

Starting Your Own Glass Etching Business

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Starting Your Own Glass Etching Business

Glass etching is the application of lettering, monograms or designs on glass. This little known business can be started in a garage or shop and work into something really lucrative. Glass etching is accomplished by covering the glass with a pattern, then, with the aid of a special machine, blowing "sand" against the surface.

Wherever the glass is not protected, it becomes "etched" as the sand repeatedly strikes and "pits" the surface. This procedure contrasts with the old metal etching techniques where the surface was covered with wax or resin, a design scratched into it and the material immersed into acid.

Examples of etched glass products are monogrammed glassware, key chains, lettered windows, designed mirrors and numbers or letters applied as identification marks.

Most glass etching today is by the sandblasting method. Two other methods, acid cream and engraving will also be discussed.

In the sandblasting method, a special type of sand is held in a funnel-like holder where a blast of air is forced through it creates a miniature sandstorm.

It works something like a bingo machine. The area to be etched is covered with a stencil made of a material like masking tape in which the design has been cut out.

When the sand is blown against the piece, the masking tape protects areas that are to stay smooth and allows the sand to pit the glass through the stencil openings. When the stencil is removed the etched design remains.

You can buy ready-made etching stencil designs and letter stencils or cut out your own. Gift and hardware stores are prospective wholesale customers for the etched glassware.

A sandblasting machine, some glass, a stencil and a good working area plus some practice is what you need to get started.

The equipment should not be set up inside the house because there is usually a good deal of dust. Unless you are familiar with sandblasting, contact several suppliers to get the best deal equipment and supplies. Then, try your hand at etching some inexpensive items until you learn to produce quality products.

Save some of your better pieces for samples, some of which can be given to retailers if you do wholesale work.

Another form of glass etching is actually engraving -- where the operator imprints the pattern or design on glass with a high speed drill and a fine, hardened steel bit.

The drill can either be used freehand, with the aid of a stencil guide, or to trace over an applied design. The latter technique allows the application of very intricate designs, which can be quite ornate when the engraver has artistic talents.

The glass etching technique is becoming popular in the auto industry, where designs are etched into the glass to beautify and individualize.

One very promising use is engraving the engine or frame number or owner's driver license number on both the front and back windshields as a police identification tool.

Thieves don't like to steal these vehicles because they must replace the glass! This operation alone may become a good business in some areas. One company (Paragrave -- see Business Sources) has developed a rotary drill based on dentist equipment that is specifically designed for this application.

Acid etching is the old fashioned way and is now considered more of an artist's medium -- even though it can be used for virtually any application. It is generally slower and a little more dangerous because of the corrosive chemicals.

Generally, the glass surface is covered with wax or resin and the design traced or scratched on with a stylus. The procedure is a little like carving a linoleum block. Once the design is finished, creamed (to prevent running) acid is applied and left for the prescribed time.

When ready, the acid is wiped off (carefully, to avoid damage to the rest of the design surrounding or applicator). Even though acid etching has disadvantages, it can produce striking results in detail and very interesting effects.

Most custom glass etching is priced on a letter or design basis -- how many and what size letters are to be applied, plus the number of pieces.

Whether the letter is sandblasted, engraved, or acidized, it takes more time and materials to do big letter than a small.

In a shop you would have a few samples of available alphabets and logos, plus catalogs of additional patterns that could be ordered. Custom stencils would of course, be extra whether you made them or special ordered them from companies that support the industry.

It is also possible (smart, too!) to make up items to sell. These can be done in your spare time at first when you have time between custom jobs and wholesale orders.

Shop around for ordinary items like mirrors, drinking glasses and door windows and inscribe interesting designs on them -- like the school or town logo, or something of local interest.

You will soon learn to be on the lookout for both new ideas of what to etch and for bargain glass items that you can decorate. In Texas, a rearview mirror with a small armadillo might sell; in Missouri, try a kicking mule on a glass goblet (you get the idea)!

Once you have learned the techniques, you might work with a store or two to produce custom etched glassware. This would help provide the volume for practice, yet not require you to do a perfect job on a \$100 glass vase.

When you feel you are ready, place ads to etch, monogram or apply designs to fine glassware --both new and pieces already owned. Use your imagination in your ads. Give potential customers something to think about. Have monthly specials: your license number on front and back windshields - \$29.95 this month; a small logo on eyeglasses for \$5 and up next month.

These specials will illustrate the various types of work you can do and perhaps stimulate potential customers to think of something they would like to have etched. Other areas to mention in specials might be holiday motifs, family coats of arms, company logos, etc.

In addition to being careful about dust and acid (if you use that medium), be especially careful to get the correct wording on the ticket and on the glass. A mistake on either means you have just etched a piece of junk.

On phone orders, repeat the copy back slowly and use phonetics for any possible mistakes.

On written orders have the customer check and initial the desired copy. You will certainly have to "eat" some mistakes -- but glass is not good for you, so try to hold them to a minimum!

BUSINESS SOURCES

JUPITER ENGINEERING CO., Box 1666, Jupiter, FL 33548,
305/746-3984. Sandblasting equipment and supplies.

LEEDS MANUFACTURING CO.,2620-8 Tyler Blvd.,Mentor, OH 44060,
216/951-1412. Sandblasting equipment and supplies.

GRAPHIC INDUSTRIES, Box 3512, Alliance, OH 44601, 216/821-0654.
Sandblasting equipment and supplies; also hot stamp dies.

COOPER GRAPHICS, Box 3485, Toledo, OH 43607, 419/531-2609.
Sandblasting masks (stencils), letters, monograms, logos, etc.

TIP SANDBLASTING EQUIPMENT CO., Box 646, Canfield, OH 44406,
800/321-9260. Sandblasting equipment and supplies.

EBEL-DOCTROW PUBLICATIONS, INC., Box 2147, Clifton, NJ 07023,
210/779-1600. Publishes GLASS, CHINA, TABLEWARE, trade magazine
for glass giftware dealers.

TAPEWAY MARKETING CO., Box 4072, Fullerton, CA 92631. Offers
business in etched glassware sales (alternate supplier?).

WHITEMORE-DURGIN GLASS CO., Box 2065, Hanover, MA 02339. Glass
working tools and supplies. Free catalog.

PARAGRAVE, 155 West Center, Orem, UT 84058, 800/624-7415. Offers
"engraving" business as low as \$65 per month. (High speed drill
and patterns).

MEISTERGRAPH, 3517 Wendover Ave., Greensboro, NC 27407,
800/222-2600, ext 166. Portable Etch-Master equipment to monogram
fine glassware.

QUILL CORPORATION, 100 Scheleter Rd., Lincolnshire, IL 60917-4700,
312-634-4800. Office supplies.

NEBS, 500 Main St., Groton, MA 04171, 800/225-6380. Office
supplies.

IVEY PRINTING, Box 761, Meridan, TX 7665. Letterhead: 400 plus
200 envelopes - \$18.

SWEDCO, Box 29, Mooresville, NC 28115. Rubber stamps.

ZPS, Box 581, Libertyville, IL 60048-2556. Business cards (raised
print - \$11.50 per K) and letterhead stationery. Will print your
copy ready logo or design, even whole card.

WALTER DRAKE, 4119 Drake Bldg., Colorado Springs, CO 80940. Short
run business cards (250 - \$3, stationery, etc. Good quality, but
no choice of ink or color.