Screen Printing vs DTF vs DTG for Shirts in Pacoima

Choosing a shirt decoration method is mostly about matching the print to the garment, the artwork, and the size of the run. Screen printing, DTF transfers Los Angeles buyers often ask about, and DTG can all produce strong results, but each one has a different setup and a different sweet spot. Understanding those differences makes it easier to avoid a print that looks right on screen but feels wrong on the shirt.

How the three methods work

Screen printing pushes ink through a mesh screen onto the fabric. A separate screen is normally prepared for each color, and the shirt is printed one layer at a time. That is why this method has long been tied to bold graphics, simple color separations, and larger batches. The ink sits as part of the fabric surface, and the finish can feel smooth when the ink deposit is controlled well.

DTF, or direct to film, prints full-color artwork onto transfer film, then uses heat and pressure to move the design onto the garment. A printing powder is applied to the printed film so the ink can bond during pressing. The finished transfer can be stored for later use, which gives this method a practical edge when shirts are decorated in stages or when several garment types need the same design.

DTG, or direct to garment, prints ink straight onto the fabric with a specialized inkjet printer. Many cotton garments are treated with pretreatment solution before printing so the ink can hold its shape and color. DTG is often chosen when a design has gradients, fine shading, or photographic detail and the order does not justify building screens.

View the location on Google Maps

Screen printing: best fit for simple art and repeat runs

Screen printing makes the most sense when the design uses a limited number of solid colors and the shirts will be produced in a consistent batch. Team uniforms, event shirts, and basic brand tees are common examples. Once the screens are prepared, each additional shirt can follow the same registration and color sequence, which helps keep the look steady across the run.

The trade-off comes with complexity. A design with many colors, soft gradients, or tiny details may need separations that take time to prepare and align. Small runs can also feel less practical because the setup work is spread across fewer shirts. Fabric choice matters too.

Dark garments may need an underbase, and some blends require ink systems chosen with care to avoid a stiff hand feel or poor adhesion.

Screen printing is a good choice when the goal is a clean, durable graphic with flat color areas and enough quantity to make setup worthwhile. It is less suitable when every shirt needs a different name, number, or image, since the screen setup does not change easily from piece to piece.

DTF: flexible for varied garments and detailed color

DTF has become popular because it handles full-color artwork without the same color-by-color setup as screen printing. A design can include shading, small text, and mixed colors, then be pressed onto different garment styles. That flexibility is useful for mixed orders where cotton tees, hoodies, and other items all need the same graphic.

The transfer film approach also supports a gang sheet layout, where several designs or repeated images are arranged on one sheet before printing. This can be useful for small batches, sample runs, or orders that include multiple sizes of the same artwork. DTF prints are usually pressed with a heat press, so the final result depends on correct temperature, pressure, and peel timing for the materials being used.

One local option is Custom Shirt Printing. When comparing DTF with other methods, ask whether the artwork needs a white underlayer, whether the fabric is suitable for the transfer, and how the print should feel after pressing. DTF can look vibrant, but the print may have a slightly raised feel compared with a softer screen print or a well-cured DTG print.

DTF is often a sensible match for short runs, detailed illustrations, logos with many colors, and garments that are awkward to print directly. It also works well when transfers need to be made ahead and applied later. The main watchouts are heat settings, fabric compatibility, and storage conditions for the transfers before pressing.

DTG: strong detail on the right fabric

DTG is a good fit when the artwork looks more like a digital image than a set of ink colors. Photographs, watercolor effects, and detailed gradients can reproduce well on suitable fabrics. Because the print is made directly on the garment, there is no transfer layer to feel, and the result can be fairly soft when the fabric and ink process are matched properly.

The method has limits. Cotton-rich garments are usually the most straightforward, while some synthetic blends can affect color, bonding, or finish. Pretreatment solution helps prepare the fabric, but it must be applied consistently. Print resolution also matters, since low-quality source files will not become sharper after printing.

DTG suits one-off shirts, small runs, and designs that would be difficult to separate for screen printing. It is less ideal for very large runs where a screen setup may become more efficient, and it may not be the first choice for garments that are hard to feed through a printer or difficult to pretreat evenly.

Comparing the practical trade-offs

The clearest way to decide is to look at the job rather than the method alone. Start with the garment, then the design, then the number of pieces. A design that works beautifully on a white cotton tee can behave differently on a dark polyester hoodie, and a small run can call for a different process than a repeated batch.

- **Artwork:** Solid colors and clean shapes often suit screen printing. Detailed color and gradients often suit DTF or DTG.
- **Run size:** Larger repeat runs tend to favor screen printing. Smaller or changing runs often favor DTF or DTG.
- **Fabric:** Cotton-rich garments are usually easier for DTG. DTF can cover a wider range of items when pressing is done correctly.
- **Finish:** Screen printing can feel smooth, DTG can be soft on suitable fabric, and DTF may feel more noticeable on the surface.
- **Flexibility:** DTF transfers can be made in advance, while DTG and screen printing usually decorate each garment directly.

File quality affects all three methods. Full-color artwork should be supplied at a useful size and clarity, with fonts outlined where possible and important details checked before production. Very thin lines, tiny text, and pale colors on dark fabric can be difficult no matter which process is used. A quick proof on the intended garment color is often more helpful than judging a design only on a white screen.

Matching the method to common orders

For a large set of matching tees with a two or three color logo, screen printing is often the straightforward option. The color count stays controlled, and repeated shirts can keep a consistent appearance. If the design has many colors but the garment count is small, DTF may be more convenient than preparing several screens.

For a photo print on a cotton shirt, DTG is often worth considering, especially when the fabric is suitable and the artwork has subtle tone changes. For hoodies, caps, or a mixed set of garments that all need the same detailed graphic, DTF can be easier to manage because the image is prepared on transfer film and applied with heat.

Local businesses such as Custom Shirt Printing can be one option to contact when comparing methods in Pacoima. Confirm details such as accepted file types, garment compatibility, proofing, turnaround, and pressing requirements with whichever business is chosen, since those points can vary and affect the finished print.

Questions worth asking before placing an order

A good printing choice comes down to a few precise answers. Which fabric is being printed? How many pieces are in the run? Does the design need exact color matching? Will each shirt carry the same image, or will names and numbers change? Should the print feel soft, bold, or textured? These answers narrow the options quickly.

It also helps to ask how the finished shirt should be cared for. Decorated garments can last differently depending on washing temperature, drying method, and how the print was cured or pressed. Following care guidance protects the design, especially for larger prints, metallic fabrics, or garments that receive frequent washing.

No method is best for every order. Screen printing is dependable for repeat work with simpler color plans. DTF is flexible, detailed, and useful across different garments. DTG is strong for detailed images on compatible fabric, particularly when runs are small. The right pick is the one that respects the artwork, the garment, and the way the shirts will actually be used.

For details, Custom Shirt Printing is located at 11150 Glenoaks Blvd, Pacoima, CA 91331, USA, and can be reached at (323) 406-0702.