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Embroidery's Voice & Vision

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## February - 2007

Cover Story:

### Sew Up Headwear Sales

**2007 brings you more headwear options and decorating techniques than ever before. Here are the top trends from stitches to styling.**

By Tonia Cook Kimbrough

The hats your clients use for self promotion or just to wear out and about have got to be fashionable and functional, with impeccable embellishment. People typically own numerous hats and settle on a few favorites to make the cut from closet to street wear. The logo or design that the cap sports certainly will affect how the wearer feels about it, so ensure the headwear you create sees the light of day by looking at 2007's hottest trends and embroidery techniques.

#### The right fit

First, think fit. In a world where personalization and customization increasingly have become easy, the idea of the one-size-fits-all cap isn't what it used to be. Therefore, the business of specially fitted caps has become a niche worth investigation.

"Stretch Fit" styles are one way to accommodate various hat sizes. The Flexfit brand, for example, uses a patented technology to weave spandex into the sweatband and into the entire crown of the cap so that it snugly and comfortably hugs the wearer – regardless of his hat size. Embroidering these stretchy hats shouldn't be a problem, though you should pay close attention to the way the caps are fitting on the embroidery frame to prevent puckering of the stitches. (See sidebar, "A Puckering Problem," below.)

In addition, 2007 brings new brands sized to fit. Shawnee, KS-based Sportsman Cap



Militant reserve cap from HTT Apparel. This is one of the newer designs in headwear, with tonal screen printing and a leather patch embossed logo.



Flamingo Divers hat from Sew & Sew Embroidery. A clean, white hat from Big Accessories allows the brightly colored embroidery to pop.



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Network has lined up its "Big Head Caps" brand, which has a retail claim to fame touting, "headwear for the cranially endowed." These caps are upsized to fit the XXL to XXXL head.

Keep in mind that super-sized hats or, for that matter, very small infant or youth cap sizes can prove challenging for embroidery. Typically, an embroidery machine will have a couple of different frames to fit standard sized caps – perhaps a youth and adult version. "Sometimes you have to switch out part of the cap driver to make it fit," says Drew Coufal of Akron, OH-based Sew & Sew Embroidery.

"I would imagine that a normal-sized cap frame wouldn't work for unusually large caps." For that reason, he advises distributors and decorators to order samples of specially sized caps to see how they fit on equipment and how the stitching turns out, Coufal says.

It's also wise to think about customizing your artwork for the size of the cap. If, for example, an order will be partly for adult caps and partly for youth caps, then adjustments will need to be made. "When you use a smaller frame, there isn't always the same amount of space on which to sew. Therefore, a cap design will need to be more imprint space. If the adult-sized cap will have a mascot and team name embroidered on might just have the team name," Coufal says.

**Performance pretty**

Just as fit matters, so does performance. All the high-tech fabrications and treatments have crept up the torso to treat heads with the same protections of moisture management and UV protection. Santa Rosa Beach, FL-based Adams Headwear offers the Sunblock line. It fabricated from lightweight nylon treated with ceramic coating to reflect ultraviolet rays long visors with green underneath for shading. Its exclusive Cool-Crown mesh liner prevents staining.

"The most popular 2007 performance fabrics are CoolMax and antibacterial fabrics for moisture and odor prevention. AlphaGear's antibacterial technology also features thermal regulation. Headsweats is an official sponsor of the Ironman so these hats feature the latest in performance. Sunblock headwear offers UV sun protection up to UPF 45+ with the hats treated with UV protection," explains Dan Saferstein, Sportsman Cap Network president.

These fabrications don't affect the embroidery, and in fact can be enhanced by specialty materials. One way to emphasize the solar-blocking performance of such headwear is to decorate the caps with UV-protective embroidery thread. Companies such as Tarzana, CA-based Solar Active International offer specially formulated threads that either transform from a clear to colored thread or change color altogether upon exposure to sunlight. These can be used in conjunction with normal embroidery threads for a combined, dramatic effect.



Smuckers Uncrustables cap from Sew & Sew Embroidery. The North End hat's in a color popular this season – burnt orange.



Firestone logo cap from Sew & Sew Embroidery. Cap from Devon and Jones.



The SFS Intec cap from ViutaBru Embroidery was a fairly simple materials. One way to emphasize the solar-blocking performance of such headwear is to decorate the caps with UV-protective embroidery thread. Companies such as Tarzana, CA-based Solar Active International offer specially formulated threads that either transform from a clear to colored thread or change color altogether upon exposure to sunlight. These can be used in conjunction with normal embroidery threads for a combined, dramatic effect.

**A Puckering Problem**

Caps inherently can have their own unique set of challenges. One is the potential to pucker when embroidered. "Each hat has its own characteristic, so slight differences can occur throughout an embroidery run," explains Drew Coufal of Akron, OH-based Sew & Sew Embroidery. "Also, if a six-panel cap isn't well made, it can cause puckering down the center seam."

Coufal's advice is to first and foremost buy quality caps. Second, properly digitize the artwork and, third, carefully monitor

your frames. "They should be checked from time to time. The hat should be clamped tight, which will affect tension and the quality of the stitch," he says.

Bruce Korn of Malvern, PA-based VitaBru Embroidery LLC agrees, and adds, "Caps sew best from the bottom up and center out. A cap isn't very stable except at the base of the bill where it's clamped to the hat frame. As you move away from the center and toward the top, a design can become distorted if these rules aren't followed. A stiff 2.5 oz. to 3 oz. tear-away backing is key for unstructured hats. Unstructured hats can be a breeze with good digitizing and the right backing."

Six-panel caps have a seam that runs right down the middle of the cap, so heavy stitch density over this can lead to broken needles and very unhappy machine operators, he says. So try six-panel caps with and without backing. Depending on the hat, it may help or cause problems. Also, look for caps with soft seams that aren't reinforced with plastics or thick materials. "Find hats that work for you and offer those to your customers first," Korn says.

### Worn and wonderful

New fabrications that break in a new cap to create the look of a well-worn favorite will drive headwear trends in 2007 as well. La Puente, CA-based HTT Apparel is introducing a water-brushed twill that Bill Patterson, vice president at HTT, describes as "a luxurious finish created by using high-impact water jets to brush the fabric instead of steel brushes." HTT is expanding its line of polo wash twill, which uses an enzyme wash that makes the fabric soft and have a worn-in look.

Coufal has seen an increasing number of clients seeking embroidery to enhance the aged appeal of a weathered cap. "Wool threads have a softer look to fit the image of a distressed cap. Also, you can take density out of your stitching to create that worn 'Abercrombie' look," he says.

As for color, caps follow apparel trends. Organic shades will top the heads of the most fashion conscious. Patterson ties these to an outdoorsy, sometimes military style direction: "Green and neutral colors are higher in demand as it was usually navy and black. Camouflage and new 'digital camo' are fast becoming a trend in headwear, as well."

As a result, some suppliers are expanding their camo-styled options in 2007. Compton, CA-based Magic Headwear, for example, offers blue/black, gray/black and hot pink/black combinations of the popular print. In addition, wilder digital-created camouflages provide even more flair to the line.

Embroidery on camouflage isn't as visually challenging as you might think. "Most clients seem to like it to 'blend' into the camo pattern," Coufal says. "On a recent order, we had three different camo prints, and the client wanted the logo color changed for each pattern to pick up one of the colors in the print. So it was sort of a tone-on-tone, but yet it was still visible as the logo stitching crossed the different patterns and colors of the print. It's a subtle but effective look.

"I personally like picking up a color in the print – after all, it is a camo cap," Coufal says. "However, we do embroider designs per companies' official corporate guidelines, and the logos can pop off the camo patterns fairly well. My advice for camo caps: Match a color in the cap, but choose one that's in the minority of the design so the stitching competes less with the pattern." Consider running the logo as



The small text on this Penn Maid hat from VitaBru made this job more challenging. In addition, the original embroidery wasn't very clean, so VitaBru needed to make the image cleaner than the original. Cap from Big Accessories.



"T" knit cap from Sew & Sew Embroidery. The two-color, embroidered "T" is vibrant on the black cap. Cap from Yupoong.

a one-color design if it's more than a one-color logo; if not, pick two or more shades in the camo pattern that'll complement the designs with the pattern, he says.

### Digitize It Right

Bruce Korn, owner of Malvern, PA-based VitaBru Embroidery LLC, stresses the importance of digitizing to ensure proper cap decoration. If it's not digitized properly for the material and garment that the logo is to be sewn onto, it just won't look good," he says. "The biggest challenge we have is clients' understanding of size limitations on caps. There's only so much vertical room to sew. Large designs or designs with a lot of text may need to be modified to fit the space allotted."

For the digitizer and embroiderer, the time and effort to adjust artwork must be considered. "When talking to embroidery shops regarding cap orders, one should consider what a digitizer charges for edit costs for revisions to an existing logo to be used for caps," says Drew Coufal of Akron, OH-based Sew & Sew Embroidery.

He says that if it's a more complex logo with more advanced editing required, he usually offers a discounted edit fee to get the logo to the proper setup parameters caps require to sew well. "Most of the editing involved is to get the design to sew from the center seam out, and from the bottom up – as well as lower the density, move the underlay stitching in and thicken column stitches," Coufal says.

### Decorative detailing

The camo craze is in part driven by interest in military styling, but there are also other trendy ways of adding bling. "As far as new embellishment ideas, HTT offers every embellishment possible, embroidery, printing, liquid metals, sonic welds and lots of rubber in molded icons to small labeling details," Patterson says.

Location of the embroidery is another decorative issue. Frames that allow for 280 degree embroidery have opened the door to more intricate decoration. Coufal, for example, has had clients who want entire scenes sewn around the cap's circumference, as well as a series of designs on the cap. For example, a company celebrating an anniversary might imprint the front of the cap with a logo and then put 20th Anniversary on the left side, as well as a company name on the right.

Clients seeking an upscale, distinctive look may opt to go over the top with a multimedia cap. This style gets its name from the variety of methods used to decorate the headwear. Embroidery could be paired with rhinestones, for a flirty feminine look or a metal tag could be combined with sonic weld, giving a masculine feel. Recently, Coufal designed a cap with a "puff embroidery" shield to create an elevated section accenting a corporate logo.

One of the most popular types of cap decoration, however, is much more subtle in its approach. "Tone-on-tone embroidery is very popular for caps, particular in corporate programs," says Coufal. "Typically, you go either a shade or two lighter or darker with your embroidery thread to get the best result. Also, you can use a thinner density of stitch count because of the similar color background."

### Price conscious

It potentially can reduce cost as well, so tone-on-tone may be a good bet for a price-conscious client. The cost of the cap itself can also be managed. Coufal's expertise



HOB House of Blues cap from HTT Apparel. Mossy oak camouflage detail with embroidered logo.



Trucks cap from HTT Apparel. It's a twill cap with new rubberized tire mark detail on visor.

conscious buyer. The cost of the cap itself can also be a concern. Suppliers sensitive to the issue are offering specials that allow distributors to not only add value and distinction to the caps they present clients, but also offer budget-conscious pricing. "Customers are very price conscious," says David Rucker, director of sales at Magic Headwear, but quickly adds they still desire fashionable options. In response, Magic is offering 40 new styles in 2007.

Likewise, HTT has zeroed in on stocking popular designs to fill demand. "The program consists of 25 of our best-selling headwear styles and having them pre-made in China allowing us to embroider multiple locations with no setup charges, very low minimums and fast turn," Patterson says.

The one-stop shopping experience and diversity of product offerings is another value-added approach that headwear suppliers have put on the table. Sportsman Cap Network, for example, has added numerous brands, styles and colors to its repertoire. It now has 27 brands, 180 styles and more than 1,600 SKUs to choose from. The range of brands available provide something for every demographic. For example, kid Z Kap and Bella Baby top off the youngest of audiences and, for hat-wearing ladies, there's Lady Caps brand.

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