

Is white the only color vinyl you'll need?

Digital printers are producing killer graphics!

By Dan Antonelli

Every year it seems that the latest batch of digital printers get better. They deliver more durability, better color saturation, and cost less to operate. The entry cost to get into the digital printing seems to get lower as well. A few years ago it would have taken over \$25,000 to get into digital printing. Today that number has dropped significantly and allowed more and more shops to get into the mix.

But what can these machines produce? We've all seen them at the trade shows printing pretty pictures of flowers and such. But I don't recall the last time a client asked me to print flowers, unless, of course, they were florists. So I still believe one of the primary reasons many custom sign shops use digital printing is to print lettering effects and graphics. Certainly you can integrate both—and I believe creative shops will continue to push this envelope further and further.

In March we received our Roland Versa-

CAMM printer. At first we were concerned since it was not Mac compatible, and that's what we use exclusively for design. But we did have a new PC-based laptop that we were promised would accept our Mac-based EPS files for ripping and printing. After plugging in the machine and setting up the RIP software, we dropped one of our EPS files into the RIP software. We held our breath as we waited to see what this machine could do.

We were worried most about color, which is obviously the most important consideration. Would the color on the screen match the output, or would we have to spend weeks calibrating the machine to death?

Well, I wish I could take credit for doing some brilliant calibration techniques, but the first print out of that machine was right on the money. Vibrant colors, perfect contour cutting. This was amazing. The possibilities were all flying through my head—labels,



Detail shot of M. Gonnella truck lettering job. One of my biggest concerns was that the vibrancy of certain colors, like Apple Greens would be lost when printed. But actually, the color spectrum has been fantastic, with a printed Apple Green nearly matching or surpassing the vibrancy of actual pre-colored Apple Green vinyl. Good luck trying to airbrush this job! This job sold for \$1150, which included the logo design.

packaging, truck lettering, site signs, see-through window lettering, and even banners. All at photo-quality resolution.

What do the prints cost? Okay, so it prints beautifully. But what's it going to cost per sq. ft.? Here comes the surprising part: other than the cost of the vinyl, the ink cost seems minimal. We've run over 500 ft. of material through the printer, and the ink level hasn't moved yet. I keep wondering where it's getting all the ink. We estimate our cost for prints at about 50 cents per sq. ft.

So let's look at a 36-by-12-in. truck-lettering job. Your total cost is about \$1.50 per door. Let's say that again—\$1.50 per door, or \$3 per truck. So if you keep your pricing the same or even increase it because you can offer much nicer work than regular vinyl, or layers of vinyl, you should be getting roughly \$350 for a nice set of doors (logo-design fee not included, of course).

You're also saving weeding time. You need only to weed one print, which goes down in one piece, without the worry of registering multiple layers of vinyl. Folks, this is the way to make money.

Durability is adequate Okay, I know what you're thinking. How long does it last? We're telling our clients that they can expect to get about three years of exterior use after we've clear-coated their vinyl prints. We encourage them to wash by hand, avoid solvents, etc. near the print.

Some sign people have had this notion that their lettering should last longer—much longer—than three years. Why? Are our clients demanding their lettering lasts 7 to 10 years? Most will sacrifice durability for creativity. And from a business standpoint, it doesn't make sense to make a product that is so durable. You virtually eliminate repeat business by producing a product whose life span might mean never seeing the client again.

If you throw down 7-year vinyl, and this client doesn't get another vehicle within that time, you'll never see him again. This cycle doesn't make sense. You spend so much time and money trying to land clients, then make a product that lasts so long that they then have no use for you for over 7 years? We're not selling cars or other big-ticket item here, folks. Even \$350 dollars worth of lettering over three years only equates to \$116 per year. That's still a huge bargain.

It opens the door to other markets In addition to your general signage and lettering



Here's a cool site sign we made. Better Signs (www.bettersigns.com) made the blank PVC panels and we then installed the digital prints.



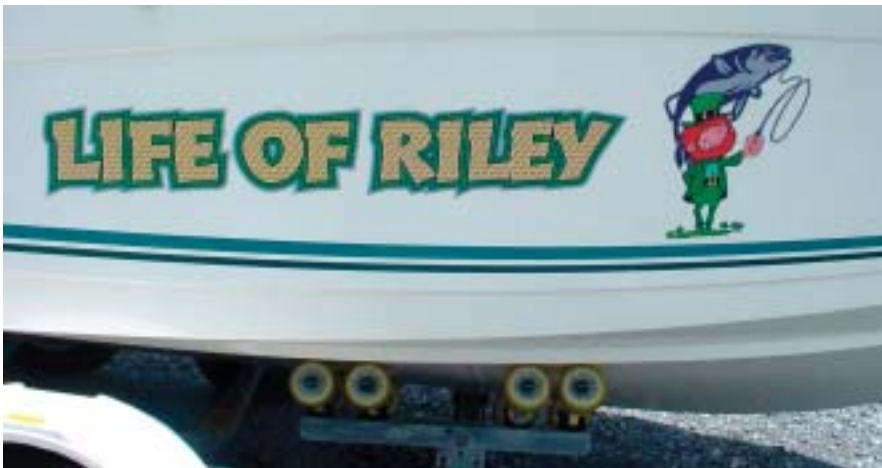
Digitally printed graphic, with the rest in vinyl film. In this instance, it didn't make sense to print everything!



Digitally printed and installed in one piece! Auto Scrap uses one of the Bergen Designs [800-214-6185, BergenDesign.com] fills. Logo and lettering price was \$1150.



I created this full-color logo for a landscape contractor and then had Rich Dombey of Rich Designs in Hillsborough, New Jersey, (www.richdesignsinc.com) handle the truck lettering. We printed all the logos in full color. The trailer logo is approximately 45 by 70, with one seam running through the bear. Rich also handpainted the striping.



I've always loved packaging design, but never really had the opportunity to do any. Now we can create some custom short-run decals for smaller distributors of products. Here, we created the logo and label for the packaging and then printed 1000 contour-cut labels for the client

requirements, digital printers can open up additional revenue streams for your business. You don't have to play with one for long before you start seeing opportunities.

Packaging: We were recently hired to design a logo and packaging for a tomato-sauce company. They are just starting up, and wanted a nice, full-color logo and label applied to their jar. We designed the logo and also handled the layout of the packaging label. We were able to print 500 full labels, contour cut for the client to "install" on their jars. Short-run, full-color labels are a nice little niche to fill in for some of your clients who might not need larger quantities.

Ready-to-apply decals and lettering: We get a lot of calls from companies around the country to design their logos. But it wasn't

practical for us to really handle their lettering requirements unless they were local. Now we can print their full-color logo and ship it to them ready to install. So you can now open the doors to the whole country instead of just your back yard.

Full-color site signs: Since we got our printer, we've been doing only printed site signs. An 18 by 24 print costs around \$1.50 to produce. No weeding—we just float the rectangle of film on the aluminum, hit it with some clear and we're done. Now you can do brilliant full color and design some really outstanding site signs—with photography or other elements that would have been virtually impossible from a cost standpoint.

Banners: One of the coolest features I think is the ability to produce full-color banners. Here's an opportunity to really get yourself into other markets, like interior POP materials, trade-show banners, etc. Again, the very low cost per sq. ft. makes this a huge potential profit center.

Ready to jump in? Still not sure if you're ready to jump into this with both feet? Then let someone else print your graphics. Buy from them for a little while until you're sure you have the market for this type of work. From a production standpoint, I think the time-savings are substantial enough for most shops to at least explore the option. And then, if you do get a printer, perhaps the only color you'll be buying would be white vinyl. It sure cuts down on the space needed to store all those colors! •SC



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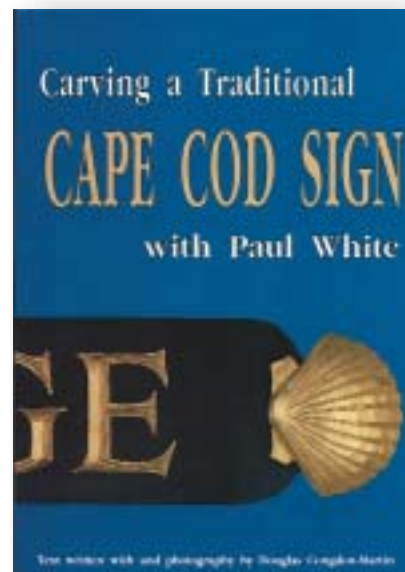
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