

Making Money from Your Embroidery

You have the embroidery machine, acres of fabric and miles of thread. Everything in your home is embellished, from the tea cozy to the screen door. After dressing your family with embroidered shirts and jackets and caps and socks, you moved out into the neighborhood and sewed up a storm for everyone on your street. And you love every minute of it.



Word spread about your prowess in the sewing room. Songs were sung by fourth graders wearing embellished choir robes with gold piping. A young poet across town wrote an ode about your quillow. And now you wonder if, perhaps, you should charge for your work. Wouldn't it be a dream, really, to have a little bit of income while enjoying your passion?

To Charge or Not To Charge

There are those of us who will never charge for our work. We simply enjoy the act of creating and take enormous pleasure when others appreciate our work. And there are those of us who have built up successful businesses that generate income for supplies, equipment, and a handful of monthly bills. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle of these two groups. We're not certain that we really want a full-blown business with 12-head commercial machines chugging in the garage. But a question lingers in the back of our minds: Shouldn't we be compensated for our time, effort, and materials?

Time is Money

If that question is lingering in the back of your mind, if the smiles of appreciation and thank-you notes aren't as satisfying as they used to be, then yes, absolutely, charge for your work. If you hesitate or feel shy about setting prices or fees, take a walk around your sewing room. Look at all the thread, the fabric, stabilizer, topping, and bobbins. Look at your collection of designs, garments, and blanks. Above all else, examine your finished work. It's beautiful, it's professional. It takes time and energy and money to create such lovely pieces. Let those that benefit from your works of art help support the artist's work.

First, decide what kind of business you want. Do you want to make a profit, or do you want just enough to cover your time and materials? Will you be sewing for friends, family, and acquaintances, or anyone that asks? Develop a pricing structure that incorporates the vision of your business.

If you want just enough to cover your time and materials, then go shopping with your customer. Have him or her pick out the garment, the thread, and other accessories. At the cash register add on a small gift certificate for you – depending on the size of the project, between \$10 and \$20. That way you can return to the store and shop for

yourself with your earnings. By taking the customer shopping with you and having him or her select the materials, you won't overspend or stock up on supplies that you don't need.

If you want to leap into the for-profit business world and see where it takes you, look at what other companies are doing. Pay close attention to what they are doing well, and even closer attention to what they are not doing well. Develop a pricing structure that is competitive, fair, and one that rewards you for your work.

Most commercial embroiderers charge between 30 cents and \$1.50 for every thousand stitches. Now, I know that doesn't seem like a lot. If you are sewing a 6,000 stitch design, that fee is only between \$1.80 and \$9. Does that really cover the costs of stabilizer, thread, and time? How in the world do people make money in this business?

In a word: garments. Buy wholesale, sell retail. You can mark up t-shirts, sweatshirts and jackets from 100 to 200 percent, and your customer will still believe that she is getting more than her money's worth. If you purchase in bulk, from the sale rack, or off-season, you can get some incredible deals on garments. Store them in a clean, dry area, and pray that they'll still be in fashion when you unpack them.

Commercial embroiderers often have multi-head machines, and they can embroider several shirts at one time. Chances are you don't have a multi-head machine, and until your business gathers steam and starts rolling along, you may not want to invest in one. Price your work accordingly, accounting for the fact that you'll sew one garment at a time.



Let's Make a Deal: Family and Friend Discounts

No matter how many projects we've created, it's still a thrill to get a special request from a friend or family member. When our loved ones show an interest and respect for our passion, and when they want us to whip up a little something special with the magical embroidery machine, we leap at the chance and throw caution and budget to the wind. It's perfectly acceptable to give a "family and friend discount," because as you begin your business venture, they'll be walking advertisements for you.

One fellow embroiderer constructed an embroidered, beaded bag for a close friend. Her friend loved it, took it everywhere, and soon requests from other friends and acquaintances started rolling in. Before long, this embroiderer was knee-deep in the purse-making business, having a wonderful time exploring different materials, methods, design and color combinations, and fusing the art of embroidery with the skill of beadwork. Now she has purse samples at a vintage clothing shop in her town which takes orders for a small percentage of the retail cost. She has long been making a profit on her work. It all started with a gift from the heart to a dear friend.

What should you charge for family and friends? Should you charge anything? That

depends on how many requests you get, and if you find that those requests are interfering with your business development and growth.

A nice compromise is to recommend a “surprise” gift as payment: a gift certificate to a fabric store, a new iron, or a little help with your business. Now, I’m not recommending that you teach your family to sew – far from it. But your sons and daughters can certainly pre-wash, iron, and fold fabric in exchange for the time you spend meeting their needs. Not only will you get a bit of help, but they will gain a deeper appreciation for the work that you do.

One word of warning: Stress to your family members that under no circumstances should they reveal your “special” prices to those outside the clan. There’s nothing worse than hearing from your daughter’s roommate’s boyfriend’s cousin that “Shelly said that you would charge me just for the thread, nothing else.” Make sure that your family and friends know that any special pricing is for their ears only.

As embroiderers, we reap a lot of personal satisfaction from doing work for churches and charities. We’re generous people; we give endlessly as others have given to us their knowledge, experience, tips, and tricks. As generous people we want to help the churches and charities that are helping others.

Is special pricing appropriate when working on costumes for Vacation Bible School, altar cloths, and choir robes? Absolutely. But make sure that you draw a line between what you are doing *for* the church or charity, and what you are doing for the people *in* the church or charity. It’s okay to work on altar cloths to make your place of worship more beautiful. But it’s not okay to make a wedding gift for the organist to give to her best friend, and not get paid.

Although churches and charities might not have a lot of money to pay you for your work, and while you may not want to accept payment, keep track of what you donate. Those “in-kind” donation forms are great “get out of jail free” cards when it comes to filing your tax forms. Create a “full price” invoice for the church or charity, write that the value was donated, and save it for tax time.

Gentle Reminders

It’s always a good idea to tell your customer how much time and effort is put into creating the product. People who don’t sew really don’t know how much effort it takes to make anything in the sewing room. Non-sewists will never comprehend the amount of time we spend considering fabric choices, thread colors, design placement, ironing, pressing, machine care, and maintenance.

Even if you don’t charge for your embroidery, let people know that while you enjoy creating gifts at no charge, a considerable amount of time and energy is used in the sewing room. One fellow embroiderer includes a handwritten card with all of her gifts

to others, and on that card she shares the effort that went into creating the gift:

*This shirt is given to you with love and friendship
3 hours of sewing time
14,000 stitches
May you enjoy wearing it as much as I enjoyed making it.*

My, oh my. There certainly are a lot of variables to factor into your decision. The greatest advice that I can give is to find a good balance in your sewing room. Whether you decide to charge or not to charge for your work, the most important thing is that you are happy and satisfied while embroidering. Above all else, you must whistle while you work; embroidery must remain a passion and not become a chore.

Regards,
Deb Munding

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