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# UPHOLSTERY JOURNAL

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## Design trends

Hot fabric and cool furniture  
attract new customers

Custom printed fabric  
provides unique  
opportunities

Expert pattern  
matching adds value

Market to the next  
generation





# The fine print\*

\*Digitally printing custom fabric gives your customers a fresh, unique approach to fabric design.

by Holly O'Dell

The ability to customize is affecting every aspect of society. We drive cars with personalized touches. We individualize applications for our mobile devices. We create distinct designs for our clothing and accessories. The same concept holds true for our homes. For homeowners who want to add a signature touch to their interiors, upholsterers can fit the bill by offering one-of-a-kind digitally printed custom fabric for residential furnishings—and for their commercial customers, too.

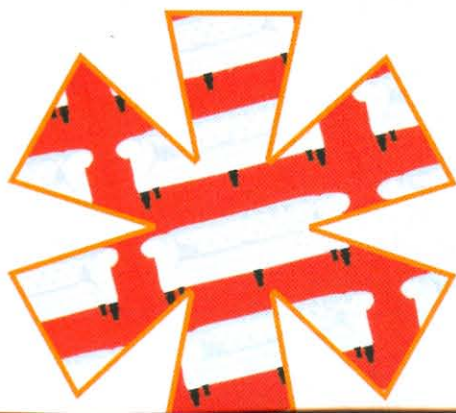
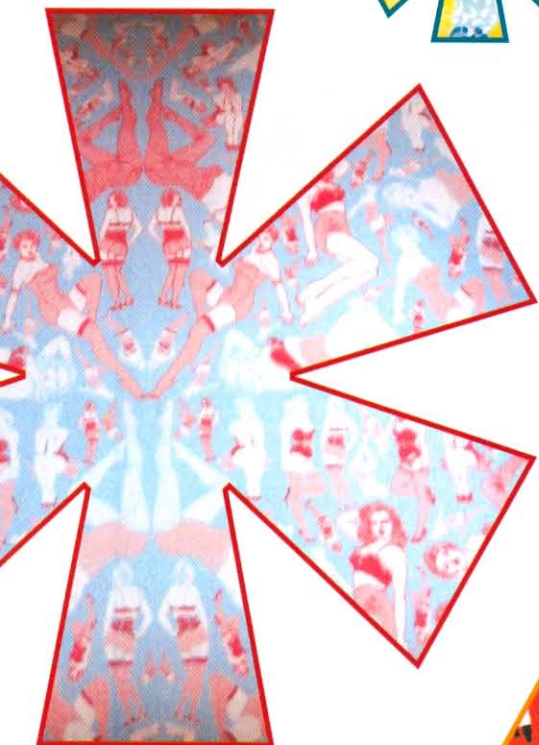
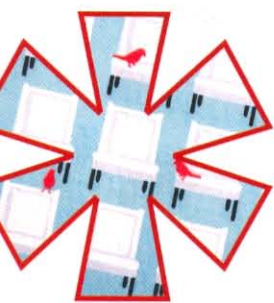
“The days of looking like you or your home came out of a catalog are gone,” says Danielle Locastro, director of operations for First2print in New York, N.Y. “Many people are looking for that special something that adds personal meaning to their décor.”

“Custom printing fabrics is both affordable and accessible,” adds Rysa Pitner, co-founder of online-based Fabric on Demand, Los Angeles, Calif. “The process makes it easy for designers to distinguish their goods from those widely available in the market.”

Perhaps the best part of all is that you don't have to be an accomplished graphic artist or printing expert to digitally print upholstery fabrics. We outline the benefits of this emerging field, explain the process and discuss potential challenges so that upholsterers can start offering this on-demand option to their customers.

## Advantages abound

Digital fabric printing is ideal for both residential and commercial upholstery applications for several reasons. One is that upholsterers can create furnishings that are unlike any other. In terms of design, “you can do whatever you want,” says Scott Jeffreys, co-founder of Karma Kraft, a digital fabric printing company with offices in Raleigh, N.C., and operations in Hangzhou, China. “If you want to make fabric for a chair with your dog's picture on it, you can do it. There is really no limit to custom printed fabric.”





Besides the ability to customize, digital printing requires no yardage minimums, meaning you only have to print what you need. "With traditional printing, you have to make so much fabric because you have to find enough people who like it and buy it to make it an economical proposition," says Andy Graven, president of Custom Printed Fabrics in Chester, S.C. "In the case of digital printing, if you only need two yards of a fabric, you make two yards. It's a different way of fulfilling a need in the marketplace."

End results also tend to be much better with digital printing, as opposed to alternative methods such as rotary or flatbed screens. "With digital printing, you don't lose any detail," Graven adds. Additionally, using the digital printing method reduces proofing time from weeks to hours. In fact, many print studios can fulfill digitally printed fabric orders within a week after receiving the final design, thus offering an on-demand service with very quick turnaround times.

What's more, many printers will archive your design should you need to reorder a fabric run in the future. "One of the big advantages of digital printing is that we can reproduce the exact same color time after time," Graven says. "There won't be an issue of color mismatch."

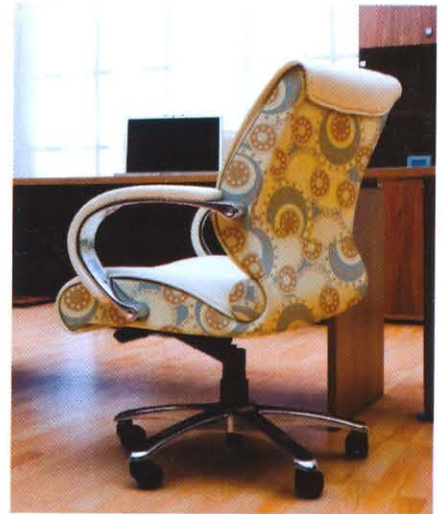
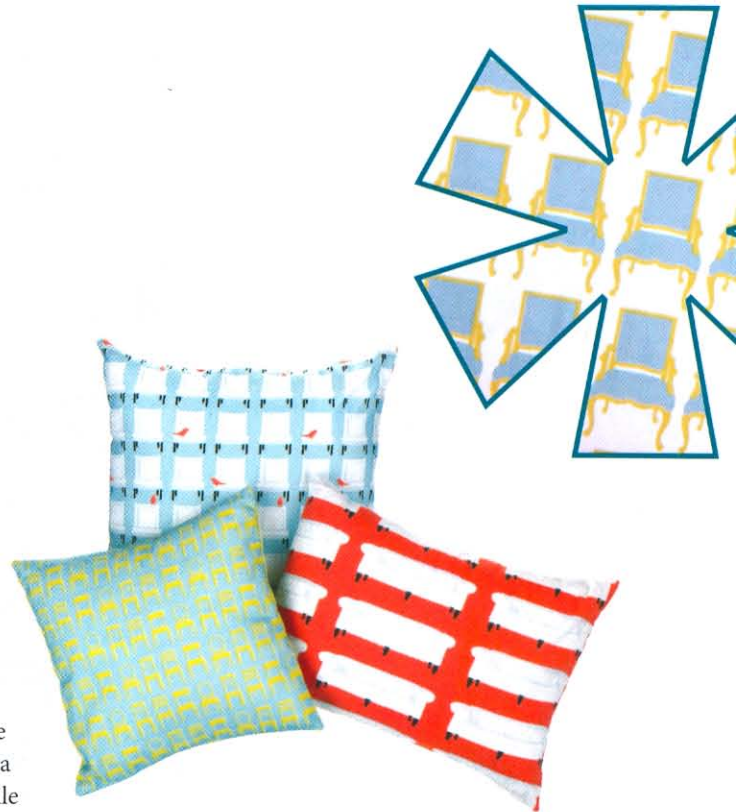
## Understanding the process

Although each shop has its own set of techniques, many digital print studios follow similar processes for printing on fabric. First, upholsterers need to specify the type

of fabric on which they want to print, and preferably its end use so that print shops can provide assistance should a problem or question arise about the project. Printers begin producing your unique design once they receive a high-resolution graphic file with an extension of .jpg, .tif or .eps (and .pdf in some instances) from the user. The file needs to be at least 300 dpi, although some print shops will accept 150 dpi files. "Fabric has a lot of natural bleed in it, so there is a limit to how much resolution you can get on textiles," explains Stephen Fraser, co-founder of Spoonflower, a web-based digital printing provider based in Mebane, N.C. "You could print something at 600 dpi and it would look exactly the same as it would at 150 dpi."

But what if you're unsure how to create a design in the first place? Upholsterers who aren't familiar with design software such as Photoshop, for example, can contract with a graphic designer or even work closely with a knowledgeable customer to create an image. Alternatively, if the upholsterer or customer has a painting or other piece of original artwork, he or she can scan it and hence use that file for printing.

Some print shops will offer design assistance as a service, while others have forgone that option to keep costs down for customers. "Because we have



Upholsterers can give themselves a competitive advantage by offering customized fabric to their customers, or even by creating a partnership with an interior designer. "Upholsterers can be unique from other service providers because they can offer exclusive designs, color ways and fabrics," says Andy Graven, president of Custom Printed Fabrics in Chester, S.C.



an internet-based model, we treat every file the same way, and we try to make it as affordable and fast as possible," says Fraser, whose company has 50,000 users. "But if we were to try to deal with every person individually, we would have to charge customers a lot more money."

Once they have a design in hand, print shops will prepare the file for printing. The two major printing processes are dye sublimation (for polyester-based fabrics) and direct-to-fabric printing for natural textiles, such as cotton, linen and silk. Dye sublimation employs disperse inks and uses a large rotary heat press wherein the ink turns into a gas and bonds with the fiber in the material, rather than becoming a surface graphic.

Meanwhile, direct-to-fabric printing uses acid, reactive or pigment inks, each of which offers its own set of characteristics. Karma Kraft, for one, uses reactive dyes on natural fabrics because of their color fastness and deep hues. Textiles that are printed using the reactive dye method undergo a five-step process of pre-treatment (sizing), printing, steaming, washing, softening and drying. "This process allows the fiber to expand so that

dyes can penetrate into the fiber itself," Jeffrey says. "You end up with a fabric that has a luxurious drape and hand."

Pigment inks, on the other hand, require a simple fabric pre-treatment, then a heat process at the end that affixes the binder in the pigment.

"In our 10 years in business, we have evaluated about 10 different manufacturers of inks, and we have found pigment inks that produce colors that we thought could satisfy the needs of our customers," Graven says. "It's working like a dream."

"Pigments are really the most eco-friendly colorant for textiles because they are water based and nontoxic," adds Fraser.

Once the fabric is printed and receives the appropriate pre- and post treatments, it is ready to be shipped. The product is similar to conventional upholstery textiles. "Color fastness and wear and tear are consistent with traditional fabrics," says Pitner about digitally printed fabrics.

## Taking it to market

Although custom digital printing opens up a world of possibilities for upholsterers, the process is not without its challenges. Color matching is possibly the biggest obstacle, particularly if you are working with an online-based print studio. "The trouble with working over the internet is that computer monitors display colors in a fundamentally different way than color exists in the real world," Fraser says. "The only way to get the colors you want is by creating color swatches yourself, ordering them, looking at them on fabric and adjusting your file accordingly." To help their customers with color matching, many



## Leather goes digital

Leather is starting to make headway in the digital printing market, and start-up company Digital Leather in Sarasota, Fla., is getting in on the act. "We are bringing the world of digital printing into the analog world of leather," says Digital Leather's Chris Cudzilo.

"Anything you can design or capture digitally you can put on leather now."

The printing process differs from that of other fabrics. Digital Leather prints an image on a clear Smart Imaging Film, then laminates it to leather, which is in the middle of the finishing process. The product is then finished just like traditional leather. "Once the image is laminated to the leather, it becomes the leather," Cudzilo notes. "You can't scuff it or scratch it. To ruin the image is to ruin the leather itself."

The company, which has been in business for less than a year, has developed a few key products using its digitally printable leather. A customer in the United Kingdom requested chairs that showcase playing cards for his poker room. In another instance, an interior designer captured elements of an original orchid painting and turned them into a pattern for a chair. "You can use any image you like, and the leather will still retain its look and feel," Cudzilo says.



print studios offer color charts and blankets, along with digital proofs and printed swatches.

Because digitally printing fabrics for upholstery applications is a relatively new concept, it may be too soon to tell how well a custom printed textile will hold up in terms of color and wear and tear.

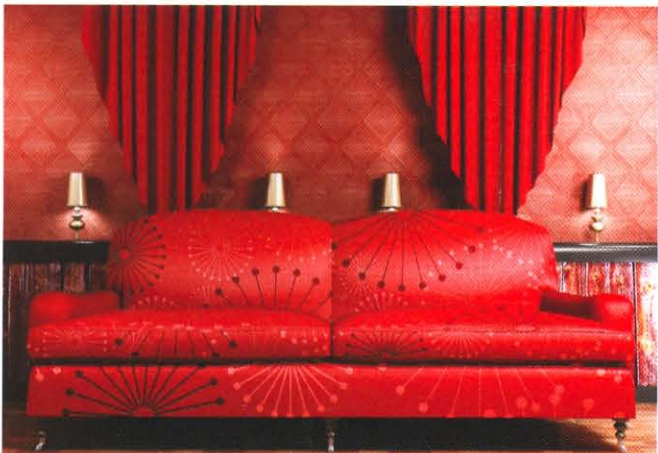
Upholsterers can give themselves a competitive advantage by offering customized fabric to their customers, or even by creating a partnership with an interior designer. Locastro recommends some ways in which upholsterers can promote this option. "They need to know their market niche," she says. "What type of clients do they work with the most? Designers or the end user? Do they have a specific type or style of furniture they handle? Are they subcontracting somewhere?"

"Start with a color blanket on the desired fabrics and sample swatches of some designs. This will help potential customers envision what is possible," Pitner advises. "The benefit statement for potential customers on the custom printing component involves flexibility, affordability and uniqueness."

Print shops that specialize in digitally printing on fabric expect to see more and more customers using their services because of the individualized nature—and upholsterers should take note. "Upholsterers can be unique from other service providers because they can offer exclusive designs, color ways and fabrics," Graven says. <sup>uj</sup>

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*Holly O'Dell is a freelance writer in east central Minnesota specializing in interior design, residential construction and architecture.*



"The days of looking like you or your home came out of a catalog are gone," says Danielle Locastro, director of operations for First2print in New York, N.Y. "Many people are looking for that special something that adds personal meaning to their décor." By digitally printing their own fabric, upholsterers can create furnishings for their customers that are unlike any other.

