



Maximize efficiency for happier customers and increased e-commerce sales.

By Luke Ryerkerk, Contributing Writer

Speed is a key factor in online sales success. The longer it takes to respond to a customer's request or needs, the more likely he is to look elsewhere.

The immediacy of digital communication has taken customer expectations regarding feedback and turnaround time to a new level. But at the same time, it has enabled apparel decorators to improve their games — and their competitiveness — by implementing a new generation of best practices.

Depending on your operation, this can involve reevaluating and modifying your website, software or sales cycle — all with the overarching goal of streamlining the sales process and maximizing efficiency.

The greatest potential for increasing speed and efficiency exists in the areas of job quoting, art approval and customer purchasing. This is the case whether your e-commerce strategy includes online design and customization, selling predecorated items through a web store or some combination of the two, along with traditional sales.

To improve efficiency, look at the big picture and each of the parts that contribute to it, as well as how they are integrated into your sales process. Online selling has many advantages, both in and of itself, and as a complement to traditional sales. It offers comfort and convenience, enabling

A WEB STORE ensures you never lose a sale because your store is not available when a customer wants to shop, and clients can view the full line of products from anywhere. All photos courtesy of InkSoft, Albuquerque, N.M.

customers to view your products anywhere at any time and minimizing delays in getting information due to the office being closed. It also supports traditional selling by serving as a reference point where customers can check out items mentioned by salespeople, which boosts speed and efficiency.

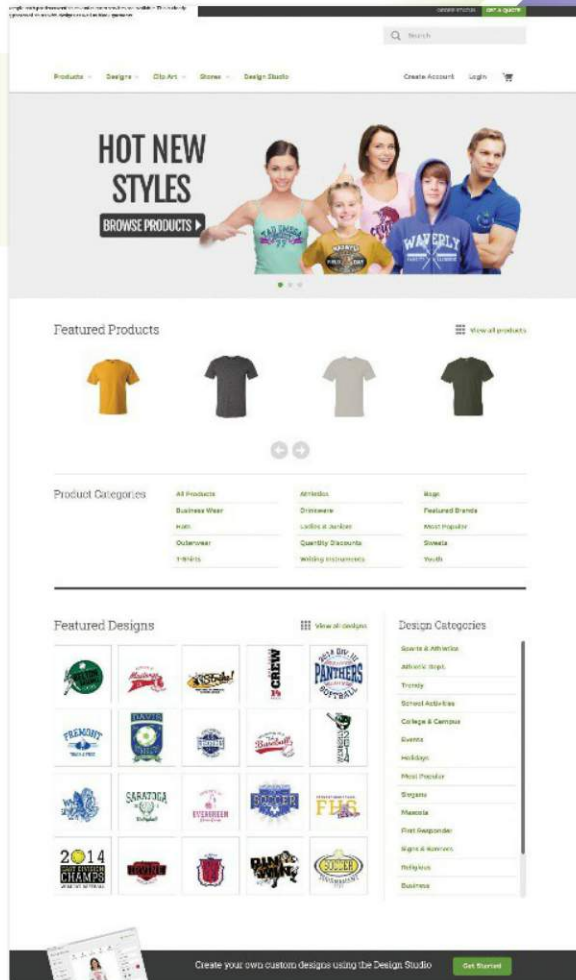
Software and technology also can speed up the sales cycle by helping you present more of what you offer directly to customers via their smart phones and tablets. In addition, they make it faster and easier to perform time-consuming — and often involved — tasks such as accurate quoting, which are integral parts of successful selling.

Furthermore, they can speed up the art process, both by enabling customers to specify — or participate in creating — the designs they want quickly and with minimal hassle, and also by streamlining approvals. Finally, the appropriate software and technology can facilitate getting the information you need to optimize your responsiveness to customers, minimizing bottlenecks and increasing customer satisfaction.

Your website can streamline selling in various ways, depending on your business' focus. It can be set up to sell preprinted merchandise, offer custom decorated products or both. Some companies may sell preprints for a particular market niche online, but also do custom decorating. Or they may have multiple web stores for individual clients.

To avoid confusion in such situations, they may have preprinted merchandise with a link to an online designer for those wanting customization. The key is to make your website's functions easy for customers to understand and use so they're not overwhelmed.

Online design software improves efficiency in many areas. It enables customers who know exactly what they want to quickly and accurately communicate a concept to you. It also makes dealing with customers who "kind of know" what they're looking for — but want you to



IN THIS WEB STORE example, both predecorated shirts and custom services are available.



FAMILIARITY WITH YOUR art library, graphics treatments and printing process enables you to quickly assemble clip art in such a way that it has a custom look without a higher price.

ONE OF THE GREATEST timesavers in day-to-day business is the ability to automate payment using a web store.

create the finished artwork — faster and easier. This saves design time while also fostering customer involvement.

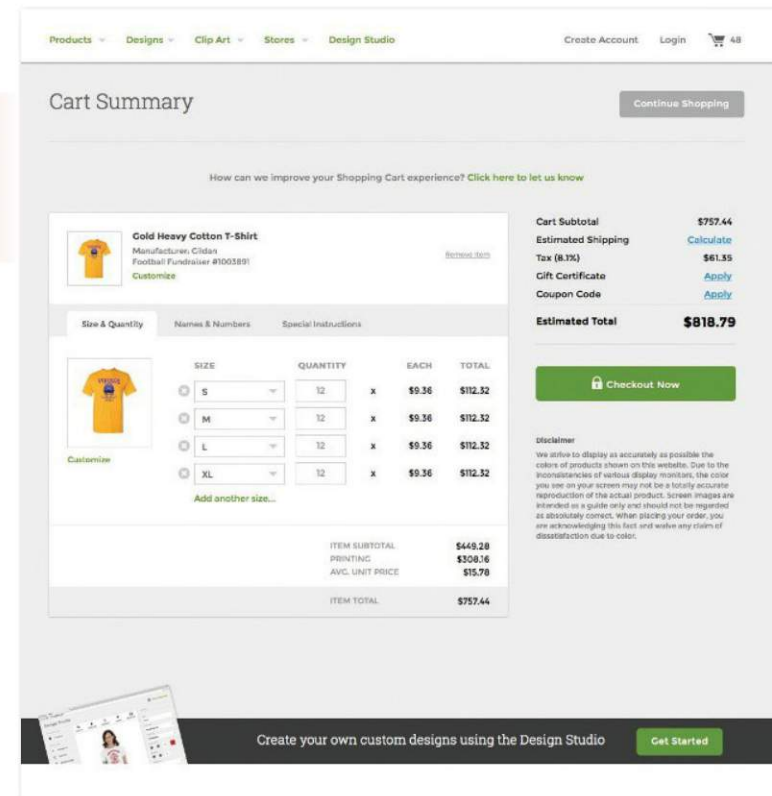
ARTWORK CREATION

There are three typical artwork creation scenarios involving decorators. In one, the customer wants the decorator to come up with a custom design or logo. This means involving an in-house or outside graphic designer who will review the client's requirements and develop artwork to be submitted back to him for comment.

The key to reducing the time and associated costs of this process is limiting the customer's options and number of revisions allowed. For instance, the designer may supply three concepts and tell the client he can choose one, or combine them, and permit three revisions. Or the designer may provide only one concept with a stated number of revisions.

In the second scenario, a customer says he has checked out online designing, but wants your professional opinion and assistance in creating a graphic. In this case, you can use an online design template and stock art to pull together something that works.

Start by asking the customer basic questions about colors, mascots, slogans, style preferences, etc., then identify available art that may work. Most decorators



are not designers as much as they are master collagers. Familiarity with your art library, graphics treatments and the printing process enables you to quickly present clip art in such a way that it has a custom look without a higher price.

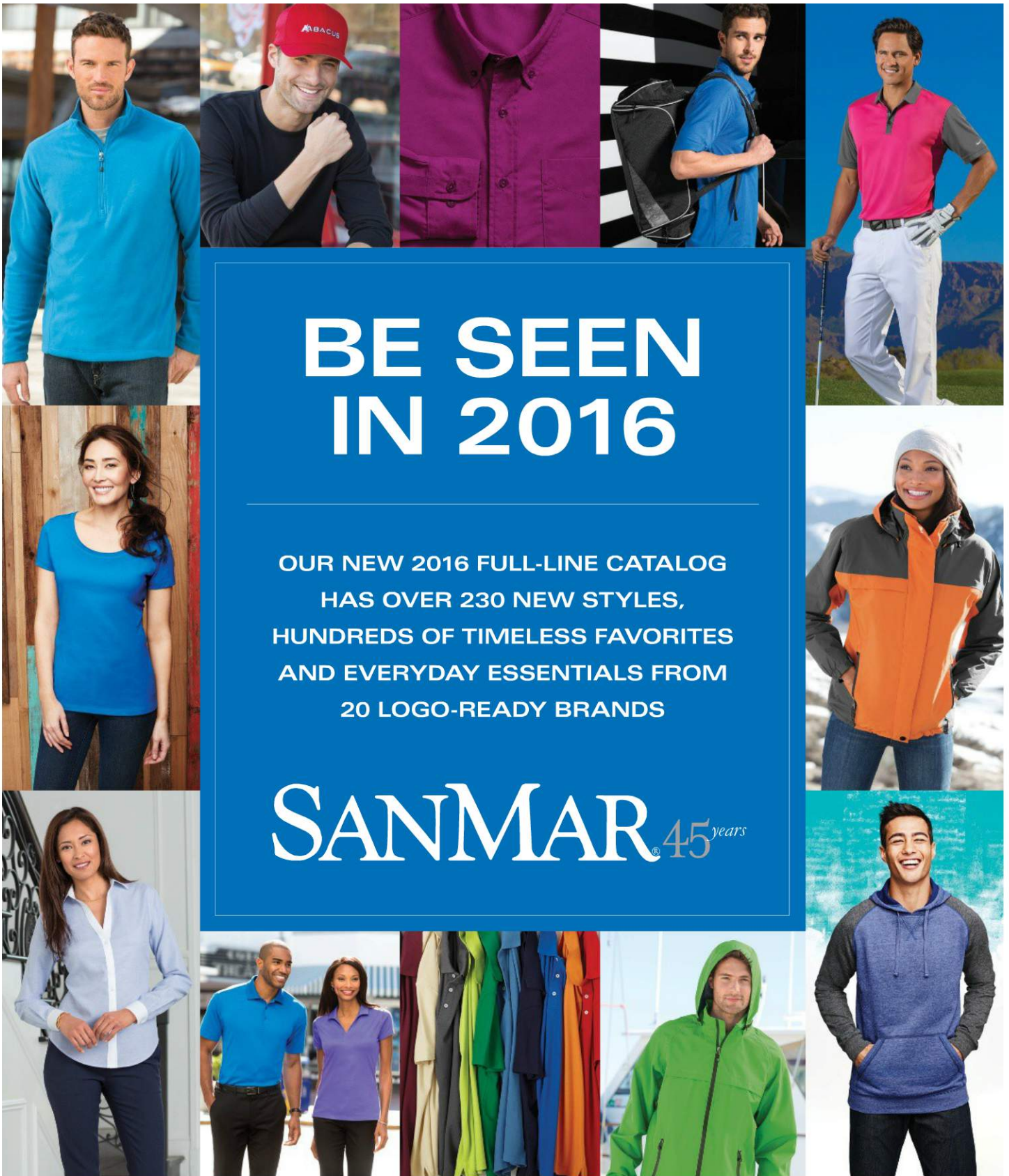
The third and most common scenario involves the customer leaving the design up to you. Here, using your clip art and templates to implement design concepts can make a huge difference. If you spend an hour on artwork that could be done in 10 minutes, you're losing money.

An online designer also reduces or virtually eliminates approval time, as that

process is built-in. Depending on the software, the customer can see and approve every aspect of the graphic without a secondary process. Online designing allows the decorator to quickly communicate potential issues and can make the customer accountable for what he has approved.

APPROVAL & PRICE QUOTING

Software and technology also have allowed for major advancements in the approval process. Creating an electronic mockup of a design or scanning a sample provides a visual for the customer to proof



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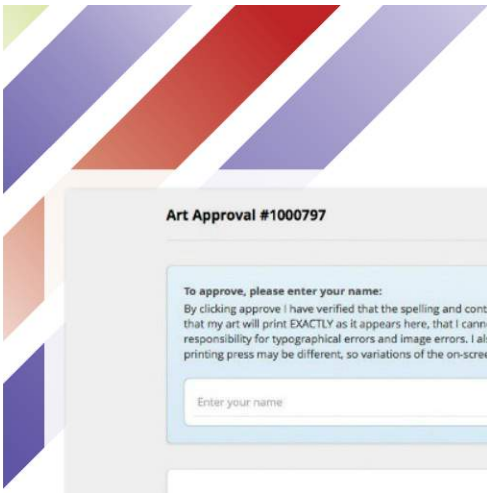
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SENDING A CUSTOMER
an email with a link to view the artwork and purchase once approved can dramatically speed up delivery.

— either online or by email — and paves the way for fast sign-offs while dramatically reducing possible miscommunication.

Price quoting is another area where speed and efficiency are critical, and technology can make a huge difference. If someone contacts you for a quote, he's also likely checking with another company. Since almost everyone is going to go to the Internet first, it's important that you have some sort of online presence. It doesn't have to be elaborate, but it should provide a way for you and customers to connect — showing them what you offer and getting the sales process rolling.

An online design program allows customers to drive the quoting process. After they create their artwork and fill in the job specifications (colors, garments, quantity, etc.), they automatically will know the cost. Being able to direct potential customers to this option by phone or email, or by using an auto-responder, can greatly speed and simplify quoting. It also is a tool

that you can use to develop quotes in response to email and phone queries.

If you don't have an online designer and are instead filling out forms for this process, review the questions to ensure you're getting the information you need to maximize quoting and overall sales efficiency.

For instance, one of the most important things to ask is whether the customer has purchased a similar job in the past. If so, knowing what he previously paid can help ascertain whether he is open to a premium product or whether price is the main concern. Asking investigative questions and adding more areas to your telephone questionnaire or online form can speed up the entire sales process while also revealing what the customer really wants.

Payment and delivery are other areas where today's technology can make a big difference in your operation's efficiency. Online design software automates the purchasing process and enables customers to pay immediately. It also can

eliminate partial payment issues and allows payment by credit card, meaning decorators don't have to spend time as bill collectors.

Online stores and design programs also can be integrated with delivery services such as FedEx, United States Postal Service, UPS, etc. If your platform allows this, setting up an account is easy and you can get good rates and freebies. Besides ensuring efficient delivery, they also offer order tracking.

The top questions potential customers ask involve time and cost. If you can introduce a quicker way to tell them what they'll be paying and offer a fast turnaround time, you'll make them happy. ▲

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