

Moving from sign shop to marketing firm

There's a great niche available to creative sign makers

By Dan Antonelli

Here at SignCraft, we frequently hear from sign makers who find their business changing. Some are seeing it start to happen on its own; others are making decisions that are reshaping their business. Some have found a niche for a certain type of sign work while others are looking for ways to sell their design skills.

By nature, design and marketing have always been a kindred aspect of sign making. We asked SignCraft contributor Dan Antonelli—who has built his business around design and marketing—how other sign makers might move in that direction.

SC: What do you see happening among sign shops that sense a change in their business or want to move their business in a new direction?

Dan: Like most businesses, sign businesses are changing, evolving organisms. Computers and the Internet have changed the business world drastically, and it doesn't look like it's going to stop anytime soon.

I think the sign industry will continue to change. I think we'll see a spectrum of sign shops with design-oriented custom shops on one end and quick vinyl shops on the other. In the middle it may be risky—these companies may feel pressure from both ends and may get crushed.

If you're on the quick vinyl end of the

spectrum, you can probably expect more pressure to produce signs faster and cheaper. If you're towards the custom sign end, you may be looking for a way to expand your business beyond conventional sign work.

We'll also see—in fact, we already have seen—sign shops that have morphed into marketing companies. They're moving into the territory that traditionally belonged to advertising agencies. Rich Dombey at Rich Designs (www.richdesignsinc.com) is a great example of someone who has become more than just a sign company for his clients.

We've moved towards an advertising/design/marketing firm. That means we chose to move away from selling signs as a commodity and towards selling our design and marketing skills.

SC: But is there room in the advertising market for sign shops that want to move in that direction?

Dan: Definitely. That's because traditional ad agencies often ignore small businesses as viable clients. They want bigger accounts. At the same time, many small business owner are aware that they need effective marketing





We developed the logo, stationery, Yellow Page ads, and Web site for this client. We also did their search engine optimization to maximize traffic to their site. Within three weeks, the site had more than paid for itself with new leads and jobs. The client is overwhelmed by the response to the new image

and advertising more than ever—just to be competitive in our economy.

This has left a huge opportunity for those who want to help meet the marketing needs of these small businesses—who want effective advertising—but can't afford high-end traditional agencies. I think sign people have an advantage here because they're used to working with these small businesses. We've been making their signs—one of their best advertising values—for years. Why not help them with all of their marketing?

SC: What are the biggest differences between being a sign shop and marketing/design company?

Dan: I think the key thing is that signs are now perceived by the customer as more of a commodity—a product. Marketing and design, on the other hand, are services. Commodities are seen somewhat equally, as something any company that provides them should be able to deliver about the same way. But services are seen as something that takes a certain level of skill and expertise. We see that when someone says, “She’s a really good lawyer....”

SC: How do you go about reshaping your business?

Dan: First, you have to identify the goal. Where do you want to be two or three years from now? What type of work do you want to be doing—or not doing?

Next, you have to decide how to get there. Start by assessing your current skills. Can I do this type of work? Do I have all the expertise and skills I need to do it efficiently? If the answer is yes, then you have to find



out why you're not currently using those skills. If the answer is no, then you decide what steps you have to take to get the skills.

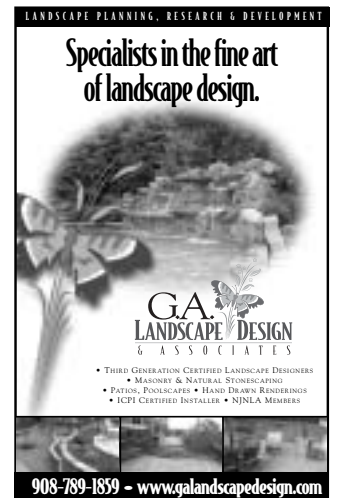
If you don't have the skills, you've got to invest some time and money in educating yourself. There are books, seminars and classes that cover specific areas—say, learning Adobe Photoshop or CorelDraw. I don't want to sound like a commercial here [laughing], but I know of a couple good books that are a great start. [Dan is author of Logo Design for Small Business, Volume 1 and 2 which are available from SignCraft.]

You may want to consider college classes in design or marketing. You have to take advantage of all you can to learn more, and make an investment in yourself.

If you don't have the means or the interest in that, then you have the option of hiring someone who knows more than yourself. Besides bringing these additional skills, you can learn a lot from them just by being around them. This approach takes a leap of faith, because you are making a commitment to paying their wages. You have to be able to market and sell enough of this type of work to do that.

This person may be an entry-level graphic designer right out of college. You'll look over their shoulder and be the “art director” who shapes the design, but you won't be doing the technical side.

A third alternative would be to outsource this work to someone who has the skills





already. We do this for other shops, and there are plenty of other people who do design and marketing work for other sign shops. The Internet makes this easier. The designer would do the creative work, and you'll mark that up and do the sign production.

SC: Would you suggest just adding one service, like logo design?

Dan: You certainly could just start with that, but we offer quite a broad range of services: logos, Web design, advertising design, marketing, printing, signs. We need to be diverse so that if someone comes looking for one thing—say a logo—we have several other things we can do for them. We want to build a relationship with them as an account rather than sell them one logo and then go on to the next logo customers. These other lines of business produce more residual income than a logo or a sign, because the customer needs them on a continual basis.

SC: What challenges can you expect when you make a change like this?

Dan: Probably the biggest one is being prepared to change your customer's perception of what you do. If customers have seen you only as a sign shop, you're going to have to tell them that you now do Web design services or color printing or whatever.

Say you've hired a bright young designer or hooked up with a designer and now you can offer Web design. You can contact your customer base and say, "I wanted you to know that we now do Web design. I know you may have thought of us strictly as sign makers

Running your shop in a changing world

Even if you're content with where your business is right now, you should at least take a look at your market and how things have changed over the past two years for you. There's no doubt that there are more changes on the horizon. You should also look ahead to see how those changes might affect your business.

You can't really assume that things are going to stay the way they are right now. You have to anticipate changes in the marketplace. I just saw an ad in a business magazine for low-cost poster printers. Businesses may soon be able to print their own small signs. National chains like Kinko's and Office Depot are already making signs and banners. Customers can buy signs on Web sites where they choose the letter style and colors. It's reinforcing the perception of signs as a commodity. The service aspect is being pushed to the background.

The execution of most types of signs has gotten easier due

to computers. Twenty years ago it took five years of hard work before you were proficient enough with a brush to be able to letter signs profitably. Now the production—the actual cutting or printing of the vinyl and the application—can be done with a little basic training.

Design is still the aspect that requires skill and expertise. This is the part that takes work and commands a higher price. So, finding a way to develop and sell those skills is worthwhile for any shop.

A shop owner may take a look at the market and decide the best option for them is to shift their shop's focus to a specialty, like illuminated signs, dimensional signs, vehicles or digital printing. Marketing isn't the only direction to take your shop. —Dan

in the past, but we can do a lot more for you and your business....”

You have to be aggressive about this. You don't want to do a sign for them six months from now and have them say, “I didn't know you did Web sites! We just had ours done....”

How you present your company to the customer is critical. Everything about your own image should be top shelf. You have to make the investment in your own marketing if you want to have any chance of selling those services to others. You can't expect others to have any confidence in your ability to create an effective Web site for their business when your own is horrible.

SC: How long does it take to make that change?

Dan: This is a gradual process. You don't get up one morning and say, “Now we're a marketing company rather than a sign shop....” It takes time to build a solid portfolio and cultivate customers who value what you can do for them. You may have to put a little extra effort into your designs that you won't be able to charge for so that you can show future customers what you're capable of. It's advertising for your own business.

A shift like this takes a conscious effort. We just invested over 80 man-hours redesigning our Web site, www.graphic-d-signs.com. We're constantly trying to push the creative envelope to show potential clients our capabilities. You have to spend time studying your business and your market. You've got to look where you want to be in a couple of years and consider how things might change. It's a little bit scary and it takes a little effort. But you're a lot more likely to get where you want to go than to just keep doing what you're doing—and leaving it to chance. •§



Dan Antonelli owns Graphic D-Signs, Inc. in Washington, New Jersey. He is the author of *Logo Design for Small Business* and *Logo Design for Small Business 2*. He's recently started a Web site, www.signshopmarketing.com, which is dedicated to the marketing needs of sign shops.

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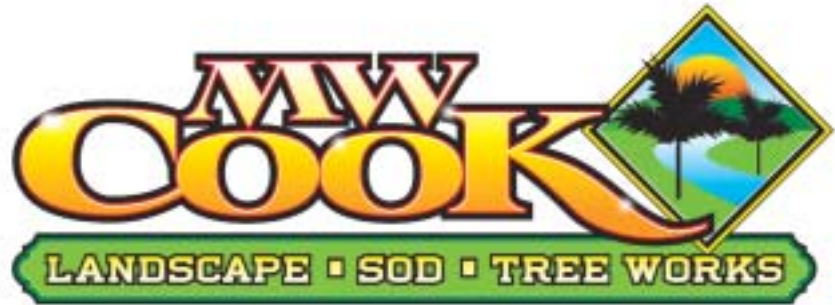
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