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Stick 'em up!

By Kim Schworm Acosta

When Natalie Jordan sends notes to family and friends, she uses an extra-special seal on the envelope: a photo sticker of her 4-year-old son, Brett, that she made using her home computer. "The quality is really good, and it's super easy," she says. "Plus, it's cheaper than ordering them from a photo site."

If you've never thought of making your own stickers or magnets, you may not realize how simple -- and fun -- it can be. And unlike those you find at the store, your creations can be personalized with your own sayings, artwork or photos. Whether you want to make stickers for projects with your kids, magnetic business cards, CD labels or any other project, it's as easy as using your computer's publishing program and printer. Just follow these steps:

Step No. 1: Decide what you want to make

If you're overwhelmed by the possibilities -- after all, any item on your hard drive can be made into a sticker or magnet by simply printing it on specialty paper -- focus on upcoming holidays or events, such as a child's birthday. For ideas, check out free, easy-to-download, pre-designed templates at sites like Avery or Microsoft Office Online. Your publishing program, such as Microsoft Publisher or Word, most likely has ready-made designs as well as clip art to jump-start your creativity. Or the web site Family Fun has free printable stickers with themes like circus animals or pirates.

Still stumped? Here are just a few items you could do yourself: name tags for a family reunion, holiday gift tags, "journaling" stickers for scrapbooks or a magnetic list of emergency contacts for the fridge.

Step No. 2: Choose a size and shape

Visit an office supplies store in person or online, or check out web sites like Avery or Epson. You can choose circular, oval, rectangular or even full-page labels or sticker paper. Magnet paper is generally sold in 8½-by-11 sheets and costs about \$2.50 per sheet.

As for ink costs, purchasing colored stickers and printing a black-and-white design is one way to conserve. If you want to experiment with

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different shapes and sizes, use full-page sticker paper, which runs about \$1 a sheet. “I like using the full-page sticker sheets because you have more flexibility,” says Jordan. “You can just place your graphics on the page and print.”

Step No. 3: Get creative

Use pre-designed or blank templates from your publishing program as a jumping-off point for your stickers or magnets. You can add your own text, replace the clip art or insert a photo, for example. When using a photo, be sure it’s high-resolution. Otherwise, it may come out blurry. High-resolution means that the photo is at least 300 DPI (dots per inch). You can find out a digital photo’s DPI by using a photo-editing program, such as Photoshop. In the Photoshop menu, for example, go to Image > Image Size > Resolution.

For your sticker or magnet’s text, choose only one or two fonts to use, suggests Atlanta graphic designer Sara Cowley. “Mixing more than that can give the piece an unorganized look and make it hard to read,” she says. If you’d like a little more design help, consider purchasing design software programs, such as Let’s Make Stickers (Global Software Publishing) or Hallmark Card Studio 2009 (Hallmark).

Step No. 4: Prepare to print

Once you’ve created your design, select “Print Preview” from your printer menu to see how everything lines up. Be sure you’ve sized your designs to fit the most on a page so as not to waste your specialty paper. When you’re ready, place your sticker sheets face down. Or if you’re printing magnets, you’ll need to feed them one at a time face down into the printer.

Under “Print Options”, be sure to select the highest quality, such as “Photo.” After printing, carefully set the sheets aside on a tabletop for a few minutes to dry. Then, using small scissors with a very sharp point, cut out your creations.

Step No. 5: Decide if you want a pro printer

If you have a large-scale project, such as hundreds of business card magnets, or don’t have a printer, you can still do it yourself: create your designs, save them to a disk and print them at your local Kinko’s or copy store (call in advance for specific instructions). Plus, you can take advantage of their professional-grade paper cutter.

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