



Top 10 Dirty Secrets in Direct to Garment Printing.

No two DTG owners have the same experience. You'll be more successful in your business and satisfied with your decision when you start from realistic expectations and a little foresight.

By: Joe Longtin



- 1 Samples are almost meaningless. Request custom prints to be done using your graphic.
- 2 You are your #1 support tech. Look for evidence of exhaustive engineering to remove points of failure.
- 3 Speed equals maintenance. Don't buy more speed than you need.
- 4 "Low maintenance" claims are less important than availability. Choose a printer that is highly available; it will save you stress and time.
- 5 You MUST become expert in a vendor's RIP software and Adobe/Corel. "Novice" interfaces are training wheels you will want to remove.
- 6 Pre-treatment is messy and takes time, but it can double or triple your sales volume
- 7 No, you can't print on EVERYTHING. Trust your sales rep when they advise you that an application might be iffy.
- 8 Training is NOT optional. But the more training you get, the more profitably you will operate.
- 9 White ink is not rocket science. It should run seamlessly with CMYK inks.
- 10 If you and your equipment operators lack technical aptitude, creative design skill or sales skills, you will fail. Having all three constitutes a great advantage.

“Forewarned is forearmed.” You’ve discovered, or you have been doing your homework, on direct to garment printing (DTG). No doubt you’ve imagined earning huge profits on 300-piece orders for your local corporate customers, or saying “yes” to single-piece and short-run orders that used to walk out the door or go online.

However, there are many issues that prospective buyers of DTG technology don’t know to ask about. Your sales rep is probably not going to volunteer much of this information. One person’s “money-printing” machine – despite having nearly identical configurations, environments, inks, pre-treatment, shirts and other consumables – may be another person’s boat anchor.

I’ve been a DTG printer owner, author and industry consultant, and for a time I sold DTG printers. By and large, my customers and prospects either knew next to nothing about DTG or they were prejudiced by horror stories from the early adopter days of DTG.

Through talking with hundreds of DTG owners of various makes and models (including Kornit, Brother, Epson, Anajet, DTG (brand), Neoflex, OmniPrint Freejet and others), support technicians, distributors and manufacturer reps, I’ve accumulated a list of assumptions and “unknown unknowns” that can lead to disappointment or disillusionment with DTG technology.



Dirty Secret #1: Print Samples Are Almost Meaningless

A manufacturer chooses a few ideal graphics, painstakingly modifies them over hundreds of tests and thousands of prints, carefully dials in the settings and the substrate (shirt) they are printed on, and even after tedious quality assurance, still throws out a percentage of bad prints. (In three years, my samples team created and distributed around 100,000 printed shirts!) They send you an excellent print.

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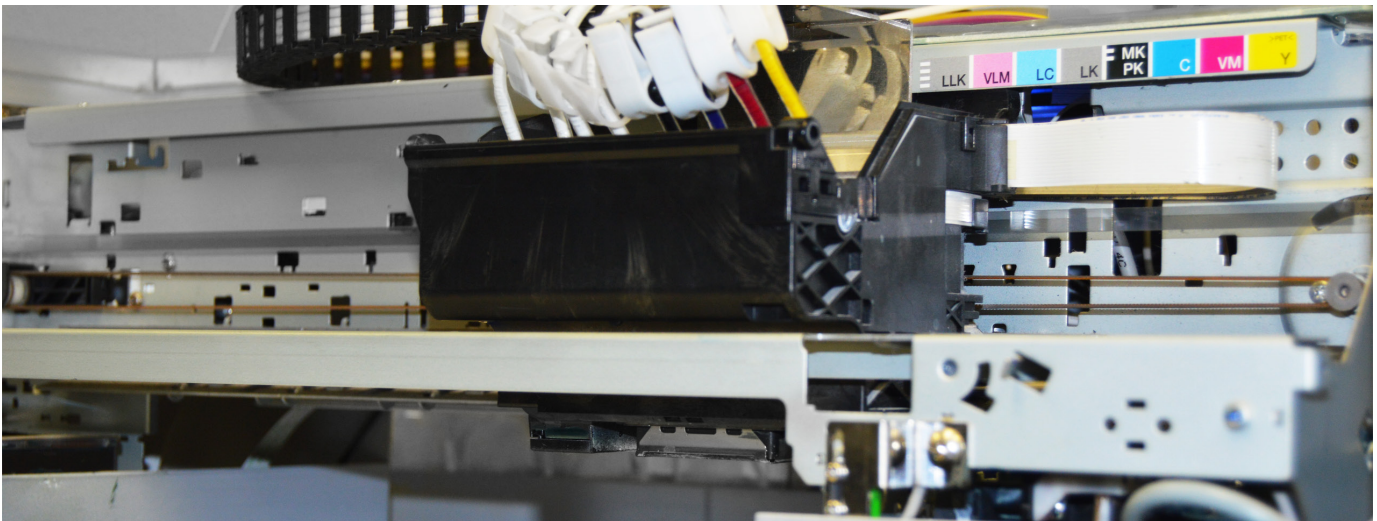
Print samples are almost meaningless. They’re the best possible output. They can (and probably should) kill a deal if they are bad or fall apart in the wash.

Some people buy based on the sample, then attempt to replicate these results without having years of practice and product knowledge. Their first prints suck. Why? It’s simple: standard samples represent the pinnacle of

quality that you can hope to achieve. But without adequate training and practice, you won't know if it's you or the printer!

The Flip Side: Samples are the main indicator of the maximum level of quality that you can hope to achieve. This is why print samples are almost meaningless. They're the best possible output. They can (and probably should) kill a deal if they are bad or fall apart in the wash.

Evaluation Tip: Leverage your sales rep's motivation to sell to you: don't check image prep off the list until you have seen it done. Send them your best graphic(s), at high resolution, to print out on a garment. Ask your rep to demonstrate the entire image preparation process. Don't take claims at face value that "no preparation is necessary." But trust their guidance as to what will look good or bad and listen to their recommendations as far as garment types. If they tell you that your source image will not look good, or that your unique idea for an application may not work, ask why and pay attention.



Dirty Secret #2: It's Your Job to Protect the Print Head

DTG print heads are the beating heart of a printer, yet some manufacturers don't warranty them beyond a period of days or weeks. Why? Often it's because they haven't designed in enough safeguards to prevent the print heads from clogging. In the quest to preserve the print head, they may have even engineered in additional points of failure.

As you learn DTG and the personality of your printer, you need to depend on your vendor to warranty this component for at least a year and rely on a direct line to technical support. A manufacturer may promise to replace print heads whenever they get clogged because they expect this to happen. If neither of these conditions are present, it's a red flag.

The Flip Side: It pays to become your own first line of defense, so dive in to learning how your printer works. When you buy DTG, you're not buying a souped-up paper printer or a solid state piece of electronics, it's a Formula One

race car that can help you win a lot of races and make money. Like the race car, the DTG printer calls for your dedicated attention in order to run well.

Evaluation Tip: Search for a printer that has been engineered exhaustively to prevent print heads from clogging, with a solid year or longer warranty on print heads, and with personal tech support. Some manufacturers address it with innovative recirculation, maintenance station and wiper assemblies. A few models even immerse the print heads in cleaning solution when the machine is idle. A good rule of thumb: fewer moving parts equals fewer points of failure.

Dirty Secret #3: Speed Equals Maintenance

You may have heard hyperbolic claims about speed. However, in practice, the fastest printers usually require the most time and ink to maintain. They also generally produce (read: cost you more in) larger amounts of waste ink. Examples of time-consuming tasks include head cleans, line fills, line purges, system flushes and opening the shell or hood frequently to access dirty components. This can have the side effect of dozens or possibly even a hundred milliliters of waste ink, which you will have to make up for in production volume.

An entry-level DTG unit built to current standards can pay for itself in three to six months of selling 20-30 prints per day. A good base model, running five days a week, can easily drive \$100,000 in sales at a 60-75% gross margin.

The Flip Side: You don't have to get the fastest t-shirt machine to be hugely profitable. Seasoned DTG owners know this. The bigger your investment, the more time you will need to devote to maintenance.

Get the right printer to suit your actual business requirements. You can buy a second unit or get the next-faster model after it has proven itself. An entry-level DTG unit built to current standards can pay for itself in three to six months, selling 20-30 prints per day, with a lower maintenance burden of time, ink and supplies. I know first-generation owners whose printer drives \$100,000 in annual sales at a 60-75% gross margin. Their machines don't gobble up liters of waste ink and they have developed excellent daily maintenance habits.

A note on quality: Multiple manufacturer surveys of owners – not prospects – reveal that if owners had to choose faster production or higher quality output, the overwhelming majority choose quality output. Successful owners know best.

Dirty Secret #4: “Low Maintenance” is Less Important than Availability

“Our printer doesn't require daily maintenance,” they may say. “You can leave it running all weekend and just do a nozzle check on Monday morning.” This is true for some, but not all DTG printers.

A light maintenance promise is irrelevant if the printer is simply not ready to perform on demand, every day, con-

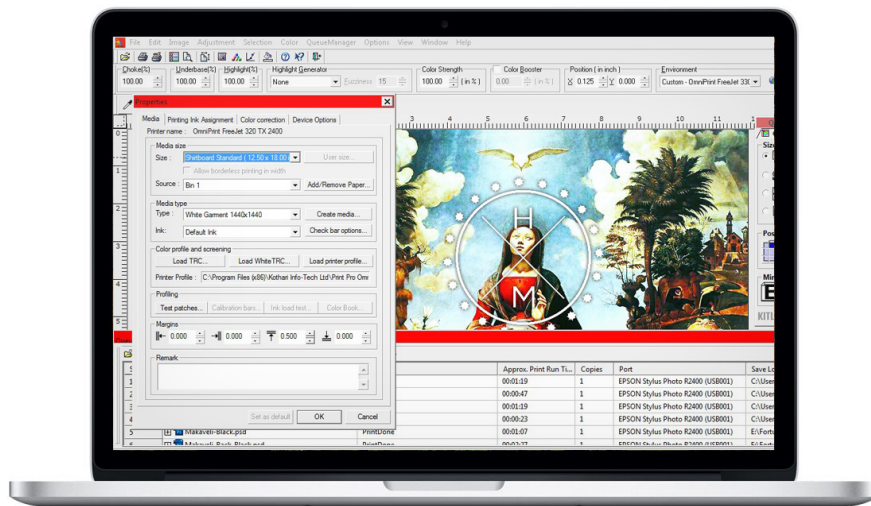
sistently. Being able to nozzle-check-and-go is great until the ink stops flowing because you neglected maintenance and let ink build up somewhere! You'll spend a few hours on the phone with support, send your printer in for costly repairs, or wait for days or weeks for a site visit.

The Flip Side: The more transparent the manufacturer is with you about downtime, the better. An honest business person understands that there is no such thing as a printer with 100% availability. As with that race car, you know that pit stops are inevitable, downtime should be expected and estimates need to have a time cushion built in. You're going to have to replace wear items. So listen for a sales rep who doesn't shine you on about maintenance, shares price lists for wear items and replacements, and points you to reference customers who have been running the model for a year or more.

Evaluation Tip: Don't be cowed by the routine maintenance that a DTG printer needs, but do press your manufacturer on the true maintenance burden. Insist on talking to several reference customers.

Ask existing owners:

- How many days were you without a printer over the past year?
- Is your printer always charged and ready to go? If no, why not?
- How long does it take to achieve 100% nozzle checks and perfect prints? The sales rep tells me N minutes. How true is that in your case?
- Have you had to repair or replace components? Was it expensive? How long did you spend on the task? Did you ship the printer in or did a tech come to you? Why?



Dirty Secret #5: RIP Software or “Ripoff Software”?

You will hear talk about ease of use for a RIP software, or how simple it is to print directly from a major design tool. However, unless you have significant experience with graphic design programs, the RIP may be a moot point. Why?

Know the phrase, “garbage in, garbage out?” A good RIP software does not necessarily equal good prints. Likewise, the absence of a RIP software also does not equate to better quality prints. The single most important factor in a successful printed image is the quality of the source image. In fact, a good quality source image will look good on many DTG printers because it has several optimal features such as:

- High contrast
- Strong primary and secondary colors
- Sharp, clear lines and text
- Small or narrow blocks of solid color; larger areas filled with gradients
- Minimal ink coverage

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To lure novices, some DTG makers have partnered with third-party companies to provide ultra-simple design interfaces. You may need to pay extra for these “beginner” tools. Why add on something that is supposed to be user-friendly to begin with? There are two possible implications. First, that preparing an image for their printer is more sophisticated than they would lead you to believe. Second, the manufacturer may lack the talent in-house to provide you with knowledgeable tech support. After all, they’re outsourcing design knowledge to a third party, and this could be a nightmare for you if the third party lacks responsive technical support.

The Flip Side: A good manufacturer really wants you to be skilled in their prep process because it will enable you to print successfully (and use more ink)! You should be prepared to master the file preparation process – be it via RIP or direct from Adobe/Corel. In all cases, the onus is on you to own the optimization of source graphics, especially during off hours and weekends when you may be tuning graphics and running production.

Evaluation Tip: As I suggested above, view as much demonstration video as you can and view a RIP/design training session before you buy! Look for advanced RIP software that is user-friendly enough to print immediately. Ask your sales rep or another owner to send you a video of the file prep/RIP process or get on a skype call with them for ten minutes so you can literally look over their shoulder.

Dirty Secret #6: You Must Pre-Treat – or You Will Miss Opportunities

The black sample t-shirts you got from the manufacturer or picked up at the trade show all have pre-treatment solution in them. It’s true across all DTG: you need to apply something to stop white ink from sinking into the fibers. You may have already asked, “How hard is it to pre-treat? What’s the process? Is it messy? Is it expensive?” The manufacturer’s production team has invested hundreds or thousands of hours in practicing the process, testing

and possibly even fine-tuning a solution. Will you have to do the same?

There are two approaches to pre-treat. If you don't do it, you will lose opportunities. If you do it, you will invest time and money but you'll realize far more orders. Pre-treatment by hand (or by machine) does take time to learn and it will be somewhat messy.

When you find the right t-shirt and learn the repetitive movements and drying process that deliver a perfect pre-treat, you will have a gold mine on your hands.

The Flip Side: It is absolutely worth learning how to pre-treat and setting up a well-ventilated work area for it! Black shirts, dark greys and vivid colors all require white ink and therefore pre-treatment. When you can offer a wider array of colors (and graphical treatments), you will get more orders than if you only offered white and light shirts.

There are some automatic pre-treatment devices on the market but they are still quite expensive and require significant maintenance time, whether you're pre-treating one piece or hundreds. If you can't make space or time for pre-treating, look for pre-treated t-shirts online or ask your manufacturer if they can produce them for you.



Dirty Secret #7: You Cannot Print on Everything

"The only limit is your imagination." Well, not quite. Over the past several years I have heard sales people promise a prospect that one could print on anything that will lay flat and fit inside the chassis of the DTG printer. Skateboards? Check. Golf balls? Check. A dog? Yes, if you can get it to lie still.

One big hurdle that DTG has yet to cross – and it is probably not too far off – is printing white ink onto dark polyester garments. What is typically a cinch for screenprinting equals a hot mess with water-based DTG ink. This never stopped a sales person from running white ink on a beer koozie or a poly shopping bag because they made it abundantly clear to their customer that it would not be wash-fast.

DTG has a huge sweet spot of tried-and-true, high-quality applications that are wash-fast for dozens or a hundred washes.

The Flip Side: DTG has a huge sweet spot of tried-and-true, high-quality applications that are wash-fast for dozens or a hundred washes: CMYK on white shirts, light shirts, towels and pillowcases; dark and black cotton garments or towels with pre-treatment; organic canvas bags; CMYK on pre-treated polyester shirts (just like dye sublimation, without the transfer paper!); canvas shoes; hats; hemp garments. Low-wear surfaces that are properly prepared and treated also work well.

Evaluation Tip: If you are considering an application that falls outside the range of the tried and true, send your sales rep blanks to run tests on. He or she will be happy to push the envelope and report the results to R&D.

Dirty Secret #8: Training Is Really NOT Optional.

The first DTG buyers to experience a crisis are the usually those who pass on training. I cannot count the number of times people - who were about to invest \$20,000-plus on a setup - asked their sales rep if they “really needed to receive training.”

“We don’t have time or money to fly to your location.” “We can’t afford to have a trainer come out here.” “We already owned [garment printing equipment] before.” Wrong: you can’t afford not to undergo training.

The Flip Side: Newbies who approach training with enthusiasm seem to advance a little faster than folks with a little printing experience. Why? They make no assumptions about their strengths and weaknesses. They actively learn and use trial-and-error.

Existing garment decorators sometimes come to the table with either very low or very unrealistic expectations about using DTG equipment and processes. The key here is to not assume the maintenance regimen or learning curve will be similar to any other equipment you own. At the same time, don’t relegate your DTG equipment to only printing singles and short runs, or avoid potentially lucrative product lines because you assume they have to be run on screen printing presses or with sublimation.

Training should be a mandatory part of your purchase. It adds to cost but it also reduces the likelihood of failure by a huge degree. Training on-site has huge added benefits: your operators also get trained and a technician can assess your environment to make sure you’re not making novice mistakes with such obvious things as excessive dryness, heat, curing methods, pre-treatment processes and so on.

Dirty Secret #9: White Ink Is Not Rocket Science Anymore

White ink capability enables you to print on a black or dark cotton t-shirt, on demand, for singles or short runs, profitably. Many DTG printers have double or even quadruple white ink channels built in by default. You will use up some white ink even if you don’t intend to print with it.



For some DTG printers, white ink requires more maintenance than CMYK inks. The dirty secret here is that handling white ink is not rocket science; if your vendor doesn't handle it seamlessly, you're buying into an obsolete technology. Red flags to look out for: your vendor charges more for white ink than for CMYK inks; customers report white ink problems; "adding" white ink channels costs you more.

The Flip Side: As I stated previously, white ink combined with effective pre-treatment can drive enormous sales and profits. One business owner I know began with a single DTG printer several years ago and has expanded to five units, with some units out at fairs and shows and the others permanently installed in the shop. He can take an on-demand order for a single pre-treated black shirt and realize a 70% or better gross profit.

You really should be able to walk away from your DTG printer fully charged with white ink for a few days, and expect to return and print almost immediately. Ask to see a demo of the maintenance routines and if your sales rep distinguishes white ink from CMYK, ask why.

Handling white ink is not rocket science. If your vendor doesn't handle it seamlessly, you're buying into an obsolete technology.

Dirty Secret #10: If You Lack the Three Disciplines, You Will Fail.

Sales skills, graphic design, and technical mastery of the printing process: if you do not have all three, bring in an expert who has one or all. Don't feel bad if you don't have all three. You just have to have all within reach in order to keep your printer available, ready, producing jobs and building a client base.

While sales reps may fill your head with visions of business ownership and big profits, they will not tell you if they have warehouses full of returned printers bought by people who had the same fantasy. There is no get rich quick here; there is hard work and lots of learning to build a very substantial line of business.

The Flip Side: If you have the three disciplines, you will probably be very successful with the right printer and the right vendor for support and supplies. Absorb any and all information available about how to make money with DTG, especially from existing owners! The best vendors will have a team of people whose orientation is customer success, not just fixing printer and software problems.

The hardest discipline, from my experience, is sales and marketing. You must have or acquire selling skills because you're going to be your #1 salesperson. If you have the attitude of "I hate sales", you can forget about earning tens of thousands of dollars in your spare time as a business owner.

Since most DTG owners honestly lack one or more of these skills to some degree, this means that the shop across town or on the other side of the county may not be getting the most out of their printer. So if you have the three disciplines or you can find them, you have an opportunity to win market share and be the best shop in town.

Making the Best Decision

There are plenty of articles published about how to evaluate DTG so I'll summarize the major steps you need to take.

1. Send your own graphics (and any non-t-shirt items you intend to sell) to be test printed, and ask for video of the process. A motivated sales rep will take the time to run them because he or she will perceive that you are serious about buying.
2. View as many demo videos or see a demo in person. Nothing exposes a printer's strengths and weaknesses better than actual production, from file prep to curing.
3. Have a plan. This should include your graphics, your target market, your estimated monthly marketing and promotional expenses, estimated training and practice time and your realistic time commitment to selling.
4. Insist on talking with multiple owners of identical or similar printer models. Ask them for the straight dope on time, learning curve, tech support, materials cost, problem resolution and business building.
5. Insist on including training in your total purchase. This should include detailed troubleshooting steps.
6. Insist on getting prices for all maintenance parts and supplies.



Thanks for your time.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any other questions.

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