

Starting A Silk Screening Business Inexpensively

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Starting A Silk Screening Business Inexpensively

Silk screen or screen printing (technically, Serigraphy) is a long used process for mass producing signs and designs economically.

Going into this business may require a little more time (to learn), effort (to set up) and money (equipment and supplies) than some, but it is a business that could virtually explode into something REALLY BIG!

The basic idea in silk screening is to create a master screen through which paint can form designs on a large number of duplicates.

You draw, trace or photograph a design and transfer it by means of a crude photo process to a thin, fine grain, photo sensitive gel coated cloth (or "silk"), which is tightly stretched over a wood or metal frame..

When the gel is exposed, the part that is exposed to light "cures" (hardens), while the unexposed portion remains soft.

When cured, the soft gel is simply washed away, leaving a "negative" image of the design. The mesh of the silk (synthetic silk these days) is open (like fine screen wire --hence, the name "screen", so that ink (paint) can pass through the unexposed (where the gel was washed away) portions only -- like a stencil.

The frame holding the designed silk is placed against the object to be printed, ink applied and a squeegee (like the one you clean your windshield) pulled across to force a small amount of paint from the top, through the screen, onto the receiving item (T-shirt, coffee mug, etc.).

The screen printed object is removed and set out to dry and the next object is inserted. Obviously, literally thousands of prints can be made from a single screen at a very economical price.

When additional colors are desired, a separate screen must be prepared for each color (much like the color separation process in normal printing). Most screen printers have drying racks -- designed for the size and type objects the operator does most.

For example, if most of their jobs are real estate signs, the racks will be build to accommodate at least 100 18" by 24" masonite type signs.

If you do not have a separate drying room, it would be wise to have fans to draw air across the drying signs and expel it,

perhaps through a vent in the roof to reduce fumes.

The silk screen frames fit into hinged holders that keep the screens aligned, and a jig (possibly just wood strips and clamps) is set up to hold the receiving objectives uniformly -- so that each succeeding color gets exactly in the right place. It takes only a few seconds to "screen" each item, pull it out and place it on a drying rack.

The biggest (and most costly) job is setting up the design or copy on the screens.

This is why a job of 20 signs or posters costs almost as much as 200.

The first sign bears the cost of setting up; the rest represent only the receiving item's raw cost plus a fraction of a cent for the paint.

Some printers store "used" screens when they expect additional orders of the same signs (like real-estate signs); otherwise, they wash them out when the job is completed and use them again for the next job -- one screen will often last for years.

Usually, customers are charged at set-up fee and a price per item, such as \$50 set-up plus 41 apiece for 100 or less; 75 cents for 500, etc. Since printers are not required to tell customers when they save a silk "master," they are free to charge a new set-up even if they don't have to set up the next order. This fee is also an incentive for the customer to order as many items as possible at one time.

Of course, there are many different levels and variations of screen printing -- from a small, hobby operations to an "octopus" looking affair, where up to four different colors can be applied in rapid fashion, using special, fast-drying inks.

Although it is easy to find very expensive equipment for this business, it is also possible to build much for your own equipment --for a fraction of the "store bought" versions. There are many books on silk screening in most libraries that can give you some excellent ideas if you want to build some or all of your own equipment.

The total cost to set up a small silk screening studio should be in the neighborhood of \$500 to \$2,000, depending on the size of the operation and the amount of homemade equipment.

For example, a light frame (for developing) can be fashioned from six two bulb fluorescent light fixtures in a homemade frame.

This produces a 12 bulb developer light source for well under

\$100. Profits in this business are excellent, unless you have a problem spelling (hopefully, that is a joke).

You should make at least \$25 an hour for your time, and considerably more with efficient equipment, streamlined operating procedures, and good sales effort, as you take on larger and more complex jobs.

Screen printing jobs include printing name tags (on plastic or metal holders), bumper stickers (on self-stick paper), two foot letters on banners (buy them blank), designs on flags or ensigns (also purchased blank), political posters, (paper or plastic), street signs (for the city) and truck signs (fleets), souvenirs, advertising stands -- and thousands of other possibilities.

Some screen printers specialize in one or two phases of the art (depending on the market), which allows them to keep mostly one size of screens, holders and drying racks.

As a screen printer, you will be able to judge which jobs in your area could be most economically produced by screening --all you have to do is show potential customers how you can save them money and give them a better product!

To get started in the screen printing business, start accumulating your equipment, learn to operate it efficiently (ruin some materials), read about the art and if possible, visit one or more screen printing plants.

When you are ready, know exactly what you can and cannot do (DO NOT experiment on your customers -- there is too much to lose) and seek only those that you can do well.

Note that the types of jobs you know you can do well will grow rapidly as you gain experience. Start contacting businesses that could use your services -- show them samples and prices.

tell them how long it will take (since you are local, this will be one of your strongest selling points), but be sure to deliver when you promise! Place ads in the local paper, and always leave a business card so people can call you to bid on jobs.

Some business people make it a point not to patronize new services until they show they are there to stay, so make it a point to call back in a month or so on businesses that didn't sound interested the first time. This time, you can tell them about jobs around town that you did.

Keep the normal business records, but especially keep a copy of what the customer approves to go on his order. Have the customer review AND INITIAL the order sheet showing exactly (spelling, layout, color) how the products are to appear -- ask the customer

to please check carefully for any errors BEFORE you run off 10,000 copies! this little extra care will save you time, money and many headaches.

In this business, you have an additional option -- something you can do instead of commercial jobs, or in addition to, or between jobs. That is buying and printing your own objects for resale.

Examples are glass mugs with the school or town emblem, ceramic tiles with scenes, fancy keep off the grass signs, or even something to hang on a small suction cup in the car (AGGIE ON BOARD?).

If your business has a lot of drop-in customers or you think there might be a market, you can also augment your "line" with stock signs from really large operations. They can produce "for sale" signs at incredibly low wholesale prices, because they buy the blanks "by the ton" and screen print literally tens of thousands at a time. That means more profit without more work -- is that OK with you?

BUSINESS SOURCES

ST PUBLICATIONS 407 Gilbert Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45202. Publishes SIGNS OF THE TIMES, trade journal for the sign industry -- subscription recommendation for those in the business!

DICK BLICK CO., Box 1267, Galesburg, IL 61407-1267. Silk screen (and many other) supplies and equipment. Old, reliable company.

MOCK SCREEN SYSTEM, 200 Emerald Ave., Lake Wells, FL 33853. Sells a plan for "look alike screen printing manual" for short runs -\$39.95.

SCREEN PRINT, 7740 E Redfield, Scottsdale, AZ 85260. Offers a screen printing mail order kit for custom caps and T-shirts.

EL DO PLASTICS, INC. Box 451, El Dorado, AR 71730, 800/643-1556. Screen print paints (same as those used for magnetic signs). reliable.

NATIONAL BANNER CO., Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, TX 75234, 214/241-2131. Wholesale banners, flags, pennants, both plain and custom printed.

FRANZ SIGN CO., 8 Glover St., Portsmouth, OH 45662, 614/353-1470. Manufacturers and wholesales stock signs.

JOSEPH STRUHL CO., 195 Atlantic Ave., Garden City Park, NJ 11040, 800/552-0023. Wholesale stock signs.

THE KELSEY CO., Box 941, Meriden, CT 06450, 203/235-1695.

Printings and related supplies; paper, presses, wood blocks, etc.
Get their prices on blank poster board and self-adhesive paper.

UNIVERSAL SCREEN PRINTING CO., Box 12657, Gastonia, NC 28053.
Wholesale custom printed hats, jackets, T-shirts. Large outfits
like this can sometimes handle orders you can't.

SIGNCRAFT PUBLISHING CO., Box 06031, Ft Meyers, FL 33906,
813/939-4644. Publishes SIGNCRAFT, trade magazine for sign
artists and commercial sign shops.

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 31 East 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11051.
Discount books, clip art, stencils, etc.

QUILL CORPORATION, 100 Schelter Rd., Lincolnshire, IL 60917-4700,
312/634-4800. Office supplies.

NEBS, 500 Main St., Groton, MA 04171, 800/225-6380. Office
supplies.

IVEY PRINTING, Box 761, Meriden, TX 76665. Letterhead: 400 sheets
plus 200 envelopes - \$18.

SWEDCO, Box 29, Mooresville, NC 28115. 3 line rubber stamps- \$3;
business cards - \$13 per thousand.

ZPS, Box 581, Libertyville, IL 60048-2556. Business cards (raised
print - \$11.50 per K) and letterhead stationery. Will print your
copy ready logo or design, even whole card.

WALTER DRAKE, 4119 Drake Bldg., Colorado Springs, CO 80940. Short
run business cards (250 - \$3), stationery, etc. Good quality, but
no choice of style or color.