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Cotton Expressions, Ltd

Matthew B. Alschuler is a colorful man - and in more ways than one. Armed with over 15,000 Pantone ink colors he has access to, he is owner and president of Cotton Expressions Ltd, a unique, quality, cutting edge design and imprint apparel company.

Tucked into a quiet corner in Warren, Illinois, (population 1,323) his operation has been in business for 45 years, with 20 of it being most recently in Warren's previous Honeywell Micro Switch facility. All 25,000 square feet of it. And while the business was originally in Chicago, Illinois, Matthew said he spent some time in the Apple Canyon Lake area as a kid in the late 1980s, eventually buying a farmhouse there in 1989. In 2006 he stumbled into his new Honeywell location with the space he badly needed.

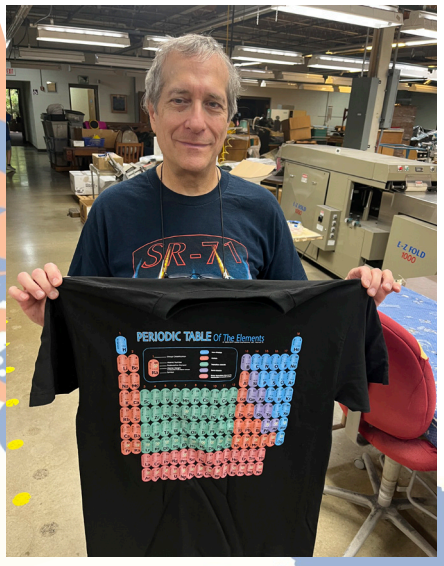
Cotton Expressions prints a wide array of t-shirts, sweatshirts and polo/golf shirts for the general retail masses. However, Matthew points out that there are key things that set them much farther apart than other run of the mill t-shirt printing businesses. With stunning custom made designs for world-renowned museums, planetariums, scientific and astronomical societies across the world, his business is no stranger to the Smithsonian and NASA, both in Washington, D.C.; the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, California Academy of Science in San Francisco, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona, and hundreds of museums worldwide.

"We do everything in house so we can control every little detail," Matthew said.

And it's all very much in the details relates Matthew. Cotton Expressions only uses 100% cotton.The printing screens they use are aluminum and the mesh is a thin, monofilament polyester, much like fishing line, that is specially weaved.

"Our screen mesh comes from Japan and is what's called low elongated," Matthew said. "So once you stretch it the screens stay taught.

"So you can stretch a screen, put it on a shelf, take it down six months later and it still lines up. Most commercial screens, they move, they stretch out - these don't do that."



Cotton Expressions Owner, Mathew Alschuler, shows one of their many intricate, multi-colored and highly detailed oriented t-shirts. This "Periodic Noir" shirt is printed with glow-in-the-dark ink.

What is Pantone?

Pantone is used to ensure precise, consistent, and universally recognized color communication across design, manufacturing, and branding.

Pantone provides a universal language of color, allowing designers, manufacturers, and brands to communicate exact colors without ambiguity. Each Pantone color is assigned a unique code (e.g., Pantone 186 C), so when a designer specifies a color, the manufacturer knows exactly which shade to reproduce, regardless of location or material. This eliminates confusion that arises from subjective color descriptions like "navy blue" or "muted red."

Matthew said he isn't even aware of any American companies that weave the special mesh.

Cotton Expressions contracts the design work out among a variety of designers, although he does have a main designer he uses from Massachusetts who originally spent 14 years in house with him before he moved.

"He knows intimately how to work with me," Matthew said.

Between Covid, crazy, fluctuating tourism patterns and staffing issues because of the pandemic and even the most recent tariffs on imports, Matthew says he has to do business much differently today. What used to be a phone call to a business to sell his products and a resulting order now takes more persistence from Matthew as managers at tourism destinations struggle to find time to even place an order due to their staffing issues and time constraints on their business tasks.

"Places that we've dealt with for years are just not ordering as much, they're not ordering as often," Mathew said. "It takes them so long to order you only get one or two orders a year, where before it would be more like two or three orders a year."

Over the years, Matthew said they have had "hundreds and hundreds" of customers all around the world. In addition to their creative designs, Cotton Expressions also adds value-added components to their customer's order by pre-ticketing and labeling the finished product. Products are also meticulously pre-folded to make it easier for the customer to stock their inventory right out of the box, thus saving them time. And when your staffing is stretched, these options make a big difference to the customer.

The hardest part of the job Mathew says is trying to get a hold of customers and marketing to new potential customers. And since he is also the company's sole sales person, marketer and printer, his challenges are very real.

"People don't answer their phones anymore. They don't respond to text. They answer their email if you're lucky. And these are people who know us, and know what we do, and know that we do well in their places," Matthew said.

Matthew is proud of the quality of his product and his attention to detail, which he says definitely sets him apart from the competition.

"I like being creative. I like coming up with new designs and working with the artists and my art director because we work well together and then figuring out the technology of putting complicated images onto a shirt," Matthew concluded. "And then the end product is just so rewarding."



Matthew and his sole in-house employee for the past 15 years, Marsha Ernst.

The Magic Behind the Man

Cotton Expression has a wide variety of inventory and machines that help run the business: heat dryers, paint mixers, folding machines to name a few. But the most important piece of equipment is the automatic screen press he bought in Chicago for $50,000 when he started the business. Today, Matthew said it would cost at least $100,000.

"I bought it used at a trade show. It was used once by a little old lady who only used it to go to a trade show," Mathew quipped.

It looks very much like a giant metal octopus.

"The most labor intensive part of the job is the setup and getting all the colors to line up, or register," Matthew said.

Set up can take anywhere from one to four hours, again depending on the design, how many colors they are printing and even the air temperature in the room.

"When it's running at full speed, we can do about 12 shirts a minute. Realistically, we can do a case, which is 72 shirts in about 10 minutes. It also depends on the designs as some prints slower than others, especially if you're dealing with an eight color design," he said.

Cotton Expressions

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