

20 Creative Thinkers

Meet 20 people who are shaking up the decorated apparel market right now with their innovative ideas.

By Joan Chaykin, Joe Haley, Annie Rehill, Nicole Rollender, Dave Vagnoni and Dan Walsh

Wescoured the industry for the most creative thinkers—people who are inventing new decorating technology, using unique e-commerce and fundraising models, taking decorating and digitizing to a whole new level, and more. We're pleased to present 20 of the industry's top innovators: a community of artistic, passionate and profitable people who are changing the way that people look at logos and design.

The Fundraiser

Jill Valentino, Appleback Embroidery (asi/123011)

Jill Valentino, a self-described TV addict, sees herself as a mix of Mary Tyler Moore, Lucy Ricardo, Detective Benson and Debra Barone. Quit the quartet, huh? “Debra because of all the chaos,” Valentino jokes.

No, Valentino’s life isn’t a drama or a sitcom, but she has enough going on to make a really good script. Friends compare Valentino, owner of Appleback Embroidery (asi/123011), to the drum-pounding, sunglass-toting Energizer Bunny. “I’m good with about four hours of sleep a night,” she says, matter-of-factly. There are times, though, when those four hours are cut short or missed entirely, like when she is out volunteering with her community’s rescue squad. “I’ve seen a lot,” says Valentino, who once, at age 16, arrived at the scene of a horrific crash where a baby had been thrown from the arms of a helpless mother. “I remember it like it was yesterday,” she says.

No doubt in her formative years, Valentino saw life’s harsh realities. But, if anything, they’ve made her unafraid and more concerned about others. Raised on a New Jersey farm, she learned

early on how to work, and there was more to do than just feeding the horses. “My parents always had us helping people and involved in fundraising,” she says. From lemonade stands to roast beef dinners, she learned how to make a good buck for a good cause. “I totally enjoyed fundraising,” she says.



And now years later, Valentino still does. Lincoln, NJ-based Appleback has created one of the most successful fundraising programs anywhere for sport teams and organizations. Selling personalized spiritwear, from flannel pants to hoodies to hats, Appleback helps groups raise money in a very stylish way. “I saw a need for it,” she says. “I know clothing fundraisers can be hard.” That’s why she

simplifies the process for customers, offering features like custom sizing on site, Web stores and even “tally sessions” to make sure the program is on track. “We work to achieve customer goals,” she says. To put it bluntly, she has cut out the chaos of fundraising programs. Bet Debra Barone would be proud. —DV

The SEO Whiz

Jeff Taxdahl, Thread Logic



Jeff Taxdahl, who was laid off from a marketing management position in 2001, was finally ready to take an entrepreneurial risk. So, the guy who had no embroidery-business

experience dove right in and started Jordan, MN-based Thread Logic in 2002; last year the company posted a 25% jump in revenue to \$1.1 million, building on consistent double-digit increases since the business opened.

Taxdahl, who’s a marketing wizard, credits his background with helping him to develop his unique online business model — he uses pay-per-click, search engine optimization and other online marketing tools to help potential customers all over the country to find him. “Look, it takes a specific skill set to make this work,” says Taxdahl, who went on a rigorous six-month bender in 2008, perfecting his pay-per-

click model. “I was skeptical about the e-commerce model, but now more than 90% of my customers are based outside of Minnesota.”

Thread Logic’s business model is clean, simple and easy. Clients visit the company’s website, where Taxdahl offers about 350 wearables, including polos, sweatshirts, jackets and hats; they select their products and upload their logos to be digitized and embroidered. Taxdahl even provides free logo evaluation, to ensure the artwork will work for embroidery (30% of those uploads turn into orders). Then, in seven to 10 business days, customers receive their decorated apparel order.

“Our work is very business-to-business,” Taxdahl says. “We specialize in left-chest logos, and mostly do corporate apparel and uniforms. It’s not that sexy, but it drives our business.” And drive the business, it does: Thread Logic serves about 3,000 customer accounts. “Our repeats are running at about 50%,” says Taxdahl, who cranked

out 70,000 decorated pieces last year.

“Flat-rate pricing is the single-most innovative thing we’ve done,” Taxdahl says. “That removed a buying barrier for clients buying online: They get our pricing now. To get our profit margins right, we’ve massaged the model to find our average.”

In the beginning, Taxdahl admits, it was tough. “I learned by trial and error how to run my two-head machine,” he says. “My startup financing came from a loan I took out against the cash value in one of my insurance policies. The learning curve was very steep.” For the first year, he pretty much did it all, from running the machine to selling his services. Then, he really broke ground.

Today, Taxdahl has eight employees and four machines with 15 heads. Just this year, he moved from a 1,500-square-foot shop on his property to a 4,000-square-foot industrial space. “Right now, this is more space than we need, but I’m projecting out our growth,” he says. —NR