

# HEAT PRESS BUYING GUIDE



**Choose the right heat press for your business!**

Pros & cons to consider.

What features do you need?

What questions to ask?

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# Introduction

Whether you're new to heat printing and looking for your first heat press, replacing your existing press with a new model, or adding a heat press to increase your business's production, you need to know what to look for. From basic elements like press type, even pressure, and temperature, to innovations like custom platens, this guide will teach you about the functionality and features of the latest heat presses. You'll also learn what questions to ask when shopping and ultimately decide which press is right for the unique needs and challenges of your heat printing business.



## About The Author

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Josh Ellsworth is the General Manager for Stahls' CAD-CUT Direct and educator for [Stahls' TV](#).

He's been in the heat printing industry for over 15 years after beginning his career with Stahls' in 1998 as a maintenance worker. From there, he moved to a position working in the sales department and then into his current position in management.

Best known for his work as an educator, Josh has published over 300 educational videos in the past 8 years with over 5 million views in 262 countries. In this buying guide he shares his knowledge and experience with heat presses to help you make an informed decision when purchasing a heat press.







## Heat Press Comparison

When shopping for a heat press one of the first considerations is what style of press is right for your business. There are differences in each heat press type that will impact both productivity and usability.



### Clamshell

The clam style heat press is the most commonly seen heat press machine on the market. These presses have a hinge between the upper and lower platen and open like a clamshell.

#### Pros:

- Easy to use – great for beginners.
- Takes up little space.
- Most portable option.
- Ideal for printing t-shirts in volume.
- Least number of steps to operate.

#### Cons:

- Gives a limited view of layout area.
- Working underneath the heat of the press can be uncomfortable and, if careless, could lead to burns.
- Machine works harder to maintain temperature as the upper platen is exposed to room temperatures.



### Manual Swing Away

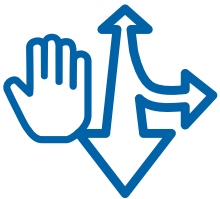
The swing away press is designed to move the upper platen away from the lower platen between presses.

#### Pros:

- Easier garment layout with a full view of the layout area.
- Precise layout and application.
- Heat free work space.
- Preserves electricity needed to maintain temperature as less of the platen is exposed to room temperature air.

#### Cons:

- More steps to complete an application.
- Less time efficient than clam models.
- More space required to accommodate swinging action.



### Manual Draw/Swing Away

This type of swing away press has a lower platen that pulls out toward the operator so layout work can be done without reaching under the hot upper platen.

#### Pros:

- Heat free work surface with reduced space requirement when operated like a draw.
- Safe to operate.
- Easier garment layout with a full view of the layout area.
- Platen heat is contained when not in use.

#### Cons:

- More steps to complete an application.
- Moveable layout surface when operating like a draw requires care to avoid moving designs out of place before application.
- Bulkier garments like hoodies and sweatshirts are more difficult to print due to dragging below print surface when operating in draw mode.



### Air Operated Swing Away

This style of swing away press is designed to move the upper platen away from the lower platen between presses while allowing for automatic closing and opening with the push of two buttons. Must be connected to an air compressor.

#### Pros:

- Very little wear and tear on operator, doesn't require force to open or close.
- Easier garment layout with a full view of the layout area.
- Precise layout and application.
- Heat free work space.
- Preserves electricity needed to maintain temperature as less of the platen is exposed to room temperature air.
- Generally the most durable.

#### Cons:

- Slightly longer to complete an application vs clamshell due to swing away and swing back time.
- More space required to accommodate swinging action.
- Requires an air compressor.
- More expensive than manual models.



## What Press Is Right For You?

The heat press style that's right for you depends on what you'll be printing with your heat press. Here are our recommendations for a heat press style based on how you're planning to use your machine.

*"I'm printing T-shirts for special events and custom jobs using screen printed transfers."*

**Go with a clam.**

Screen Printed transfers require minimal layout and can be pressed at a faster rate with a clam style press. The clam press is also the most portable option for custom printing at events.

*"I'm pressing sports uniforms with both names and numbers."*

**Go with the swing away/draw.**

Letters and numbers take a little more time to lay out so visibility of the layout space is key. Being able to make adjustments without the heat in your face or close to your arms is also ideal. The draw function will provide an option for occasional event printing in tight quarters.

"I'm doing sublimation."

Go with the swing away/draw.

The clam press sometimes creates a pinch effect that will cause ghosting of sublimation transfers. The swing away also allows for thicker items typically printed with sublimation such as plaques.

"I'm curing for DTG printing."

Go with a clam (particularly with auto-open functionality) or an air swing away.

You'll appreciate the auto open feature on longer dwell times required in DTG curing so you won't have to stand by the heat press.

"I'm doing a little bit of everything."

Take your pick.

If you're doing a little bit of everything you're able to decide which style of heat press works best for you based mostly on personal preference. For example, [in my videos](#), I most often use a swing arm press for the heat free work space and the extra moves in production don't bother me

While the basics of each heat press type are the same, there are other features to consider when purchasing a heat press. Looking at things like temperature accuracy, ease of use, available warranty coverage, and available tech support allow you to make the best purchase decision based on your needs.

## Considerations For Purchase

Once you've decided which type of heat press is right for your business, you'll need to consider the features of specific makes and models on the market. Here are some things to consider when evaluating the heat press you'll purchase.

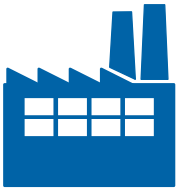


### Quality

A high quality heat press will inevitably cost more than cheaper, less durable counterparts. A heat press needs to withstand constant movement and clamping so high quality parts will ultimately perform better.

- Is the heat press frame constructed from plastic or steel? *Steel is ideal.*
- How many welds (if any) are present in the frame? *Less is better.*
- What warranties are offered to protect your purchase over time? *5 years is industry standard.*
- Are there reviews?





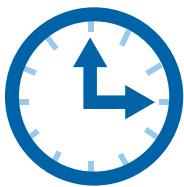
## Manufacturer

A broken heat press doesn't help your business, getting a broken press back up and running quickly is imperative to your business' success. Knowing who you're buying from and what their business looks like will help you feel confident in your purchase.

- Does the company you're buying your heat press from have reliable customer service and tech support?
- Do they provide troubleshooting resources online and over the phone?
- Are they quick to resolve issues for their customers?
- Is the heat press made in the USA?

## reminder!

*It's a common misconception is that weight = durability, there's more to the quality of your press than that.*



## Time

Time is one of the key ingredients to a successful heat transfer application so an accurate timer is imperative. A timer on the machine will also save you many headaches in the long run.

- Are the time, temperature, and pressure readings digital or analog?  
*Digital is preferred for accuracy.*
- Does the timer reset automatically with each application?
- Does the press beep or open automatically when the time is up?  
*A heat press that automatically opens when the time is up allows you to multi-task in a busy shop without leaving your garments on the press too long.*
- Is the press programmable?

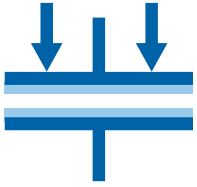


## Temperature

Accurate temperature is key to a durable heat transfer application.

- What kind of temperature gauge does the press have?
- Does the press use a bimetallic thermometer (5-10 degree temperature variance) or an RTD probe (+/- 2 degree variance)?
- How are the heating elements spaced out inside the press?  
*Elements that are spaced no more than 2 inches apart will ensure edge to edge heat without 'cold spots'.*
- How thick is the heat press platen?  
*Thinner lighter platens will lose heat much more quickly than those that are 3/4" thick.*
- How high does the temperature go?  
*Some applications require heat up to 400°.*
- How long does the press take to heat up?  
*20 minutes is standard. An auto power feature will allow you to set the press to power on at a certain time, so it's ready to start pressing when you are.*





## Pressure

Pressure is another key element to a properly applied heat transfer, it's important to have the correct pressure, (light, medium, or heavy) for your substrate and material. You need to know pressure will be evenly applied at the right strength.

- Is the pressure read out digital or analog? If analog, how is it adjusted and measured?  
*A digital pressure display gives you an accurate pressure reading without guess work.*
- Is the pressure adjustment over the center?  
*Over the center pressure gives the most evenly applied pressure on your heat press machine.*
- Is there even pressure on every corner of the platen?  
*Test for even pressure by putting four squares of paper on the press, one in each corner, and close the press. Try to pull out the papers. If one paper comes out easier than the others the platen is not providing even pressure across the lower platen.*



## Platens

A heat press will come with a standard platen usually measuring between 15"x15" to 16"x20". The larger platen will give you flexibility in the items you can decorate from XL T-shirts to oversized hoodies. Custom platens come in many different shapes and sizes for different uses like printing on shoes, duffel bags, hat bills, and more. These options create more sales opportunities for your business.

- What size is the standard platen on this machine?  
*If you plan to print oversized items a larger platen is ideal, but if you're planning to print mostly kids t-shirts a smaller platen may work well.*
- What custom platens are available for this machine?
- How easily can the lower platen be changed?  
*Some machines require a tool and others have a quick change mechanism to quickly switch out the platen to print different items easily.*

## Load-ability

Heat presses vary greatly in their ability to be easily loaded. Loading speed is important, but even more so loading accuracy. A press that is 100% threadable will allow for both loading speed and accuracy to ensure a flat pressing surface onto your item. Getting an item flat for printing is critical to durability.

- Is the machine able to have a small shirt, bag and the like split over the lower platen for loading?
- Can I rotate my T-shirt or jersey while on the machine to print both front and back without wasting time in reloading?



# Conclusion

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A heat press is the cornerstone of a successful heat printing business. Many decorators have been able to make \$50-\$100k per year in a spare bedroom, garage or even off of a dining room table. Add this to the many retail brands, sporting goods shops and embroiderers making much more a year with heat printing and you'll see the heat press is important. It's an investment in your business that shouldn't be taken lightly. Do not compromise quality for price in a haste to get started. I firmly believe that an inaccurate heat press is a fast track to ruined garments, lost customers, bad word of mouth and eventually business closure. The quality of what you create starts with your investment. Good luck!

Learn more about Hotronix Heat Presses on [Stahls.com](https://stahls.com)

# About STAHL'S'

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STAHL'S' is the leading resource for business-to-business garment and product identity at every level. STAHL'S' creates solutions, technologies, products and services needed to start, run, and grow any garment imprint or personalization business.

Whether you're interested in learning how to use a heat press or how to decorate a soccer uniform, you'll find our educational resources extremely beneficial. ([stahls.com/help-education](https://stahls.com/help-education))

# Worksheets

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Now that you've read our Heat Press Buying Guide, you're ready to start shopping. These worksheets will help you find the right press with the right features for your business.

## COMPARISON CHART

This chart helps you narrow down your options when considering what style of heat press is right for your business. Use it to compare the quantity of items you'll be printing, how much space you have and what type of garments you'll be printing to make the best choice.

## COMPARISON WORKSHEET

Once you've decided which type of heat press is right for your business, you'll need to consider the features of specific makes and models on the market. Use this worksheet to compare different makes and models on the market to make an educated purchase.

# Comparison Chart

This chart will help you consider how you'll use your heat press and what heat press style is best for your business needs.

Heat Press Style	Typical Quantity	Space Needed	What Type Of Garment
<b>Clam</b>	1–12	Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• T-Shirts</li><li>• DTG</li><li>• Onsite Customization</li></ul>
<b>Swing/Draw</b>	12–24	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uniforms</li><li>• Sublimation</li></ul>
<b>Air Operated</b>	1–48	Large (For Press & Compressor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anything</li></ul>

# Comparison Worksheet

for "yes," leave blank for "no."

## Quality

- Is the heat press frame constructed from steel?
- Is it a weld free framework?
- Are there positive reviews?
- Does the press have at least a 1 year Warranty?
- 3 year Warranty?
- 5 year Warranty?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Manufacturer

- Does the company you're buying your heat press from have reliable customer service and tech support?
- Do they provide troubleshooting resources online and over the phone?
- Is the heat press made in the USA?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Time

- Are the time, temperature, and pressure readings digital?
- Does the timer reset automatically with each application?
- Does the press open automatically when the time is up?
- Is this press programmable?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Temperature

- Does the press have a +/- 2 degree variance?
- Are heating elements spaced out within 2" of each other?
- Is the heat press platen at least 5/8" thick?
- Does the temperature reach 400°?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Pressure

- Is the pressure read out digital?
- Is the pressure adjustment over the center?
- Is there even pressure on every corner of the platen?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Platens

- Are there custom platens available for this machine?
- Can the lower platen be changed in less than 30 seconds?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Load-ability

- Is the machine 100% threadable?
- Is the machine able to have a small shirt, bag, and the like split over the lower platen for loading?
- Can I rotate my t-shirt or jersey while on the machine to print both front and back without wasting time reloading?

A	B	C
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**BRANDS** | A. \_\_\_\_\_  
 B. \_\_\_\_\_  
 C. \_\_\_\_\_

Each "yes" equals 1 pt., scoring 25 possible.

- 23–25 - Excellent
- 20–22 - Good
- 17–19 - Buyer Beware
- 16 or Less - Do not invest!

TOTALS | A  B  C