

CRAFTY, CUSTOM TEXTILES

internet-based printer expands

by Amber E. Watson

Digital textile print service providers are in a unique position to serve a creative community of individuals looking to design their own fabric to make items such as curtains, quilts, clothes, bags, furniture, pillows, artwork, costumes, and banners.

Business is on the rise, as is evident by the continued success of Internet-based fabric printer, Spoonflower. The site makes it possible for individuals to design, print, and sell fabric. It was founded in 2008. The company came about when one owner's wife, Kim, persuaded him that printing her own fabric for curtains was a great idea.

Learn as You Grow

Since launching services to the public in 2008, business has taken off. A staff of 32 works at Spoonflower's 9,300 square foot facility in Durham, NC, which co-owner, Stephen Fraser admits they are quickly outgrowing. Over the past three years, the company expanded from a customer base of 28,000 to over 500,000 registered users.

Spoonflower customers are typically women using fabric to make items for personal use or to support a design-based business. Many of the people who buy from the marketplace are quilters or crafters looking for special fabric for a project.

equipment. "We grew quite a bit in terms of the sophistication with which we are able to handle a high volume of online orders," states Fraser.

Apart from continuing to expand its Web site—a custom application written and maintained by in-house software engineers—and its capacity to integrate the site with the production process, the company developed a well trained and disciplined operations staff and a hard working customer service team in order to keep up with demand. The print room runs seven days a week, often 24 hours a day.

An example of how Spoonflower has grown includes its finishing department. "We managed for the first two years with a single heat calendar made by Practix Manufacturing U.S.A. Now, we own three, one of which is a custom double wide unit that allows us to fix two 60-inch rolls of fabric simultaneously," explains Fraser.

Before moving to Durham, NC in 2010, the team was unloading rolls of fabric from delivery trucks by hand. They now

"The Spoonflower of today is hardly recognizable from the business it was three years ago." — Stephen Fraser, co-owner, Spoonflower

The online Spoonflower marketplace currently offers the largest collection of independent fabric designers in the world. Its growth is made possible by the enthusiasm of people who are passionate about fabric, design, and crafting and look to contribute to the community.

Designers can choose to make their fabric designs available for sale in exchange for a commission. The site also runs a weekly themed fabric design contest.

To keep pace with incoming business, Spoonflower founders invested in a lot of



Left to right: Spoonflower customers create their own designs and upload them to the site for printing. *Snails on Parade* by Cheyanne Sammons, *Raccoons are Taking Over* by Deborah van de Leijgraaf, and *Rainbow Spools* by Maria O are just some examples.

have a forklift and a large wall of fabric storage shelves, which makes the process easier, more organized, and efficient. "The Spoonflower of today is hardly recognizable from the business it was three years ago," says Fraser.

An Evolving Print Process


Digitally printed textiles provide advantages. Unlike conventional textile manufacturing, digital printing entails little waste of fabric, ink, water, or electricity. Spoonflower prints using eco-friendly, water-based pigment inks called Nano Colorant distributed by Expand Systems, LLC on natural fiber textiles. No additional chemicals are used in the printing or preparation processes.


The pigment ink includes a heat-activated binder. "This was hard on the print-heads in the first printers we purchased," explains Fraser. "Natural fiber textiles also tend to be very unpredictable." The fabric handling system on a printer is crucial to the company's success, as is sourcing fabrics that work well with its process.

Spoonflower uses 20 Mutoh America, Inc. ValueJet 1618W printers specially modified by third parties to handle 60-inch wide fabrics. In the past year, Mutoh has worked with Spoonflower and Expand Systems to assist in research and development efforts for both the ink and printers. Images are printed directly to the fabric on various weights of cotton, linen cotton, silk, and cotton silk. The fabric is fixed after printing with the heat calendars from Practix.

Future Fabric Printing

Over the next few months, Spoonflower plans to introduce polyester fabrics in order to add diversity to the textiles it currently offers. This also prompts consideration of new equipment and processes such as dye-sublimation.

The company's growth and success over the years is a testament to the popularity of custom, digital textile printing. As technology advances, so too do the possibilities of what can be made, and sites such as Spoonflower appeal to the community of creative consumers ready to try it. 

 See page 20 for more info.



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