

Big Profits In The Sign Fabrication Business

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Big Profits In The Sign Fabrication Business

A few years ago it would have been foolish to even consider a sign business unless you were well qualified to hand paint letters and illustrations.

But the modern age is upon us: the sign business is no longer confined to those with special artistic talent. Although it would be helpful to be able to paint your own signs, it is certainly not necessary. Some very expensive franchise today involve little more than a computerized machine that cuts out letters and figures from self-adhesive sheets of plastic.

This business can be very profitable one, however it must be promoted as a sign fabricating as opposed to sign painting business from the beginning.

You will have little problem explaining that your signs are not hand painted, and that if hand art work is necessary, you can always send it out (for an additional fee).

Your products are every bit as stylish, longer lasting and cheaper than the average hand painted sign -- facts that help gain rapid customer acceptance.

In addition to hand painted signs, which are not the subject of this booklet, there are two basic types of signs that are well within the average person's ability to learn to produce in a professional manner: permanent and changeable.

Permanent signs have letters and symbols that are held in place by nails, glue or self-stick backing; changeable signs are those with tracks that accommodate letters and symbols that can be slid in and out to displace various messages at the customer's discretion.

PERMANENT LETTER SIGNS

These are signs where each letter or symbol is mounted individually. The only necessary artistic qualifications are an eye for letter spacing. Generally, round letters (O's P's) should be closer together, square ones (M's I's) further apart -- which will then appear to be equally spaced.

This is usually easy for most people just by looking at the letters arranged into words on a line. All that is really necessary is move those O's closer until they "look about right"!

The business of permanent letter signs involves little more than buying or

making the letters and/or symbols,
arranging and applying them to
desired surface.

For letters on a building, once the size of the letters is determined, a means of anchoring them must be devised. They can be set onto holders or platforms nailed to the roof, screwed to a wood surface or they can be glued in place.

Most letter suppliers have different systems for anchoring the letters that can be purchased at a nominal extra price (which the customer pays for). Many letters on buildings are held in place with clear plastic silicon that comes in caulking tubes. The sign man applies a bead of resin onto the back of the letter and sticks it in place. If the letter is heavy, masking tape or brads (painted to match, of course) through small drilled holes can be used to hold the letters until adhesive sets.

before we leave permanent signs, if you have much call for truck work, look into screen printed fleet signs. These can have about any type of copy (even photographs), can be any size, and are available with permanent glue. To remove them (after they have "cured" one needs a sander!

Generally speaking, orders for less than a dozen orders are much cheaper by the screen method. Just be sure to have your customers order a good supply of extras. The extras cost surprisingly little -- and even can be "free" if the number of extras takes the order to the next price break level.

Tip: if you use plywood for sign OR
CUT OUTS, use genuine signboard
This material is more expensive than
plain plywood (about the same as
cabinet plywood), but is much better.
It will stand up; the other will not.

Many of those red octagonal STOP signs are made from 5/8" signboard, and they last for years!

Also, any wood you use in your sign work (except signboard) MUST be treated. At the very least, apply liquid silicon (like Thompson's Water Seal) before painting to help prevent deterioration. Let your customers see that your signs last.

Extra tip: to make a nice looking
magnetic sign, apply self-stick letters
and symbols to white full magnetic
sheeting!

Buy the sheeting in rolls or lengths, cut to size, lay out the pattern in light pencil or chalk dust and apply your letters.

Also note that in emergencies, you can order extra pieces of self-stick vinyl make your own small symbols (arrows, parens, undelines, even logos if you are talented with the scissors).

CHANGEABLE LETTERS

Profits from changeable letter signs can be made on both the holders and the letters. Small units are usually sold as kits that include a basic supply of letters. These units range from small open/closed door signs and 3 foot wide reader boards for restaurant menus, to flashing units with 2-3 inch etters displayed in store windows and those outside flashing arrow signs.

Although most of the large ones also come with a set of letters, they can often be more effective for the customer with additional colors, symbols and sizes of letters and symbols. if you deal in these types of signs, it would ne advisable to either keep a stock of alternatives on hand or have a supplier who can get them to you fast.

There are two popular types of letter material: vinyl and styrene. The plastic letters are usually clear, but they come in two sizes. The wider ones are much more expensive and are usually on thicker material.

Vinyl letters are long lasting and easy to care for. Scratches can be touched up and the letters "rejuvenated" with a little Armor-All or similar product.

Styrene letters (usually white backgrounds, seldom over 6" in height) are for inside use. Outside, they will yellow and crack in just a few weeks of sun. Both types are sold in sets called fonts.

A font is a selction of letters based on their use: many t's and e' fewer j's and q's). A font of letters is designed to be sufficient to display most messages without running out of letters.

Note that it is possible to alter or even re-paint the letters. An R can be made into a P by masking off the tail and using a little acetone to wash it away. If you do much of this, get plastic paint (see JOHNSON PLASTICS under BUSINESS SOURCES).

In addition to numerous types, colors and syles of wod and plastic letters avilabole from commercial suppliers, there are many kinds of patterns, special saws and jigs available to enable

one to mass produce their own letters.

You can also design and cut out your own. For example, with an opaque projector (available at any art store) you can show a blown-up image of a company letterhead or logo onto a large screen (or the wall).

Cover the image with paper, trace the image and, Presto... a customized template of your client's logo and/or lettering.

Next, transfer the template to a sheet of treated plywood (signboard is best), cut out and finish the symbols for a professionally produced sign that is well worth what you charge your customer!

Tip: you can also use a pinwheel punch (a wheel with perforating projections) to trace over your lines on any pattern.

When you tape the pattern in place on the desired sign surface and dust with chalk, the dust penetrates through the pin holes in the pattern. When you remove the pattern, you have a "paint by the number" outline in chalk!

With a little practice, you should be able to produce good results and sign fabricating -- a system that has been used for years by many professionals.

The easiest way to handle this business is to buy ready-made letters and apply them to prepared surfaces.

In most cases, this involves showing the client a catalog of letters and letting them pick out what they want. Then you order the letters and plan how to apply them. While waiting for the letters plan to layout and do any necessary measuring on the building.

The customer pays retail (catalog price) for the letters plus your labor. You make 40% on them plus any extras. You should be able to make at least \$25 per hour for your labor, plus approximately 40% markup on all materials.

One of the "big secrets" in this business is getting the sign to look professionally proportioned.

certainly it would be difficult to arrange those big letters on a 15 foot ladder and come out anywhere near symmetrical.

This "trick" performed with mirrors, it is done with cash register tape (buy it at a surplus store).

Mark (paint) a straight line of your garage floor and lay the letters the way you want them to appear on the sign.

When staidied with the alyout, tape a piece of cash register paper to the floor along the bottom of each letters so the bottom of the paper equates to the bottom of the line of letters.

next, trace the bottom section of each letter onto the cash register paper. Mark the center (if your sign is tobe centered), and you are ready to mount your letters.

Measure where you want the bottom of the letters to appear on the building and chalk a line (with a snap line) at the BOTTOM of each line you plan to install. Also snap a center line on the building surface. Then tape the applicable register tape to the bottom on each line, lining up the center marks on the top with the one on the building.. Next, arrange the letters one at a time to conform to the letter bottom outlines on the cash register tape.

It might be helpful to have a helper stand a short distance away just to make sure you get each letter straight. When finished remove the cash register paper and let the public admire your talent!

Another category of adhesive letters is die-cut self-stick vinyl letters with peel-off backing.

It is also quite possible to build your own changeable letter signs -- either stand-alone, or as part of larger displays. Most of the signs in this category will use 4,6,8, and 12 inch letters and some signs will be lit (from light behind or within the sign).

Building a changeable letter sign involves selecting a background (solid or translucent for lighted backgrounds) and applying the proper spaced tracking to hold the letters. If the sign is to be lit, you can even build a case to hold fluorescent lights and cover it with translucent plastic. About the only limiting factor is that the holding frame must fit the fluorescent tubes you plan to use.

For example, to build a 3 by 4 foot sign with two four foot shop lights, take the light fixtures apart and position the four bulb holders inside a inner box proportionately, so the bulbs will fit properly. Then build the rest of your sign around that box.

The inner box serves two purposes: first, it gives strength to the sign; second, it serves as a spacer between the sign face and the insides. If the inner box is made from 1x5 inch strips and the outer box from 1x7 inch pieces, there should be room to fit the plastic inside the 1x7's to rest on the 1x5's and still leave a half inch or so margin on the outside. When the sign face is installed, cut strips of quarter round (plastic is fine) and ring

the sign face.

The precise measurements will depend on the width of your sign face as well as the space needed for the inside light fixtures. The objective is to finish with the quarter round about even with the edge of the outside box.

To make a unlit sign, the cheapest way is to use one face and place plastic letter strips on that one side only. If you try to use both sides of the sign, the shadow from the side facing the sun will show through on the other side and make it unreadable. To avoid this problem, and still have a two-way sign, use two-way sign, use two sign faces with a 3 to 4 inch "dead" space between them.

Most changeable letter signs these days use plastic track, which comes in 8 foot lengths of double and single slots (the single slots are for the top and bottom rows.

The tracks are positioned with spacing boards for top or bottom) and jigs (usually tin cut to letter size) for spacing between lines), and fixed in place with 1/8" rivets. On ribbed plastic a 1/8" hole is drilled and riveted every third rib.

Although most commercial signs are metal, it is quite possible to build good, long lasting changeable signs from wood. The wood should be treated (especially the bottom), light weight and strong, such as white pine or fir. The corners should be re-enforced with metal brackets and galvanized screws are recommended for long use.

These signs can be mounted on poles in the ground or on bases. Be sure your stands are sturdy, treated and that they are large enough to keep the sign from blowing over. In some areas stakes are placed in the ground and cables run to the sign tops for extra strength. And, if there is a problem with letter pilferage, build a frame and cover it with 1" mesh chicken wire to position (lock) on the sign.

BUSINESS SOURCES

AMERICAN ACRYLIC CORP., 400 Sheffield Ave., West Babylon, NY 11704.
516/422-2220.

Manufactures sign faces, imbedded sign graphics, skylights, etc.

ACME PLASTICS, 220 Bowerton Rd., West Paterson, NJ 07424.
800/631-3690. (Also
Alexandria, VA). Manufacturer of plastic sheets, etc.

PLEX LAB Corp., P.O. Box 926, Warren, MI 48090. Manufactures plastic sheets.

SIGNCRAFT PUBLISHING CO.,INC. Box 06031, Ft Meyers, FL 33906.
813/939-4644. Publishes SIGNCRAFT, trade magazine for sign shops.

KAUFMAN COMPANY, Centertown, MO 65023. Teaches sign painting,
cartooning and pin striping. Free cat.

SIGNMASTER, 202 Hooker Rd.,Greenville, SC 27834. Video sign
painting courses. details -sase

METALLIC SIGN CO.,1217-19 Newport, Chicago, IL 60657. Gold or
silver self-stick letters that look like gold leaf.

DIE CUTS, 183 St Paul Ave.,Rochester, NY 14604. Die cut vinyl
letters and symbols (order at same price from Johnson Plastics).

JOHNSON PLASTICS, 10809 Normandale Blvd.,Minneapolis, MN 55437.
800/328-3778. Molded and die cut letters, adhesive, plastic
paints. Old, reliable company.

WALTER HARTLAUER, 85907 Baily Hill Rd.,Eugene, OR 97406.
503/343-5971. Custom die-cut letters to 48" high; machinery and
supplies.

POLY FORMS, INC., 49 Gaza Blvd.,Farmingdale, NY 11735.
516/249-5011. Formed plastic letters 4 ft tall.

ST PUBLICATIONS, 407 Gilbert Ave.,Cincinnati, OH 45202. Published
SIGNS OF THE TIMES, "the" trade magazine for the sign business.
Also offers sign courses.

THE ENGRAVERS JOURNAL, P.O. Box 318, Brighton, MI 48116.
313/229-5725. Trade journal for the engraving industry - has ads
for machines and die cut letters as well.

BUMPA-TEL, INC.,P.O. Drawer A, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701.
800/334-2211. Wholesale full magnetic sheeting (including white
that is used for magnetic signs. Good prices.

STOP LOOK SIGN CO., P.O. Box 20477, Los Angeles, CA 90....
800/4474467. Wholesale reader boards and sign letters; inside
flashing signs. Reliable.

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, 31 East 2nd St.,Mineola, Ny 11051. Discount
books, clip art, stencils, etc.

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

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

IVEY PRINTING, Box 761, Meridan, TX 76665. Letterhead: 400 sheets
plus 200 envelopes - 418.

SWEDCO, Box 29, Mooresville, NC 28115. 3 line rubber stamps- \$3;
business cards - \$13 per thousand.

ZPS, Box 581, Libertyville, IL 60048-2556. Business cards (raised
print - 411.50 per K) and letterhead stationery. Will print your
copy ready logo or design, even whole card.

WALTER DRAKE & Sons, Inc., 4119 Drake Bldg., Colorado Springs, CO
80940. Short run business cards (250 for \$3), stationery, etc.
Good quality but little choice of style or color. Can be
difficult to deal with (they are a "short-run" mail order house).