Homerun!
Starting A Home-Based Apparel Decoration Business

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A Note From The Speaker

Thanks for registering for my class, I think you will find it very worth your while and look forward to the opportunity to share my experiences with you.

I have created this handout as a supplement to the class, rather than as an exact outline of the presentation. I have a tendency to “fine-tune” the direction of the seminar based on the profiles of attendees, which means I may spend more time in some subject matters while skipping other topics (when warranted). Thus, I may not follow the hand-out as it’s written. Think of the handout as a resource, rather than a script.

Another point I wish to make, is that I prefer you to focus on the live content, rather than trying to follow along in the handout. I use lots of projected images and actual samples (when possible) so if you aren’t paying attention to the front of the classroom, you might miss something important. Plus, it would be impossible to document every bit of information that gets shared in the class, so if you are reading the handout trying to figure out where I am going next, you might get behind and miss out on something useful.

With that said, I do encourage you to print the handout and bring it to the class so that you have something to write your notes on, but don’t let it distract you from listening and asking questions.

Jimmy Lamb
Apparel Decoration makes for an excellent home-based business opportunity. All you need is some basic production equipment (usually very compact), a computer, some shirts, a little bit of elbow room and your set. Just plug the machine in and presto, out come the orders and in comes the money! A simple operation that is neat and compact, such that it easily fits in a spare corner of any room. Right? I don’t think so!

On the surface, it may seem this simple, but in reality there is a lot more to setting up a legitimate home-based apparel decoration business. Yes, the equipment is the core of the operation, but there is more to it than that. Before starting your home-based operation, there are four areas that need to be investigated:

1. **Sales & Marketing Solutions.**
2. **Consumable Supplies.**
3. **Administrative Equipment, Supplies and Functions.**
4. **Physical Location.**

**Sales & Marketing Solutions**

Working from your home offers a lot of advantages: no rent, no commuting, no dress codes, flexible hours, etc. But it also has some disadvantages as well, with perhaps the most significant one being “lack of visibility.” If customers can’t “see” you then they aren’t going to know that you exist. But due to local zoning laws and ordinances, it’s unlikely that you can put out a sign or a billboard. The fact of the matter is that if you operate from home, you are probably invisible. Further compounding this matter is that many corporate entities view home operations as hobbies rather than serious business operations. Making it known that you are working from your house can be detrimental in some situations.

In order to gain customers and make sales, it is necessary for you to leave the confines of your comfortable abode and journey out into the cold cruel world. Thus, it’s important that you invest time and money in a Sales and Marketing Program for your company. This sounds expensive, but it doesn’t have to be. It begins by creating a Sales Kit so that you are able to work successfully away from your house.

This first item that goes into the Sales Kit is a portfolio. Since you probably don’t have any customers at this point, create some snazzy designs by combining stock designs and lettering.

If you are an Embroiderer, sew them out on felt. Purchase a photo album with “slide-in” pockets (usually 3” X 5”). Neatly trim each design swatch with pinking shears or a rotary cutter, so that it fits in the pocket.
If you are a Printer, then create some finished products and photograph them for your portfolio. Rather than using a physical book, like a photo album, put together a creative slide show that can be played back on a computer or tablet.

As you gain new customers, ask them if you can display their logo in your portfolio.

Once you have a portfolio, you need to put together a collection of sample merchandise. Though catalogs are much easier to carry around, it’s vital that you have real samples of your best sellers. Gather together some of the items that you plan to offer. Whether you decorate them or not is up to you. Sometimes embellishment on a sample garment is distracting and a turn-off to the customer if they don’t like the choice of design or color.

Identify each sample clearly, so when the customer is looking them over, he has a reference. Obtain clear name badge holders and name tags from an office supply store. Create an ID Tag for each garment including Item #, Brand, available colors and available sizes, then place this tag inside the name badge holder and clip the holder to the shirt. Purchase a garment bag(s) to store and transport your samples in and add your company name and/or logo on it. (And don’t be surprised if someone wants to order garment bags because of it.)

The next item in your Sales Kit is a price sheet. (Pricing is a very detailed subject that won’t be covered here.) It’s imperative that you create a pricing system for your goods that takes into account quantity discounts. Ideally you will have a printed price sheet, at least for your merchandise. Most of the Apparel Distributors in this industry are making their wholesale price lists available in MS Excel format, so that you can download it, create your own markup formulas and easily create a printed retail price list. You don’t want to spend too much time in front of the customer fumbling with a calculator. It looks suspicious, as if you don’t know what to charge. In the customer’s mind, this is a perfect invitation to negotiate the price.

The final piece of the Sales Kit is your own clothing. What will you wear? Obviously you should dress somewhat to the tastes of the intended client. But, be sure to wear something decorated, preferably with your logo, as this will constantly remind the customer who you are. And always wear clothing that you sell. Many times the customer will like what you have on and wish to order it. Consider yourself a “snapshot image” of your business offerings.

Now that you are ready to show your wares to your customers, you need to line up some potential clients. This is where you need to develop a Marketing and Promotions campaign to let the world know that you exist. The whole world is a customer, so be prepared to promote yourself anytime, anyplace.
The first step is the easiest; create business cards. Business cards are so simple, yet so critical. Carry them with you everywhere you go and hand them out in huge volumes.

The second step is to ALWAYS wear something embellished, preferably your logo. A picture is worth a thousand words. A lot of people simply do not understand what apparel decoration is. By wearing it, you have the perfect example to refer to. Plus, spectacular designs always garner comments. Be prepared to take advantage of such comments by handing out a business card and expounding on the virtues of what you have to offer. Anyone can be a customer and you never know whom you are talking to.

Here’s an example. As you are checking out, the cashier in the Grocery Store notices your decorated shirt. “Nice shirt” she says. You respond with “gee thanks, I own a business that does this type of work.” And of course you are handing over the business card at the same time. “I’m Jane Doe with ABC Shirts. We specialize in all types of imprinted products including company shirts and caps, school uniforms, gift items, etc. If you ever need our services, please give me a call.” Keep it simple and to the point, as the checkout line is not a great place for a full-blown sales presentation. It may be that the cashier simply drops your card into the circular file (trashcan). On the other-hand, she could be the President of the PTA. (I know this from experience.)

The rest of your strategy for marketing your business simply becomes a process finding ways to put your name in front of key people. Supply products for door-prizes at a school carnival. Join the local Chamber of Commerce and participate in all events. Sponsor a local team of some sort. (Bowling, fishing, golf, cycling etc.) Typically this can be done for a very low investment. Send out Press Releases to the local newspaper. There are lots of creative and fun ways to reach people.

**Consumable Supplies**

When starting any kind of apparel decoration business, the primary focus is always on buying the proper equipment. Typically, a machine company will sell you a startup kit that includes consumables (threads, backings, transfer papers, inks, etc) to help you get started. But you will still need some other items to help you process your work.

For example, two tables are needed in the work area. Preferably six to eight feet in length and sturdy in construction. One table will be used for prepping the work for production. The second table is used for finishing. On this one you will finish out and fold up the goods after they come off the machine. In addition, if you are An Embroiderer, you should invest in a hooping device to assist with proper placement and hooping of your garments.

Other things that are needed in your production area include: a steamer (handheld model will do fine), an iron, adhesive spray, adhesive backing, storage containers, extra
lighting, plenty of wastebaskets, masking tape, tailors chalk, scissors, snippers, tweezers, hemostats (for holding and installing needles), etc.

Another major item to consider is an Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS). This device functions like a battery backup. You plug your machines and/or computers into it, and then plug the UPS into the wall. If the power should go out, then UPS will continue supplying power to the equipment for a short period of time. (Long enough for you to secure and shutdown the equipment.)

Though some machines won’t lose their memory if the power fails, it is not healthy to expose the equipment to the electronic impact of such an event. In addition, a UPS will further protect your equipment by serving as a power filter and a surge suppressor. A worthwhile investment.

*NOTE: Only low power equipment with volatile memory require a UPS. Items such as a heat press do not.*

**Administrative Equipment, Supplies and Functions**

It’s quite easy to assume that once you buy production equipment you are in business. Wrong! You must understand that you are creating a Business That Does Apparel Decoration, rather than an Apparel Decoration Business. The focus must be on the “Business” aspects first, everything else second. You must develop methods and systems to track leads, take orders, process jobs, order merchandise, pay bills, etc. So to ensure that you setup the business aspects of the business you need to invest in some non-decoration equipment.

The first item is a computer for administrative functions. It should be separate from the one that does production and art functions. There are several reasons for this separation. First of all, graphics software is very sophisticated and it demands a lot of the computer resources. Second, the nature of the software (especially embroidery digitizing programs) is such that conflicts may occur when it encounters other programs on the same system, which can lead to crashes. Third, when it becomes necessary to do two things at once (A frequent occurrence), one computer becomes totally inefficient. Example, you are invoicing customers, and your husband comes in to help you out by setting up some designs. One computer doesn’t work!

Along with your computer(s) it’s necessary to invest in a good quality scanner and photo-quality printer. This allows you to process artwork, create flyers and brochures, etc. And of course, you will need the proper software to make everything work.

As a business you will need programs that create files that others can easily read. The business standard for spreadsheets is MS Excel (I’m not getting a commission), while the business standard for documents is MS Word. (I repeat, no commissions!). For example, if you wish to email documents, quotes, price sheets, etc to a customer, chances are
that he can read the MS Word format. If you send anything else, he may not be able to read it. So it’s important that you are on the same level as the rest of the business world. Most business in this country have invested in MS Office Suite which includes these two programs. Depending upon which level you buy, you will also receive MS Access which is a database program. Databases are vital for tracking leads, keeping up with customers etc. Another must for any business.

Along with office software, you will need accounting software. There are many programs to choose from. Quick Books is very popular among small businesses. Talk to your Accountant and find out what he recommends. This will ensure you are compatible with his system, which can save you some money in the long run.

Desktop Publishing is a must for a new decoration business as well. This will enable you to create flyers, brochures, mailers, etc.

With a full complement of software, you will be able to manage your business affairs much more effectively than if you use paper and pencil, combined with manila folders. (Though you will still use paper files to some degree.) You make money in this business through sales and production, not “paper-pushing.” By setting up good systems for managing vital information, you will spend less time playing Clerk and more time producing revenue.

In addition to the more complex pieces required to manage your business, there are the small everyday items that go with it. Don’t forget the routine office supplies such as pens, paper, pencils, whiteout, stapler, staples, tape, post-it notes, rubber bands, markers, shipping supplies, paper clips, binder clips, file cabinets, file folders, envelopes, letterheads, calculators, etc. And then there are telephones, answering machines, fax machines, etc that also have to be purchased. (A new business is a wonderful asset for the office equipment store.)

Along with having the proper resources, there is a whole art to making it work properly. For example, order forms. What is the perfect order form? Each business is different, so there is no single order form that is perfect for every business. The problem is that much of product decoration is custom, so it’s hard to cover every possible variation of every detail within a printed form. Some shops use elaborate multi-page affairs, while others use a blank sheet of paper. Ideally, you should start off with something simple that ensures you gather the needed details. Over time you can fine-tune the so-called form into a smooth working document.

A beginning order form could consist of a blank area at the top, followed by a series of questions to ask the customer. In the blank area, you attach artwork or draw a sketch of the design concept (or both). The questions at the bottom are to ensure that you get all of the required information. Example:
1. What is the customer’s contact info?
2. What date is the finished order required?
3. Do garments have to ordered? If so, list separately.
4. Does the same thing for on each garment? If not, create a separate order for each garment.
5. What is the design going to be applied to?
6. Where should it be placed on the garment?
7. What are the colors?
8. What is the required size?
10. If a stock design is used, what is the name and number?

No matter how simple the job is, it’s imperative that each work order can be reproduced by simply looking at the form. Make sure all the information is legible, and be sure to save notes about the setup. Most shops use the work order form to create a design information sheet that details all of the parameters necessary to recreate the design.

Forms are a big part of the decoration process. As your business grows, you will no doubt find that you need a variety of forms to cover a variety of issues. Using your business computer system, you will be able to create, modify and output forms for every occasion.

Physical Location
Now that you have production equipment, samples, consumables and administrative supplies, etc. need to find a place setup your business. A key factor for location within your home is SEPARATION. You need to maintain a physical and emotional separation from your business. Though your business will become your life, you do need to spend some time away from it. But just as important, you must keep certain elements of your home environment away from your business operation.

For example, small children. A production shop holds many wonders for a small child, but unfortunately danger lurks just beneath the surface. Sharp objects, moving parts and electrical devices are just a few of the things can easily hurt a child.

Another element to contend with is household odors such as food smells, cigarette smoke and cleaning solvents. All of these items can permeate the merchandise in your shopping that is awaiting delivery. Your customer will reject his order if the shirts smell like cigarettes.

Pets can also be a problem. In addition to physical dangers that might cause injury, a pet can leave behind odors and hairs, which can also permeate garments awaiting production.
Another thing to consider when choosing a location within the house is physical environment. Can you get your equipment around corners and through doors? Can the floor support the weight of the machine? Is there adequate heating and cooling? (Damp basements are a no-no.) Can you squeeze all the “other stuff” in as well?

As you can see, starting an apparel decoration business in your home does involve more than just purchasing the right equipment. It takes careful thought and planning. And just because you are in your house, doesn’t mean that you are exempt from local, state and federal laws concerning businesses, taxes, licenses, permits, etc. The main difference between a home-based location and a commercial location is just that: location. The rest of the details that make a business a business are pretty much the same. Identify and manage them and you will do well, ignore them and you may fail.

Well that about does it for the handout. We will be covering plenty more in class, so I look forward to seeing you there!

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