

# Fit to Print

**A new generation of customized performance wear takes shape.**

**By Emily Walzer**



**VAPOR**  
Engineered to be tech-friendly for sublimators, Vapor Apparel responds well to the heat process incurred during printing.

**A** young South Carolina textile company, Source Substrates, is looking to bring a new dimension to athletic wear and is focusing on two strong trends in the marketplace right now. “We are riding the tide of mass customization and the mainstream performance apparel wave,” says Chris Bernat, chief revenue officer, Source Substrates.

The nascent fabric firm is developing product and programs that elevate printing on technical garments. By engineering performance fabrics and clothes that have both the athlete and the print decorator in mind, Source Substrates is bringing a more sophisticated and customized level of printing into the sports and outdoor apparel markets.

No longer just for sneakers and snowboards, the mass customization trend is taking hold in all product categories, including sportswear for teams, clubs and organizations.

“Individuals who want a custom shirt—one with their name, number, and color of choice—nowadays also want a shirt that looks and feels like a performance top,” explains Bernat.

In other words, forget about the conventional cotton T-shirt with vinyl lettering pressed on the back. Charleston-based Source Substrates supplies not only bulk fabric, but also has introduced a new Vapor Apparel collection that includes singlets and other athletic-specific styles made from moisture-managing polyesters that can be customized with sublimation printing.

Sublimation has been around for a decade, but the ability to digitally print sublimation ink, as opposed to screen-printing, is new. And this advance has several benefits in activewear. For example, with screen-printing, garments lose any inherent breathability and softness where the print appears.

Sublimation, however, doesn't interfere with the hand or performance properties of the base fabric.

A custom print shirt can be worn in the gym or on the trail and still offer top-notch wicking

performance.

Another advantage of the Source Substrate collection is a higher grade of color. In the past, sublimators have been restricted in their color options by the nature of the printing process. According to Bernat, the company has developed fabrics that work well with the sublimation process, resulting in maximum breadth of color and greater vibrancy. The product lines provide dozens of color/style combinations from which to choose, as compared to the limited selection previously available in the market.

Vapor Apparel is also engineered to be tech-friendly for sublimators. Specifically, the garments respond well to the heat process incurred during printing. For example, the line often formed around the image in conventional printing does not occur when using the Vapor Apparel products.

“The sublimation market is now ready to talk about performance apparel,” says Bernat. “Polyester has been the preferred fabric for sublimation, but cotton ruled in the marketplace. Now polyester has become a hot fabric for athletic apparel. And that will help sublimators extend into a higher-end performance market.”

Bernat founded Source Substrates two years ago with business partner Jackson Burnett. Each brings a specific expertise to the business. Bernat's background is in printing and he previously served as head of sales at Sawgrass, a large international ink company. Burnett is a veteran of the yarn business and recently worked at Unifi as the head of South American operations.

Source Substrates is gaining ground with the print community. “We have used most of the garments on the market at one time or another, and find that these Vapor garments are far superior to anything we have tried,” comments Mark Collins, owner of Earthtone Graphics. “The fabrics that they have come up with have been designed to accept a very vibrant print, while resisting the heat transfer lines associated with sublimation heat transfer printing.” Earthtone Graphics is based in Asheville, NC and has been doing some of the largest-volume print runs on performance fabrics in the market.

“Mass customization is no longer for the aesthetically challenged—people who want a picture of their kid on a cotton T-shirt,” says Bernat. “From traditional football coaches to innovative specialty customers, there is huge potential for growth in sublimation print performance wear.” ■



**SUBLIMATION**  
Digitally printed ink allows garments to retain inherent performance benefits.

