

GROW: Marketing Ideas for Print Shops

Strategies for Faster Turnaround





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About the Author

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Coffee-drinker, technology addict. Some people call me a Marketing Guru. I don't correct them.

With over ten years industry experience, JP Hunt, M.B.A, combines his expertise in Internet marketing and strategic planning to help businesses solve problems and adapt to and leverage modern marketing opportunities.

JP is Co-founder & Partner at the world's most important software company (InkSoft).

In a world where a product is delivered to the customer's door within an hour by pressing a button, fast turnaround is one area where a decorator can really differentiate his business.

THE KEY IS TAKING A HARD LOOK AT YOUR OPERATION AND ADDRESSING BOTTLENECKS TO STREAMLINE THE PROCESS FROM ARTWORK TO DELIVERY.

When it comes to e-commerce, most consumers' experience with online retailers has trained them to expect to get an order in the time it takes for it to be picked and shipped. Few people have a clue about how a print gets on a shirt and all the steps involved such as creating artwork getting it approved, job setup, the production process, and packaging and shipping.

Consequently, most people wait until the last minute to order T-shirts for family reunions, company picnics, and other events that are date sensitive. They're not proactive, but you can be, and reap the benefits of meeting their needs and expectations.

Within the decorated apparel industry, major internet decorators have a standard two-week delivery time on custom-printed items, in many cases offering an upgrade to one-week delivery—at a massive premium. Want to find out how to beat that? Here are some ideas on ways to improve your turnaround and gain a competitive edge.

FIND THE BOTTLENECKS

The first step is to analyze bottlenecks that exist in your business. Working with your team, have every department review what is slowing them down and ask how they can be more productive.

As you get input, a great idea is to create what is called a “mind map” or work flow chart. On one side of the chart is the beginning of the process, which might be customer contact. At the end of the chart is the customer receiving his product. If you Google “mind-mapping software,” you will find free programs you can use to facilitate this process.

It will be interesting to track all the steps, sub-steps, and processes. Once you have recorded them, you will have a visual map

of your business. At that point, you want to prioritize which area you want to take action on first. Do not try to do everything at once.

You can break up the process into two stages. The preproduction stage is providing a quote, getting the order, preparing the art, getting art approval, and anything else that has to happen before the job is turned over to the production team.

If there’s a slow down with customer service that is lost time that get compounded downstream. For example, if a client leaves a voice mail wanting a quote, and you don’t get back to him for 14 hours that may add another day to the final delivery.

You want to be efficient from the very beginning of the process. If you give the buyer a great experience and product, you’re going to have a customer for life.

MAKE IT A TEAM EFFORT

It's critical that as you go through this process that every representative from every department is included. Get team members to walk through their procedures they follow on a daily basis step by step. As other departments listen, you will build cross-team understanding, and individuals may better realize how their performance and actions impact other employees.

As you resolve bottlenecks, celebrate these successes with team members. When a company improves, it has a big influence on the company and the customers. By recognizing and showing appreciation, it will improve morale and create a positive culture in your company that will inspire further improvements.

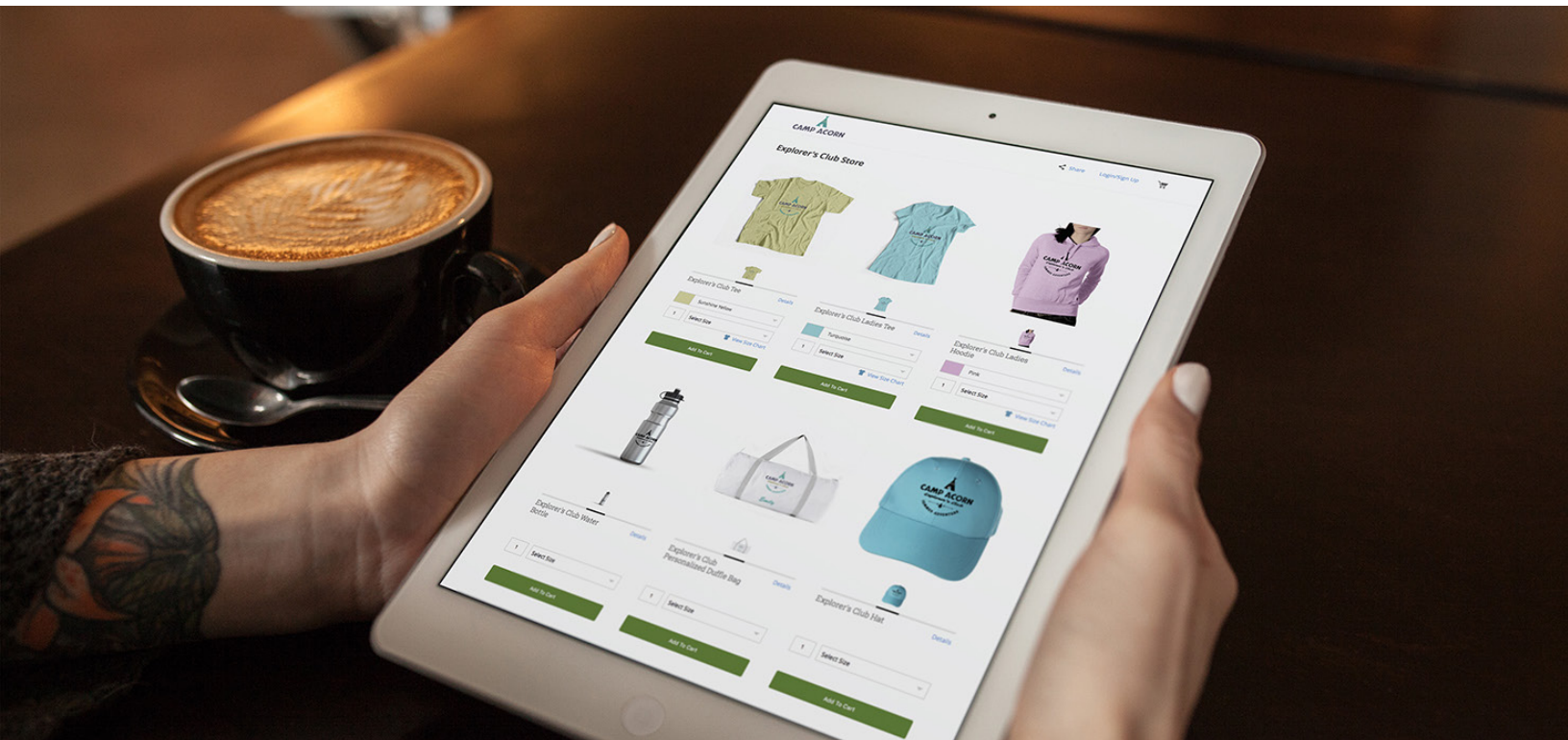
MAXIMIZE AUTOMATION

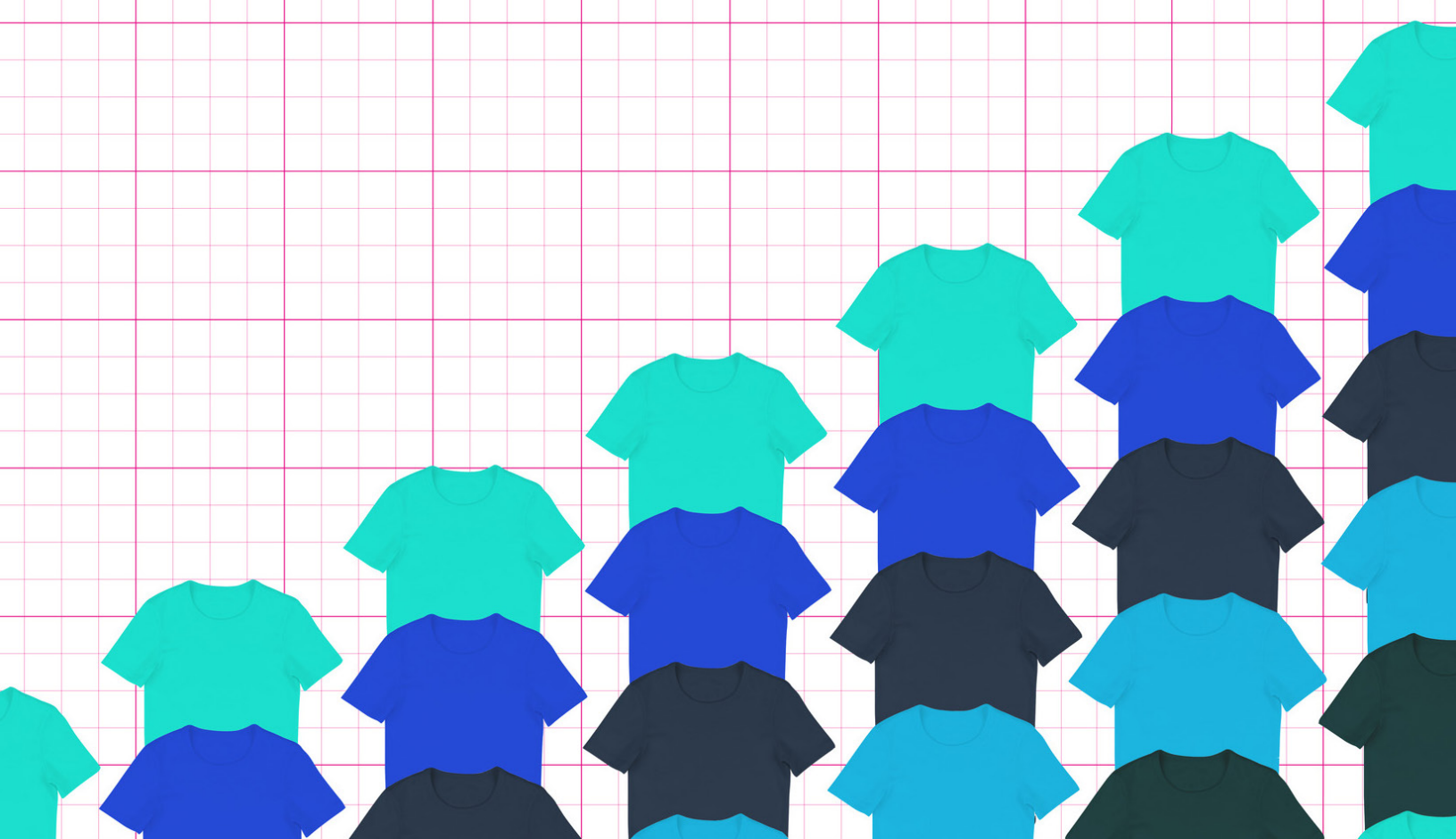
As you do your bottleneck analysis, be looking for processes that can be more automated. You are looking for ways to expend less labor and increase the speed of every process. In the software world, this activity is called “velocity.”

Examples of it in decorated apparel might be upgrading from a manual to an automatic screen printing press or purchasing an automatic screen cleaning machine. It might be investing in a digital direct-to-garment printer for short-run orders that are currently sucking up too much time on a printing press.

So it's really about figuring out how to take out the human element and replace it with equipment or software. Rather than having the necessity of an employee showing a product catalog to a customer, waiting for the customer to look through all the choices and pick, an online catalog is a much quicker solution. Especially one that can be viewed on a website or a tablet, making it easy for potential buyers to look at your products in any place and at any time.

So as part of the automation assessment, you will want to break it down into two categories: equipment and software.





KEEP SELECT SHIRTS IN STOCK

Sometimes when a mom wants to tell dad she's pregnant, she wants to wear a clever T-shirt or get a T-shirt for the toddler that says, "I'll be a big sister on Oct 27th." In order to turn that type of order quickly, you need to have shirts in stock.

Otherwise, you run the risk of your supplier being out of stock in specific sizes or colors. So you have to be willing to make the investment of keeping a certain level of inventory of the most popular items in the full range of sizes and colors offered on your website. This allows you to shave one to two days off the delivery date.

While every company has a different customer base, there are formulas for what quantities and sizes to have on hand. This makes a good guideline for getting started if you don't have any sales history to use.

According to Jennifer Cox, president and cofounder, National Network of Embroidery Professionals, Kent, Ohio, the current size scale for decorated sportswear is 2442. So for a dozen items, it breaks down to two medium, four large, four XL and two 2XL. A modified scale (based on 14 items) would include one small and one 3XL.

Use this ratio for larger quantities of shirts when you are projecting how many shirts to order in each size. For example, for an order of 200 shirts, the ratio would be 14 smalls; 29 mediums, 57 larges; 57 XLs; 29 2XLs and 14 3XLs.

By offering a limited number of the most popular styles, you do not have to go too deep with inventory. And of course, you also can offer the option of additional styles with the stipulation that it will slow down delivery time.

You might include information that says, "For fastest delivery, these options are in stock. Other selections will delay delivery by one or more days."

CHOOSE THE DECORATION METHOD WITH THE QUICKEST TURNAROUND TIME

Another strategy to speed up delivery will be to create the shirt using one of the faster decorating processes. For example, digital direct-to-garment printing or any type of heat-applied graphic (sublimation, inkjet or laser printer transfers; print and cut; or vinyl cutting) can be done much faster than screen printing or embroidery.

The possible higher cost of using a low-volume technique is people will pay a premium price to get a product faster, and you will be offering a service that your competitors cannot.

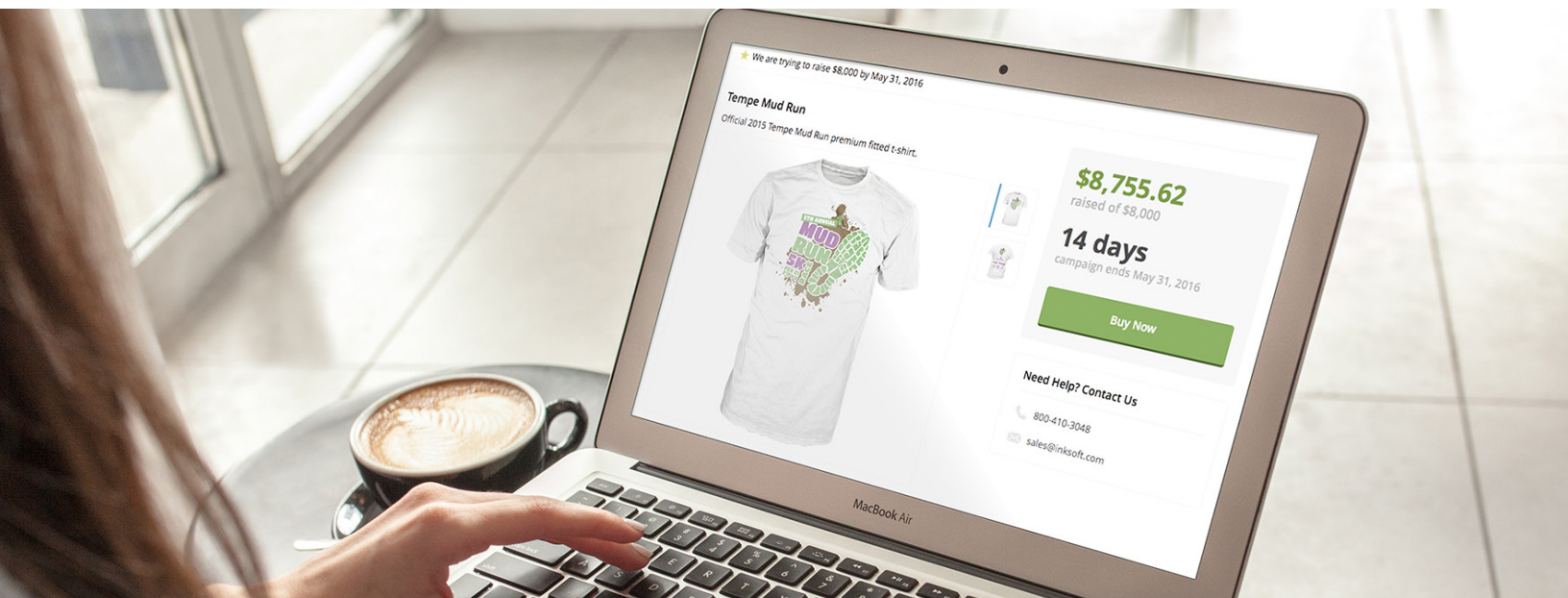
If you offer faster delivery than any of your competitors, consumers are not going to worry if the price is a dollar more or higher. In fact, if time is really an issue, you may be the only option.

ACCELERATE CUSTOMER RESPONSE TIME

You want to come up with a system that allows you to be responsive and nimble when it comes to serving the customer. Anytime a shop misses a call and receives a voice mail that has to be treated like a race against time to get back to the potential buyer as soon as possible.

In many cases, when you don't answer the phone, the shopper moves down the list to your competitor to see if he can get the information he wants from someplace else. Whoever can satisfy the customer the fastest wins the order.

This is one reason why having a website that allows for self-service solves some of this problem. If a customer gets voice mail that directs him to a website that has product information and services, pricing, and the ability to design his own artwork and place the order online, he can get instant satisfaction. It eliminates the frustration of having to leave a voice mail or email and wait on a response.



ACTIVELY MARKET FAST DELIVERY

Of course, you do not want to guarantee faster delivery until you are ready. The bottlenecks have to be resolved and maybe you even do some test runs to ensure you have a system in place that allows you to make good on your promise. But once you are ready, you want to get the word out to old and new clients as aggressively as possible. Your message might include phrases like “quicker than all competitors” and “get it today.”

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Another good strategy is to tell customers before they order when their job will be shipped or ready for pickup. Using software, as orders come in, the program estimates the delivery time, and this is included at the time the order is placed on line as well as in a confirmation email.

As protection for you, it needs to be made clear when the clock starts ticking. For example, you may need to strongly state that delivery time is based on art approval. Ideally you state a range, from three to five days for example, that is based on best and worst case scenarios.

You want to make sure that you are managing customer expectations in such a way that you can fulfill them. Another strategy is to send out email updates on the status of an order. For example, the first email confirms receipt of the order. The second email states that the order is being processed. The third email announces that the order has been shipped and its estimated time of arrival. You want to be actively communicating with the customer and not creating a situation where the client has to pick up the phone and ask “where’s my order?”

As you get started on the journey to speed up delivery, perhaps you limit what you offer at first. Choose products and services that are the quickest and easiest to produce and deliver. As you gain experience and history, you can expand your offerings as you see fit. Even if you cannot offer all of your shop’s services faster than the industry average, it’s still an advantage to be able to offer some services that you can promote as fast and easy.

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