



EMBLEMS— TECH AND STYLE INNOVATIONS

Today's companies are offering an array of new looks and products, including digital printing of emblems

By Carol Patton

Roughly 10 years ago, a secondary school in the United Kingdom (UK) was testing a new way to take attendance: microchips were embedded in uniforms worn by students that registered their arrival in class on a teacher's computer.

Since then, microchip technology has advanced. The number of potential ways that it can be used appears endless. Among the latest is hospital administrators in Northern Ireland who are considering microchip implants in nurses' uniforms to track how many times they wash their hands.

While employers around the world have been inserting microchips in uniforms for more than a decade, some want to advance this concept one step forward—embedding microchips in emblems on

uniforms to make garments more functional, flexible and fashionable. As emblems change in appearance—some are considered haute couture by employees—these embellishments are now expected to do more than just look good. They need to perform by helping employers better manage workers and keep them safe.

Industry experts believe it's just a matter of time before microchip-embedded emblems on uniforms become commonplace. Here are some applications currently being considered:

- Chip-embedded emblems can also replace traditional time clocks, automatically detecting when employees enter or leave the building.
- Emblems can also help employees working in hot environments avoid heat stroke. Embedded microchips can monitor the air or their body temperature. It can change colors, signaling when the worker needs to drink more water or take a break to cool off.

Although some of these ideas may seem far-fetched, keep in mind that these innovations already exist and are among the fastest-growing technologies in the U.S.

LOOKS STILL COUNT

As research continues on wearable technology, many companies have introduced retail-inspired emblems.

World Emblem International Inc., a global designer and manufacturer of emblems, badges, and other decorations, recently introduced two different emblem styles, says Nicolas Restrepo, the company's senior vice president of sales in Miami.

The first is called Clean Cut, which features a thin stitched border with matching fabric so that the border and the emblem blends into the similarly colored shirt. While they blend into the shirt's fabric, they still stand out, offering a modern retail look, and can be removed. Depending on the quantity ordered, he says they can be slightly more expensive than embroidered emblems.



ABOVE: (Clockwise, top/left) Embroidered applique emblem with choice of border & shape/size & cutouts inside the design; high-visibility emblem with fluorescent materials/threads; a combination embroidered & woven emblem; an applique emblem; on pg. 46: woven emblems show detail, small lettering.

“Clean Cut has been our biggest grower, not our biggest seller,” he says. “It’s grown by roughly 30% over the last two years.”

FlexStyle, however, is the company’s newest form of decoration that offers greater detail, bold metallic finishes, deeper, more detailed texturing. It also sticks to a variety of surfaces, such as fabric, glass, wood, metal and plastic. Since there’s no backing, it’s also comfortable against the wearer’s skin.

“One of the trends we’ve seen within the last couple of years is the market moving toward high-performance garments, which are lighter than other garments,” says Restrepo, adding that embroidered emblems may be too heavy for such garments to support. “This is very lightweight, looks more pristine, and is comparably priced to direct embroidery.”

Since the FlexStyle was introduced roughly two years ago, he says it has

experienced a “nice, steady growth rate,” around 10%. It was developed for high-end garments and to help the company diversify into high-fashion and sports-apparel markets, he said. While some companies have branched out into clothing or promotional products, World has kept its focus on decorating apparel.

Even garment labels are evolving, adds Bob Fudge, vice president, sales and marketing at Thermopatch Corp., a global manufacturer of garment branding solutions based in Syracuse, NY.

He says newer labels contain substantial improvements. Their characteristics make them much more dye-resistant and adhesive. For example, consider that the PSI pressure (pounds per square inch) needed to pull the label off the garment is currently between 12 and 14. However, the PSI of the new labels is double that amount. The company plans to transition to these labels early next year.

However, the industry still faces one stubborn problem: making labels that strongly adhere to denim as they do to other fabrics.

“It’s an industry nemesis that’s been out there for 30 years,” Fudge says. “If denim is washed before labels are added, you won’t have that problem. But customers don’t like it because they feel like they’re not getting new goods.”

Another challenge involves embroidery vs. digital printing. He explains that the latter technology enables a company to reproduce its logo on an emblem or label in far greater, accurate, and complex detail than embroidery can ever achieve.

Europe has been successfully marketing digitally printed, heat-sealed logos as emblems or labels for years. So much so that he believes it has become the technology of choice. But that preference hasn’t yet crossed the Atlantic. In North America, he says embroidery is still king.

He tells the story of one client—a branch of the Canadian government—that asked for samples of its digitally printed logo on badges. He says the detail was clear, clean and crisp and looked “extremely great.” Unfortunately, the client did not share that opinion, explaining that it didn’t feel heavy or tough enough, like an embroidered emblem so they didn’t transition to it.

It’s also common for labels to come off a garment or become unreadable after repeated washings. They must be re-labeled or retagged, which delays their delivery and upsets customers. Although labels with digitally printed logos would avoid such scenarios, he says some textile service operators simply take this in stride instead of switching to this new technology.

“It’s one heck of a tremendous uphill battle, partially because of the perceived value of embroidery—the thickness, the feel or hand—in this marketplace,” Fudge says. “We made a ‘If Europe can do it, we can do it’ decision, but found it to be very challenging.”

THREE C’S: COLOR, CLARITY & CHOICE

To compete against embroidery, Penn Emblem Co., markets products like Penn Weave and PennDuo, which are removable and reusable woven patches, says Randi Blumenthal-Joseph, president of the Philadelphia-based company that offers different ID solutions for the health-care, industrial and hospitality sectors.

“We can give companies an embroidered patch, but prefer to give them something that differentiates them,” she says. “Woven emblems offer clarity, detail, color and the image is 3D.”

Some customers have taken advantage of technology advancements, opening an online store. She says employees are

given an allowance to purchase a variety of company-logoed products that are pre-made with embellishments and then warehoused.


Some of the new embellishments involve threads. They’re now offered in a wider selection of colors that are more fashion- and streetwear-oriented. As an example, she says her company is introducing fluorescent colors and glow-in-the-dark threads that will appeal to safety professionals.

Blumenthal-Joseph says that companies are moving away from traditional embellishments, seeking more creative ways to display their logo or image since uniforms are becoming less industrial and more fashionable.

“Like performance wear, the industry is following streetwear,” she says. “We follow the trends and have become in-house designers. We go to fashion shows to see the introduction of new streetwear fashions and colors.”

Among the trends are inks that come in vibrant colors. Likewise, her company recently introduced “silkscreened glow,” which is a cheaper alternative to reflective striping, emblems with new backings that last longer in the industrial laundry, and iron-on applications enabling shirts to be re-used.

But there is one industry trend that appears to outdo them all—continuous innovation involving both products and business models.

“We’re not just an emblem company,” says Blumenthal-Joseph. “We consider ourselves your brand decorator, offering design, creativity and innovative embellishments for anything and everything that needs a logo, design or name.” 



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