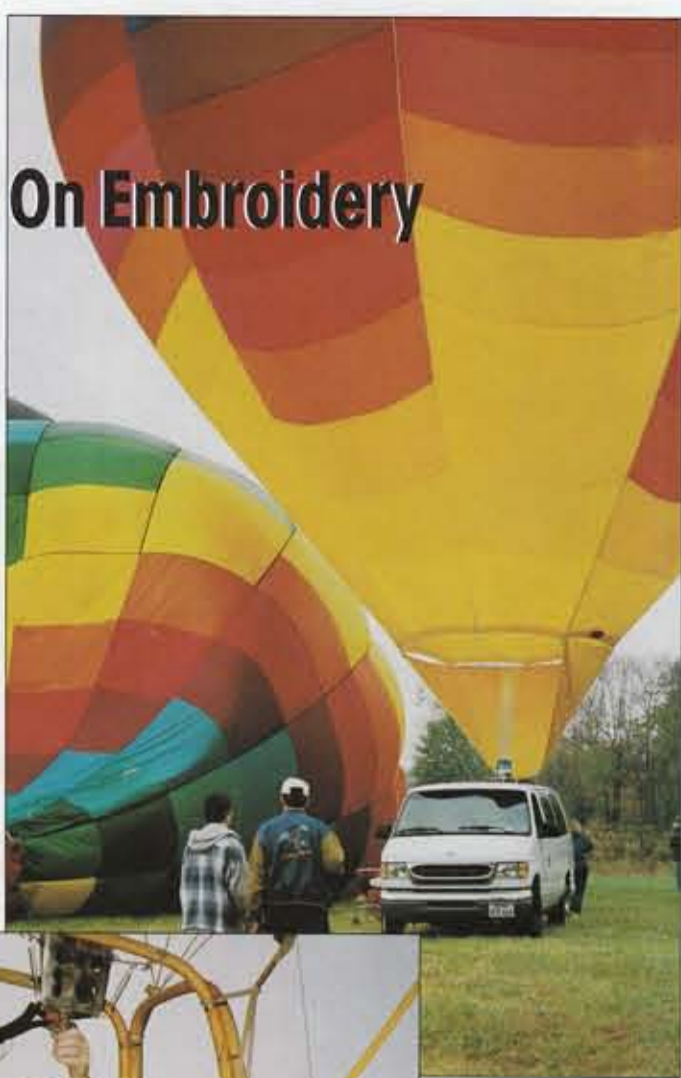


Getting High On Embroidery

All roads lead back to embroidery for this community volunteer.

Embroidery's been very good to me. Without it, I might never have experienced some of the fun—and pride—that owning my business has brought.

How has it been good to me? It gives me so many opportunities to come up with new ideas and work on unique projects. And being involved in a number of community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Hotel Motel Association, Convention and Visitors Bureau, The Rotary Club and many other civic organizations, is an added plus.



Participating in non-embroidery related community activities could open a world of opportunity to sell embroidery and market your services. Above: Twenty-six balloonists participated in the Chattanooga, Tenn., 1997 hot air balloon festival. Left: Embroiderer Melanie Cookley decides to experience firsthand what a hot air balloon ride is like.

A "Hot" Opportunity

Having crewed for a nationally known balloonist years ago, I realized the balloon rally I was embarking upon was the largest project I had ever attempted. As the project unfolded, I got an even better grasp of what we were attempting: The rally was turning into a three-day festival with a budget of approximately \$52,000. Volunteers flocked to the project. The



By Melanie Watts Cookley

24 Stitches Magazine March 1998

Because many community leaders and business entrepreneurs are also involved in these organizations, it's easy to find out what is going on in your community and establish a great network of friends and business associates—people looking for creative ways to improve and grow the communities in which we live and work. And

many times, those "creative ways" involve embroidery.

It is through my association with such organizations and people that I was offered a truly unique opportunity last year—that of coordinating a hot air balloon rally. Little did I know what an opportunity this was to not only sell embroidery, but market my services as well!



Taking advantage of the opportunity at hand, embroidered jackets, caps and lapel pins were some of the garments offered by Signature Designs, commemorating the hot air balloon festival.



word was out that a tremendous event was going to take place, and people wanted to help make it happen. Invitations were sent to balloonists throughout the country. At first, only a few responded, but by the time the event rolled around, 26 balloonists had accepted. Entertainment was also booked for the event. Friday night was designated oldies night, featuring The Drifters; Sam Bush was the contemporary blue grass feature on Saturday; and Sunday lent itself to gospel music, with a 150-member contemporary youth choir being the highlight. Fifty-three crafters displayed their goods, and 18 food vendors offered an array of food choices. Clearly, a lot of work went into organizing the event. But the story gets even more interesting when it came to finding sponsors.

Embroidery Talks

Even with a large budget, I still needed financial and volunteer backing. I began telling my customers that I was involved in the balloon festival, hoping for volunteers. Then I mentioned the scope of the project to a local banker whose bank just happened to be opening a new location within blocks of where the festival was taking place. What a fortuitous conversation. The bank signed on as our predomi-

nate sponsor.

I began contacting other potential corporate sponsors. This is when I noticed a change taking place for my company. Every time I contacted a potential sponsor, I left a business card for identification and as a way to contact me. I found that they were not only interested in the festival, but in what I do as well.

In laying out the package for what the sponsors would receive in exchange for their advertising dollars, it occurred to me that my company needed to be a sponsor, too. Not only did we sponsor the event financially, but also with shirts to identify volunteers. Each sponsor was listed on the back of the 500 or so T-shirts that were distributed to volunteers. It was like having 500 miniature billboards walking around with our name, along with an elite group of sponsors, being advertised. And then there were radio advertisements in which each sponsor's name was mentioned. With approximately eight spots a day on two different radio stations, this became an excellent opportunity, considering what such advertising would have cost us if we advertised individually.

I often hear embroiderers say they

I would encourage all embroiderers to step out of the box and try something new.

can't afford to market. My question is, can you afford not to? While much of my business still comes from word-of-mouth referrals, many of the companies I contacted for sponsorship of the event have become embroidery customers. We continue to establish ourselves as a company interested in being involved in the community and helping make things happen. As a matter of fact, recently, a woman applied for a job as a sales rep with us because she liked the presence we had in the community and the way we work with others to make a difference.

The Added Bonus

As the festival planning continued, people started asking if I was going to sell sweatshirts and souvenirs to mark this first-time balloon festival. I had gotten so consumed in coordinating the festival that I almost let a wonderful sales opportunity pass by.

We came up with several embroidered garments, including sweatshirts (one with a special metallic-trimmed collar for women), caps and jackets; we also sold commemorative lapel pens. The embroidered jackets were also commemorative, as only a certain number were produced

continued on page 30

26 Stitches Magazine March 1998



Sweatshirts with the embroidered Jordan Fest logo were another highly coveted item of the festival.

Continued from page 26

and sold. Everyone loved the line we had put together.

We secured booth space, and for the first time, sold our embroidery out of the shop. I have been to many seminars and have heard others talk about mobile embroidery, but I had never tried it. With

the shop being so close to the festival grounds, we didn't bring our machine, but rather kept the booth well-stocked. I can see how mobile embroidery could be a lucrative way to sell embroidery while encouraging consumers to try something different.

The Moral Of The Story Is...

I would encourage all embroiderers to step out of the box and try something new. It could be a balloon festival or whatever else you're interested in doing or being a

part of. There are always ways to find new markets in embroidery.

If you're in a rut, or business is not what you'd like it to be, try something new. You may find yourself in a situation similar to mine—doing something that doesn't seem to relate to embroidery, but

leads back to it anyway.

Other large companies have traveled the same path by being involved in the communities that have been so good to their businesses. In fact, every now and then I'll see someone wearing that festival T-shirt with my company's logo on the back, or a lapel pin stuck in a hat, and I realize I helped make a difference. Plus, it was nice to be a part of the project instead of just an observer.

Believe it or not, we held the first organizational meeting for Jordan Fest '98 Hot Air Balloon Festival in January; the event is scheduled for September 11-13. Of course, I'm already thinking about what kind of embroidered apparel we can put together for this year's event!



Melanie Watts Cookley is the owner of Signature Designs in Chattanooga, Tenn. She has been in the embroidery industry for seven years. In 1997, she was awarded the Chamber of Commerce Entrepreneur of the Year Award, as well as being honored by Hamilton County Commissioner, Curtis Adams, for her part in the first Hot Air Balloon Festival—Jordan Fest '97.