



Screen-Printing – A Primer

Screen-printing is the primary technique used for imprinting logos on products. Yet we note that many clients have never learned how screen-printing works. To help you impress your boss and better deal with vendors, we present a quick way to visualize the inner secrets of this primitive but efficient printing process.

Imagine a window screen, a squeegee and a bucket of airplane glue are sitting on the table in front of you. Use the squeegee to spread the glue on the screen. Let it dry. Now that film of dried glue has made the screen impermeable, right? At this point you can lay a blank T-shirt on a table, place the screen over it and dump a bucket of water or turkey gravy on the screen. Nothing will pass through to the shirt. You could even dump a cup of paint on the screen, drag a fresh squeegee through the paint puddle and try to force some through to the shirt. Despite your effort, the shirt would remain clean because the glue filled in all the tiny holes in the screen.

But – what if you take a pin and poke a few holes in the coat of dried glue? You could clean the glue out of some large areas and some small ones. Form a pattern with pinpricks. Or spell your name by opening up holes. When that's done – it's time to squeegee another glob of paint across the screen. Bingo – the paint is squeezed through the holes. You just screen-printed on the shirt underneath the screen that pattern you created by opening up holes in the film of glue on top.

Turkey gravy washes out. Paint merges with the fabric and dries in a lasting image. Forget the gravy – use the right kind of specially formulated screen-printing ink and you will create great, permanent screened impression that sinks into the fibers and remains soft and flexible. (If you were screen-printing a solid, impermeable surface you might use a different ink – and the same process.)

That's screen-printing in its simplest form. Now, upgrade it with screens of varied porosity for different effects. Stretch those screens ever-so-tightly in special frames engineered to keep them rigid. Use modern technology to transfer your design to the screen in a manner that dissolves away the barrier so ink will pass through and carry your design to the surface below. Use special thick paints that are easy to handle and produce all sorts of wonderful impressions.

Put these components to work in complex, computer-driven assembly line machines that perfectly calibrate both screen and imprint surface. Now a series of colors can be printed with perfect registration – each color being applied separately through a screen made to lay down its ink in exactly the right place and with the right density. You've sophisticated the process a bit, but it's still basic screen-printing, only now you're doing perfectly registered multi-color spot-printing or even 4-color process printing.

Screen-printing is quite a bit more complex and labor intensive than the above might indicate. And plenty of judgment is required during the pre-production process. But the information here is the essence of a simple and reliable process. It's all you really need to know when placing orders for custom screen-printed merchandise. And it's probably a lot more than the person in the next office knows.



443 Main St./POB 1659
Lyons, Colorado 80540

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