

Pressing Potential

A Beginner's Look at Buying an Automatic Press

BY SANDRA SEPANIAK

Many screen printers have a moment where they realize their shops can't keep up with a requested turnaround time. That's when some will start to look for an automatic screen-printing press that they can fit into their shop setup to increase their production. But, when it comes to finding a press to suit their shop's needs, some owners might not know where to start.

Automatic presses can be a lifesaver for shops trying to fill large orders and make production easier. Plus, with dozens of models designed for users across all levels of experience available in multiple sizes, there are plenty of options. It's all a matter of knowing what works best with your shop and setup.

You may have to make sure that the rest of your shop, including your electrical and plumbing systems, can accommodate for an automatic screen-printing press once you're ready to acquire one. (Image courtesy Workhorse Products)

KNOWING THE TIME TO BUY

For some decorators, the moment they realize they need to upgrade to an automatic press can come in a few different ways. It could happen if you are thinking about adding a second or third manual press to accommodate your increasing workflow. It could also happen when you get an order so large that it's the only thing your manually-operated shop can work on for several days at a time. If not even one client can be squeezed in for a quick job during that time, explains Glen Carliss, M&R, it might be time to enter the market for an automatic press.

According to Tyler Dummett, Workhorse Products, the moment might also come when manual labor begins to take its toll on you or your employees. Operating a manual screen-print-

ing press can be very hard on the body, especially the joints in the wrists and arms, he explains. Investing in an automatic could come as a physical relief, potentially sparing you and your employees from injuries. What's more, it could also mean the ability to take time off that would have otherwise been sacrificed in the past, or even reduce the amount of hours you have to work each week.

Sometimes, even the number of employees working at your shop could be a deciding factor, explains Matt Babcock, Brown Manufacturing Group. He notes that some well-established companies might invest in a manual press when they determine that they have enough work for both an additional manual press and another employee. On the other hand, some owners/operators might start looking for an automatic press when they decide they can no longer do everything at once.





Ultimately, most suppliers agree that it might be time to bring in an automatic press if you want to consistently cover bigger jobs while decreasing the amount of manual labor involved.

“An automatic press opens up opportunities to bring in work that you would have never thought of taking on,” says Carliss. “It reduces your labor costs, decreases printer fatigue, reduces frustration with sloppy registration on an old manual press, and gives you the ability to get multi-color jobs up and running using a pre-registration system.”

PERKS AND PITFALLS

Overall, the work involved in screen printing can become much easier with the use of an automatic press. The machine can accommodate much larger orders than a manual, but are reportedly faster and with more consistent registration over time. In fact, almost any garment that can be run on a manual can be run on an automatic press.

Babcock notes that automatic presses will always be best suited to large runs, but as the equipment’s technology evolves, he says that even smaller orders are becoming reasonable to run on an automatic press.

Not to mention, by investing in an automatic press, you may help to lower your shop’s expenses. Dummett explains that you might not necessarily have to hire a new employee in order to operate the automatic press. As a matter of fact, the system is so hands-off compared to manual presses that it could help keep long-term labor costs down as well.

“One automatic press can allow one operator to run the production of two, and sometimes three, manual presses,” Babcock says. He elaborates, saying that a shop with only one employee or an owner/

operator could do the production of twice or three times as many people, keeping the payroll down as well.

On the other hand, Dummett notes that there are improvements in print quality that can come with investing in an automatic press rather than sticking only with a manual, since there isn’t a human operator constantly involved.

“If I’m a person pulling a squeegee, my print at 8 a.m. could look different than a print at 5 p.m.,” Dummett explains. Fatigue could set in over the course of the

day, causing the angle and the pressure of the squeegee to change over time, affecting the quality of the printed garments by the end of the shift.

An automatic press could eliminate all of those factors by providing a repeated process. According to Dummett, that can help ensure all of your decorated garments look exactly the same, improving consistency in quality and allowing you to move into more detailed work.

Furthermore, automatic presses reportedly require relatively little maintenance.

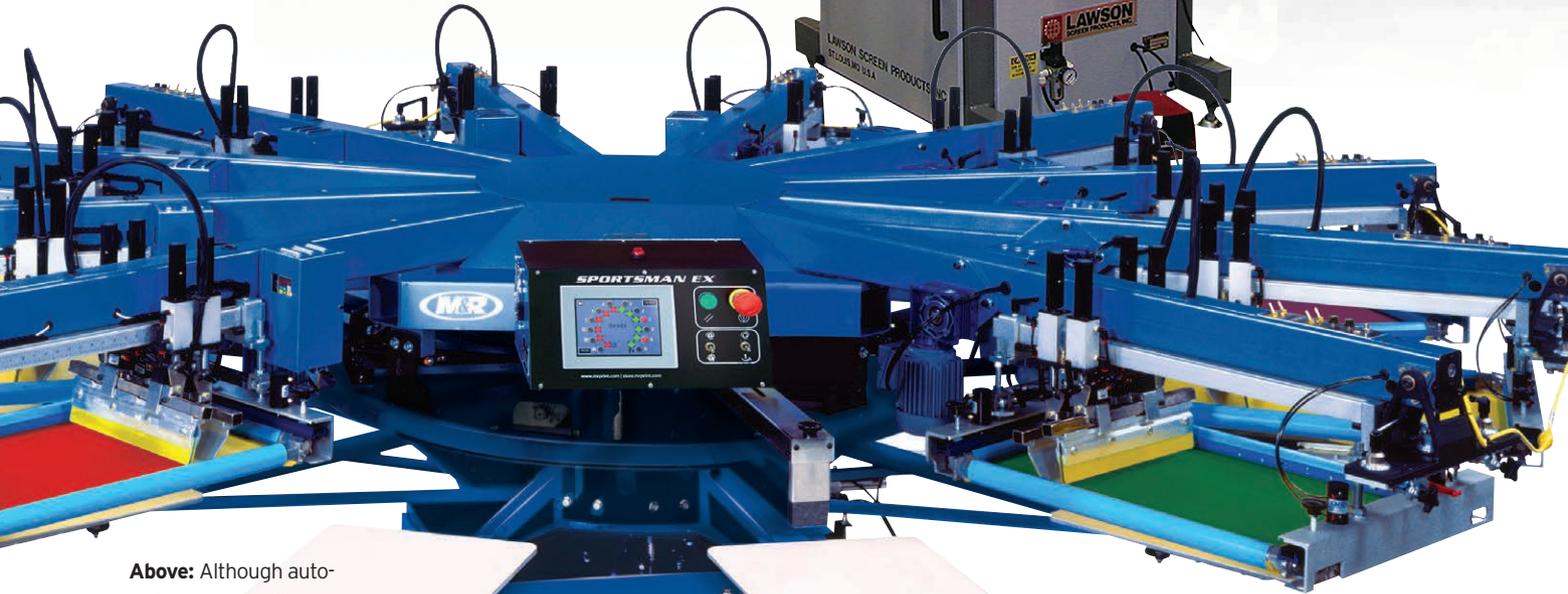
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Right: Automatic screen-printing presses can be quite an investment, but they can also enable your shop to take on much larger orders. (Image courtesy Lawson Screen & Digital Products)



Above: Although automatic presses will always be best suited for larger jobs, they are becoming more versatile and capable of printing on even shorter runs. (Image courtesy M&R Companies)



Below: While they can be expensive, there are financing options for automatic screen-printing presses, like loans, subsidies, and leasing. (Image courtesy Brown Manufacturing Group)





Carliss reports that most of the maintenance tasks to keep the machine running can be broken down into daily, weekly, biweekly, and monthly routines. Most tasks involve cleaning and lubricating the machine, and he adds that they typically only take a few minutes to complete.

Before you warm up too much to the idea of never pulling a squeegee by hand again, there are a few situations in a production shop where manual presses are still a necessity. Dummett states that a manual press can be beneficial for pre-press work, such as making sure the artwork going onto the garment is ready for production and checking for any neces-

sary minor adjustments before a major job.

Those aren't the only cases where you might want to have both a manual and an automatic screen-printing press, either. For instance, if you're only making a few samples or filling very small orders, using a manual press might be a more economical choice than preparing your automatic press for such a short run.

Plus, keeping a manual press on hand could also mean being able to run industrial items that require a special jig or holding device, Carliss says. Manual presses are also more accommodating of specialty products, various substrates, and ink formula-

tions that would be difficult to set up and print on an automatic press. For instance, Babcock explains that specific types of print jobs, like athletic numbering, require a manual press due to the customization of each garment.

Upgrading to an automatic screen-printing press might also mean overhauling your shop in order to accommodate an increased workflow. Dummett and Carliss point out that you may also have to make sure your utility setups can handle the power of an automatic press—for example, if you have a single-phase electrical power system like most homes and businesses, you might need to switch to

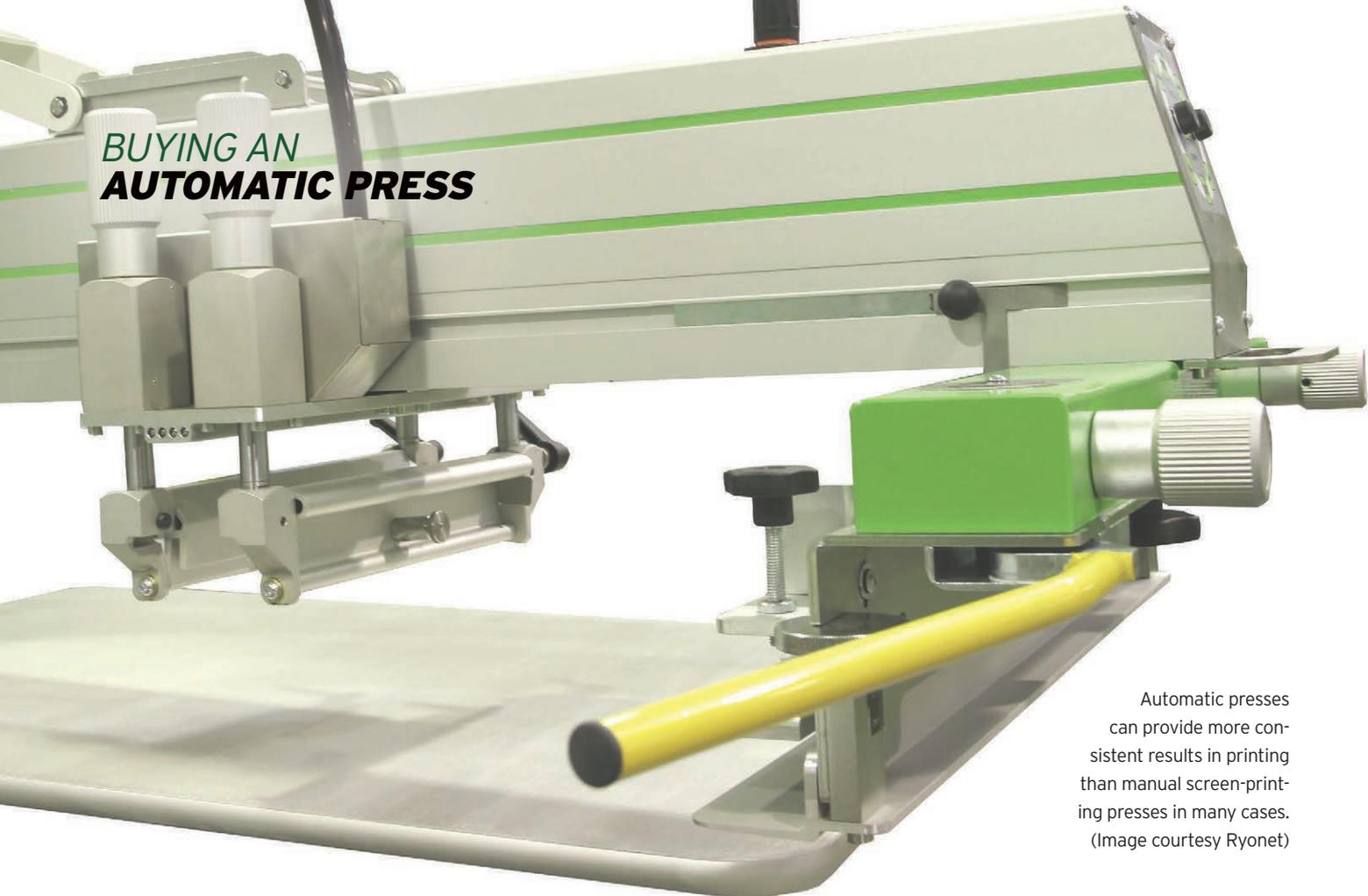
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Automatic presses can provide more consistent results in printing than manual screen-printing presses in many cases. (Image courtesy Ryonet)

three-phase to compensate for the machine's huge amperage draw and to help it operate properly, as well as keeping your utility bill reasonable. Your plumbing system might need a similar adjustment.

Likewise, your shop setup could need to have an upgrade of its own. With the higher production volume that often comes with an automatic screen-printing press, you might have to invest in an exposure unit that can accommodate the larger screens that automatic presses often take. The dryer you use with your manual press might not be able to handle the extra workload brought on by an automatic press either, causing a bottleneck in the middle of production.

SUBVERTING STICKER SHOCK

If after reading this article you decide to look at the prices of automatic presses, you might find that some can be very expensive. In fact, it's not unusual for many to run in the five-figure range. Before that becomes a deal breaker, there are options other than shelling out thousands of dollars outright. Getting a loan from your bank or leasing the press are other approaches you may be able to take.

While paying might seem overwhelming at first, it can be done affordably if your output is large enough. Using the figure of \$50,000 on a 60-month lease for an automatic screen-printing press, Carliss explains that the average monthly payment would amount to about \$1,000.

"It is important to break things down a little to get a better understanding of the benefits you will realize with an automatic press," Carliss explains.

There is also a common misconception that in order to be able to afford an automatic press, it needs to be running all day, every day. According to Carliss, that isn't the case. Revisiting the \$1,000 monthly lease, he explains that if you make a profit of \$1 for each shirt, for example, you would need to print 1,000 shirts in one month to cover your lease payment. Since an automatic press can print anywhere from 500–1,000 shirts in an eight-hour day, with three or four setups, the leasing price can be easily justified. The only caveat is that you have to maintain a reasonable sales volume.

To help make that possible, Babcock figures that an additional three to five jobs each month would help cover the monthly

lease payment while both keeping up with existing orders and adding new clients to your portfolio.

The financing options don't end there. Small business loans are available, in addition to personal loans. Municipal and state incentives also exist in some areas to establish businesses in development zones or to hire more local employees.

At the end of the day though, choosing an automatic screen-printing press that works for you comes down to much more than just the price tag.

"Most manufacturers of automatic presses have overlapping models at different price points," Carliss says. "It is important to make sure you choose a press that will handle current needs, but will also allow you to grow in the future and branch out into different market segments."

There are plenty of decisions you have to make if you want to upgrade to an automatic press. You just have to make sure you know all of your options. Be prepared to ask equipment suppliers plenty of questions, be aware of what other accommodations you might have to make for your shop, and make sure you're aware of all financing possibilities. The rest is up to you. 