

How To Add Custom Sublimated Mugs To Your Business

By Kevin Lumberg

Have you looked to expand the offerings of your business? Many customers want custom mugs but they can't meet large minimum-order quantities, and sublimation is the perfect decoration technology to service that niche. Every business owner likes good, consistent sellers, and mugs are a product that definitely fit that description. Why turn away customers from your business when it is

Mugs are a fun gift or award because, realistically, there are not many gifts or awards that you can actually use in your daily life. A mug can be used daily, and if it is personalized, it can really make an impact on the recipient.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

To sublimate mugs, you need a computer with a graphics program loaded on it.

WRAPS

With sublimation, the three components for a good imaged mug are pressure, heat and time. Wraps apply the pressure part of the equation, by clamping around the mug over the transfer. They are an easy and economical way to apply the sublimation transfer to the mugs.

Mug wraps cost anywhere from \$20 to \$40 dollars each, and they are reusable. If taken care of and used correctly, they should last for years. To use wraps, you print your sublimation transfer, and using a heat-resistant tape, you attach the transfer to the mug. Then you snug the wrap around the outside of the mug over the transfer, being careful not to over-tighten the wrap, or you will damage it.

Now, we have to apply the second part of the equation—heat. To heat the mug with the wrap, you put them into an oven at 400 degrees. Preferably a convection oven, as the fan inside the oven will keep the heat even and consistent throughout the interior of the oven. The Hamilton Beach Convection Oven with Rotisserie is a small tabletop model that works very well and can sublimate up to five mugs at a time. This oven can accommodate steins and taller mugs also, and can be purchased for from \$80 to \$100 dollars.

If you want to sublimate a lot of mugs at one time, a larger commercial convection oven can be purchased for approximately \$1,500 dollars. Further, large conveyer mug ovens are available in the \$15,000 range. Mugs are loaded with wraps into one side of the conveyer oven, and as they travel through the oven, the sublimation process occurs. A mug cooling unit can also be added to these ovens, making mugs a very high-volume, high-production venture.

The small Hamilton Beach can be used



There are many different styles and sizes of mugs available for sublimation, and there are more added all the time.

relatively easy for you to produce custom sublimated mugs?

WHY MUGS?

Let's look at why offering sublimated mugs make a good addition to a business. Look around, and you will see mugs everywhere. Open your cupboard at home, and more than likely it is full of mugs. Look at people's work areas, and you will see mugs. Maybe even as a pencil holder.

Watch people walking around or driving, and you will see travel mugs everywhere.

CorelDraw, Photoshop, or Illustrator work wonderfully. You may even already have the computer. You will need a sublimation printer with sublimation inks and paper to print the transfer.

Printer packages range anywhere from \$400 up to \$3,200, and generally the packages include the printer, inks, paper, and color-correction software. To apply the image to the mug, you will need either a mug press or a mug wrap. Each has its pros and cons, which I will explain further.

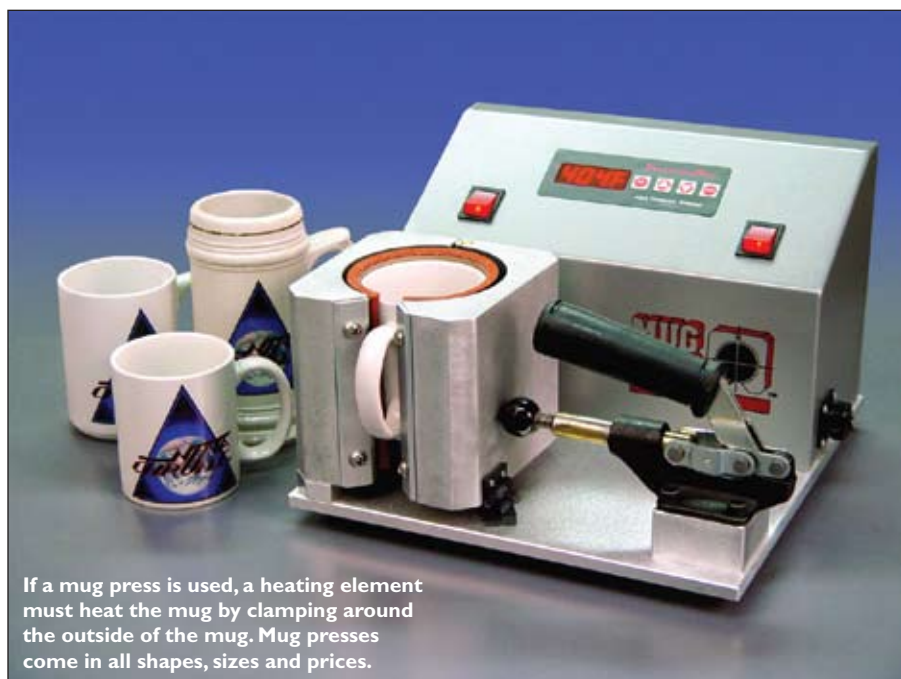
on a regular twenty amp circuit, but if you go to larger ovens, you may have the added expense of installing a higher amp or volt circuit to your place of business.

The third part of the equation is time, and a basic eleven-ounce ceramic mug will take about fifteen minutes for the sublimation process to complete. This will vary depending on the oven, and the quantity and quality of mugs you are sublimating. Ceramics hold their temperature for a relatively long time, which can allow the sublimation process to continue past the optimum time, so they must be cooled down quickly, or the quality of the image can be compromised. There are different trains of thought here, so I will share each, with their pros and cons.

The most popular and easy way is by dousing the hot mug into a container of warm water. The key here is warm, or else the mug may crack and be damaged. When I started my sublimation business, this was the way I cooled my mugs. When you do it this way, often slight cracking noises can be heard, but cracks may not be visible to the eye. I had a customer return a mug that had coffee stained cracks on the inside.

From that time on, I always cooled my mugs on a rack inside a freezer and never had another problem. Another way to cool mugs is to place the mugs on a metal rack, with fans blowing on them. This process can also cool them down rather quickly, but make sure that they are not touching each other, or they may sublimate from one mug to the other.

I like the versatility of mug wraps because you can start with one or a couple of wraps, and then increase their quantities as your needs increase. For optimum productivity, it is best to have three sets of wraps. That way, you can have one set in the oven, one



If a mug press is used, a heating element must heat the mug by clamping around the outside of the mug. Mug presses come in all shapes, sizes and prices.

set on mugs ready to go into the oven, and one set cooling, so they can be applied to another set of mugs. From a production standpoint, I also like that you can place a timer on your belt, and have enough time to work on other things in your business, while the mugs are sublimating.

MUG PRESS

Mugs, to no one's surprise, are cylindrical, and therefore, if a press is used to heat the mug, a heating element must heat the mug by clamping around the outside of the mug. Mug presses come in all shapes, sizes and prices, and may operate in one of two different ways. Sublimation generally occurs at 400 degrees. One type of mug press "idles" at a lower temperature, and when a mug is clamped into the press, it will start to heat toward 400 degrees. After it reaches that temperature, a timer will start, and when finished will sound an alarm.



Mug wraps apply the pressure part of the equation; if taken care of and used correctly, they should last for years.

The second type of press will stay at 400 degrees, and when a mug is placed into the press, the timer will count down until the mug is completed and an alarm will sound.

Generally a mug press will take anywhere from four to six minutes, depending on the press and the type of mug that you are sublimating. If you want to increase your production speed, you can add more mug presses.

There is also a press available which allows you to add a second mug heating element to the original mug press at a lower price, since the base unit continues to be the unit that controls time and temperature. A couple of advantages of a mug press are that it will heat up faster than an oven, and you can complete a single mug from beginning to end faster with a mug press. A mug press will also generally draw less amps of electricity than an oven, and may be able to work on the same circuit as a flat heat press, without blowing fuses.

SO WHICH WAY SHOULD YOU GO?

As you can see, there are pros and cons to using mug wraps or a mug press. There is no exact answer to which you should use. You will need to look at your business, and lay out your goals, and processes, to determine which style of sublimating mugs will work best for you.

Using either a mug press or mug wraps will give you stunning sublimated mugs, and you will certainly get mixed messages as to which is the overall preferred method.

A WORD ABOUT MUGS

When it comes to mugs, there can be big differences in the quality of the ceramic itself, and in the quality of the coating. Get samples, and try different mugs. A mug may be cheaper to purchase, but if you have a high wastage rate, due to quality, it may not end up being cheaper in the long run.

Soft-coated mugs will sublimate quicker, but they will not be dishwasher safe. Find

the mug that meets your needs. There are many available, including ceramics of different sizes, stainless steel and even plastic mugs.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

Adding custom sublimated mugs to your business is not difficult, and the potential return on your investment can be very high. With sublimation, there are many different styles and sizes of mugs available, and there are more added all the time. Pick the mug sublimation method of wraps or press that works for your business model. It may even be a combination of both.

You are not limited in the images or colors that you can decorate the mugs with. Whatever you can imagine and design with your graphics program can be sublimated onto the mug. Your customers will be amazed by the quality. SA



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