

# HOW TO CREATE AND SELL DIRECT-TO-ACRYLIC PRINTS



● Vibrant color and crystal clarity are two of the hallmarks of acrylic imaging. Courtesy of Roehm America

*For some frame shops, digital photo prints on acrylic can be a profitable add-on service.*

*By Kimberly Biesiada*

**D**irect-to-acrylic imaging can not only turn your customers' photography into memorable wall art, but it can also make for durable and extraordinarily vibrant prints. UV-cured ink on acrylic maximizes a photo's depth, creating a dramatic look that's both vivid and modern. When finished with polished metal stand-offs—a popular choice for these types of prints—the image is framed and supported, making it look like it's floating in a sheet of glass. Another benefit? Unlike paper or canvas prints, an acrylic print is impervious to moisture and spills and is less likely to crack than glass—making it the perfect choice for something like an office or a college dorm room.

More and more frame shops are adding wide format digital printing to their repertoire. Though direct-to-acrylic printing takes an investment to get started—you will need a specific kind of printer, ink, and acrylic sheeting—for some shops, particularly those doing a high printing volume and/or a lot of commercial work, it can become a profitable way to diversify your business.

## Direct Printing vs. Face Mounting

Direct printing is a process in which a specialized machine—commonly, a UV flatbed printer—prints an image directly onto the acrylic substrate. This differs from face mounting, which framers may be more familiar with. The face mounting process involves permanently bonding the face of a print to the acrylic and backing it with a board and an aluminum subframe, resulting in a museum-grade display of the print.

It is important to keep in mind that, while a direct-to-acrylic print is often a less expensive option than a face-mounted print, its lifespan is shorter than its



● Unlike face mounting, these images are printed directly onto the acrylic sheet with UV-curable ink. Courtesy of Roehm America



● A UV flatbed printer is the most common printer used for this kind of imaging. Courtesy of Roehm America

face-mounted counterpart. Be sure to educate your customers about the pros and cons of both methods before moving forward with a sale.

## What You'll Need

There are a few products and pieces of equipment you will need to start creating direct-to-acrylic prints. One of them, unsurprisingly, is the acrylic itself. There are many acrylic products, including mirrored, light-diffusing, anti-static, solar-tinted, block acrylic for lighting, and more. Clear acrylic sheeting is the most common form and is supplied in thicknesses from 4" to 0.003", widths from 3' to 10', and lengths from 4' to 12.5'. It is impact- and moisture-resistant.

Traditionally, to create this kind of print, you would have to first apply an adhesion promoter (think of it as

a primer) to the acrylic prior to printing. Today, there are several acrylic products on the market designed to save you that costly and time-consuming step.

Products like Roehm America's ACRYLITE Digital Print Acrylic Sheet and Plaskolite's Optix DA Digital Acrylic Sheet are engineered for optimal adhesion of the ink to the acrylic—no separate adhesion-promoter layer needed.

"Historically, acrylic has been a tough match for these wide format, UV-curable flatbed printers," said Chris Airoidi, product and applications development engineer at Roehm. "Most of those inks don't want to stick to acrylic—it's just a bad chemical match. ACRYLITE Digital Print solves that problem. It's got a special coextruded layer on one side that's much more receptive to ink adhesion."

There is a range of desktop, benchtop, and large-scale UV printers on the market that can print directly onto acrylic. A good way to go about the buying process is to reach out to leading printer manufacturers like Epson, Canon, HP, EFI, Mimaki, and others, and ask them to create a sample print for you with an image you've sent to them. This way, you can get the tactile

experience of handling a sample and can get a closer look at the color and clarity of your image before committing to a major piece of equipment.

You will also need UV-curing ink to produce direct-to-acrylic prints; these are available from major printer manufacturers. Examining a few different samples will help you get a better idea of what kind of acrylic/printer/ink combination you might want.



● Acrylic prints are widely used in the signage industry. Courtesy of Roehm America

Scott Walton, national sales manager at Plaskolite, recommends sticking with a manufacturer-approved ink to ensure proper adhesion. "We get a lot of calls saying, hey, there's something wrong with your product—the ink is not sticking to it," Walton said. "What we find is that they've made the investment in these machines and then tried to go cheap on the ink. When they use a non-manufacturer-recommended ink, that's typically when they begin to have problems."

## Hanging and Finishing

Options for finishing and hanging your acrylic print include a standard mount with metal standoffs, a standard mount without standoffs, and a full bleed with standoffs, where the metal covers four small portions of the image. It is not recommended to use museum mount or float mount hanging



● Offices, hotels, dorm rooms, and outdoor spaces are a few good candidates for direct-to-acrylic prints. Courtesy of Roehm America



● Reach out to printer manufacturers for samples. Courtesy of Roehm America

systems with direct-to acrylic-prints, as you would be affixing the frame directly onto the printed ink layer on the back of the acrylic print—which could lead to ink adhesion failure.

## Stunning Results

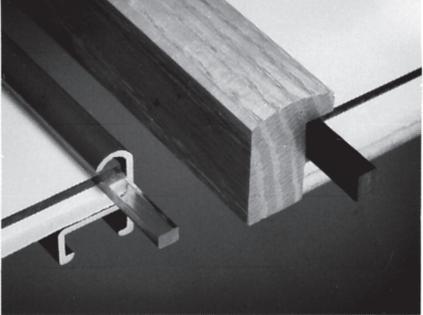
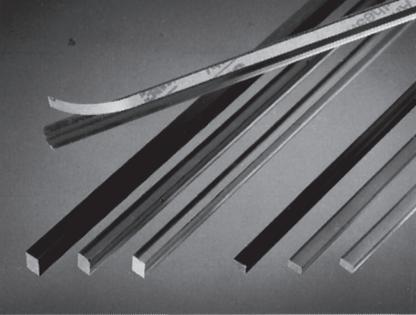
Direct-to-acrylic prints can enhance any room with their modern, glossy, polished look. Quicker to produce than a face-mounted print, they can also be time and money savers—however, producing them takes a not-insignificant initial investment. It's important to consider the level of volume you'd anticipate doing with this kind of product, the footprint the necessary equipment would take up in your shop, and other factors. For business owners who foresee a good return on investment, this type of print can help them stand out from their competition and open up a new revenue stream.

"People love to print on acrylic sheet because the result looks so stunning," Airoidi said. "In the market, it seems there is increasing demand for it—we keep selling more and more of this product."

The detail and durability of an acrylic print make it an attractive sell to many commercial and residential customers alike. For framing retailers looking to diversify, it's worth exploring what this product could do for your business. **PFM**

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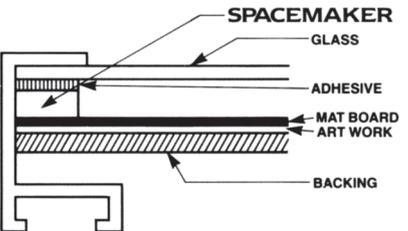
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