

# Digital Art Solutions makes top-quality, economical design an in-house reality for the imprinting industry

*"I don't think any other graphics application has the flexibility or versatility of CorelDRAW. It's helped our company become a real, value-added software provider. It's phenomenal."*

Craig Mertens, President  
Digital Art Solutions



## SPOTLIGHT

Digital Art Solutions  
[www.smartdesigns.com](http://www.smartdesigns.com)

## CHALLENGE

To meet the diverse design needs of the imprinting industry with a single, comprehensive and easy-to-use solution.

## SOLUTION

Adopt CorelDRAW® as the engine for a specialized application.

## BENEFITS

Rapid, simple, template-based design for sophisticated and cost-effective art production.

## The Story

Digital Art Solutions got its start in 1993 as a spin-off of Arizona's largest screen-printing firm. Its goal was straightforward: to supply companies throughout the imprinting industry with ready-made clipart images.

'Imprinting' covers a broad spectrum of products and processes, from screen printing and embroidery to award making, engraving, sign making and promotional-product imprinting. Each of these involves the application of graphic designs to three-dimensional physical materials: T-shirts and baseball caps, trophies and vinyl awnings, pens, coffee cups and countless other items.

The founders of Digital Art Solutions, the Mertens family of Arizona, quickly recognized that computers were destined to play an integral role in the design and production of imprinted products, and set out to develop a clipart image assembly software program specifically for the imprinting industry. With CorelDRAW as its engine, that program—Smart Designer™—has become the leading design application for printers.

## The Challenge

The diversity of the imprinting industry presented one of the most significant challenges to the team at Digital Art Solutions because production requirements vary greatly from one type of imprinting to the next.

At the same time, says Digital Art Solutions President Craig Mertens, a fair degree of migration occurs within the imprinting industry. "A lot of companies start out doing something inexpensive, like apparel printing," he explains, "and then expand into other areas. So a single firm can end up with multiple design and production needs."

Another fundamental challenge was economic. Imprinting is not an exceptionally high-margin industry, and as a result, controlling costs is essential to profitability.

In all, Digital Art Solutions identified five requirements for its software product:

1. **automation** – it would have to achieve a demonstrable degree of process efficiency to be valuable;
2. **process-specific functionality** – it would have to be flexible enough to meet the needs of any industry player, for example, by sizing artwork to various kinds of promotional products;
3. **integration** – it would have to integrate artwork from various sources effortlessly, through clipart image importing capabilities, for example, and database interoperability;
4. **template orientation** – the solution would have to provide easy-to-use templates, accelerating and simplifying the design process; and
5. **plug-in interoperability** – it would have to accommodate plug-in modules for specialized functions such as vinyl cutting and bitmap-to-vector conversion.

***“Smart Designer with CorelDRAW gave us a graphics department. It allowed us to do design work in-house. And it’s so polished, it makes us look like a million bucks.”***

***“Literally, people who produce graphics themselves can cut their art production time by 50 to 90 percent.”***

“Our goal was to find a software product that met these criteria,” Craig explains. “Something we could add our own industry-specific enhancements to. Without a doubt, that product was CorelDRAW.”

### **The Solution**

Digital Art Solutions launched Smart Designer with CorelDRAW in 1997.

Digital Art Solutions found CorelDRAW to be an excellent value, offering clipart images, optical character recognition (OCR) tags and a multitude of other features in a single, cost-competitive bundle. Its import and export capabilities were determined to be more extensive and more flexible than those of any other product on the market. And its open platform was readily conducive to the use of third-party software.

CorelDRAW also had certain essential design features built in from the very beginning—such as text enveloping.

“Corel had text enveloping from Day One. Basically, it lets you create a template and modify it without having to re-typeset. Adobe® Illustrator® didn’t add this until version 10. That’s one of the big reasons we chose Corel. We were standardized on Illustrator, but it didn’t have text enveloping, and that simply didn’t fit with our vision of Smart Designer.”

Six years and five versions of Smart Designer later, Digital Art Solutions maintains a very close working relationship with Corel. Digital Art’s lead programmer is an alpha-tester for new versions of CorelDRAW, and the company routinely passes customer remarks and requests for features on to the Corel design team.

### **The Benefits**

In CorelDRAW, Digital Art Solutions discovered a single software suite that could satisfy all its core requirements for the imprinting industry. And with the release of each new version of CorelDRAW, Digital Art Solutions has been able to build on that core in increasingly powerful ways—for example, by adding automation features such as Name Drop Xpress™, which imports variable text data directly into a CorelDRAW design.

Digital Art Solutions has also become the imprinting industry leader in providing virtual-sample functionality. Rather than produce costly physical prototypes for customers, CorelDRAW’s sophisticated PDF-creation capabilities allow companies using Smart Designer to send small, vector-graphic files instead. The results are significant cost savings and the added efficiency of having designs approved at the pre-production stage.

Since 1997, Digital Art Solutions has quadrupled in size.

“By using smart templates and a host of other automation features,” Craig Mertens explains, “what we’ve done is make in-house digital design accessible and affordable for the imprinting industry. Literally, people who produce graphics themselves can cut their art production time by 50 to 90 percent. With the combined features of Smart Designer and CorelDRAW, a process that would normally take hours can be finished within minutes. Obviously, the benefits are cost savings, better efficiency, and a stronger bottom line.”



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