

# Get Your Motor Running

**P**roduct demand has always been a factor in whether a business succeeds or fails. But that little something we call *product diversification* can be just as important. This is especially true for a business where demand can be cyclical and seasonal.

Today's successful embroiderers are finding plenty of profit in cars, boats—even helicopters.

If you want to grow your embroidery business, you need to be creative in your approach. That means if you've been chasing the same group of customers and knocking on the same old doors, you have to start looking outside the box. Many of the more traditional embroidery shops are widening their scope and building new businesses around—what else? The automotive aftermarket, a \$31 billion-a-year retail industry.

## Auto Décor

Ernie Aguilar Sr. of Montclair, Calif., has successfully pursued the automotive aftermarket with a vengeance. "I was looking at long-term strategies because I was concerned about losing market share," Aguilar said. As the co-owner of Lancaster Uniform Co., Aguilar helped position the company as one of the largest manufacturers of veteran's caps. Beyond that niche, he was beginning to wonder whether the veteran business could sustain him and he started looking at markets that had an interest in his craft.

After taking over Lancaster Uniform in 1982, he decided to look for business in places he loved. He always had an interest in car shows so he made it a point to attend some local events, talking with shop owners who specialized in auto interiors, upholstery and seat covers. After honing his technique, Ernie began to offer simple designs for free, embroidering flames on seats and door panels. Soon, he was partnering with upholstery

shops to do all their embroidery work.

For Ernie, working for free had created a huge payoff. He not only learned about a new industry, he learned how to grow and diversify his business. "People would see what we were doing and say, 'Can you do this for me?' It started to give us some real exposure," Aguilar says.

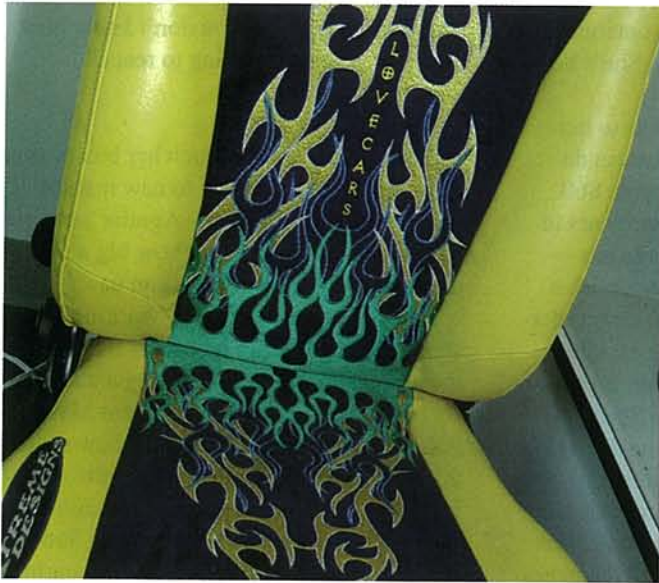
As his new business began to grow, he realized that he needed a new name—something separate from his company name. So he came up with the name *lovecars.com Embroidery*—a clever name that describes his business and his passion for cars. The business is so popular that *lovecars.com Embroidery* now accounts for about 25 percent of his business.

Much of his success is due to his Web site, which shows off photos of auto-related work and shows he's attended. Plus, he even offers seminars for folks who want to learn how to develop their own niche embroidery business. "I tell people, if you want to grow your business, see what you can do with a hobby or something you enjoy," he said. "You already know your market and know what people like. So why not have some fun with what you do?"

## Learning The Business

Ask anyone who sells embroidery for a living and he will probably tell you he likes to work with the things he knows best. So how do you move into uncharted territory that could lead to bigger and better business down the road? Some believe you should find a new hobby, and then do everything you can to learn about it.

Jamie Graham, owner of Monikers in West Chester, Pa., is an experienced embroiderer who found an impressive niche in autos, boats and helicopters. Her father had always lived on a boat, so she learned to experiment with seat-back monograms and custom designs. Over a 20-year span, she's gotten so good at her craft that she's aligned herself with a nearby upholsterer who sends a lot of boat work her way. Even the local fishermen want her to customize their boats.



"It's all custom work," Graham says. "A lot of these guys are sports fishermen so they want everything to have a fish on it. It's like their own personal insignia."

This is the kind of work she likes best. "It seems the markets you get into are the things you do as a hobby," Graham says. She attends street rod shows to make new contacts and discover new ideas for her work. "I have a boat and a street rod so I know what these customers are looking for," Graham says. "I saw a car that was done in red cherry and black cherry. Then they had these little cherries monogrammed on all the seats."

Graham has worked on some unique projects. Right now, she's negotiating with a transport

helicopter company who wants her to customize some seat interiors with its company logo. She's also done her share of other work, monogramming horse blankets, towels—even casket blankets. But she'd rather get out and talk to people at go-cart and midget car shows, or the local tractor shows she regularly attends. She's made so many contacts that way; even sign shops call on her. "I don't even advertise anymore," she says.

### Becoming An Exhibitor

One of the best ways to learn about the automotive aftermarket is to exhibit at car shows and network with other exhibitors.

**Aguilar's lovecars.com Embroidery has found success in embroidering for the automotive aftermarket. Above are some examples of their work and a glimpse into their operations.**

That's what Sharon Pierce, owner of Sew-Fine Embroidery & Sewing in Elizabethtown, Pa., does. Pierce first started exhibiting at craft and dog shows until someone recommended she try a car show. She's been working them ever since.

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Her work is turning heads thanks to her impressive custom designs on a Toyota 860. After only four years in business, Pierce has managed to establish a unique niche, embroidering miniature cars and motorcycles on caps, door panels, shirts and cushions. She also works on leather and vinyl, embroidering logos on seatbacks and door panels.

Restoration specialists have fun with her work and have asked her to adorn uniforms and jackets with custom embroidered patches. She also does work for an event organizer who brings a great deal of work her way.

"I did my homework," Pierce says. "When

I did my first show, I chose one closest to where I live. You just have to find out which car shows have the best traffic. When you're trying to branch out, you don't know how different people are going to react."

### The More You Know

Pierce realizes how much her business can grow because she's open to new markets. If you consider how quickly Aguilar's business has expanded, you realize how big a niche the automotive aftermarket can be.

Like the others, he is also working auto shows, concentrating on events like SEMA, the annual aftermarket extravaganza sponsored by the Specialty Equipment Market Association. The 2005 SEMA show drew 2,055 exhibiting companies worldwide and it was Aguilar's sixth year as an exhibitor.

"I had three cars there [last year] and 40 booths at the show had exhibitors wearing our apparel," he said. "We wear really special shirts we embroider ourselves and then we walk the show. People stop us and say, 'Who did your embroidery?'"

It isn't just the apparel that's turning heads. Aguilar also embroiders panels for restylers that are showcasing their high-end hotrods, in addition to ostrich, stingray and shark leather seats.

Working a car show can be tedious, but you just have to be steadfast and work smart. Also, it doesn't hurt that Aguilar knows how to fix his own sewing machines, so if something does go wrong, it won't tie him up for too long. He also makes it a point to tell his customers up front if he knows something might pose a problem. "We get samples of whatever we're sewing so we can hang onto it before we do the final piece," Aguilar says. Pierce also believes that automotive work isn't difficult, as long as you know the basics. "The only thing is, I like to make sure it looks as good as it possibly can," she says. "Door panels can be tricky so don't use a wooden hoop or it could leave a mark. I recommend a flat hoop with sticky back."

The automotive aftermarket is certainly an exciting field to explore. For embroiderers who enjoy the world of cars, boats and helicopters, it can be both exciting and profitable.



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**Pierce digitized these designs based on photographs sent to her by customers who restored their vehicles. The designs were then embroidered by Pierce onto shirts, hats and jackets.**

