

## **Buying Your First Automatic Press**

**Knowing your goals is key to a smart selection.**

**By Deborah Sexton**

When purchasing your first automatic press, the most important thing to keep in mind is why you are doing it. What you hope to accomplish by automating is critical to determining everything from the size and number of colors to the capabilities and durability, and, of course, the cost of the press that's best for you. Your current situation and your goals for the future dictate the questions you need to ask and what matters most to you.

Maybe you're simply tired of pulling a squeegee so many hours a day and want a few more hours for yourself. Or maybe your business is exploding and you need to print faster or handle more complex jobs. These are both valid reasons for buying an automatic, but they may suggest different types of purchases. Evaluating the features and costs of various automatics in terms of your individual goals is key to making the best selection.

### **Look to the Future**

When buying an automatic, it is important to consider how you see your business evolving. Five years out is a good time frame to use, as 60 is a common number of payments for loans/leases. Take a realistic look at:

- The type(s) of business you will be pursuing (custom, contract, preprint, etc.) and what these customers typically require
- The type(s) of printing you will be doing (athletic' sophisticated, high-end prints; etc.)
- The volume you will be running

Then consider the impact these points will have on your screen printing operation as a whole, including the type of automatic press you will need.

### **How Much Press Do You Need?**

The complexity of the designs you'll be running indicates whether you should be looking at a small, inexpensive automatic or a larger, more sophisticated model.

*Design complexity* is a key consideration in what you need in an automatic in terms of

- Number of Colors
- Image Size
- Flashing capabilities/configurations (type and number)
- Options/attachments

*Volume* dictates production speed requirements. How many garments will you need to print per hour, factoring in your design parameters and customer requirements?

One of the biggest mistakes a business can make is buying an automatic—or any piece of machinery—to meet only current needs, without considering the future. If you're simply looking to make your life easier and are not looking to expand your business to any extent, your current needs may be your future needs; but if it is important to determine that and communicate it to your sales rep upfront. Conversely, if you're seriously planning to grow in terms of capabilities and capacity, you have to factor that into your purchase now.

Take screen size, for example. While a 23-by-31-inch screen may suffice for the jobs you're doing now, will the type of work you plan to be doing a couple of years down the road require 25-by-36-inch frames? If so, would you be better off buying them—and a press to accommodate them—to start with?



***Screens are another consideration. In addition to size, you'll have to determine what kind of screens make the most sense. If you buy new***

***screens, will rigid aluminum frames do the job for the foreseeable future, or will retensionable screens better meet your anticipated needs? Photo courtesy of Castle Shirt Co., Kernersville, NC***

While it doesn't make sense to overbuy just to have the biggest machine in town, you also don't want to cut yourself out of work because a prospective client is concerned about your capacity. Nor do you want new customers to continue doing business with other printers. Having a larger press enables you to tell customers, "Think of me first for whatever work you have." A 16- or 20-color press can be a profitable investment if it is based on sound planning and works for you financially.

### **Features / Options**

Be sure to carefully evaluate the machine's features. When comparing prices try to compare apples to apples and look for the features you will really use. Some machines come standard with quick-release squeegees and flood bars, while others offer this feature as an option.

For an eight-color press with a 16-x18 inch print area, the basic considerations are:

- Electric (servo) vs. pneumatic indexing
- Electric vs. pneumatic print heads
- Intracolor vs. Intercolor flashing
- Simple vs. advance control systems

### **Budget for Success**

Automatic presses run from \$20,000 to \$200,000. If it is in your budget, you have to determine whether spending \$50,000 as opposed to \$40,000 will make more sense in the long run. Your monthly payment may be \$200 more, but you might gain \$10,000 worth of business. Also, with most automatics, regardless of size, typically there is one job each month that makes your payment. With a small automatic, that might be a 500-shirt order. With a large automatic, it may be a 5,000-shirt order. It's all relative. You have to consider the work the equipment will enable you to do, not simply the amount of the payment.

Although ideally you should buy a press that is big enough to meet your anticipated needs, your current finances may not make this feasible. After adding freight, installation, startup, and associated operational costs to the price of the press, it may make sense to move toward your ideal automatic by degrees. Buying a "stepping stone" machine can allow your business to continue to grow without outstripping its financial resources. At the end of three or so years, you can upgrade to a bigger machine or possibly add one, depending on your business.

Typically, after an initial post-purchase drop in value, automatics depreciate by about 50 percent. But then they level out and hold there, provided they're kept up. This makes three years a good point at which to stop and evaluate your needs and progress.

When trying to decide between an eight- or 10-color press for example, consider your overall installed cost. With freight, installation, air compressor and other factors, the price difference between the two may be less than you think.

### **Also Worth A Look**

Attachments and the capability of adding them are something else to consider with respect to your company's future. In addition to the press itself, take a close look at the basics—squeegees, flood bars, pallets—as well as more specialized offerings, such as cool-down stations, flash-cure units, and systems for spraying glue, specialty decorating (flocking, foiling, etc.), and automatic loading/unloading and tagging.

Safety features are another consideration. The keys to safety with any automatic are education and barriers between the machine and people. But it is important to determine what safety features are available and what they actually do.



***An important question to ask when shopping for an automatic is what are the safety features? This yellow cord serves as a barrier and a reminder to employees to not get between the print heads when the press is on and get injured as a print head indexes. When the cord is disconnected, it turns off***

***the press and it cannot run until the cord is hooked up again. Photo courtesy of Sundial Shirt Co., Memphis***

### **Consider the “Big Picture”**

It is also important to remember that an automatic press doesn't function in a vacuum. Adding an automatic impacts every aspect of a screen printing operation from art and purchasing to finishing and shipping; and it is all intertwined.

Start with your shop itself. For instance, the size of the automatic and its footprint may require moving to a larger space, and the increased volume it allows for may call for more storage space for garments.

Screens are another consideration. In addition to size, you'll have to determine what kind of screens make the most sense. You won't be able to use your manual size screens on your automatic. If you buy new screens, will rigid aluminum frames do the job for the foreseeable future, or will retensionable screens better meet your anticipated needs? Depending on screen size and the design complexity you're now capable of producing, you may find that you need to upgrade your exposure unit.

You will also need a powerful compressor and chiller with enough CFM to handle the machine.

Also, the speed of the automatic may enable you to do four or five times as many jobs a day, begging the question of whether it will be necessary to upgrade your screen room to keep up. And what about your dryer? Can it let you run your press at optimum speed?



***Can your current dryer keep up with the production demands of a new automatic? If you need a bigger dryer include this in your budget as you figure out the total costs of purchasing an automatic. Photo courtesy of Castle Shirt Co., Kernersville, NC***

Then there are your human resources. Press speed is limited by the speed with which shirts can be loaded and unloaded. Factoring in screen prep and unloading the dryer, you may need to add people.

### **Getting Started**

Another human factor to consider is training. With more buying and selling being done online, there are fewer opportunities to learn on-site from visiting suppliers. It is important to determine going in how you will learn to use your automatic and what the role of the manufacturer is with respect to education. When installing an automatic, the primary educational focus of the technician is on the machine and how it works.

Although our company offers a class that helps buyers transition into printing with an automatic, the technician's job during installation is to make sure the customer understands the machine's operation and how to use it properly to enhance the process and benefit the business. That doesn't mean teaching how to do artwork or prepare screens. If you're going to invest in an automatic, it only makes sense to invest in training to get the most out of it by taking workshops and classes such as those offered at industry trade shows.

Similarly, first-time buyers should consider service needs. It is important to find out what kind of support the manufacturer offers and the company's overall service philosophy. Support should be right up there with functionality and price as part of the complete purchase package.

### **Choosing A Manufacturer**

In selecting a manufacturer, good points to explore include:

- How long has the company been in business, and in what shape is it in financially
- The depth of the manufacturer's inventory on replacement parts
- Its location with respect to your time zone.
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While a good relationship with your local distributor or supplier is important, when it comes to getting support for your new automatic, the ability to access the manufacturer and its commitment to supporting your purchase is invaluable.