, producing the product, packaging and shipping. It was the best business decision we ever made and as a result, we've filled orders from large companies including Google, NASA, the U.S. Army and MTV. I like to share the secrets to our success with other entrepreneurs so that they can be proactive rather than reactive.

Step 1: The order is received

Contrary to popular opinion, landing a new client, or a large order from an existing client, isn't always the hardest part. It's once the order is in your hands that you have to navigate through all of the steps to fulfill it, while juggling other orders that are in different stages of the process.

Before you start any step of your production process, you need to have a way to track the progression and manage the timeline so that the order doesn't get lost along the way. We chose QuickBooks software as the first step to input the details of the order into our accounting system. By doing this first step, you can email a copy of the invoice to the customer to review the terms while you proceed to the next step. If your production process is very extensive, there are also great project management software systems that can sync with your accounting software for order tracking, inventory and work flow.

Step 2: Start the process in the Art Department

For our embroidery shop, sending the order to the art department is the first step in the production process. Our designers perform whatever work needs to be created or edited, from digitising the logo to separating colours. Because embroidery has different art requirements than printing, we make sure the customer's logo will work to achieve the desired look. After the logo is sized, digitised and colour separated, the order goes to our in-house colour specialist who ensures that the embroidery thread colours coordinate with the garment's colour.

embroidery

Before the order leaves the art department, we send a final proof of the digitised artwork in jpeg format for each colour to the customer so they can approve the embroidered look. This step is where we learned the hard way that we needed to perform one last check for the customer. Before we were scrambling to fix mistakes, but with the final approval of the customer, we are assured that we are giving the customer exactly what they want.

Step 3: Production begins

Now that the order is input into the accounting system and the artwork has been approved, we are ready to start production. Often referred to as traffic and scheduling, we created a production progress worksheet for each order that outlines every detail of the order including quantities, style, colour way, stitch count, deadline date, logo location, P.O. number and embroidery operator. Each form requires a manager's signature to make sure that every aspect of the order has been signed off on. The form also has a spot for notes in case of special instructions that aren't applicable elsewhere on it.

After the production worksheet has been completed, the product is pulled from inventory. At this step, we are able to tell if we need to order more products immediately to fulfil the order, and if we need to replenish the inventory for future orders. This step has greatly increased our turn-around time by ensuring that we maintain an inventory of all styles and colours. By reordering before we run out, we have dramatically reduced delays when the next order is placed for the same product.

The first production step is to start the first embroidery run so that a manager can review it for accuracy, colour, logo placement, thread tension and quality. If the manager notices any issues, we are able to catch them, address them and correct them before producing the entire production run. This important step has saved us from costly re-runs and ensures that our customers are happy with their final product.

After the final production run, our Trimming/Quality Control Department reviews every piece to ensure that there are no mistakes that will cause the customer to return the order.

Step 4: Shipping

Once the order is complete, it is packed and sent to our shipping partners. The delivery company receives the shipment and provides a tracking number that we send on to the customer in an email so that they know when to expect delivery.

A process only works if you are dedicated to follow each step carefully. A few key things that will ensure that you don't deviate from your production process include:

- Never move an order into production without first creating an invoice.
- Ensure that the customer signs off the order before production begins.
- Encourage everyone in the company to have accountability for their part of the process.
- Create a realistic timeline and provide the customer with a promised in-hand date.

Since we have created this process, we have seen great improvement in shorter production times, tracking orders, providing timelines to customers and delivering on our promises. Creating a streamlined product process delivers a big payoff. Not only will you be more profitable, your employees will be less stressed by being proactive rather than reactive. And the biggest payoff of all: satisfied customers who reward your excellent customer service with future business and profitability.

Our thanks to Brian Burr CEO at WholesaleHats.com for submitting this article. For more information please contact Brian on 001 800 745 1667 or visit the website at www.wholesalehats.com.

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Brian Burr is the owner of Wholesale Hats (www.wholesalehats.com), a family-owned hat manufacturer in the United States. For 30 years the California-based company has manufactured, imported, embroidered and screen-printed hats and caps for some of the world's most respected organisations including NASA, Google, the United States Post Office and the U.S. Army.