

Coaches: Thinking of Ordering New Uniforms? What You Need to Think About Besides the Design

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Working with coaches and directors for more than two decades, we have come across some recurring problems that make the process more difficult than it needs to be. As a coach or director who is in charge of procuring team uniforms or costumes, you must do your homework. You need to know more than just how many and when you need the garments. You need to come up with the answers to these questions.

1. What is your Budget?

- Do you have set budget, or is it "yet to be determined" because of future fundraising options?
- Will you have the same budget next year, or will it be higher or lower?
- Are your funds available immediately, or will they not be available until at a later time?
- Are you allowed to prepay your order, or must you work only with a school Purchase Order?
- Will you need to get pricing quotes from more than one company?
- Will your budget determine who you buy from, or how much you spend, or both?

2. Who has influence on what your team will choose for uniforms?

- Do you, as coaches have the final say?
- Do you need to answer to a parental booster club?
- Does the athletic director or school board influence or have stipulations for your decision?
- Is your school community very influential in what is "proper" for your team?
- How much influence do your team captains have on the decision - will they support your decision or undermine it?
- Is there extreme loyalty to a particular costume company or "sewing Mom" that your team has used in the past?

3. How long do your uniforms need to last?

- Do you want your uniforms to last for only one season?
- Will you need to reorder additional uniforms in the future?
- Can you utilize your old uniforms?
- Do you know how to protect your uniform investment by proper uniform "maintenance"?

Many bad experiences for you, the coach in dealing with getting new uniforms can be eliminated if you know exactly where you stand in regards to all of these points. At Satin

Stitches, we have probably seen it all. We have seen "in-fighting" between parent groups and coaches and team captains. We have seen coaches very disappointed that their grand plans could not be supported by their budgets, because they had an unrealistic idea of what those budgets were. As a coach, you need to be aware of all of the answers to these questions.

Many costume companies, including Satin Stitches, offer discounts for being able to order during "off season". For many high school dance teams and similar groups, the peak delivery season for new costumes and uniforms is from August to March. The slowest season is in the spring, when none of you want to think about next year's season. We all need to keep our employees working, so many of us offer discounted, promotional deals for this time of the year. If you have money available to spend in the spring, from April through June, you may be able to save money. Something else to keep in mind: If you are getting any funding from your school - be aware that school budgets generally run from July 1st to July 1st. Schools may have money left in their budget in June that they need to spend, or they may not release funds until after July 1st.

Some discounts are given for cash payments instead of school purchase orders. If you have the cash in your account - you may be able to take advantage of these discounts. Prepayment discounts of any sort - remember that these are for checks actually received. A purchase order is not the same as prepayment.

Additionally, some companies may offer special discounts that are only available by reading about them on their web site. Satin Stitches has a SPECIALS PAGE that each one of you should be checking at least once a month. Always do your homework. Ask your favorite costume or uniform company if they do this.

Also, it is important to understand delivery timeframes for peak seasons. Costume companies, including Satin Stitches, can only complete so many orders during any given week. You must be aware of delivery guarantees during the peak season. If you demand quicker delivery than quoted times - you may be assessed a "rush fee". This will increase the price of your uniforms, all because of poor planning on your part. Besides delivery for "back to school", December is the traditional start of the competitive season for many dance teams, along with other performance groups. It seems that everyone in the country is looking for something new for this date. If you plan ahead, you won't be disappointed. If you don't - you will either not get your new uniforms when you would like, or you will pay more for them.

Different companies offer differing qualities of costumes and uniforms. Be aware that some companies specialize in recital style costuming. This costuming is very inexpensive and is produced for groups that need something flashy for wearing only once, or a very limited number of times. These costumes may not come fully constructed. If your team can utilize these inexpensive costumes "as is" or by adding costumes pieces to them for a great themed routine, great! But don't expect these costumes to last for more than a season.

Costume catalog companies that offer "uniforms" generally have much better and longer lasting quality than the recital catalog companies. These costumes and uniforms generally will last for more than a season. Your best bet is to be able to see for yourself, the particular quality of a specific costume piece from any company. If you have the chance to go to a dance conference or convention where dance costume companies are able to display their products, please go, and educate yourself. Just because a costume looks great in a catalog photograph doesn't mean they look great "in person", inside and out.

Costume companies should be able to send your team a sample for inspection, if you ask.

If you need your costuming to last for several seasons, you will need to be much more aware of the limitations of some fabrics & trims. Quality construction is necessary for the longevity of a uniform, but so is making informed choices for fabric and trims. Be sure and ask your company about the life of fabrics and trims that they are showing you. Regular fringe will not stand up to hand washing - you must either dry-clean the garment or not clean it at all. Hologram surface prints - that are so popular right now, and have been for several years - will NOT dry-clean - the hologram effects will disappear. All of the flashy surface-printed fabrics may not wear or hand wash well, either. Hand washing CAN cause problems, especially if the hand washing is too rigorous or done too often. Ask your company about laundering options of any fabrics that you are choosing. You can lengthen the life of your costumes by very careful laundering ("gently rinse" does not mean, "soak") and using a great product like FRESH AGAIN®. At Satin Stitches, we offer a Costume Care Service - where we can launder your costumes for you.

If you are planning on ordering anything besides exactly what you see in a catalog, you must also understand that you need to allow enough time for the design process, when working on getting something custom. Your delivery date is determined when the order is placed, NOT when you first start the process! You will need to allow time for initially designing your uniform. You will need to allow time for your company to be able to produce a sample - if you need to approve the sample before you place your order. And then you need time to critique the sample. You then may need time to get everyone's approval first, before you actually place your order. The fastest time for this entire process may be 1 month, but 2 months is more the norm. And sometimes it takes even longer than this.

Do you want to build a wardrobe of uniform pieces? Work with basics that you can mix and match, and add new costume pieces to. Again, plan ahead so you have enough of your basic pieces if you increase the numbers of your team. Make sure you have ordered enough originally, or know what your reorder options are. Also be aware of what your options are, if you have a new talented dancer that may not fit into any of your current uniforms. If your basic pieces are an unusual fabric - the fabric may be discontinued. "Fashion" fabrics are generally discontinued after a season or maybe two. If you plan ahead, and order additional fabric for future orders, you will be able continue wearing these uniforms. If you do NOT plan ahead - you may need new uniforms simply because you don't have enough for your team. Being able to add 2 or 4 or 6 new uniforms is much less expensive than starting over, and having to order an entire team's worth of uniforms. At Satin Stitches, we let you know up front, what the chances are that your fabric will be available in a year or two. Again, planning ahead can save your team lots of money.

Trim on a uniform can be an expensive part of the cost. Yes, design your "perfect costume". If it doesn't fit your budget, discuss with your designer - what can be modified to save money and still keep the essence of your idea? Look at your design from "performance distance" (if not in actuality - in your mind) to see if less trim will still "do the trick". Can more trim be added at a later date, when you have more funds? Perhaps you have a talented team member or booster parent that can help.

Can you utilize your old uniforms? Salvage your old, tired, out of style costumes and update them - for very little money! A general rule of thumb - is to determine if most of the change involves ADDING something, rather than lots of ripping. A talented sewing Mom may be able to help you determine this. If not - check with us - submit an old uniform and discuss what you'd like to achieve. Satin Stitches has been "recycling" uniforms for years.

We can give you an estimate of the costs and make other suggestions of what might work better. Having one uniform transformed will determine the visual results and the costs involved. This is the best way to determine what works and what doesn't, and how costly it will be.

So never throw out your team's old costumes and uniforms - they may be able to be updated. Many teams have added sequins or rhinestones to update and sparkle up their uniforms. These transformations are very cost effective because the teams started with investing in a very high quality costume - with fabrics that will last for years. Basic spandex fabrics are the "work horses" of the dance uniform industry. Velvets will not hold up as well. Why? Knee and seat areas on velvet uniforms can look worn, if too many knee drops are done, or the team sits on bleachers that snag or otherwise harm the fabrics. Many of these problems are more visible in velvet than regular spandex. If you feel that they cannot be saved - offer them for sale on eBay or other venues.

Are you thinking of saving money by hiring "home sewers" to make your costumes? Home sewers may save you money in the short run, but generally not in the long run. Home sewers do not have the same expertise that companies that have been in business for a long time, have. Home sewers may have sewing construction expertise, but do they also have fitting expertise and patternmaking expertise? Do they have as many fabric sources?

At **Satin Stitches**, and most custom companies - we have experts in each category of the costume design and manufacturing area. We don't expect one person to be an expert at everything:

- Design (including sourcing for the fabrics and trims)
- Patternmaking (including sizing and fitting)
- Cutting
- Sewing
- Trimming

You may have heard the expression "Jack of all trades" - well, the rest of the saying is "... Master of none". The most difficult to master is the design, patternmaking and sizing or fitting. Not to say that you should never use the services of a home sewer, you can. If you need something sewn that is simple and they are willing and able, by all means - take advantage of them - especially if they have a connection to your team. Don't hesitate to use a talented home sewer for any alterations or hemming that you may need. Or for any "wear it once or twice" project that doesn't need to withstand seasons of use, you may be very lucky to have someone willing to lend their services to your team. You need to have it perfectly clear, as to what is expected from them and what they are expecting in return. The art of sewing is rapidly disappearing in our world, so treat any talented volunteer with respect. But don't assume they can "do it all". Sewing with costume fabrics and trims is perhaps the most difficult sewing of all. Stretchy fabrics are very tricky to work with. We have developed our professional sewing techniques over the more than twenty-five years of being in the costume business. We continue to update and refine our procedures to make good quality garments. Home sewers may not have all the expertise you need.

Protect your investment. "A stitch in time saves nine." This is another old saying. If you cannot take the time, or do not have the expertise to maintain your team uniforms, find someone who can. Any repairs should be done before a uniform is stored until the next performance. Your team should be wearing your performance costumes as little as possible. Wear warm-ups whenever possible, especially when traveling and when your

team is eating or putting on makeup. Be aware of how your uniforms should be laundered and stored. Even if you are tired of their look, your Junior Varsity team may be thrilled!

Again, we have seen lots of problems that coaches could have easily avoided, if they took some extra time to research what they really need, and how they could best achieve their goals. By doing just a little bit of homework, you can save time, money and your sanity!

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