EVERGREEN LESSONS

Shop Growth Insights

Pricing, quantities, niches, equipment, hiring and profitability — drawn from data across thousands of shops and conversations with hundreds of shop owners.

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2026 Edition

Use this as a reference, not a manifesto. Nothing here expires with a season: the same seven lessons apply whether you run one press or six. Read it front to back in about twenty minutes, or jump to the section that matches the decision in front of you this week.

~2%
the annual price review most shops skip — and inflation doesn't

132
average units per job; order sizes are not shrinking

2–3
presses — where many owners say the work was most profitable

01	Review your prices every year	Pricing
02	Don't assume order quantities are shrinking	Capacity
03	Find your niche — and your sweet spot	Strategy
04	DTF: buy equipment or order transfers?	Equipment
05	Do more with fewer people	Hiring
06	Use AI for front-office work	Operations
07	Understand profit with contribution margin	Profitability

SECTION 01 · PRICING

Review Your Prices Every Year

For a long stretch, average order size across the industry barely moved — on the order of 1% a year. That sounds fine until you compare it to inflation, which typically runs around 2%. A shop that doesn't raise prices at least ~2% annually is effectively losing ground each year.

When costs spike — as they did when wages, garments and supplies jumped during the pandemic — shops end up scrambling to catch up, raising prices reactively: increases of roughly 17%, then 11%, then 1% in consecutive years.

The steady approach

~2% every year, on the calendar, applied before anyone asks. Nobody notices, and you never fall behind your own costs.

The reactive approach

17%, then 11%, then 1%. Every conversation is a negotiation, and the increase arrives when your customer is already feeling squeezed.

The lesson

It isn't that price hikes are bad — it's that waiting for a crisis to raise prices is. Build an annual price review into your calendar so you're never playing catch-up.

SECTION 02 · CAPACITY

Don’t Assume Order Quantities Are Shrinking

When DTG printing took off, the popular narrative was that order quantities were shrinking. The data doesn’t bear that out. Across thousands of shops, average order quantity per job has held remarkably steady — moving less than about 11% over five years.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS	THEN	NOW
Average units per job	~118	~132
Five-year movement	—	under ~11%

Shops have shifted niches — print-on-demand, contract, retail and more — but per-job quantities have stayed stable.

DO THIS

Plan your capacity and pricing around steady order sizes rather than an assumption that jobs are steadily getting smaller.

SECTION 03 · STRATEGY

Find Your Niche — and Your Sweet Spot

“Find your niche” is a cliché, and it isn’t practical very early on. Under roughly $1 million in sales, most owners grab whatever work they can to get revenue in the door — an uphill grind, and hats off to anyone who reaches that first million profitably.

Once shops cross that mark, the ones that thrive narrow their focus.

- ✓ **Cut unprofitable customers**
- ✓ **Trim services down to the core**
- ✓ **Get comfortable outsourcing more work**
- ✓ **Hire salespeople to drum up core business**

The faster you double down on a specialty, the faster you streamline your people and processes to maximize opportunities in that space.

Mind Your Sweet Spot

Owners tend to fixate on top-line growth — more is better. The problem is you can cruise right past your “sweet spot,” the point where profitability is maximized. Each stage of growth carries a cost:

~10 people

You’ll need a lead worker or two.

~25 people

You’ll need strong management.

~50 people

You’ll need middle management.

Each of these levels is costly and can set your profit margin back before you scale to the next stage.

> **“2–3 presses, with as small a team as possible.”**
>
> **How many owners of large operations answer** | when asked where the business was most enjoyable and most profitable

Be careful what you wish for

Optimize for owner lifestyle and profitability, not revenue for its own sake.

SECTION 04 · EQUIPMENT

DTF: Buy Equipment or Order Transfers?

Direct-to-film's use cases are clear: challenging print locations, specialty materials, low quantities and printing on demand. The real question is whether to invest in equipment or simply order transfers. Perspectives from shop owners across the spectrum:

LIVE EVENTS

Prefers not to staff someone on a DTF machine, and is happy to spend on outsourced transfers so the team stays focused on events.

PRINT ON DEMAND

Several machines, and it works well for POD — but maintenance is significant. Don't buy unless your transfer spend justifies it.

POD, IN-HOUSE

Brought DTF in-house and it's no small feat. Be ready to invest serious time learning the equipment.

The takeaway

Match the decision to your business model and your tolerance for maintenance, not to the hype.

SECTION 05 · HIRING

Do More With Fewer People

Hiring is competitive in a tight labor market, and it takes more than it used to. Shops attract and retain talent with referral bonuses, open houses, remote-work options where possible, and paid trial days. Just as important is running leaner.

A Few Things to Ponder

- ✓ Do a manual time study in your production areas to find equipment upgrades
- ✓ Invest in software to increase efficiency
- ✓ Rearrange your shop to reduce steps
- ✓ Consider virtual assistants to free up your team's time
- ✓ Work with a sales coach to supercharge your sales team
- ✓ Explore AI for creative and front-office work

SECTION 06 · OPERATIONS

Use AI for Front-Office Work

AI can save your team real time on cold sales emails, social captions and full marketing campaigns. Customize the bracketed fields in the prompts below to fit your business, and remove the brackets before submitting the prompt to the AI tool of your choice.

Marketing Campaign Prompts

PROMPT **Email series**

"Build me a set of 5 email templates I can use to promote my print shop's services, including **[screen printing, direct-to-film, and embroidery]**. Mention that I can also provide customers with online stores for their **[fundraisers, schools, and small businesses]** and save them time on collecting money."

PROMPT **Limited-time offer**

"Create 5 sales emails for my print shop offering a limited-time **[15% OFF]** for using our online store and print services with the code **[STORE15]**. Mention my shop's website **[your website]** and include my email **[email address]**, and urge customers to reach out before the offer ends on **[end date]**."

Social Media Prompts

PROMPT **Instagram caption**

"Create an engaging Instagram caption for our new print designs and encourage followers to click the link in our bio."

PROMPT **Facebook giveaway post**

“Write a Facebook post highlighting the benefits of our printing services and encouraging users to Like and Share to enter a giveaway.”

PROMPT **Anniversary post**

“Craft a social post celebrating our print shop’s anniversary and inviting customers to share their favorite memories with us.”

SECTION 07 · PROFITABILITY

Understand Profit With Contribution Margin

Pricing is complex, and detailed pricing matrices full of questions about overhead, production time and wages often don't stick — they don't help owners actually understand profitability. Contribution Margin Theory simplifies the whole thing.

Fixed costs, per month

Rent, ink, labor, owner's pay and utilities. Establish this number first — it is the bucket you have to fill.

Variable costs, per job

Commission and garments are good starting points. Everything that only exists because the job exists.

Contribution margin = Total sales − Variable costs

Drop each job's contribution margin into a monthly "fixed-costs bucket." Your goal each month is to break even on fixed costs as quickly as possible. Once the bucket is full, every additional dollar of contribution margin that month is profit. Here's how a handful of jobs might fill the bucket:

ORDER	TOTAL SALE	CONTRIBUTION MARGIN
Order #1	$900	$250
Order #2	$400	$200
Order #3	$3,000	$2,500
Order #4	$1,200	$600
Into the bucket	**$5,500**	$3,550

TRY THIS FIRST

The simpler the solution for creating more profit, the easier it is to achieve. Track contribution margin per job, fill the fixed-costs bucket each month, and let everything after break-even be profit.

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