



# WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SURVIVE?

By Kent Lind PART 1 OF 2

**A**LTHOUGH I STILL GET MANY TECHNICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT how to airbrush T-shirts, the recent trend of inquiry has been much more geared to business survival. Lately, many people have seen a decrease in their discretionary incomes, the money they spend on whatever they want. To me this is evident in foot traffic at the amusement parks and malls where I work. Whatever your situation, I'm sure you've noticed a fall-off in consumer spending as well.

Recently, I had two phone calls in one week from individuals in Virginia and Wisconsin describing to me their difficulties staying in business. Both have had years of experience airbrushing on all types of surfaces and in all types of settings, but now they are hard pressed to make a go of it.

"What should I do?" was the bottom-line question. >>

To answer, I can only draw on my own experience. For although attendance and foot traffic are issues at the parks where I'm located (Valleyfair and Nickelodeon Universe in Minnesota and Six Flags in St. Louis), my sales and per-caps are either holding strong or going up in all three locations. How is this possible? With all of the challenges consumers face today, how am I able to thrive? The answer lies in continual growth and adaptation; I'm constantly looking for ways to improve my operation and my work.

To best answer questions of business survival requires a comprehensive approach. So although I'd need to write a book to cover them, I'm at least going to glance here at the main strengths of my operation. Just a few issues back, I outlined some of the business aspects: booth location and layout, display layout, order forms, and so on. Now I'm going to focus more on the front line of attack: the types of shirts and peripheral items to offer, required equipment and materials, hot new design trends, the approach to selling, and the overall look of the operation. You see, I'm dedicated not only to my own business but to the entire airbrush T-

shirt industry; if I can aid the industry, in the long run I'll aid myself. Let's get busy.

The first thing is the airbrush itself. I've used pretty much every kind of T-shirt brush out there and have settled on what I think is

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the best: the Iwata Eclipse HP-BCS. Simply put, it is a dependable work horse. Its performance is second to none in the T-shirt world, and it's made by a reputable and forward-thinking company out to advance the airbrush industry as a whole. The price is actually middle of the road, but it is definitely top of the line among T-shirt airbrushes. I like to operate with 12 to 15 airbrushes. I find that's enough to maintain excellent speed and not be overwhelmed in terms of cost, space, or maintenance. The best sources for the

Eclipse and its replacement parts are Coast Airbrush, of Anaheim, California, Dixie Art, of New Orleans, and a couple of others.

Next is the matter of paint. Anyone who's followed this column knows I'm a big proponent of Createx textile paint. Their dedication to continual improvement of their product line and willingness to listen to artists were what attracted me to them initially and kept me coming back. And now, after a year and a half of working with Terry Hill and Craig Kennedy at Createx, I am honored and excited to introduce their line of Wicked™ paint. I hinted at its performance in the last issue, where I wrote about the white I used on airbrushed boots. Craig recently sent me the finished formula to test, and it's perfect. I've tried it on T-shirts, hard surfaces, paper, cardboard, pella—you name it—and couldn't have been happier. As for the kind of line I can pull with this white, I set up a piece of mat board, and after two continuous minutes of swirls, daggers, thick-to-pencil-thin lines and thinner, with no breaks and virtually no tip dry, and without ever stopping paint flow, I was convinced. The paint comes out with a powdery look and feel, with sharp edges. Of course I also painted a quick design to check covering ability; after all, great flow without great opacity doesn't mean much. And, as expected (given 18 months of tests and re-tests), the covering ability is fantastic. I haven't been this excited about a paint since I started airbrushing 21 years ago. Don't take

my word for it, judge for yourself. Not incidentally, you can buy the new Wicked line from Coast Airbrush.

Products like these are great, but you also need to understand how to use them. As I always say, unless you're ready to be successful you won't be. What separates my business from those that are struggling? It comes down to just a few points.

First, you have to be good at everything. I know that many artists can do one or a few things very well: this guy paint portraits like



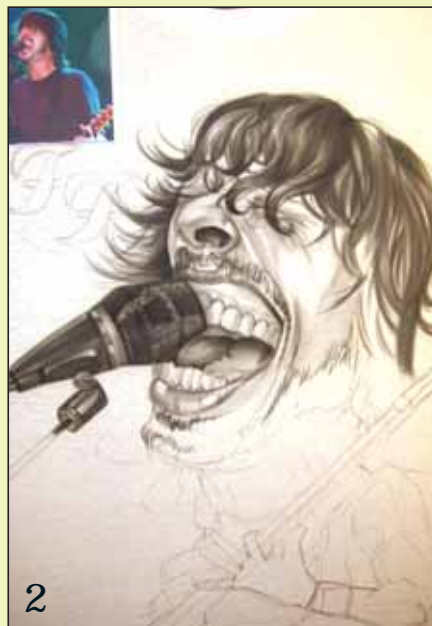


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nobody else, that girl can really paint cartoon characters, this dude is off the hook at graffiti. But nine times out of ten that's all they can do. The rest of their work suffers by comparison. There is, of course, room for these people in a niche market, and many do wonderfully within that market. But we're talking about surviving in the airbrush T-shirt world. For that you've got to be good at it all—portraits, caricatures, lettering, cars, bikes, animals, cartoons, etc. This is where most people fail. Many artists are better than me at those things separately, but I know of very few who are superior in all. This does not mean you have to be great at painting on everything. It's a popular misconception that an airbrush artist must know how to paint on T-shirts, walls, cars and cycles, mailboxes—whatever. That doesn't hurt, but at some point you need to focus on one. The assumption here is that your niche market is the T-shirt, but you need to know how to paint any and all types of subject matter within that framework. That's really the thrust of what you're going to see in the step-by-steps that follow. I'm attempting to set a standard here for the subject matters that must be mastered if you're going to make a go of T-shirt airbrushing.

Second is the manner in which you display, advertise and sell your ability to do it all. I know display is extremely important and has been covered by many other

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### CARICATURE:

The caricature is not a huge staple of my business in terms of quantity. So why include it in the list of top designs? The reason is its ability to attract customers, based on artistic difficulty and the readily recognizable figure. People are drawn to what, or whom, they know. If you recognize your subject in the caricature, chances are someone else will, too; and they will at the very least come over for a closer look.

As subjects for caricature, choose people you find interesting. I've always been a fan of the Foo Fighters and couldn't think of a better person to caricature than their lead man, Dave Grohl. I've seen the Foo a few times in concert, and the one thing that really stuck out was Dave's energy when he's singing. To



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get that energy across was the most important element in picking a reference. I came across the image below on Google and thought it fit the bill perfectly. And what caricature of Grohl would be complete without him banging away on his guitar? With the layout complete in my head, and my references ready, it was time to get to the fun stuff.

### DAVE GROHL 1:

In any attempt to convey Dave's energy, the shape of his head and how it relates to his hair jump out right away. His nostrils flair and he also has pretty formidable choppers, all of which contributes to the aforementioned energy level. His mouth extends downward, but his jaw remains small. I used the top pic-



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ture as the main reference, but I also like to keep a secondary angle to help me mentally round out the face.

### DAVE GROHL 2:

Here's the completed drawing with the first layer of color. I chose to keep the palette black and white, and all shades in between, and focus the color on the background with a bit bleeding into the figure. The first color was medium grey with a squirt of white and just a few drops of light brown. You've got to remember to treat this initial color as though it's the only one you're using to complete every aspect of the figure.

### DAVE GROHL 3:

I took that initial color and added more Wicked Black and a few drops of dark brown to give more value. The idea was to build on what I already had to create as much depth as possible. Also, notice I'd been working on the peripheral items as well, like his clothing, guitar, and microphone. Elements such as these are important to the overall feel of your piece.

### DAVE GROHL 4:

Here's the completed mono-chromatic figure, without the highlights. The last color in the figure was roughly half medium gray, one third Wicked Black, and a squirt of dark brown blended to constitute the darkest color. It was added to dark existing areas for more depth. Remember to reference your photo often!

### DAVE GROHL 5:

Now it was time for the background. I'd already decided I wanted the palette to be blue, so I planned accordingly. Before starting, I sprayed a few pieces of wax paper with adhesive for a mask to cover the figure. Using an X-Acto blade, I cut around the figure and the Foo Fighter's FF logo, which I included to offset the figure itself. A word of caution: use only light pressure to cut around the figure; a heavy hand will shred the shirt. I started with a mixture of Brite Blue and Fluorescent Yellow, with a squirt of white for the lightest color, added depth with Brite Blue, then finished off the effect with a mixture of Brite Blue, deep blue, and a few drops of black. I also did a fade within the FF logo.

### DAVE GROHL 6:

Here's the completed background with the paper pulled away. You might get residue from the adhesive, so look for it. If you find any, it's



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authorities in terms of what to paint, quantity, location, pricing, etc. But what's equally important, and really hasn't been looked at extensively, is the way you move your product. Allow me to elaborate. This summer I was talking to my supervisor at Valleyfair about the way things are going at the park and, specifically, at my location. After mulling it over, we both concluded that the booth was about as effective and diversified, and as saturated with designs and display, as the space would allow.

"So what's the deal? Why are some days busier than others?" I asked.

He answered that, based solely on sales figures, he could tell me what days I, or my assistant, or both of us work, without looking at our schedules. It took me a few minutes to understand what he was saying.

"If you want the booth to perform better, you'll have to work every day yourself," he explained.

Then it hit me. My ability to connect with the customer is what drives sales, my gift of gab some might call it. I call it reading what customers want and directing them towards an actual sale. I put myself out there and talk to people. Yet, that can be harder than it sounds. I try to instruct all of my artists to be this way, but results are mixed. Some get it, others don't. A simple "Hi, how's your day going?" might be all it takes for a customer to stay a few minutes longer and decide to buy. "Let me know if there's anything you need" is so simple yet effective for creating a connection, it's scary. Trust me. Of course, knowing this without the skill to deliver on it will seriously hinder sales. Again, success goes back to being able to do it all.

Now that we've got the selling attitude down, plus the inventory that goes with it, what do we do? It's crunch time; here's where performance and the skill to deliver come into play. I'll say it again: you've got to be able to do it all! So, next, I'm going to run through what "doing it all" might look like in terms of styles. The step-by-steps I've included cover merely the rudiments for each, but that should give you enough to grab onto and run with. Here are the two of the style categories you need to excel at, a sample of each, and why they're top dogs.

Caricature continued from page 53

easy enough to pull off using tape. It will further reduce when you heat-set the shirt.

### DAVE GROHL 7: ( AND CLOSE-UP PHOTO 8 )

Finally, the completed design! I used Wicked White to add further depth and secondary lighting. I achieved the lighting by referencing my photo and understanding where the light was coming from. The hair was the coolest effect. This is where the performance of the new Wicked White really shone. I was able to spray fine line after fine line in the hair, with virtually no line breaks and without having to stop to clean my tip.

### LETTERING:

Never underestimate the selling effect of well painted lettering. Here I'm going to give you just a small taste of style, paying close attention to application and composition.

You've seen the two styles here before; the twist is that I did them in exactly the same color palette. Why? Well, these styles and complementing colors are huge sellers for me. The slash style and tag style sell neck and neck and

The covering ability was perfect, and I was able to range from subtle to completely opaque. After the initial white overlay, all I had to do was add Fluorescent Green for the desired effect. I also added a little atmospheric out-of-focus lighting to complete the rock star look.

Remember that the power of the caricature in your display comes from its ability to attract people to the familiar. However, in your display as a whole, try to have as diverse a look as you can, ranging from complex, as in this one, to simpler, with only the face and a limited background. Pricing on caricatures will range from about \$35 to \$95. ■

definitely compete with the all-powerful script. Also, I wanted to give you a look that maybe you hadn't thought of for your current display. The colors were Pearl Silver, Wicked Black, and white. It was that simple. Many of you may not have pearl colors in your arsenal. I like to keep Pearl Silver and Pearl Gold on hand; you'd be surprised how many schools have gold or silver as one of their principal colors. At any rate, it pays to have both at the ready.



### TAG STYLE:

This style really ties into the hip hop culture, where it is very popular. I applied it in block style rather than as a straight print to give you another look.

### TAG STYLE 1:

First I laid out the lettering with the Pearl Silver. Remember to keep it flowing and to give it some flair.

### TAG STYLE 2:

Next I outlined and shaded with the Wicked Black. This was the most difficult step. Keep your lines clean and try to move at a consistent rate around the letters. I also added depth by fading with the Wicked Black down from the top.

### TAG STYLE 3:

The outside of the letters is really whatever you're feeling.





I like to do a swirl pattern that has somewhat of a pinstripe effect. This is probably the most popular look for us lately, for it spans name, heart, and cartoon designs.

**TAG STYLE 4:**

The last step was to highlight the design. Remember that less is more, and keep your white really clean and tight. This look is

extremely effective (not to mention quick) in that the price is generally \$20, including the shirt. ✖

**Continued next issue!**

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