

Want to Print your own Inventory Tags and Labels?

When you are cataloging a lot of costumes props/sets or equipment it may seem like a good idea to print your own tags and labels rather than ordering them from a printer every month or two. Here is what you need to get started.

- Thermal Transfer Printer** - Depending on the quality of the printing - 300 or 600 dpi (dots per inch) a Thermal Transfer printer can cost between \$400 and \$3000. I would not recommend getting a 200 dpi printer as you want the barcodes to print very clearly. Printer manufacturers that I use are *Zebra, TSC and cab*. You will want to research which model will suit your needs.
- Ribbons** – The image is transferred to the material using a special ribbon and each material (iron-on/sew-in tags and adhesive labels) require different ribbons. Ribbons run between \$12 and \$65 each – depending on the size and length. Usually the manufacturer has a 6 ribbon minimum. I get my ribbons from *Electronic Imaging Materials* in New Hampshire.
- Material** – To print the garment tags you will buy large rolls of the appropriate material. The Iron-on material is about \$275 per roll and prints about 3,000 tags – again a 4 roll minimum. The size of the rolls you can order depends on the printer you buy. (Smaller less expensive printers can only take 5" rolls - which are more expensive per inch of material). The adhesive labels are less expensive. I get my material from *Electronic Imaging Materials* in New Hampshire. They are very good to work with but not inexpensive. Most tag material (iron-on and sew-in) require a 3 - 4 week lead time.
- Software** – the printers require a software written for barcode printers. There are free versions that come with your printer but to do higher quality printing and to have more control over the printing I recommend *BarTender* software. It is around \$400 and has to be updated to the newest version about every 3 years
- Excel spread sheet or Access Database** - to keep a log of what you have printed. You want to keep track of the starting and ending numbers of each print job, the date printed and the type of material (iron-on tags, large/small labels, etc.) so that you don't print the same numbers twice or skip a series of numbers.

I have a record of every tag order I have printed for the last 7 years so when customers call to order more I know exactly what number I printed last.

- **Misc supplies** - Small cardboard cores/tubes. When you print the tags they come off the printer at about 4 inches per second. You need to be there to wrap the material on a core of some kind. You don't want to print just a few at a time as the setup time can be long so you want to print a few hundred at a time – but then you need to store them where they won't get wrinkled. I recommend putting the finished tags on the core in a plastic bag with the date, starting and ending numbers so you can easily find them when you need them. You will also want to get a few alcohol wipes to clean the print head and rollers at every ribbon change. You can also get a machine to wind the tags up as you print them. The winders cost about \$400.
- **Space** – The printer and supplies will take up several square feet of space. Once your printer is set up you will want to leave it in place. Your supplies should be stored in a clean container with a secure lid to keep the material dust free. You need to set up the printer in a very clean environment as any dust can get in and damage the printer (the printer head is very expensive to replace if it is scratched by dust) or leave marks on the printed tags/labels which can make them hard to read by the barcode scanner.
- **Good math skills** – you will need to do a lot of calculations on how many tags you can print per roll of material and ribbon. The material and ribbons are different lengths so you can run out of one before the other. The material is custom made and takes 2 – 3 weeks to get after you place an order so you need to try to figure out how much you will need and order 3-4 weeks ahead of time to be sure it is ready when you need it.
- **Time** – You need at least one hour to set up the printer and install the ribbon and material. You need to plan to spend at least 2-3 hours to learn how to use the software with the printer. Then you need time to design the tag, plan the numbers and print the tags. Designing and printing 500 tags can take as little as 30 minutes or as much as 2 hours – depending on the design and if your printer is cooperating that day. Each printer has its quirks – so you will need to learn to work with those. One of my expensive printers will often decide to print everything ¼" to the left of center – so I have to watch it and design the tag carefully and then watch it as it prints to be sure the design is centered.
- **Staff Continuity** – If one person in the organization sets up the printer/software/material etc – that is fine. But if they retire or leave the organization then it is up to them to train their replacement to do the printing. Many people have little enthusiasm for learning the software and the printers and keeping track of all the numbers. I have one organization that purchased everything and printed tags for a year or so. Then the person doing the design and printing left. No one wanted to take over the job so they gave up. It was a big waste of money and time for them.