

You can have just one...

# At the Single-Head's Helm

BY HEATHER B. FRIED



Always advancing, technology serves to simplify our lives. For that reason, embroidery heads have fused forces to create today's 10, 20, 30-plus multi-headed machines, stitching toward innumerable proportions. But even with such order-cranking capacity, there's still something to be said for simplicity, and in a lot of cases, one head is better than *some*. Here, embroidery equipment makers and marketers marvel at the mono-stitching single-head machine and explain that when it comes to embroidery technology, single-mindedness can be a good thing.

## Stand-alone stitchery

"Any apparel-decoration business that has a need for short-run, high-end customization is a natural fit for a single-head commercial embroidery machine," says SWF East's Don Copeland. "Screen printers who generally farm out embroidery can benefit from having a single-head machine in house to do one-offs, samples and the ever-dreaded short-run re-order—you know, the guy who orders one-hundred forty-four and then comes back six weeks later and needs three more!" Copeland also observes an increasing number of uniform shops bringing embroidery in-house to not only reduce costs, but also to keep control of the process and reduce turn time. "Even large embroidery houses need a single-head machine to do name drops and customization."

Melco's Mike Angel calls the single head a sensible and lucrative investment with a broad diversity of applications that can be fitted specifically for each business. "With the current state of economic times, it's important for a company to be diverse, and single-head embroidery machines offer a path to profitability and growth," says Angel.

One offshoot along that path to profits can be attributed to the single-head's ability to hit the road for onsite opportunities. "Take them off to a fair or any kind of event and run them off of generators," suggests June Mellinger of Brother International Corporation's Home Division. "So now you show up ready to customize something for someone right on the spot. You can't do that with a multi-head machine." Portability, she adds, affords publicity. "Whether they're at the mall or at the horse show, they're out there and getting business like crazy."

As a portable customization station, the single head also makes it an apt space saver, adding a lot to a business without taking up a lot of a business. "With the compact commercial machines on the market today, it is feasible to have a full-powered commercial embroidery machine in a space only slightly larger than a tall filing cabinet," Copeland remarks. "Even the smallest of multi-head machines will take up three or more times the space."

### For whom the head stitches

Another advantageous aspect in the single-head's favor is its adaptability across applications and business models—great news in today's promotional-apparel marketplace where businesses can span a good amount of territory. "The apparel industry lines are becoming blurred as we proceed into the twenty-first century," comments Copeland. "Companies that were historically called embroiderers or screen printers are now known as apparel decorators. Why let your customer walk

down the street for embroidery because you are *just a screen printer*? That company down the street offering embroidery may have added screen printing to their line and you may end up losing that customer's screen print business as well."

Copeland also points out that the promotional-products industry, for years divided into distinct manufacturer, embellisher and retailer groups, is now seeing



Networked single-head machines offer versatility that conventional multi-head machines cannot, according to Melco's Mike Angel. (Image courtesy Melco)

those within the last category adding equipment for short-run decoration. Popular buys at this level include direct-to-substrate printers and single-head embroidery machines. "The average promotional-products reseller is a small home-based business that lends itself well to a single-head embroidery machine, as they take up little space, require only a moderate amount of training to be very functional and actually produce output while the operator goes about his normal work routine," Copeland says.

Angel also notes many different business types adding embroidery services as consumers increasingly demand personalized products and technology makes embroidery production and personalization

easier. "We see embroidery and personalization offered from screen-printing businesses, advertising and promotions businesses, gift stores and internet retailers, to name a few." According to Angel, even those apparel-decoration businesses that go on outsourcing embroidery production can still benefit from producing small orders that garner higher premiums, as well as having the flexibility and speed to produce samples, promotional items and add additional revenue with no minimum quantities of personalized products, all from a single-head's perspective.

### Simple as a sample

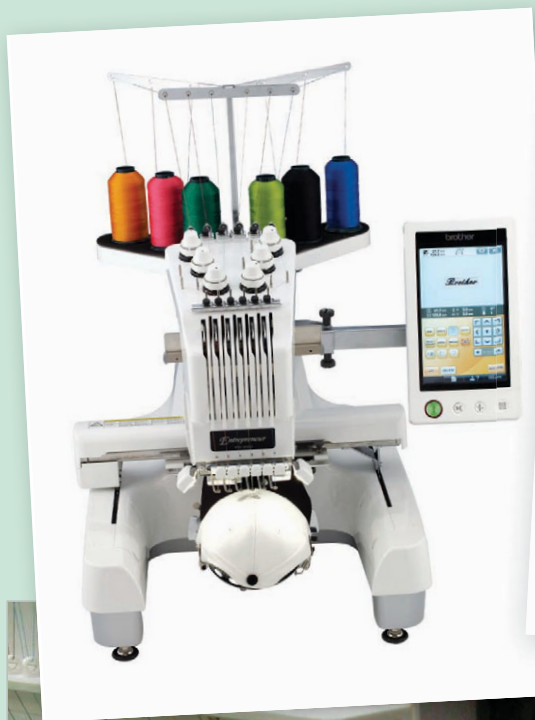
"A single-head embroidery machine is a good tool to add to any apparel-decoration business that either does not offer embroidery or farms it out," Copeland concurs. "It allows for quick turnaround, quick fill-in orders as well as the ability to produce samples prior to taking a large order. In fact,

having a sample in hand when bidding a job can be a deal-clincher in many cases."

For established embroiderers, a single head on board means being able to conduct testing without tying up multi-head machines that should be running bigger jobs, Mellinger points out. "It's quick, it's far less expensive and quality is identical or better," she explains. "So if you're using it for a sample, it's impressive. You don't have to say: 'it will be better, trust me.' The quality is there right from the get-go."

For newbie embroiderers those "far less expensive" price points offer some solace, as most won't yet know if their production

## Single-Head Embroidery



**Far left:** A single-head's portability affords its owner publicity. (Image courtesy Brother International Corporation) **Left:** If a fair amount of business is custom one-off type work, you will be wasting energy and cash by running your multi-head with one or more of the heads turned off, according to Don Copeland. (Image courtesy SWF East)

justifies, and can sustain, a bigger purchase. Copeland explains that a good single-head commercial embroidery machine can be purchased for \$10,000–\$13,000 while quality two-head machines start at around \$20,000 and up.

The day when that initial single head becomes dually dedicated to samples and small orders, making way for an upgrade, depends on a few factors. “When am I ready for that change?” Mellinger asks of multiplying headcount. “I’m only really ready when I can see that I’ve expanded my business to the point where I’m going to have the orders that will help me pay off this machine.”

### Head strong

Copeland is often asked when it makes sense to consider upgrading to a multi head, answering: “Most good commercial embroidery machines will work harder than you will. When proper daily maintenance is done on a commercial embroidery machine, it will work three shifts a day. Problem is, most folks don’t want to work three shifts a day! When you are working more hours than you want to, *that* is the time to look at adding more heads to your operation.” Take, for instance, a single-head machine currently running at 10 hours per day. In Copeland’s estimation, it is safe to assume that same amount of work can be accomplished in a little more than five hours with a two-head, assuming, of course, that most of that work is in multiples of two.

When considering expansion, Mellinger encourages embroiderers to look not only



A new application for single-head machines is mixed or multimedia decoration. Embroidery combined with digital printing, screen printing and/or rhinestone/spangles can be done on various embroidery machines, but is probably easier to register when done on a single head, SWF’s Don Copeland explains. (Image courtesy SWF East)

at order volume and quantity, but also at business from a quality standpoint: "I hear a lot of people saying they've got an order for two or three hundred of something. Where you start to separate the men from the boys is, what's my turn-around time, and what type of job do I want to deliver?"

Similarly, Angel states: "When businesses begin receiving orders that exceed their acceptable delivery times, they can simply add another single head or heads and increase their production output." Angel steers people toward multiple single heads because, when networked, single-head machines offer versatility that conventional multi-head machines cannot. "Independent heads can be configured to handle personalization which is a grow-

ing trend. Multi-head machines are much slower and cannot personalize one product without disabling heads," he explains. He experienced this first hand with New Balance Inc. when the company switched its custom Lace For The Cure shoe production from 90 identical shoes per hour with a 15-multi-head machine, to 100 individual shoes per hour with six single heads.

"Corporate promotion and work apparel represents a large portion of uses for an embroidery machine. However, mass personalization is a growing trend that can only be accomplished with networkable single-head embroidery machines," adds Angel. "Companies are offering just about any product that can be personalized, such as purses, holiday

stockings, wine bags and even pet collars."

Copeland notes that while the amount of embroidery actually done in the U.S. has declined in the past decade (due in large part to a lot of bigger orders going overseas) the demand for short-run, more custom work has grown. "With this growth has come a resurgence in the demand for single-head embroidery machines, which are better-equipped to handle this type of work," he remarks.

Whether an embroidery business is budding, growing to necessitate a network of multiple single heads, employing a massive multi head or functioning as something other than an embroidery business altogether, there will clearly always be a place for the single-head's solitary success. **Pw**

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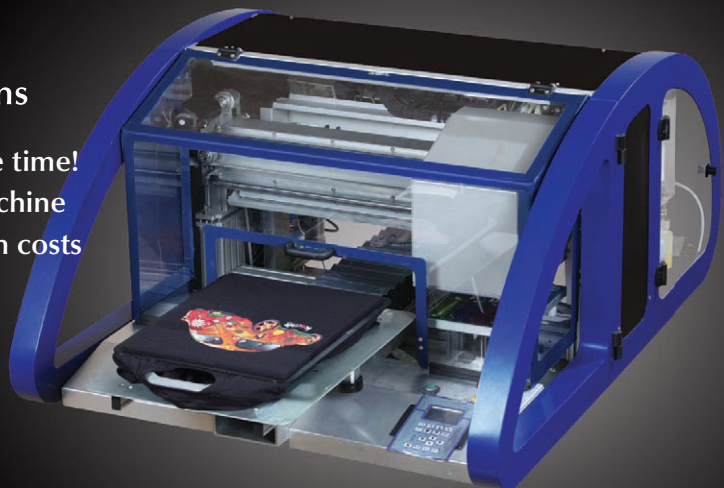
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