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How to Set-up Art for Vinyl Cutting

Cutting Vinyl, whether for heat applied apparel, family stick figures, or for tons of other uses, has a relatively short learning curve. It can be fun while providing a wide variety of application to your clients. There are great profit margins in vinyl work once you figure out the basics and apply a few key steps to your design and production process.

Recognizing the huge benefit of working with Vector art, small and large imprint shops agree that simply setting up cuttable graphics can save a ton of time. Having the ability to quickly apply a basic design to signage or apparel substrates can be an immediate addition to any production shop, or effective enough to base a whole business on. Here are some key concepts and steps to make sure you're staying efficient when it comes to Vinyl Cutting Artwork.

As with all pre-production steps, the more information regarding your client's expectations the better. An un-informed customer might assume that a digital print is the same as a vinyl applied banner. Or the inside hand on a thin Tee will feel the same as a thick Sweatshirt after applied. Make sure you gather as much information as you can about your customer, their art, and what they want the result to be.

Most often we start our jobs with a logo from the client. Make sure you are capable of doing some basic bitmap to vector tracing yourself, or at least inhouse. Why send a job to a designer, or wait & pay to outsource something so simple you could do in minutes? Control as much of the job and the results as you can yourself. This is less relevant for large shops but will make the difference in a 2% growth year, over a 12% growth year.

Try to simplify the art as much as you can before you perform your trace. Quite often, especially when setting art up for simple processes, converting to a lower resolution bitmap with a lower Color Mode, will give straighter lines & curves with fewer resulting nodes. I know this may sound counter-intuitive at first. Pushing your design program to give you as much detail as possible is not necessarily best. Trust me, when it comes to simple imprint production, or cutting, we'd prefer the trace program assume more for us than just see all the detail, steps, colors etc. For example a nice round curved area in the logo, or a nice straight edge, lets the program to assume those features instead of going into every little nook and cranny. Consider re-drawing some of the basic shapes in the logo yourself. Use your Crop tools with copy/pasting to separate part(s) of the image. You may only need to trace a section of it while you can simply draw other part(s) yourself. Ever looked at our American flag? A rectangle, a square, a square in thirteen stripes and fifty stars. Align & Distribute appropriately. Sounds pretty easy when I put it like that eh?



Either in Corel-PowerTrace or Illustrator perform your trace on the simplified version of your design, or its parts. You'll want to reduce colors as much as you can inside the trace but remember that once it's all vectorized it is very easy to Weld pieces of the design back together. Consider becoming a member at CorelTrainer.com for access to tons of videos, and recorded seminars on this topic plus a great many more.

If a logo is not provided, the client will tell us what they are looking for. Once again, it is important to make sure you are both on the same page, as far as art and application. I recommend using virtual proofs as often as possible. Think proper expectations.

Clipart can help with parts of the design you're building / re-building. This roots back to your original conversation with the client. "I have almost exactly the same Viking mascot, and it's production ready, so I won't have to charge you an art fee." Be straight forward and ask the customer: "Can I use a similar Flag in the background?" These quick questions can save you hours of work. Most clients will want to tell you to use their exact logo. Just remind them that their file, or business card, or cell phone pic, is not production ready and that "some art fees apply." Present the alternative(s) as an improvement. Mention the other imprint processes you can provide for them once their art is of a better quality. This turns the conversation about their poor quality image into an upsell opportunity.

When researching and purchasing stock artwork 'clipart', remember that vector line art is not all created to the quality we need for cutting vinyl, design and production. "Scalable Vector Graphic" and "Encapsulated PostScript", learn these terms. Ideally with very limited colors, with very limited nodes.

Also consider finding free parts or less expensive versions of the client's logo via an internet search. A much simpler 'Viking' .jpeg in black & white may serve you much better than a pic of an old tee shirt. I recommend DuckDuckGo for image searching in our industry. Be careful with copywritten material though. I'll be happy to point readers in a couple directions via email; ClayB@TrainingInCorel.com

When several vector layers are on top of each other they often interfere creating unwanted cut lines. Familiarize yourself with the Shaping tools, often found in the property bar of your design software as a short-cut. Learn the difference between Weld, Trim, Simplify, Intersect etc. Or, as I tell my members; just click on one, if it doesn't do what you want, go back and click the next. Corel remembers 150 undo steps.





Some cutters, lasers, and digital print/cut machines require an outline on all art, as a specific color, in order to identify a cut line or "kiss-cut". Other lines and colors may be seen as alternative functions, such as print, burn/depth, or draw. Most require the outline to be defined as hairline thickness. All necessary color palettes can be installed from the corresponding Workspace or Window options in good design software. Obviously, I recommend every shop have CorelDRAW GS.

Make sure your art is production ready before sending to your cutter. Shapes and text should be Converted to Curves, though not all require this, it is good practice for most export applications. Remove all your Outlines or 'strokes', or Convert them to additional Objects, as Scaling with Object is probably not relevant for cutting vinyl. Size your resulting vector image appropriately. Keep in mind how difficult tiny detail will be to weed out, while knowing what is too small to be legible anyway. We, as imprint shop owners and managers, more often have a need for perfection than our clients who have little to no knowledge about our industry. Decide how much 'perfection' and your time is necessary to keep the client happy. A++ work is often overlooked.

If you run into issues while learning these steps, reach out to your equipment company or additional training resources online, at an event, or on-site with them. Personally, I answer dozens of questions each week, not all from members of my website. Remember why you are in the imprint industry. Have fun with it, make some money, and keep learning.

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Some of the information in this periodical article may be out-dated, including contact vitals:

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