

*Setting your shop apart from the competition
and elevating your own image, all at the same time*

It's not truck lettering, it's vehicle advertising

by Dan Antonelli

When a customer comes to me for vehicle lettering, I explain that I have a marketing and advertising company that also does vehicle lettering. I'm not a sign company that also does marketing and advertising. Notice the subtle difference? In the customer's eyes, it's a big difference. My goal is to build an image and identity for my clients that will help their business grow. It's what makes my company different from the vast majority of my competitors.

Anyone can stick vinyl letters on various surfaces and, thereby, apparently call themselves sign makers. With the advent of computers and plotters, the bar for entry into this profession has not been elevated, but lowered. The general public holds the belief that it's easy to make signs: you just "spit it out on the computer..." We have a big problem when the general public perceives our trade to be nothing more than someone who bought a cutter that makes letters.

How is your shop different?

One segment of our industry is devoted to quick or instant sign production. The underlying message to the public is that it apparently takes little time—and therefore effort—to produce signs. As a consequence, the value of signs is

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being diminished. Not enough emphasis is being placed in the thought process behind effective signs. Of course, there's always going to be a market for quick signs. But if you'd rather set yourself apart, you need to capitalize on your expertise, creativity and education. You have to produce work that exemplifies your grasp of marketing—not just lettering.

Remember, there's no apprenticeship for entry into this profession. Just a little cash, and bingo, you're a sign maker. That's precisely the reason why I'm not a sign maker. I create identities and an image for business owners using a variety of advertising mediums—and one of them is vehicle advertising. I'm an image builder, an art director, a graphic designer or an expert on marketing

small businesses.

I've sought to elevate what I do for clients. I went to college and studied advertising theory and its principles. I've taken that education and, more importantly, years of experience, and applied it towards vehicle advertising. I've taken businesses and turned their identity around and helped make them more successful. Vehicle advertising is one of the tools I use to make that happen.

This is what distinguishes my services from most other sign companies. Capitalizing on this has made me successful at garnering the work that I want to produce.

Take the time to care

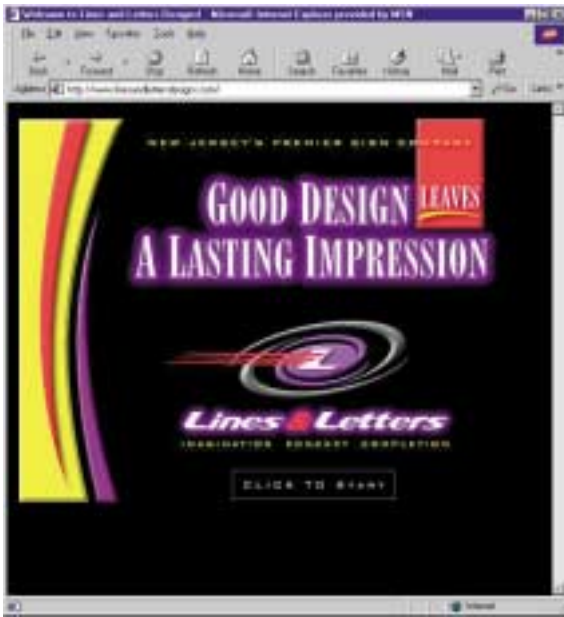
When you take on the responsibility of lettering someone's vehicle, I feel you should take the time to care about the image you are creating and what effects that image will have on the business. Find out the goals of the lettering—what is the owner trying to accomplish? Does he want to look like a big, reputable company? Does he plan to use his vehicle as a primary advertising medium?

As soon as you begin to answer some of these questions, you stop being a sign maker and become a marketing person. Like a marketing expert, you're trying to assess the needs of your client and develop a design to meet those needs.

Many of us do this on a regular basis. The real question is, have we been compensated properly for it? If we haven't, perhaps the fault lies in the way we have presented ourselves to the client. Do we present ourselves as someone whose main goal is to create unique and cohesive identities for our clients—or someone who merely sticks letters on a truck?

Educating your clients about image

To be successful at distinguishing your services from every other shop, you must educate your client on the importance of developing an image and carrying that image out on various advertising mediums. Keep in mind that you are dealing with someone who may be an expert in his or her trade—but has little or no marketing expertise. You are there to help



This Web site presents a cohesive, unified identity to potential clients, and establishes the sign company as one that is primarily concerned with design and image building.

create an image for their business that will help it grow.

Use concrete examples to explain to your clients how you'll be able to help their business with services such as logo design, stationery, typesetting and, for some, even Web design. These are easy for you to offer and provide. Your primary message is the importance of a cohesive identity. Continuity of their image is critical to their success. You have the tools to make their identity consistent. Play them up!

The customer is wrong if they believe that all they need is Helvetica Bold on the side of their truck to project a positive image. The strength of your portfolio should convince them otherwise.

The start of an image-building campaign for your client should be designing a logo. That logo will be the foundation on which to build the rest of their advertising and marketing—whether it is stationery, T-shirts, vehicle advertising, etc. Making the logo a separate part of the sales process immediately establishes the importance of starting with a unique and powerful image. From this, you will help create their identity. And, make sure that the cost of creating a logo is a separate charge—not included in the cost of the vehicle advertising.

Your own image

What your own image says is just as important as the ones you create. If you don't present a professional, cohesive identity, why should anyone believe you could help him or her with his or hers?

Recently, I've had the opportunity to help two other shops present their work and image on the Internet. In the January/February 2001 issue, I outlined the Web design and brochure for Rich Dombey of Rich Designs (www.richdesignsinc.com). Since then, I've been

able to work with Brian Schofield and Karin Levin on the development of their company Web site (www.linesandlettersdesigns.com). Following Brian and Karin's art direction and design files, I helped build a site that is not only consistent with their overall identity, but also stresses the importance of good design.

The work that these two companies produce is outstanding. But, the presentation of the work is almost more important. Their corporate identity shows how serious



Rich Dombey, Rich Designs, Inc., Hillsborough, New Jersey

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they are about their own image. And, it instantly elevates their reputation as design and marketing professionals. It shows that these aren't just folks who do truck lettering. These people are image builders.

How much is it worth?

We all know vehicle advertising is the most inexpensive type of advertising available to most businesses. There aren't many advertising mediums that you pay for just once, yet lasts up to ten years. Do the math on that: if a client spends \$1000 to have his van lettered, it costs \$100 per year. Even if the vehicle is in use for only five years, it's still just \$200 per year. What can he get in the Yellow Pages for \$200 a year—which is about \$17 per month? Not much more than a listing.

But yet, many of us create powerful vehicle advertising all the time—advertising that not only helps the client get new business, but also helps establish them as a reputable, established business. Isn't that advertising worth more than just the cost of time and materials, or an hourly shop rate?

It's not the type of vinyl nor

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- **Create an affordable, full-color brochure for your shop** from the November/ December 1998 issue
- **Step-by-step: Creating special effects for digital printing** from the September/ October 2000 issue of SignCraft



Brian Schofield and Karin Levin, Lines and Letters, Bridgewater, New Jersey



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how much we used to complete the job that adds value (or cost) to the job. Rather, the sheer marketing and advertising value of what we produce is what should be used as a gauge to help determine pricing. And, it's also the value of what you bring to the table to help make the vehicle a successful advertising medium.

Remember: you're a designer—or a marketing expert—who just happens to use vehicles as a method to effectively advertise businesses.□

To view more of Rich Dombey's work, visit his Web site at www.richdesignsinc.com. To view more of Brian Schofield and Karin Levin's work, visit their web site at www.linesandlettersdesigns.com.



Brian Schofield and Karin Levin, Lines and Letters, Bridgewater, New Jersey



Dan Antonelli's shop Graphic D-Signs, Inc. is in Union, New Jersey. You can e-mail him at dan@graphicd-signs.com or visit his Web site at www.graphicd-signs.com.

His book, Logo Design for Small Business, is available from SignCraft. To order, use the order form bound into this issue, or send \$25 plus \$6 shipping and handling to SignCraft, PO Box 60031, Ft. Myers, FL 33906.



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