

Production Efficiencies

Q: I have a four-head machine now, and need to up my production. What's the most cost-efficient way to do that?

■ **Add a shift.** "I've always liked using one-and-a-half shifts when I've needed additional production," says Deborah Jones, owner of MyEmbroideryMentor.com. "It's much easier to find qualified part-time help who can work until, say, 9 or 10 in the evening." This allows an operator from another company to help you out part-time and gives your production a big boost.

■ **Maintain your machine.** "Many times, machines are neglected, and over time they lose efficiency," says Jim Weter, owner of United Thread. "During this time, rotary hooks get scratched, thread guides wear, the trimming system probably needs adjusting and so on. The machine might seem to be running OK, but is it running as good as it was when it was new? Having a machine technician check over a machine once or twice a year and fine-tune it will help keep it running efficiently. A machine that produces 10%, 20% even 30% or more than it was producing is free money."

■ **Use top-notch materials.** Using higher-quality thread, bobbins and backing can also allow your machine to run with fewer thread breaks, making it more efficient. "It's easy to only look at the cost of supplies when they're purchased, but what is the true cost of supplies when you factor in the cost of a thread break?" Weter says. "If spending a little bit more on supplies allows for more productivity off the same machine, the increased output not only pays for the difference in cost, it puts more money in your pocket because the same machine is producing more."

■ **Find a contractor.** Every embroidery company should build a working relationship with a larger embroidery contractor. "This will provide the backup support for those larger orders while building the confidence in handling them," Bernstein says. "In today's world, contractors are slowly changing over to do direct work. If you don't have the capital, then you have to build a good relationship with someone you trust and then use them for your larger jobs."

Q: I want to offer clients screen printing, sublimation, digital printing and heat transfers in addition to embroidery, but I don't currently have that equipment. What should I do?

■ **Size up your intended market.** "Any good business plan needs to establish an intentional growth of product program," Bernstein says. "You have to get a plan of how you're going to expand. Determine your market, focus your market and then have a plan on how you're expanding your market development."

■ **Create a partnership.** Successful embroiderers typically

find one or two companies to partner with that have the equipment they don't have. "They create a two-way partnership where they help each other capture more business," Weter says. "For example, an embroidery company might find a screen printer close by that they can contract screen-printing work out to. The screen printer needs to teach them all the basics of screen printing so that they can sell screen printing as if it was being done in-house. The second part of the partnership allows the screen printer to contract their embroidery business to them."

■ **Don't mess around with low-quality machines.** "When you decide that it's time to begin adding your own equipment, a high-quality heat press should possibly be your first addition," Jones says. Resist the temptation to buy less-expensive imported models or used machines, as they could let you down in a crunch or produce uneven heat, resulting in an inferior product. "Start out right with an entry-level model from a recognized brand-name company," Jones says.

Q: I have a small space for production and a showroom. How do I make the most out of a small space?

■ **Start from scratch.** First of all, empty out your work space down to the floors and walls. "Nothing goes there that you don't use 10 times a day," Cox says. "If you're not holding an item every hour, it shouldn't go in there. It's prime real estate; you can't afford to give it away, especially when space is at a premium."

■ **Take advantage of walls.** "Use your wall space for everything you reach for regularly," Cox says. "Items should be from chest to head height on a wall."

■ **Use an apron.** Wear all the tools you can safely keep on an apron. "The apron with six pockets on the front that ties in the back – I love that," Cox says. "It looks dorky but it's effective."

■ **Consolidate.** Make your showroom partly a production room, as well. "Customers are always fascinated by watching embroidery machines run, so you can actually maximize your space by adding a production area," says Steve Freeman, owner of Qdigitizing.com (*asi/700501*). "It forces people to be very neat and clean so it doesn't look like mayhem, but it allows you to maximize a small amount of space."

■ **Think small machines.** "Interestingly enough, many of the new embellishment formats require very little space," Bernstein says. "Here at the Solution Studio, we have a small room with a single-head embroidery machine, a hooping station and a direct-to-garment printer. That would satisfy a high market segment of programming."