

# Buy Your First Automatic Press

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 press 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:

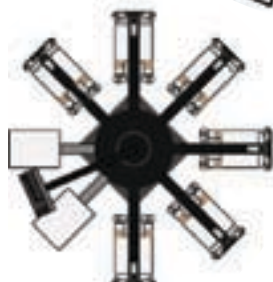
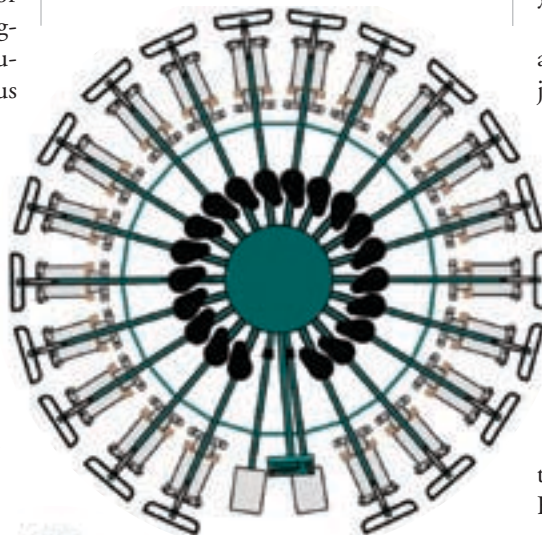
- the type(s) of business you will be pursuing (custom, contract, preprint and so on) and what these customers typically require;
- the type(s) of printing you will be doing (athletic, one-color or sophisticated, high-end prints);
- the volume you will be running.

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.

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.



Factors as mundane as the sheer difference between the respective footprints of manual and automatic presses must be taken into account, pre-purchase. Is your space large enough?

*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 it is important to determine that and to communicate it to your sales rep upfront. Conversely, if you're seriously planning to grow in terms of capabilities and capacity, you must factor that into your purchase now.

Take screen size, for example. While a 23" X 31" 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" X 36" frames? If so, would you be better off buying them—and a press to accommodate them—to start with?

While it doesn't make sense to over-buy 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

Some years ago, I went back to school to finish a degree. Of course I had to buy a new computer and I *had* to have all the

options! So I bought one with every drive imaginable: CDR, separate DVD, floppy and *two* kinds of ZIP drives. This nearly doubled the cost. As my wife continues to remind me, I never needed the DVD and CDR, nor did I ever use *either* of the ZIP drives.

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, for example, come standard with quick-release squeegees and flood bars, while others offer this feature as an option.

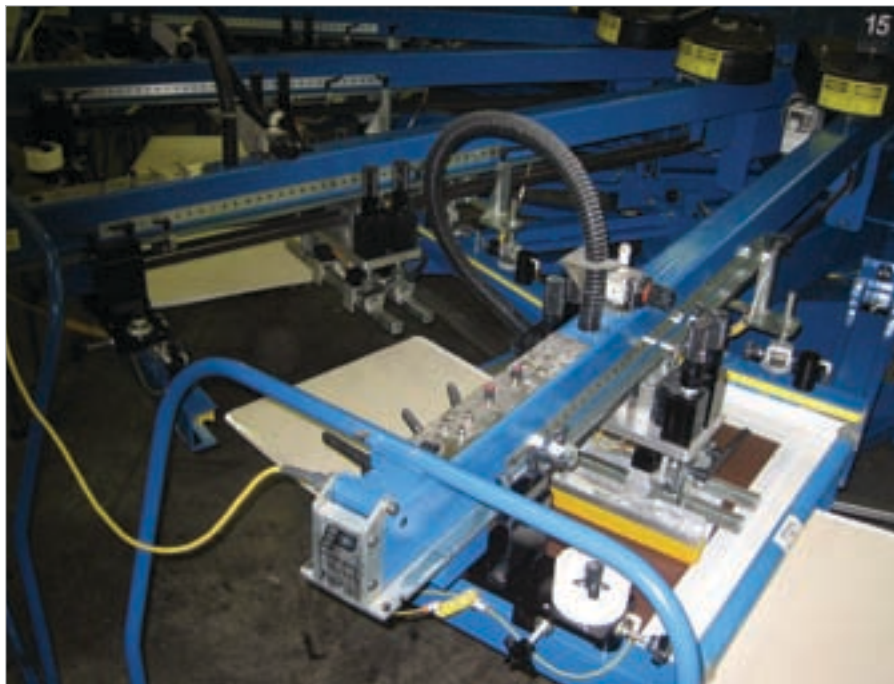
For an eight-color press with a 16" X 18" print area, the basic considerations are:

- electric (servo) versus pneumatic indexing;
- electric versus pneumatic print heads;
- *intracolor* versus *intercolor* flashing;
- simple versus advance control systems.

#### **Budget for success**

Automatic presses run from \$20,000 to \$200,000. If they're both 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 financial picture may not allow this. After adding freight, installation, start-up and associ-



In addition to all the *physical* accommodations necessary when installing your first automatic, you must also take into account the potential need for more personnel, as well as their anticipated learning curve.

ated 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 properly maintained. 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, floodbars, platens—as well as more specialized offerings, such as cool-down stations, flash-cure units, systems for spraying adhesive, equipment for specialty embellishments such as flock, foil and so on, and automatic loading/unloading as well as folding, tagging and bagging equipment.

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.

#### **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.

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Just a small air compressor for your manual operation? Surprise! You will also need a powerful compressor and chiller with enough CFM to handle your new machine's rate of production.



Start with your plant 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 and staging 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 effectively 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 also need to upgrade your exposure unit. You will also need a powerful compressor and chiller with enough CFM to handle the machine's rate of production.

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?

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 up front how you will learn to use your automatic and what the role of the manufacturer is with respect to learning



Also remember that your new press will be (hopefully) spitting out printed shirts at a significantly higher rate than you're used to. Is your current dryer up to the demand?

process. 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 for automatic production. 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

When selecting a manufacturer, good points to explore include:

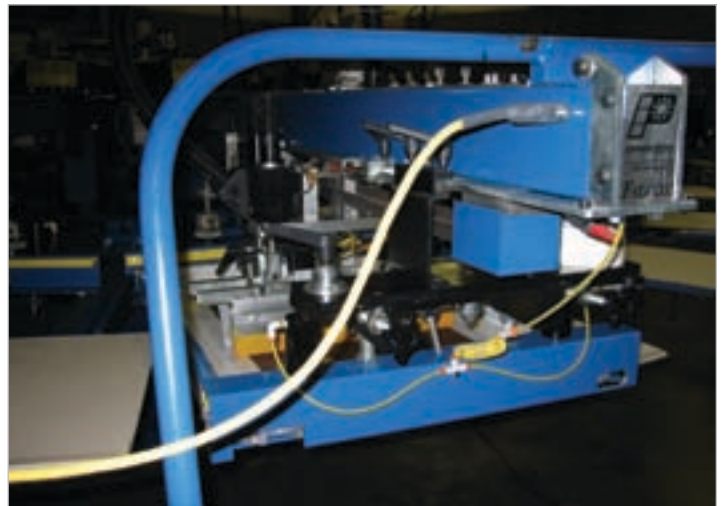
- how long has the company been in business, and in what shape is it financially;
- the depth of the manufacturer's inventory of replacement parts;
- its location with respect to your own time zone.

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. PW



According to the author, the screens you've been using for manual production cannot be effectively used on your automatic. Thus, another expense to anticipate.

Safety is a huge concern with automatic production. Great care must be taken to maintain an adequate safety barrier between machinery and people.



Sufficiently expanded area for garment staging, packaging and shipping should also be accounted for, pre-purchase. Can you say "forklift"?

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