

TATs With Flair

By [Kasia Dawidowska](#)

They're fun, colorful and come in hundreds of different shapes and sizes. But most importantly, they look real! Temporary airbrushed tattoos, or "TATs," are all the rage among teenagers and young adults who treat them as another fashion accessory or a way to make a statement.

Although most parents would balk at the idea of a real tattoo, they won't mind a temporary one that can easily come off with a few swipes of an alcohol pad. Whether it's a goldfish, a butterfly, or a Chinese dragon, the design can be easily applied to any part of the body and lasts up to two weeks. A delicate rose near the navel today and a cute, pink kitten in the same spot a few weeks later? No problem!

Kirk Knapp, president and founder of TAT International, a Grand Rapids, MI-based company that distributes top-quality tattoo airbrush systems, explains the popularity behind temporary tattoos. "Real tattoos are expensive, painful and worst of all—*permanent!*" he says. TATs, however are safe, durable, made from high-quality ink, and can be easily removed with rubbing alcohol. The ink used in TAT International's system is 100 percent organic, non-allergenic and made with FDA-approved ingredients. "Parents love it!" he says. "It's safer than peanut butter."

The advantages of TATs over tattoos are clear, "and consequently TATs are replacing tattoos as the preferred choice," Knapp says. He adds that although tattoos have been around for thousands of years, the temporary version is a relatively new phenomenon that is quickly catching on.

A better system

Kirk Knapp wasn't always in the TAT business. A commanding officer in the army, he became a stockbroker when he left the service. He worked for the well-known brokerage firm E.F. Hutton & Co., and then started his own investment banking and brokerage firm in the early 80s, which he later sold. When his son, Ben, asked for management advice for his toy business, Knapp was happy to help.

Ben had been selling toys at trade shows, when Knapp came up with the idea of introducing the toys into malls, which turned out to be a great move. "I then became involved in selling different products to carts and kiosks," says Knapp. "We experimented with watches and sunglasses. During one mall visit, Knapp ran into Ray Brandt, who was one of the first people selling airbrush tattoos. Knapp noticed that Brandt's cart was surrounded by teenage girls who were very interested in the new tattoos. It seemed that every girl there wanted one.

Knapp remembers thinking: "I can put together a better system and sell tattoos." He got started immediately. The Knapp family pulled together and opened 11 mall locations as an experiment, just to see if the idea would catch on. "It worked really well," says Knapp. "My



Kirk Knapp, president and Ben Knapp, general manager

Kirk Knapp, President

Company: TAT International, LLC

Headquarters: Grand Rapids, MI

Founded: 2002

Products: Temporary airbrush tattoos

Operations: Wholesale supplies and start-up systems

Number of employees: 11

Number of TAT retailers: 2,000+

Retail prices: \$5 to \$15 per tattoo

Markup: 10,000 percent average

Phone: 800-280-8198

Web: tatstore.com

Advice to retailers: "If you're going to get into specialty retail, look at your start-up costs, your markup on your products, and calculate what your return on investment is going to be, because that's the name of the game."

—Kirk Knapp

daughter was running a cart at Rivertown Mall in Grand Rapids, making \$7,000 a month net profit!"

That was four years ago. Knapp emphasizes that the secret behind TAT International's success is selling products of the highest quality at prices comparable to or below what's offered by the competition. Knapp says his TATs last up to two weeks, while other airbrush tattoos come off in just a few days.

The business has become so profitable that today the whole Knapp family is involved in the day-to-day company operations. All of Mr. Knapp's children and their spouses hold managerial positions at TAT International. Knapp's son, Ben, oversees company operations as the general manager, and his wife, Kelly, is in charge of office management. A daughter, Sarah, oversees stencil production and art along with her husband, Joe Stanul. Another daughter, Andrea, is the shop manager, responsible for maintaining inventory, and shipping and receiving. Knapp's wife, Bonnie, handles accounting.

Quick results

According to Knapp, starting a TAT business is great fun and can bring quick sales. The wholesale cost of the supplies needed to apply a temporary tattoo range between five and ten cents per tattoo. The retail price per tattoo is \$5 to \$15. The average markup per tattoo, Knapp says, is 10,000 percent.

On average, it takes one to three minutes to apply a tattoo, depending on the number of colors used. In a dream scenario (a location with lots of traffic), this translates to a profit of about \$5 per minute. "If you're incredibly efficient and work non-stop, you can take in \$300 an hour," says Knapp.

He remembers one retailer who hired a couple of high-school students and applied tattoos in an assembly-line fashion. One student collected the fee from customers, cleaned their skin with alcohol, pulled the requested stencil out of the box and handed it to the person applying the tattoo. The other cleaned the used stencils after the tattoo was applied, and placed them back in the box for another use.

The \$300-an-hour profit may be unusual and applies to only high-traffic locations, Knapp says, but he adds that all TAT retailers should be able to bring in at least \$500 a day at events like festivals and fairs. Retailers in those types of high-traffic locations who make less than \$500 in sales per day, he says, "are definitely doing something wrong."

Knapp recalls one retailer who called him to say



how happy she was with her sales, which were averaging \$295 a day. "She was shocked when I told her it was *terrible* and asked her to describe exactly what she was doing." It turned out the woman had put her 58-year-old husband in charge of applying TATs and he failed to attract the most important customer group—teenagers! Once her 22-year-old son stepped in, sales increased to \$900 a day.

The airbrush system is very easy to use and doesn't require artistic ability, Knapp says. "If you can point, you can do it!" An airbrush gun with a color-changer applies the ink to the skin precisely where needed. The stencils make it easy to create exact shapes. Made from durable but flexible Mylar, the stencils conform to the skin to ensure even application.

All products sold by TAT International are of the highest quality, so the stencils are guaranteed to last a lifetime. There are three turnkey startup systems available for those wanting to give the TAT business a try, and they all come with a 30-day unconditional money-back guarantee

(although there is a return fee of \$200).

The basic startup system costs \$1,730 and includes an air compressor, Power Palette color changer, Titan Airpro Airbrush, 246 starter stencils with a numbered organizer, 15 ounces of ink, laminated posters promoting different designs and various other marketing aids. For those ready to make a bigger commitment, TAT International offers a professional system for \$2,665, or an entrepreneurial system for \$3,695. The professional and entrepreneurial systems include more ink, more stencils and additional workstations, so that multiple TAT technicians, or "TAT artists," can work simultaneously.

The company offers ongoing marketing help and advice to all of their retailers who become MVPs (Most Valuable Partners) when they purchase a startup system. An introductory eight-page letter and training video give invaluable advice to new MVPs on how to maximize their profits and attract more customers. Also, the company distributes a newsletter with the latest sales tips and ideas and a toll-free help line that partners can call anytime they have questions or need additional advice, even a year after launching their business.

For special occasions, such as company picnics or high-school basketball games, TAT International can create a custom-made stencil featuring the company or the team logo or any custom design. Thanks to a computer-controlled laser-cutting machine, the stencil can be ordered as late as 24 hours before the event. "Just fax us the design, we'll make the stencil and send it to you overnight," says Knapp.

Wherever there's skin

The most efficient way to sell TATs is to set up shop in a public space, preferably outdoors, somewhere where a lot of people spend time in a casual atmosphere—at a ball game or a popular park, Knapp says. Other great venues are spas and beauty salons, which attract women who are already seeking to polish their appearance and might enjoy having another cute "accessory" such as a temporary tattoo.

Knapp adds that vacation resorts are places that bring excellent revenue. One TAT International retailer set up a TAT station at the poolside of a Westin Hotel at Maui and "didn't even have time for a lunch break," says Knapp. A cart or kiosk in a large mall can also bring excellent profit year-round, especially in shopping centers located in southern states that enjoy more sunshine and have more year-round opportunities for young people to show off their tattoos.

But, says Knapp, with the right approach, "you can make a good living in the dead of winter in Michigan if you're willing to go out to people." The TAT system can be easily transported and it only takes a few minutes to set up. Any public place where young people like to "show a lot of skin" is guaranteed to bring a lot of revenue.

Knapp says some retailers have set up shop in gay bars and even strip clubs, making excellent profits. Another idea? Exchange TATs for free advertising! "Approach a hot local radio station, get out to a concert or car rally from which they broadcast, and offer to put free tattoos with their logo on people if they agree to talk about you on air," says Knapp. This way, in addition to getting the word out on radio, people who come to the event will be able to see for themselves that the TAT designs are of the highest quality and will come back to you for more.

One TAT retailer, Dawn Brusk in West Alice, Wisconsin, jump-started her business in a similar way. Struggling at first, she could only afford to buy 12 stencils and ink and applied designs with a Q-tip. One of her first venues was a motorcycle rally where she made \$10,000 in 10 days. The TAT systems are a great opportunity for go-getters and natural entrepreneurs, Knapp says. The most innovative MVPs can even get paid for good ideas! Every once in a while, Knapp sends a \$500 check to the entrepreneur who comes up with the most innovative way to sell more TATs and become more successful. Care to join the club?

Kasia Dawidowska, an SRR senior writer, is a freelancer based in New York City.