

**GRAND PRIZE WINNER**  
This graffiti-inspired monogram design won the competition.



# BIG DECORATING CHALLENGE

For the second year in a row, we dared decorators to design a complete look for a discerning fictional client.

By Theresa Hegel, Sara Lavenduski and Alexandra Steel

The standard left-chest logo is a mainstay in the commercial embroidery world, but not every client wants the same old stitches in the same old location. Decorators who take advantage of retail-friendly trends like bling and multimedia reap the rewards in higher-margin sales and a diversified client base. Still, many worry about taking the plunge into unfamiliar waters. That's where our Big Decorating Challenge comes in. We wanted to give decorators the opportunity to flex their creative muscles and take a few design risks in a fun, fashion-focused competition.

So, we created Sophie Blue, a budding pop star who needs a head-to-toe look for her first multi-state concert tour, where she'll be promoting her debut album *Under the Blue Star* – a unique blend of rock and hip-hop. Sophie Blue wants a bold, graphic look to help her stand out on stage. Also important, however, is ease of movement, since the YouTube sensation made her name by showing off her dance moves online. Decorators had to choose a cap, shirt, hoodie and pants and embellish them with an original logo and other flourishes.

The entries this year dazzled us, each employing an array of techniques and special effects: rhinestones, glitter vinyl, reflective ink, metallic thread, puff embroidery and more. Though the color blue and shimmering stars abounded, the looks that really stood out showed some out-of-the-box thinking: like the graffiti-inspired fuchsia, blue and black logo scrawled across our Grand Prize Winner's entry, and the glittering guitar logo created by the First Runner-Up. But all five top teams displayed strong technical skills, a keen knowledge of retail apparel trends and a high level of creativity. Without a doubt, Sophie Blue would be well served by any of our finalists. A round of applause, please, before turning the page to check out this year's winning designs.

### METHODOLOGY

Decorators created an original logo and decorated stage wear for Sophie Blue, a fictional pop star. Entrants submitted the decorated ensemble and digitizing file for judging. In the initial round, designs were rated in three categories: originality of artwork, decorating workmanship and apparel presentation. The judges selected five finalists to move on to the second round of judging, which evaluated the quality of digitizing. The grand prize winner and two runners-up were chosen, based on performance in both rounds.

**THE CHALLENGE:**

Create an iconic logo and complete four-piece stage wear outfit - including a decorated hat, hoodie, T-shirt/tank top and pants - for Sophie Blue, an up-and-coming pop star whose music is a blend of rock and hip-hop, and who exudes a sporty, streetwear-inspired personal style.

**THE CLIENT PROFILE:**

Sophie Blue is a young singer with a growing following on social media. She got her start posting original songs and dance moves on YouTube, but recently landed a recording contract with a small label. She's about to release her first album, *Under the Blue Star*, and go on a months-long multi-state tour, opening for a larger, more-established band. Sophie Blue is looking for some cool decorated apparel to wear during concert appearances. The outfit must be comfortable enough to dance in, while still flattering the figure. The embellishment should be bold and striking - something that will show up well for crowds. Sophie Blue wants to wear something creative that will embody the "Sophie Blue" brand. She wants you to create an iconic logo for her, using the title of her album *Under the Blue Star* as the inspiration. Decorators can also use her name, monogram or other flourishes to embellish the outfit in additional locations. Sophie Blue is looking for something highly graphic and striking; multimedia designs, bling and special effects are likely to impress her.

**WHAT THE CLIENT WANTS:**

- A four-piece stage wear outfit for Sophie Blue's *Under the Blue Star* musical tour, including a decorated hat, hoodie, T-shirt/tank top and pants.
- The original logo, embellishments and apparel chosen should convey a cool, luxury-athletic aesthetic, giving singer Sophie Blue a unified look and capturing her personal brand of hip-hop-infused rock.
- The stage wear should make Sophie Blue stand out, helping to launch the young singer's budding career.

# GRAND PRIZE WINNER

Creating an iconic and bold ensemble with a well-articulated retro street-style, DGI Creative paired top-notch design skills with near-flawless technical chops. The team's stagewear was the clear choice for grand prize.

**The Shop:** DGI Creative, Hanover, PA  
**Artists:** Weston Caple, Josh Markle and Jess Schultz  
**Digitizer/Embroiderer:** Kym Cavey  
**Screen Printer:** Michael Crance

**The Solution**

**Original Artwork:** DGI Creative put together a graffiti-inspired blue, black and fuchsia design for Sophie Blue, transforming the "SB" monogram on the hat and hoodie into a stylized butterfly and turning an "A" on the burnout tank into a scrawled star shape. The idea, says Weston Caple, DGI's creative director, was to come up with a clean, universal concept that would work well with any medium, whether embroidery or screen printing. "That's kind of how we approach all design," he says. Their tactic worked, with the judges wowed by the design's creativity and versatility. Geri Finio, first-round judge, says she liked the monogram in particular: "This is definitely unique and hers, and it wasn't just picked out from a font and put together."

**Technical:** Production of DGI's entry went "surprisingly smoothly," according to Caple, with only the puff embroidery on the knit hat requiring fine-tuning. "We ordered three of each apparel item and ended up getting everything on the first try," he adds. The judges were very impressed by the high quality of the

decoration. Digitizer/embroiderer Kym Cavey employed a nearly flawless use of underlay and logical, efficient pathing, according to Erich Campbell, second-round judge. Coverage was spot on, though Campbell noted a few edge flaws in the black fill and recommends a satin border to mask the roughness. He also pointed out a few spots where foam bits were still visible in the embroidery. However, Campbell adds, those are minor details and don't detract from the ensemble's high quality. "To me, the embroidery looked very well done," Finio agrees.

**Overall:** From the apparel to the color choice to the design, DGI's outfit for Sophie Blue was well thought out. The shop created a bold and iconic brand for the budding singer - one that could easily be expanded onto promotional apparel, like T-shirts, bags or other fan items. Finio called the look a "true ensemble." Campbell notes that the look used a "cohesive graphic vocabulary." He adds: "It's a pitch-perfect set of pieces that looks and feels like the concert-wear and promotional gear that the brief demanded." For the staff at DGI Creative, the praise is gratifying. "Our goal is not to be the biggest, but it is to be the best," Caple says. "That's our pursuit, and this award is confirmation that we're headed in the right direction."

**Tools of the Trade:** The embroidery was digitized using software from Wilcom, stitched out with Robison-Anton 40-weight thread on a Barudan machine.

**HAT:** The District cabled-brimmed hat in charcoal (DT628) from SanMar (asi/84863) features a 19,812-stitch 3-D foam logo in three colors.

**HOODIE:** The J America (asi/62977) ladies' vintage Zen full-zip hoodie (J8913) from Bodek and Rhodes (asi/40788) features the same puff embroidery logo on the front and a two-color screen print on the back.

**SHIRT:** The ladies' burnout ombré Next Level (asi/73867) tank top (NL6532) from Bodek and Rhodes features a three-color screen print.

**PANTS:** These performance workout pants (LPST880) from SanMar feature a blue puff ink screen print.

**DECORATING TIP:**

When attempting puff embroidery, match the 3-D foam color as closely as possible to the thread color that will go on top. That way, judge Erich Campbell says, minor problems in stitch quality will be less noticeable.



# FIRST RUNNER-UP

This retail-inspired outfit combines glam glitter and striking metallic thread with a rocker's guitar, making for a bright, bold look.

**The Shop:** TeamWorld Corporate Programs (asi/34534), Binghamton, NY  
**Artist:** Lauren Snyder  
**Digitizer:** Dave Shearer  
**Embroiderer:** Adele Brock  
**Printing:** David Wozniak

## The Solution

**Original Artwork:** TeamWorld designed an eye-catching logo for Sophie Blue that combines metallic thread with a screen-printed guitar. “We wanted to create a look that would be appropriate for a young rock star,” says Adele Brock, embroidery manager at TeamWorld. “We combined embroidery, appliqué and screen printing and added plenty of sparkle. From the beginning, we planned to combine a number of techniques.”

First-round judge Liz Hathaway says she gravitated toward this entry from the

get-go. “It’s professionally done and had a very nice retail look to it,” she says. “I could see this being sold as merchandise on Sophie Blue’s tour. This is a great logo – it’s strong and powerful. While I think they could have done more with the hat, the overall look is still very consistent, and that’s important for an effective logo.”

Although the logo is assertive, it’s not overdone, says second-round judge Jay Fishman. “The choice of blue glitter appliqué fabric was a nice touch,” he says. “It’s bold, but not at all over the top.”

**Technical:** Production was very smooth, Brock says. “We didn’t have any challenges, but then, this isn’t the first design I’ve done. I’ve been in this industry for 22 years.” The judges in both rounds were impressed with the quality of the embellishment work. The appliqué and embroidery were top-notch, and extra touches, like custom tagless neck labels and laser-engraved cord stops added to the wow factor.

**Overall:** The judges loved the slouchy, sleeveless hoodie chosen by TeamWorld, though Hathaway says she would have liked to see more creative use of color. “They put a lot of focus on designing and embellishing the hoodie, but the apparel colors themselves didn’t really pop,” she notes. “I was very impressed with how well the logo was done. I appreciated the strong font, and the guitar that gives it a rocker feel. You need a properly designed logo, otherwise people won’t buy it.”

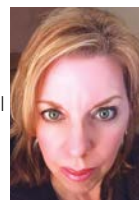
Fishman applauds the team’s ability to balance a variety of decoration techniques. “I liked the overall concept and creativity of the design,” he adds. “All of the pieces, while different, had a logical artistic flow.”

**Tools of the Trade:** The embroidery was digitized with software from Pulse Microsystems and stitched out in Robison-Anton 40-weight thread on a Tajima TUMX embroidery machine.

## MEET THE JUDGES



**First-round Geri Finio,** owner, Studio 187, Anne Arundel County, MD



**First-round Liz Hathaway,** creative manager, Penn Emblem Co. (asi/77120), Philadelphia



**First-round Lee Romano Sequeira,** co-owner, Sparkle Plenty Designs (asi/88442), Philadelphia



**Second-round Erich Campbell,** digitizer/e-commerce manager, Black Duck Embroidery and Screen Printing, Albuquerque, NM



**Second-round Jay Fishman,** owner, Wicked Stitch of the East, Cleveland

## WHAT THEY WON

**GRAND PRIZE:** DGI Creative received a prize package that includes two licenses for Melco Design-Shop V10 Pro+ digitizing software, valued at \$22,000, plus a \$250 gift certificate from Madeira USA and a \$250 gift certificate from Vantage Apparel (asi/93390).

**FIRST RUNNER-UP:** TeamWorld Corporate Programs (asi/342534) received a two-year subscription to Embroidery i2, a plugin for Adobe Illustrator or CorelDRAW, sponsored by Pulse Microsystems and valued at \$5,000. Also included is a \$100 gift certificate from Madeira USA and a \$250 gift certificate from Callaway, Perry Ellis International (asi/77715).

**SECOND RUNNER-UP:** Heritage Logo Works received a two-year subscription to Embroidery i2, a plugin for Adobe Illustrator or CorelDRAW, sponsored by Pulse Microsystems and valued at \$5,000, and a \$100 gift certificate from Madeira USA.

**FINALISTS:** The two finalists received one-year decorator memberships to the Advertising Specialty Institute.

**HAT:** SanMar (asi/84863) carries this District Distressed Military Hat (DT605). The team embroidered Sophie Blue’s name on the crown in one color in 3,307 stitches.

**HOODIE:** This sleeveless hoodie (W1444) from MV Sport/Weatherproof (asi/68318) has a screen-printed guitar, glitter appliqué and 19,818 stitches in one thread color. It also features laser engraving on the metal cord stops and a digitally printed neck label.

**PANTS:** These Bella leggings (812) from alphabroder (asi/34063) have a screen-printed guitar, two thread colors and 4,532 stitches.



**SHIRT:** This Bella cropped tank top (6680) from Eva Sportswear (asi/52834) features a screen-printed guitar, two embroidery thread colors and 4,532 stitches.



**DECORATING TIP:** “With appliqué, you have to make sure you have enough coverage and density, and that the underlay isn’t too far in or out,” Adele Brock says. “If you have a little piece sticking out, it can be really hard to trim. I always test, test, test before the sewout.”

# SECOND RUNNER-UP

With a smart use of multimedia and just the right touch of sparkle, this sporty ensemble hit the right notes, but a lack of final polish kept the look from reaching the next level.

**The Shop:** Heritage Logo Works, Plymouth, MI  
**Artists:** Nancy Davis and Melissa Willson  
**Digitizer:** Nancy Davis  
**Embroiderers:** Judy Good, Tina Veazey, Chris Selk and Mahier Jano

## The Solution

**Original Artwork:** Heritage Logo Works Owner Nancy Davis says her team fell in love with the color combination of the Flexfit cap they chose, and centered their overall design around that blue-and-black contrast. The look combines glittery appliqué stars, rhinestone accents, swirling screen prints, monograms and pops of puff embroidery on a sporty-casual ensemble. The judges liked the use of multimedia design. Second-round judge Erich Campbell says he liked the tank top, which features a “fantastic use of combined print and embroidery, particularly with the added interest that the perfectly placed rhinestones bring to the piece.”

**Technical:** The Heritage team ran into a few bumps in the road executing the ambitious Sophie Blue design, including unexpected fabric shrinkage during screen printing, according to Davis. Sewing quality on the garments was only fair, says Campbell, who notes extreme tension and possible breakage issues in the metallic thread used on the pants. In several cases, underlay stitches showed through satin-stitch edges, due to less-than-perfect stitch angles, he says. Trims and jumps were sufficient in the embroidery, but the overall densities could have been lowered on the lighter fabrics, Campbell

notes. First-round judges also took issue with the stiffness of the oversized appliqué on the back of the lightweight hoodie, worrying that it threw the look off balance. Another concern was the uneven, awkward placement of rhinestones on the stars’ tight corners.

**Overall:** The look had a good theme, nice printing and a strong sense of multimedia design, Campbell says. “The use of multimedia was spot-on for a retail look,” he adds. Still, Heritage would have benefited from taking a few more risks on the cap design and polishing the fit and finish of the decoration on the other pieces, according to Campbell. First-round judges were concerned that the garments were a bit too casual, but liked the use of glitter and rhinestones to create striking stage wear. Davis says she was pleased with her team’s efforts. “We all loved how the outfit came out,” she adds. “The whole shop was working on this in one way or another.”

**Tools of the Trade:** The embroidery was digitized using a Tajima machine and Pulse software with a Madeira 40-weight thread.

**DECORATING TIP:** When sewing with metallic embroidery thread, lower your tensions and machine speed to minimize thread breaks. In these cases, a slower machine will actually speed up production, due to fewer sewing interruptions.

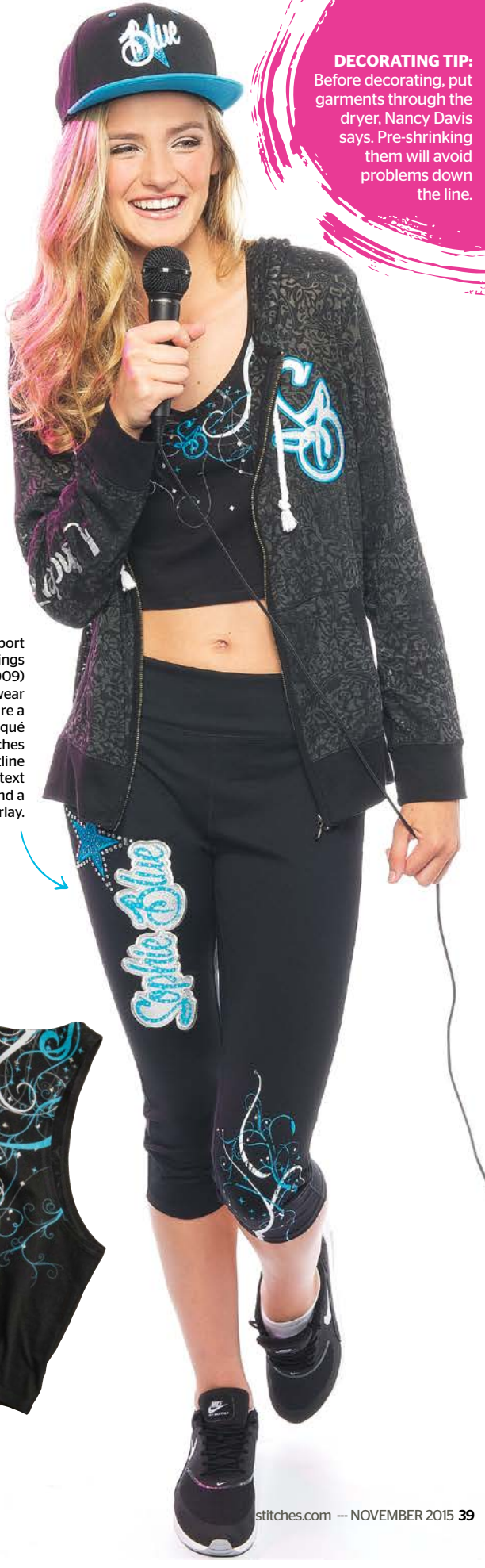
**HAT:** The Flexfit Wool Blend Flat Bill Snapback Cap in black and teal (110F) from S&S Activewear (asi/84358) features a two-color, 5,210-stitch design that combines glitter appliqué and puff embroidery.

**HOODIE:** The MV Sport Ladies Stefani full-zip hoodie in black (85852) from S&S Activewear (asi/84358) features a glitter flake appliqué monogram on the front with 8,987 stitches, a foil ink screen print on the right sleeve and an 8,871-stitch glitter flake star-shaped appliqué and embroidered monogram, with a rhinestone outline on the back.

**PANTS:** The ALO Sport Ladies Capri Leggings in black (W5009) from S&S Activewear (asi/84358) feature a glitter flake appliqué star with 1,945 stitches and a rhinestone outline and glitter appliqué text with 7,254 stitches and a screen-printed overlay.

**SHIRT:** The Bella & Canvas Ladies Crop Tank in black (6680) from S&S Activewear (asi/84358) features a two-color screen print, a 2,346-stitch embroidered monogram and specially placed rhinestones.

**DECORATING TIP:** Before decorating, put garments through the dryer, Nancy Davis says. Pre-shrinking them will avoid problems down the line.



# FINALIST

Visual Impressions created a varsity-inspired look combining unexpected colors and light-catching embellishments with solid technical proficiency.

**The Shop:** Visual Impressions, Milwaukee, WI  
**Artist:** Samantha Neary  
**Digitizer:** Bob Lompa  
**Embroiderer:** Karen Gillis  
**Other:** Ashlee Banmann and Marshall Atkinson

## The Solution

**Original Artwork:** Visual Impressions created three separate logos for Sophie Blue that combine thread, appliqué and screen printing. “We thought about what motif would make the most sense, and someone suggested a star,” says Marshall Atkinson, chief operating officer. “We thought about how someone would move onstage when wearing the pieces, so we decided to add metallic accents that would catch the light.” The team set the items apart with variegated thread, reflective ink and a motif that could be repeated easily on a variety of styles.

“The apparel was decorated nicely, and the colors really flowed,” says Liz Hathaway, first-round judge.

**Technical:** The Visual Impressions team wanted to push the envelope by sewing on a burnout T-shirt. “No one does that,” Atkinson says. “We wanted to sew on something nobody else would.” The puff embroidery on the military-style cap was another challenge. The first-round judges loved the technical artistry employed in the burnout tee, pointing out that it would be “highly marketable for fans.”

Execution of the design was solid, though digitizing was problematic in places, according to Fishman. “The underlay was almost nonexistent, and I don’t know why,” he adds.

**Overall:** Visual Impressions chose a varsity jacket in jade-graphite and a burnout

tee in Tahiti blue-white to differentiate themselves from the solid, deep blues they expected other teams to choose. For the most part, judges liked the garments and colors chosen. “Even though there are a variety of colors, they all work together,” Hathaway says.

Though the pieces showed a strong grasp of technique, judges weren’t sold on the overall design aesthetic. Hathaway thought the logos were somewhat disjointed, and Fishman had concerns that the appliqué on the jacket back was “a little too collegiate” to work as stage wear.

**Tools of the Trade:** The embroidery was digitized with software from Wilcom and stitched out in Robison-Anton 40-weight thread on a Barudan embroidery machine.

**SHIRT:** This Ladies’ Ombre Burnout Crossover V-neck (6542) from Next Level Apparel (asi/73867) features screen printing in two colors, including metallic appliqué on the side seam, and 6,512 stitches.



**HAT:** The District Houndstooth Military Hat (DT619) from SanMar (asi/84863) features one color of variegated thread with puff and 2,543 stitches.

**HOODIE:** This Ladies’ Varsity Sweatshirt (W2344) from MV Sport/Weatherproof (asi/68318) has a left-chest embroidery design in three colors, with 4,491 stitches. The back features appliqué in seven colors, with 38,335 stitches, including metallic and variegated threads, while the sleeve is printed with stars in reflective ink.

**PANTS:** The Combed Spandex Jersey Yoga Pant (1004) from Royal Apparel (asi/83731) features thread in three colors, with 4,491 stitches. Screen-printed stars in reflective ink run down the leg.



**DECORATING TIP:** Don’t be afraid to try something new. “We sew mostly left chest, so we don’t get a lot of opportunities for experimentation,” Marshall Atkinson says. “You have to get out of that rut. I wouldn’t recommend experimenting on a real order, but it’s important to try new things and test yourself.”

# FINALIST

Combining vinyl, embroidery and rhinestones, the ensemble from A&P Master Images has retail appeal, but received lower marks for its overall simplicity and lack of risk-taking.

**The Shop:** A&P Master Images (asi/702505), Utica, NY  
**Artist:** Sean Hogan  
**Digitizer:** Jessica House  
**Embroiderer:** PJ Loomis

## The Solution:

**Original Artwork:** A&P Master Images' main goal was to create a look that was fresh and could be worn by all ages. The team kept the design simple, emblazoning Sophie Blue's name in glitter vinyl and embellishing the look with vinyl and embroidered stars, each punctuated with a handful of rhinestones. "We made sure the design could be used across the board with any media we chose to use," says

CEO Howard Potter. "I really see a look that can be turned into a clothing line that's unique."

The judges noted the simplicity of the design, agreeing that it had retail potential. But the artwork lacked the boldness requested in the design brief, according to second-round judge Erich Campbell.

**Technical:** Given the design's simplicity, there wasn't much room for error, and the garments were cleanly decorated. The quality of the embroidery and digitizing was good, with little chance of thread breakage and appropriate stitch density. The simple, but elegant use of rhinestones – perfectly placed at the center of each star – helped give the designs an extra pop.

Still, there were issues. The text on the foam front trucker cap could have benefited from extra pull compensation for a bolder look, Campbell says. "It looks a

little anemic in the blue type," he adds. The rest of the outfit's fabrics weren't considered in the digitizing stages, he adds, "But the designs are so simple that it hardly damages them."

**Overall:** From a retail standpoint, the outfit was on-point and relatable. "It's definitely not out of step with a certain segment of the population," Campbell says. First-round judges loved the apparel choices, particularly the trendy cropped hoodie and tank. However, the design's overall simplicity and lack of risk-taking kept the ensemble from ranking higher. "The anemic cap logo and very small decoration areas overall fell a bit short," Campbell says.

**Tools of the Trade:** The design was sewn out on Robison-Anton 40-weight thread using a Tajima machine and Pulse software.

## JUDGING CHECKLISTS

The judges used these comprehensive checklists to rate the Big Decorating Challenge entrants.

### ORIGINAL ARTWORK

- Art is cleanly finished and provides a solid foundation for embroidery (and other decoration) on apparel
- Art adequately responds to the client's needs as presented in the competition brief
- Art exemplifies the qualities and culture of the client's brand
- Art differentiates the client's company from its competitors

### EMBROIDERY

- Placement: alignment, balance, height, width and creativity
- Stabilizer: front and back appearance, smoothness, and finishing
- Blank: weight of garment or piece to embroidery design
- Use of color: balance, overall appeal and dimension
- Density: coverage, underlay, outlining, registration and detail
- Thread breaks or problem areas
- Tie-offs and trims
- Stitch angles, stitch types and/or special fills
- Multimedia: appliqué, beads, sequins and print
- Placement and use of garment/piece to color and design

### DECORATED APPAREL PRESENTATION

- Overall artistic appeal
- Use of design for the selected garment or piece
- Coverage, mixed media, embellishments, finishing and saleability
- Brand recognition and accurate representation

### DIGITIZING

- Overall sewing quality
- Thread breaks: excessive/minimal/none
- Sufficient coverage with proper densities
- Use of underlay
- Punching in relation to intended fabric
- Registration
- Use of pathing, trims and color changes, i.e., is the design centered? Does the machine and design travel logically through completion? Is the design logically pathed for caps/hats?
- Sufficient trims and/or jump stitches
- Sufficient lock stitches (tie-in and tie-off)
- Colors sequencing (excessive or minimal)
- Use of stitch angles, stitch types or special fills
- Use of multimedia (appliqué, beads, sequins and/or print)



**HAT:** The Flat Bill Snapback Trucker cap (DT624) from SanMar (asi/84863) features a two-color embroidered design with rhinestone accents.

**HOODIE:** The Crop Hoodie (F397) in black from American Apparel (asi/35297) features a glitter vinyl design, rhinestones and embroidery.

**SHIRT:** The Crop Tank (6680) in white from alphabroder (asi/34063) features a two-color glitter vinyl design with rhinestone accents.

**PANTS:** The Ladies Fleece Jogger (31082F) in black from alphabroder (asi/34063) features glitter vinyl, rhinestones and embroidery.

**DECORATING TIP:** Steer the Sophie Blues of the world toward decorations that are cost-effective for mass production, Howard Potter says. "By doing this, you'll both make money and grow together," he adds.