

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

MARCH 2024
THE MAGAZINE FOR THE
SIGN PROFESSIONAL

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TUESDAY



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ST PRODUCTS

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Electronic Displays and EMCs: They're everywhere!

ST BUSINESS

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The Case of the Reluctant Retiree
A signshop owner perhaps should, but won't, let go of the reins. **By Rolf L'mao**



REVOLUTION: IDEAS SHAPING THE SIGN BUSINESS

Four sign pros discuss ongoing trends and challenges. **PAGE 26**



You Know You're a Sign Pro When...

Our Brain Squad completes that sentence — and then some! **PAGE 36**

BUZZ SESSION

Do you currently use AI for anything related to your sign business? The Brain Squad reveals their applications of and anxieties about the flourishing technology.

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ON THE COVER:
Our Group Design Editor Victor Cantal used DreamStudio to generate this AI artwork based on the prompt, "Dramatic portrait of a woman with neon signage on her head."



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5 SMART TIPS FROM THIS ISSUE

1 Learn about transparent panels and other types of digital displays and EMCs. (*Tech Products*, p. 20)

2 Check out the various ways diverse sign pros and companies are or will be using AI technology. (*Revolution*, p. 26)

3 Assess what you should and shouldn't be doing — and more — as a manager. (*Maggie Harlow*, p. 47)

4 Review your labor and material cost percentages monthly, lest they devour your profit. (*Dale Salamacha*, p. 49)

5 Find out when, or if, our Brain Squad members plan to start using AI in their sign companies. (*Buzz Session*, p. 52)



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Signs of the Times Magazine



Usually, I wouldn't date an Editor's Note with recent news, but just this morning I saw something debuting from OpenAI: Sora, "an AI model that can create realistic and imaginative scenes from text instructions," per its website. Type in "two pirate ships battle in a coffee cup" and there you have it. Some of the "imaginative scenes" (short videos) can be pretty convincing.

Yet another amazing "model" from the company that brought us ChatGPT. I'm imagining how sign companies might make use of this: "a Sprinter van wrapped in royal blue with bright orange accents drives down a street." And I'm imagining those threatened by this, such as video-production companies.

Technology has always brought change, sometimes radically so. Around four decades ago, computer-aided design and signmaking revolutionized the sign industry. To address the question of AI and signs specifically, we've covered or mentioned it in several parts of this issue — from our feature on ideas shaping the sign business (*see page 26*) to whether or not your peers already use AI, when they plan to (if ever) and what they fear most about it (*see page 52*).

I admit it: I'm a bit afraid of AI. Afraid it could render my creativity obsolete, replace me at my job, become dangerously self-aware and more. Luckily, (I guess?) OpenAI CEO Sam Altman *also* claims to be a little afraid. "I think people should be happy that we are a little bit scared of this," he told ABC News in an interview.

Whatever change AI brings to the sign industry, on behalf of *Signs of the Times*, "I'll be back."

Mark Kissling

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THE LENS OF HISTORY

In case you didn't know, prior to the invention of color photography, the world itself was black and white — signs, too! From around the web our studio content manager Jeff Russ has curated a photo collection of historic and vintage signs that spans the 1880's up to 1980, captured in stunning black-and-white and sepia. View the historical photo gallery at signsofthetimes.com/032401.

ANIMATION AUCTION

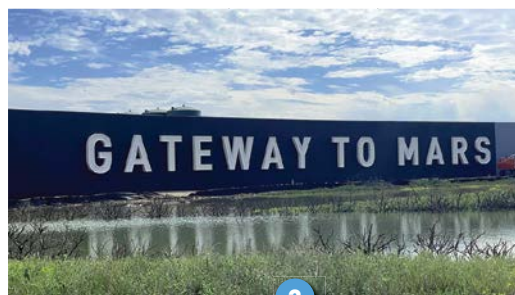
The Cartoon Network Studios team vacated their Burbank, CA animation studio last year following a 2022 merger with Warner Bros. Animation. Western Sign & Awning (San Diego) was hired to remove the original Cartoon Network logo from the building, from which it hung for 23 years. An anonymous ebay seller purchased the full sign after its removal and proceeded to auction it on the website, letter by letter. Read the news at signsofthetimes.com/032402.

TOP OF THE CLASS

The International Sign Association has announced its ISA Elite Class for 2024, which comprises 35 up-and-coming names representing the next generation of sign industry leadership. The program recognizes those who have been working



3



2

in the industry for at least two years and are 35 years of age or younger. The Elite Class will convene for the first time at the International Sign Expo in Orlando, FL. See who made the list at signsofthetimes.com/032403.

SPACE CHALLENGER

Over the past three years Ion Art (Austin, TX) has completed several projects for high-tech rocket company SpaceX. Their latest is a laser-cut aluminum sign reading "GATEWAY TO MARS" 2 for the front of SpaceX's Starbase on Boca Chica Beach. Just picking up the letters for installation was an adventure, say project manager Mónica Boulton and install manager Mark Ermis. Learn more about the project at signsofthetimes.com/032404.

CAFFEINE PARTY

Marco Peterie and Scott Moberg's "Toasted Roasters" 3 coffee truck has been described as looking like a mullet — "business in the front and a party in the back." With a vision for clear and effective communication, the owners

commissioned a local caricature artist to impart the playfulness to the truck's branding, alongside local company Go Graphix to print and install the wrap. Learn what challenges faced the installation team at signsofthetimes.com/032405.

HOWDY OOPSIE

A billboard typo misspelling "Howdy" as "Hodwy" brought the gas station franchise Buc-ee's into the spotlight last year, prompting debate as to whether it was a genuine spelling error or a deliberate marketing ploy. In either case, more people were paying attention to and talking about the beloved Texas icon. Read more about the case at signsofthetimes.com/032406.

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VISUAL MARKET

→ We recently worked with a marketing firm for an event that was about video/content creation for social media, website, etc. We brought an EMC to show how their already-designed videos can be used in other places to promote the sale of message centers. I think a good topic would be about EMC-design content and the benefits of partnering with the video marketing industry in that aspect. — *Sara Geiger, Fox Cities Sign, Appleton, WI*

WEARY BUSINESS

→ 28 years and counting... This is a tough business and it keeps getting tougher. So much of what we do these days is not about

signs. Landlord, muni, marketing approvals, CYA provisions and the need for over-communication seem to take the lead... — *Bob Persichetti, Effective Sign Works, Burlington, NJ*

READ AND ASK

→ I had a conversation with another sign-shop yesterday. This person commented on the challenges of all the mom and pop signshops that continue to start up. How does it impact the bigger or more

established shops? — *Nancy Wilde, Wilde Signs, Vernon, BC, Canada*



→ Current equipment financing options. What are sign companies doing to pay for new equipment? What are typical rates and terms for purchases of equipment? — *Kelley Campbell, Specialty Graphic Solutions, Vancouver, WA*

→ What are typical markup rates for materials, labor and outsourced goods? — *Dominic*

Tancredi, Woodshed Stage Art, Cleveland, OH

READ AND REFERENCE

→ Designer burnout scenario was a great article (see ST, January 2024, page 46). I try to give my designers tasks away from the computer. It breaks the hold and keeps their eyes fresh. As a former designer who worked their way up to ownership, I know by first-hand experience. — *Bobby Jordan, Fastsigns White Marsh-Joppa, Joppa, MD*

✉ **REACH OUT!** We always love to hear from you. Send your feedback and requests to us at editor@signsofthetimes.com.

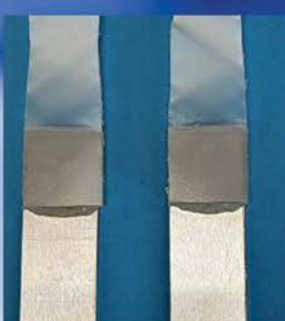
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NEW PRODUCTS p.16 | TECH PRODUCTS p.20

New Products

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fiery.com

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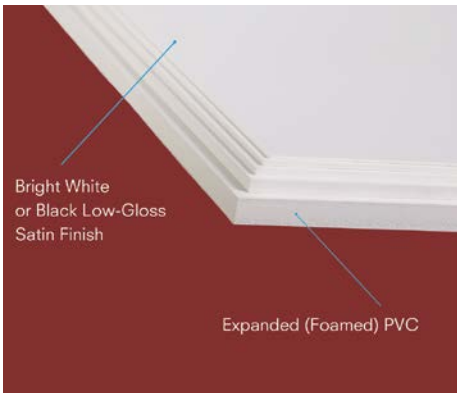
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Let's play a word-association game. If we say electric sign, what pops into your head first? Channel letters? Backlit signs? Neon? Yep, those are all signs and they use electricity, but we want to discuss programmable electric displays where the message can be changed to suit the customer's needs. So let's look at the popular market seg-

ments, what products address the needs and where everything is headed in the future. The simplest types are posters, sort of the entry point into electronic signs. These look like flat-panel TV sets and are typically used in restaurants, hospitals and other service facilities. Often the screens are networked either via hardware or cellular, while software

controls the information and graphics being displayed. The next step up is where things start to get interesting. We encounter kiosks all the time. They could be in the hospital clinic or an auto service center — heck, gas pumps are becoming more like kiosks every day. The current trend insists that kiosks have higher resolution displays and more intuitive interactivity. Touchscreen interfaces have become more prevalent and companies are finding the kiosk a good place to slip in additional advertising. The signs we just described are what you could call the 'up close and personal' side of the business, really designed for viewing by a single or small

group of individuals. How do you address the multitudes? The most popular method for enclosed areas such as auditoriums, arenas and other large spaces is a video wall. In this case, a number of panels comprise a giant monitor, which displays live performers, lecturers and on-field closeups at sporting events so that large crowds can see everything. Some stage performers will also use video walls for mood-setting graphics like fire or spaceships or whatever fits the performance. Between acts or during timeouts these signs can conveniently display advertising. Speaking of advertising, probably the best known electronic signs are digital billboards. We've discussed these

More businesses are using digital displays and EMCs due in part to flexibility of programming.



in the past but they are popping up everywhere. Your first thought may be the giant billboards you see on the road but

schools, churches and shopping centers are using them to advertise events, sales and fundraisers as well. The smaller signs

are actually a good area to get your feet wet if you are interested in getting into the electric display business. What are some of the new innovations available today? The transparent panel is probably the most exciting. Installed on glass doors, windows, bus stop shelters and other transparent surfaces, the panel uses a motion sensor

to display messages. Another interesting development is the use of curved panels, which allow for varied geometric shapes as well as a better field of view. These technologies are available today. In the future, who knows? Changes may come from the audience-recognition side, using biometrics and AI to specifically target ads and messages. Looks like *Blade Runner* may finally be coming true. Technologies such as vision tracking and audio input can make informational signs and kiosks more effective in the future. So, that's a small run-down of this growing market segment in our business. Informational digital posters and small-scale electronic billboards are great areas to start with. Just look around; they're everywhere.

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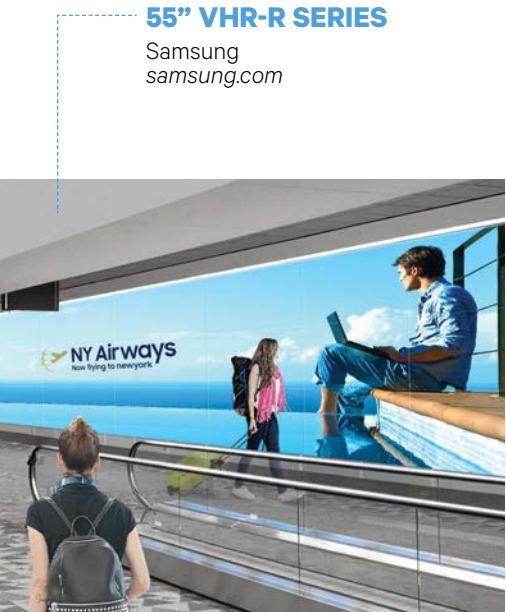


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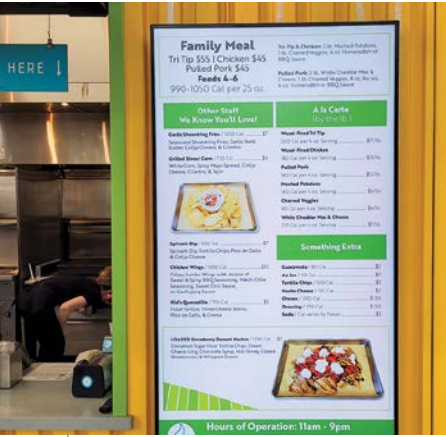
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March

THE BIG DATES



National Employee Appreciation Day, the first Friday of March annually, lands on **MARCH 1** this year. Show your employees how much you value them by doing a little something extra: a bagel breakfast, pizza lunch or letting them leave early would all work.

"Beware the **Ides Of March**," goes the famous quote from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, referring to **MARCH 15**. The title character should have heeded the warning, as members of the Roman Senate stabbed Caesar to death on this day in 44 B.C. "Et tu brute?"

Global Recycling Day on **MARCH 18** creates the opportunity to review the recycling efforts at your sign company and home. It's possible, if not likely, that at least some items you're trashing can be recycled, thus reducing the amount of waste bound for landfills.

Finally, **MARCH 28** is **National Black Forest Cake Day**, evidence there's a "national day" for just about everything. No one's quite sure how this got on the national calendar — or this one — but here's your chance to try some *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte*. Enjoy!

MANAGER'S TO-DO LIST FOR MARCH

AlphaGraphics Oceanside (Oceanside, CA) conducts "email and phone touches to past clients that require tax preparation signage or mailings," she says.

STORAGE Kelley Campbell, Specialty Graphic Solutions (Vancouver, WA) plans to sort through her shop's cold-weather gear and tools. "Toss what's no longer in good shape," she advises. "And clean up/store the things you'll keep for next winter."

WEEK 3

MAR. 17-23

SEASONAL "We will be concentrating on the spring cleaning companies," offers Ted DeWitt, Signarama-Covina (Covina, CA), meaning landscapers, HVAC services, roofing and plumbing outfits. "All home service companies will be getting busy that time of year," he says. Meanwhile, Earl Walker, Image360 Tucker (Tucker, GA), will send out graduation reminders to

local schools. "We typically produce over 2,000 signs in May," Walker reports.

SOCIAL MEDIA Chad Lawson, Sign Pro of Skagit Valley (Mount Vernon, WA), is starting a new social media push. "Something we have never done in the past," he says. It's never too late!

WEEK 4

MAR. 24-31

MANAGEMENT "Build a

marketing plan!" urges Adam Brown, Sign Effectz (Milwaukee). "Not just tactics, but a plan that analyzes your target market and your Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)," he says. "If you've never performed an ICP exercise, do that first."

ANALYSIS At the end of March, Dominic Tancredi, Woodshed Stage Art (Cleveland, OH) reviews wins, losses, sales, etc. for Q1 for a meeting with his bookkeeper in early April.



Las Vegas' famous (or infamous) Desert Inn, 1966. The hotel's top floor served as celebrity/tycoon Howard Hughes' home and base of operations for four years during this period. Room service! — Jeff Russ, SOT Facebook curator

OUR FACEBOOK POST OF THE MONTH

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Mimaki CJV330 Helps A&M Graphics Increase Production

Based in Auburn, NY, A&M Graphics is the area's premier shop for signage, vehicle graphics, murals, ADA and wayfinding systems, and related products and services. The company has earned designations as 3M™ Certified Graphics Installation Company and 3M™ DI-NOCTM Architectural Finishes Preferred Installer.

CAPACITY NEEDED FOR INCREASED VINYL PRINT WORK. In 2022, the company saw some large-scale vinyl print work projects on the horizon that would require an increase in print capacity. Matthew Ferguson, Creative Director and President of A&M Graphics, knew it was crucial to add another printer to its line-up to

increase their horsepower. "I've had a great experience with Mimaki up to this point and was browsing their offerings when I viewed a post about the Mimaki CJV330 printer," said Ferguson. "The great experience I have had with Mimaki, its representatives, and technicians in the Rockaway, New Jersey office, and my dealer are all factors that have me only looking at Mimaki," said Ferguson, who worked with Keith Howard at Glantz to acquire the unit.

MIMAKI CJV330 PUT THROUGH ITS PACES. One of the projects for which this printer was purchased was a large exterior mural depicting the life of Harriet Tubman, the American abolitionist and social activist who called A&M

Graphics' small town of Auburn, New York, home until her death in March of 1913. A&M Graphics was approached by the Harriet Tubman Boosters organization and local artist Arthur Hutchinson who designed the mural. The company printed the mural on 3M SV480mC Envision Wrap film as it was installed on an exterior painted block wall. The final product, approximately 26 feet by 61 feet, spans the entire side of a downtown building and garnered national press coverage upon its unveiling. "Once we completed the installation of the mural and removed the scaffolding, the artist was in disbelief as to just how vibrant the colors of the final product turned out to be," said Ferguson.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY. "One of the most immediate benefits of the CJV330 is the print speed," said Ferguson. "With the type of premium work we complete, we are always printing in the highest quality print modes and this machine still prints amazingly fast." The ID Cut feature is also a benefit. "Being

able to produce multiple prints on the same roll with registration marks and a barcode for the Mimaki CJV330 printer to automatically recognize and continuously cut jobs without constant human intervention has been game-changing for us," said Ferguson.

The new media handling features have helped productivity as well. The three-roll Media Changer offers the ability to quickly load several media types and saves time as operators no longer need to fully dismount and re-mount rolls. Additionally, when the media is on the machine, the team knows it is acclimated to the ideal environment for immediate printing.

"The Mimaki CJV330 printer has enabled us to increase our production volume and dramatically shorten the time it takes for us to turn a project around. Quicker turnaround means we get paid quicker and are on to the next project," said Ferguson. "I believe Mimaki is the best printer manufacturer out there right now, and the new features they continue to put out prove this."



Mimaki CJV330-160

Never Stop Production

CJV330-160

KEY FEATURES

ID CUT

- Contour cut multiple jobs automatically without user intervention
- ID Code generated by RasterLink7
- Crop mark sensor reads the ID code automatically
- Saves material, speeds up production

MIMAKI REMOTE ACCESS APP

- Control the 330 Series printers remotely
- All printer panel settings available on your mobile device or computer
- Status updates



LARGE INK SUPPLY SYSTEM

- 2 Liter ink bags
- Up to 4 Liters per color in a CMYK configuration
- Change inks while printing (4C)
- Less time spent changing inks

3X ROLL MEDIA CHANGER

- Up to 3 media rolls can be mounted at one time
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- Storing media takes less space



XY SLITTER

- In-line finishing without the need for a second device for cutting posters, banners, etc.
- No manual cutting of sheetwork
- Accurate, automatic cutting without human intervention
- Digital sensors compensate for misalignment
- Registration marks generated in RasterLink7



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REVOLUTION: IDEAS SHAPING THE SIGN BUSINESS

BY DEBORA TOTH

*Four **sign pros** discuss ongoing trends and challenges.*



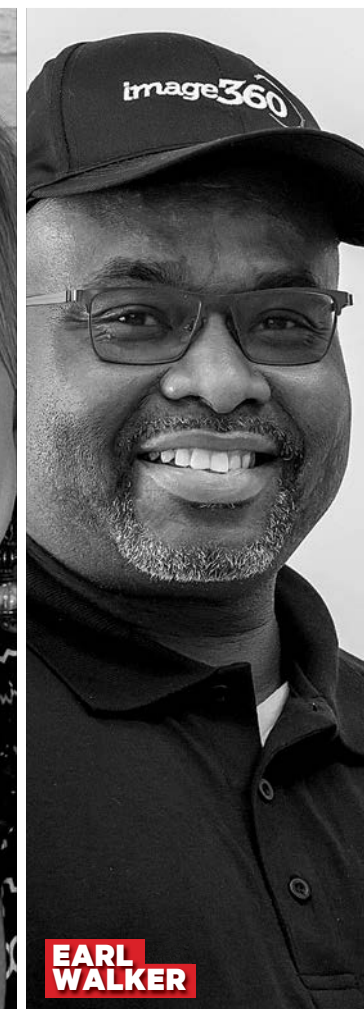
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JOHN
YARGER



TERESA
YOUNG



EARL
WALKER



PABLO
GUERRERO

What happens when you place a crystal ball in front of four expert signmakers to predict the future? *Signs of the Times* Editor-in-Chief Mark Kissling, who organized just such a meeting in January, moderated an intelligent and enlightening discussion about current and future trends in the business — artificial intelligence (AI), growth markets, disruptions in the industry, hiring and training new employees. Taking part in the virtual roundtable were Pablo Guerrero, president of Amigo Arts (Monroe, WA); Earl Walker, president of Image360 Tucker, (Tucker, GA); John Yarger, CEO of North American Signs (South Bend, IN); and Teresa Young, president Sign Biz, (Dana Point, CA). These four experts represent different parts of the US as well as different shop sizes, sign services, demographics and viewpoints.

THE IMPACT OF AI

One of the hottest trends making headlines right now is AI. How will it affect the signmaking industry? The four-person discussion began by addressing AI's current role and use in the sign industry and where it will be expanding. Young, who owns a consultancy company with over 100 member sign companies, proclaimed that AI is here to stay — large and in charge. Her viewpoint comes from knowledge gathered from hundreds of signshops that feed her information organically.

“The most intriguing use of AI for me is virtual people used on electronic digital signs inside convenience stores,” she says. “There are three Chevron trial stores in southern California, which depict a virtual sommelier who you can ask questions about which wine to pair with what type of meal you are having. They are very realistic.”

On the traditional sign side, Young says, AI is exploding. In the next 12-18 months she predicts that AI will be able to easily produce vehicle wrap designs for nearly any make and model using available templates and vector files. She also sees AI being used by signmakers to generate sign messages and other written material.

Guerrero, who owns a small, full-service custom signshop, was more cautious about AI’s impact. “AI will be a good prompt for ideas and concepts as well as streamlining the design process, but I don’t think it’s refined enough for production,” he says. “I’m seeing too many consistent frameworks through AI. Yes, AI can help build interactive projects and give you a recipe where to start but at a certain point, there will be a bland design aspect to it and you’ll need physical people to push it forward.”

Yarger, who oversees a large operation that produces signs for national installation, tended to agree with Guerrero. “When you ask AI to do your writing, it is helpful to give you structure, but the unique voice and final editing still need to be there and [right now] that can only come from a human,” he says. “AI is certainly great for all sorts of office texts or starter outlines.”

GROWTH MARKETS

Another hot topic is the anticipated growth of certain markets or industries. Where should signmakers concentrate their sales forces in the next three to five years? Which markets will see the greatest rate of growth in revenue during that time, and why? The panelists named a number of markets to watch, including multi-family



dwellings and restaurants.

“Covid stalled the growth of new restaurants but we’re now seeing an uptick in restaurant openings and I believe that will continue for the next three years,” Yarger says. “People are once again going out in droves. There are new signage concepts going into these spaces, both locally and national chains as well.”

In the Atlanta metro area, an enormous number of new apartments are being built due to the need for affordable housing, says Walker, who operates a franchise shop along with his wife. “Typically when new management comes in they switch out the graphics,” he says. Another growth market: drive-thru restaurants. “One of my best customers got a

boost in their business due to the growth in drive-thru. We did a wonderful build out for them.”

Young agrees: “Multi-family housing will be booming for the next three to five

years or beyond. There’s massive growth and opportunities for the sign industry.”

Guerrero has seen a resurgence in handmade custom signage. “It’s on a 10-year cycle,” he says. “It was popular back in 2010 and now we’re getting contracts for it again. Here in our Seattle metro market, people are doing more, small boutique things and asking for projects that

are more highly crafted to be tailored to their small, niche demographic. For example, churches not only want handcrafted

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furniture but customized signage as well. And we've taken on customers like crazy mini-golf places lately. The cool stuff dried up and now it is coming back."

Walker agreed: "People want to express themselves more and, as signmakers, we can be their channel to allow them to do that."

NEW BUSINESS IDEAS AND DISRUPTIONS

Next, the panel moved to sharing the best new ideas that applied to their sign businesses. Rapt attention was paid to Guerrero who described his usage of augmented reality (AR — not to be confused with VR, virtual reality) as a value-added offering

to his customers. "Augmented reality is very forward thinking," he says. "I've used it for a customer's perspective monument sign. Using AR, I could allow the customer to walk around the entire sign and see how the sign would look in their foyer, all by using this new Google technology." Or, say you're designing a food court sign for a customer. You can anchor that sign where it's going to be and the customer can walk with their phone under the sign, around the sign, and see it as though it were already installed. "It's a great sales tool and will be used more and more in the next three years," Guerrero adds.

Which possibly disruptive influences to the sign industry need to be addressed?

Augmented reality (AR) is very forward thinking ... I could allow the customer to walk around the entire sign and see how the sign would look."

PABLO GUERRERO

Two topics rose to the forefront: supply-chain disruptions and increasing retirements of sign business owners — not oft-cited aging out of skilled installers.

Supply chain disruptions continue to plague manufacturers, including signmakers. While it started during Covid, Yarger says, these disruptions continue. "Everything is stretched. Like last summer, due to the *Barbie* movie, everyone was trying to find pink but it was difficult," he says. "The ongoing China situation is fraught with problems. I hope it doesn't get worse and become a crisis."

Another ongoing disruption? What Walker calls "veterans cashing in their chips." *ST's* 2024 Big Survey found that nearly half of respondents are 60 or older and though 19% never plan to retire, that still portends a tsunami of retirement that may crest anytime now and flood the industry over the next decade or more. "I went to visit one of my [subcontracting] fabricators recently and was surprised to learn that he had sold the business," Walker says. "He's not the only experienced and skilled tradesman to retire. This will be a disruptive influence in the market until we gain some new hires that are well-trained to pick up the skills that have been lost with retirees."

HIRING

Using that discussion about retirement and losing experienced workers, the group transitioned their focus to one of the major disruptive factors today for signmakers and the greater realm of businesses: hiring new employees. Workers are short in number, turnover rates are high, and finding reliable employees with the best skillset is hard. It's a hiring crisis. What can owners and managers at sign companies do to attract and retain new and young employees?

Walker emphasizes education. He likes

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to talk to students about different projects and stress that signage is everywhere. Look at your grocery stores, he says, or the fancy signage at a local Walmart. Young took it upon herself to make a video to show kids the world of signs. Her goal was to pique their interest and get young students thinking about signage as a career.

When you are working with the designers, if they stay past two years, that's great. I have to let my old way of thinking go. Yes, it's tough."

EARL WALKER

Guerrero plans to cut back his office hours and begin teaching. "Our high school offers CTE (Career Technical Education). I'm looking forward to getting into the classroom and showing students how to take a pencil sketch on a napkin, creating the design, selling it and seeing it through production," he says. "It's my way to give back

to the industry." Guerrero wants to make it a fun class and show the students how to wear many hats. "I want them to be a rockstar signshop designer," he says. "I was once just like them — a kid drawing designs on my computer that eventually led me to open my own business."

On the other side of the coin, the panelists encouraged their peers to "fill up the slack" and change their attitudes toward younger employees. A generational shift is taking place from aging Baby Boomers through Millennials and Gen Z; it's up to sign company owners to learn how to deal with them as both customers and employees.

"Find a 25- to 35-year-old who is eager,

teachable and has a good character, and create a novel environment that is exciting and fun," Young says. "Rather than a typical workday, offer to hire them as part of a bank of installers and designers who will only have to work for hours a week when they choose," she says. "They get their own free time within the confines of your rules and good systems, and you've created an environment that is perfect for them. Give them a virtual checklist to communicate with them at home."

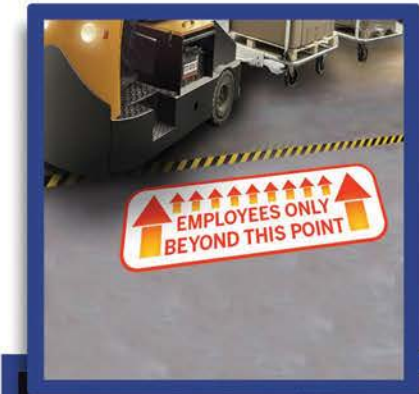
But the group agreed training is the key. At Yarger's North American Signs, management works to develop an atmosphere of collegiality and comradery. Beyond that, management needs to look at employees as less permanent and more fluid. "If I can get two years out of this person, it's okay. If I get more that's awesome," he says. "Some new hires are not the right fit and it's important not to take an attitude toward them because they might eventually come back to you. When they come back, they'll have more experience and that's valuable to me and my company. In turn, they'll value us more because they can compare us to other experiences and value what we have to offer."

Walker concurs. "The days of staying with a business for 25 years are over. The days of getting that gold watch are over," he says. "When you are working with designers, if they stay past two years, that's great. But as an owner I've come to the conclusion that I have to let my old way of thinking go. I have to take a different approach. Yes, it's tough. But every time we hire a new designer, she or he brings in fresh ideas. That's a positive."

TRAINING

Finally, the panelists noted that there can never be enough training after finally finding the perfect new team member. By training a person closely, a manager will be able to assess how well positioned the person is for their job and the company and perhaps weed out a new hire that won't make it. As Young described, "it's like having two full-time jobs. You're running your business

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and you're training, or you're managing your department and you're training. It's exhausting," she adds.

One of their tips is to create a mentor for the new hire. Studies have found that a mentor or a buddy system helps to retain a new employee. With one, the newbie would have someone to eat lunch with, to ask questions about company policy and to form a friendship. Often these mentors become both a friend and ally within the company and perhaps stay with them throughout their career.

Due to the lack of new hires, today's

managers might need to step up to the plate. "When I was in my 20's doing super-creative stuff, the market was filled with people like me," says Guerrero. "Now I'm in my 40's; there aren't people filling up the slack. Today, we're charged with teaching this younger generation with what we need and navigating the idiosyncrasies of their particular age." We're in a climate, he feels, where people are a bit less willing to take risks and start new businesses. "Perhaps it is people like us that will need to kickstart a resurgence and get more involved," he says.



If you have a revolutionary idea you'd like to share, email it to editor@signsofthetimes.com.



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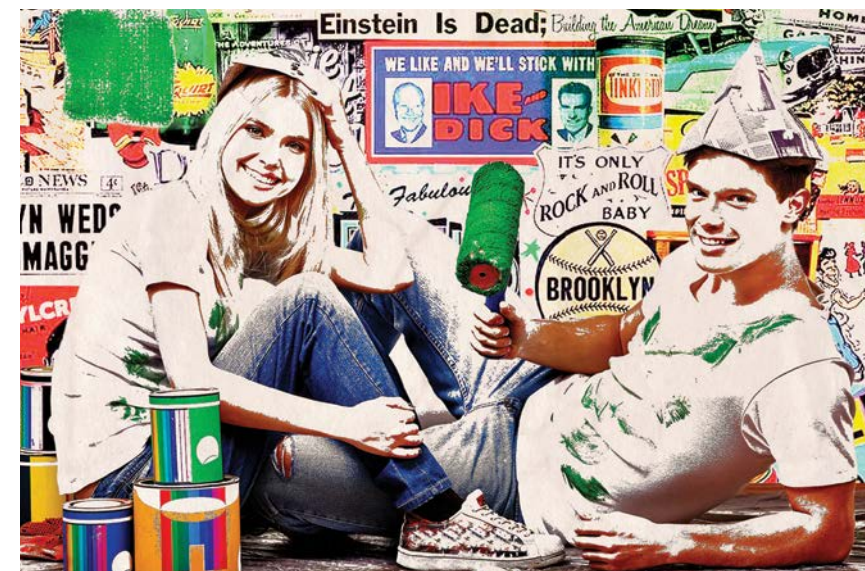
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YOU KNOW YOU'RE A SIGN PRO WHEN...

Our **Brain Squad** completes that sentence — and then some!

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A hobby or skill becomes a profession when it results in formal agreements, contracts and food on the table. A hobbyist or practitioner likewise becomes a professional after devoting weeks, months or years of time and toil to their trade. Very particular experience and deep understanding of a field comprise the telltale marks of professionalism — for those in the sign industry, those marks can be something more, something specific to their chosen niches and a badge of pride. Here are some of the foremost marks of a sign pro, according to our Brain Squad.



KNOWLEDGE

→ You speak in cast and calendar, in IJ180, 480, 35, in 3M, Avery and ORACAL, in Foamcore, Acrylic, Gatorboard. We know the differences and the uses. **Steve Linville, Linville Design Studio, Farmington Hills, MI**

→ You understand every step of the process to get the project completed

on time, within budget and code compliant with a result of a happy client and profit for the company. **Greg Abbott, Abbott Image Solutions, Wilmington, OH**

→ You have the ability to train your crew to perform their jobs with competence. You have the ability to assist your customers

in achieving superior results by providing expert advice. **Michael Snow, Innovative Sign Systems, Vista, CA**

→ You are able to tell the difference in sign lighting that has had LEDs replaced. **Matt Robinson, Eastern Sign Tech, Burlington, NJ**

YOU KNOW YOU'RE A SIGN PRO WHEN ...

EXPERIENCE

→ You know when to turn down a potential order or turn away a potential client. **Dominic Tancredi, Woodshed Stage Art, Cleveland, OH**

→ ...you've felt the power of a 60Ma transformer and lived to talk about it!

→ ...you've felt the comfort of an undersized body harness and can't put your arms over your head and you know the value of kitty litter when a truck blows a hydraulic line. **Adam Brown, Sign Effectz, Milwaukee**

→ You, too, have your

vehicles wrapped. The same would go if you sell electric or EMC signs. **Paul Havenaar, Sign Impressions, Kalamazoo, MI**

→ You know you're a sign pro when you are always trying to learn and develop all of your skills and realize other like-minded individuals can teach you a thing or two. **Rob Tafflock, Tafflock Signs & Graphics, East Northport, NY**

→ You have nothing else to learn. **Brett Jeltema, Fresh Coast Signs and Graphics, Spring Lake, MI**



WORK

→ You have a good backlog of work. Not because you're the cheapest but because you deliver an exceptional product, on time and on budget. **Louis Pascuzzi, Economy Sign Co., Danbury, CT**

→ You can take the impossible situation and make it work. **Ben Phillips, Phillips Signs Inc., Seaford, DE**

→ You don't design a great-looking sign that is impractical to fabricate.

→ You don't throw quotes from the hip or guessimate quote prices.

→ You don't badmouth other sign companies; you just outshine them. **John Miller, Signs by Autografix, Branford, CT**

→ You start your morning with plenty of pep in your step, by lunch you have solved three deadline issues... two unexpected employee quirks... one supplier missed delivery...

and a flat tire on your service truck..... and close out the day with an unexpected sale you quoted six months ago. **Bob Chapa, Signarama Troy | Metro Detroit, Troy, MI**

→ You say "NO" more often than "YES" to unusual projects. **David Gonzalez, Toronto Channel Letters, Toronto**

→ You can estimate any project possible within scale of project. **Gary Wildner, GW Sign & Paint Co., Cape Coral, FL**

→ You don't budge on a price you've given. **Peter Poanessa, Keene Signworx, Swanzey, NH**

→ You are proud of the work you are putting out. **Louise Fischer, Trimline Signs & Graphics, Rocky Mountain House, AB, Canada**

→ Your installation trucks are out all day with work and your team is dedicated

to finish before coming back! **Shaun Ensign, Legacy Sign Group, Westville, IN**

→ You make it look like the design. **Joe Gibson, Ramsay Signs, Portland, OR**

→ ...you arrive at the job site that hasn't been surveyed correctly and succeed with the task at hand regardless.

→ ...wear a Brain Squad T-shirt under your winter business shirts.

→ ...can read the comments on Facebook's "Those Damn Sign Guys" and not resort to 6th grade communication skills but instead try and understand the a***** posting the dumb as f*** comment or question. **Edward DeZuzio, Butler Sign Co., Wayne, NJ**

→ ...you'd rather tell them to check the breaker box instead of charging for a service call.

→ ...you tell your client the sign is still in permitting to buy yourself an extra week for fabrication.

→ ...your kid's softball team wins first place in the banner contest. **Russell Toyne, Studio Dzo, Austin, TX**

→ You know how much time is needed to fabricate and install per project.

→ You're driving at night with your family and your little guy says, "Hey dad, they need an LED retrofit on their sign." **David de Los Santos, D-signs & Awnings, Allentown, PA**



OFF - WORK OBSESSION

→ You can't drive anywhere without obsessing about every sign you drive by. **Jeremy VanderKraats, Signs by Van, Salinas, CA**

→ You know you're a sign pro when you have more photos of signs on your phone than pets or family members. **Matt Brasel, Indigo Signworks, Brasel, ND**

→ ...you have RTA vinyl stuck to your clothes and hair at the end of the day.

→ ...you go to a new exhibit or attraction and you're trying to see/figure out how they made the signs.

...you get geeked about white ink and

varnish. **Karrie Brock, Fastsigns of Toledo, Toledo, OH**

→ You stop in a parking lot to check the quality of a wrap installation on a car you're walking by on your way into the store. Or you step over to get a close-up look at how the interior dimensional sign is made before sitting down in the waiting room at your dentist's office. **Kelley Campbell, Specialty Graphic Solutions, Vancouver, WA**

→ That sign that has needed service for the last two years just drives you crazy even though it's not your client. **Bob Burke, Burke Enterprise, Oakdale, CT**

→ When you break

down a font to your wife on vacation.

→ When you point out all the cool signs to your wife on vacation.

→ When your wife leaves you at the pool because you won't stop complaining about the lack of and unclear safety message of the pool signs. **Chad Lawson, Sign Pro of Skagit Valley, Mount Vernon, WA**

DC-Silver Spring, Kensington, MD

→ Your family pulls you away from looking at methods of attachment while shopping. **Keith Davis, KRD Design, Chester Springs, PA**

→ ...you are driving down the street and keep saying, "We did that, we did that, we did that..."

→ ...when you see a vehicle with graphics on it pass by and say, "That's installed crooked." **Ted DeWitt, Signarama Covina, Covina, CA**

→ ...you can deconstruct a sign mentally faster than it takes to pass the sign while driving.

→ ...you can't follow a movie or TV show because you're constantly looking at signage. **Kevin Obregon, Brown Graphics, Dallas**

→ When you do not read signs but feel them to see how they are constructed or mounted. **Andrew Akers, Image360**



FINAL THOUGHTS

→ Your hairdresser tells you your hair always smells like ink. **Sabrina Davis, Port City Signs & Graphics, Wilmington, NC**

→ You have more trips to the dumpster with liners than trips back home. **Marco Milliotti, Image360 South**

Orlando, Orlando, FL
→ You are constantly pulling studs and screws out of the dryer! **Bobby Jordan, Fastsigns of White Marsh-Joppa, Joppa, MD**

→ You work long hours, put up with good and bad customers, deal with

employees, pay more taxes than you would like, think you're making



a lot of money till all the bills come in, have days that are like a dream and some days that are nightmares. I can go on and on! **Cody McElroy, Commercial Signs, Houma, LA**

→ You start running out of large equipment purchases on your dream list. **James Cota, JC Signs & Graphics, Clear Lake, MN**

Easy Signs, Middletown, OH

→ A client sends a card that says that they appreciate that I take notice to detail for specific sign projects. That's what we do! **Cindy Gillihan, Gilly's Super Signs, Placerville, CA**

→ ...your customer base views you as the go-to first choice for service/support. **Don Budde, CalComp Graphic Solutions, Cypress, CA**

→ You do not let the customer dictate everything. **Harold Pedley, Sign Engineering, San Juan, PR**

→ Other sign professionals come to you for input and advice. **Ian McLellan, Hill House Graphics, Bristol, RI**

→ More work comes from repeat and referral than advertising, you do not advertise at all, and your business is still growing. **Larry Mitchell, SignChef, El Dorado Hills, CA**



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ST Business

SELL MORE / SPEND LESS / MANAGE WISELY

ADD MORE HUMAN TOUCHES

At its core, culture is human connection, argues the business author and marketer Seth Godin. Over hundreds of thousands of years, our brains have evolved to excel at interacting with other humans, and as a result we feel most fulfilled when we do. It's why the more technology colonizes the world, the more important it becomes to add human touches throughout your operation. Godin says every member of your staff should be trying to "figure out how to take that customer who just came in or is on their way out and make them feel 10 percent better by saying something, doing something, interacting with them. Not because it's in the manual, not because they memorized it, but because they see a way to connect to another person." It's the sort of action that will allow your company to truly stand out at a time when most service is either abrupt or automated.

A LOOK
BACK



p.66

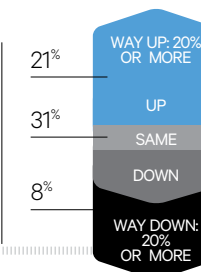
ONE QUICK QUESTION: When do you envision AI will be used in your business, if not already? p. 52



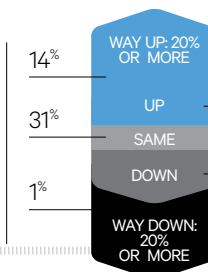
REAL DEAL: The Case of the Reluctant Retiree p. 50



BENCHMARKS
Office park signs that make clients want to go in to work.
PAGE 44



MONTHLY SALES SURVEY
How did your January 2024 sales compare with January 2023?



How do you expect your March 2024 sales to compare with March 2023?

signsofthetimes.com

MARCH 2024 41

Tip Sheet



MARKETING THE HUMAN TOUCH

1 Think of the dreaded “M” word as a component of business development, not sales, says James Keppel of CLI Services (Denver). “Show your work, talk about the process and tell everybody where the bodies are buried,” he explains. A good anecdote about a project, process or client interaction helps to humanize the story, the people and the results. “Don’t allow your work to be viewed as a commodity.”

QUOTING

FRIENDLY REMINDER

2 “Follow up!” recommends Russell Toyne of Studio Dzo (Austin, TX) on old quotes that never received a response. “Follow up in a non-pushy, ‘just circling back on this’ way. Don’t leave a bag of money hanging on a

limb,” he adds. To help customers understand what they are getting at a job’s end, Cody McElroy and Commercial Signs (Houma, LA) spell out their quotes in detail.

COLLABORATION

THE WORK OF OTHERS

3 Ask a peer to review your work before submitting if more than three revisions have occurred, whether to design or estimating, advises Bob Persichetti of Effective Sign Works (Burlington, NJ). Ian McLellan of Hill House Graphics (Bristol, RI) encourages delegating and overseeing when possible, with patience. “Do not micromanage,” he stresses.

DESIGN

BREVITY IS WIT

4 The best signs quickly communicate problem-solving values and benefits that appeal

to a client’s needs or wants, according to Larry Mitchell of SignChef (El Dorado Hills, CA). Pick words and graphics that immediately express benefits. “Some of the best headlines are only two words: ‘WAR ENDS!’ – ‘CANCER CURED!’ – ‘FREE GAS!’ I’d buy that newspaper!”

RESOURCES

BOOK CLUB

5 Comprehending and optimizing processes are paramount for expansion, says Patrick Clifford of Clifford Signs (Kokomo, IN), regarding a lesson he learned from reading Michael E. Gerber’s book *The*

E-Myth Revisited. Derek Atchley and Atchley Graphics (Columbus, OH) recommend *The Lean Deal* by Michael Althoff of Yellotools fame. “Very good content that we are adapting into our own processes and more,” Atchley says.

TRAINING

SLOW BUT STEADY

6 Make use of the online training that the International Sign Association (ISA) provides for new employees, advises Sara Geiger of Fox Cities Sign (Appleton, WI). “Having them learn starting with Signs 101 has helped tremendously for people new to the industry,” Geiger says. She often hears employees complain about past companies that offered them minimal to no training, which then subjected them to management’s wrath. “Slow down, take the time, it pays off!”



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“EVERY GREAT DREAM BEGINS WITH A DREAMER.”

HARRIET TUBMAN

TIP BRIEFS

➔ When mounting a sign with studs embedded, prior to installation, tooth-paste provides a good alternative to mark the wall.

Jeffrey Chudoff, Fastsigns of Maple Shade, Maple Shade, NJ

➔ The subscriptions for software may seem a little overwhelming, but they are the only way to have the latest and greatest computer-aided software.

Tim Ward, Sign Solutions, Frederick, MD

➔ I recently brought back the 4 x 8-ft. calendar on standoffs for the shop and sales team to schedule properly. Digital calendars are great if you’re at your desk all day. I wanted everyone to see what is scheduled.

Bobby Jordan, Fastsigns of White Marsh-Joppa, Joppa, MD

➔ Never trust realtors.

Marti Etheridge, Laguna Bay Printworks, Laguna Vista, TX



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Benchmarks

➔ OFFICE PARK SIGNS

WHITE COLLAR WORKSITES

Collections of companies and their signs.

BY MARIE ADAMICK AND MARK KISSLING

The pandemic made ghost towns of many, but office park signs are back, directing employees and visitors to which companies are where. Following are five designations of various types and styles for professional building sets.



ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENT

➔ The new sign for East Shore Business Park (La Porte, IN) was designed with the architecture of the building in mind, says Legacy Sign Group's (Westville, IN) Marketing Coordinator Megan Swick. The shop's fabricators used a CIDAN CNC Metal Folder, AXYZ CNC Router and acrylic flat cut out (FCO) elements. For the background, they direct-printed ACM with a wood-grain graphic. The aluminum tenant panels have vinyl copy and graphics with a cultured stone veneer base. Fabrication required three weeks and installation took one, for which Legacy's team used an Altec Digger Derricks truck.

SIGN OF LAND

➔ To reflect the civil and environmental engineering consulting, landscape architecture and land surveying specialties of client Environmental Design Partnership (EDP; Clifton Park, NY), AJ Sign Co. (Burnt Hills, NY) crafted a multi-tenant monument with reverse-lit LED channel letters mounted on a rustic and environmentally friendly wood alternative material. To complete this project, says AJ Sign's Director of Marketing Tim Szablewski, the designers used SAI Flexi, Gerber OMEGA, Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, while fabricators and installers put the shop's MultiCam Apex3R CNC router, Roland TrueVIS VG2-640 printer/cutter and Elliott L60 Boom Truck to use.



TEAM ENDEAVOR

➔ JC Signs & Graphics (Clear Lake, MN) designed and installed this sign for Lakewood Health Systems in Staples, MN. After presenting four design options provided by Minneapolis-based firm The Sign Producers, JC Signs & Graphics fabricated the monument with an assist from Ed's Signs (Sauk Rapids, MN) spec'ing the same steel siding used on the building and ¾-in. acrylic push-through letters, backlit by Principal Industries LEDs. "The main monument was a unique sign all the way around. That made it fun to fabricate," says James Cota, JC Signs' owner.




PUZZLE PIECES

➔ For their new facility, Sunshine Fuels & Energy (Bristol, RI) contacted local signshop Hill House Graphics. The logo was created from ¾-in. PVC cut on a CNC router. The shop recessed a ¾-in. channel for LED backlighting. The yellow and black on the sign are vinyl, with the red letters CNC-cut PVC, painted with a high-gloss automotive clear coat. The process took three weeks. "The biggest challenges on this project came in the design stage, as there were so many unique pieces to this puzzle that had to be worked out," says Ian McLellan, Hill House's owner.

RUSTY OR RUSTIC?

➔ Atchley Graphics (Columbus, OH) created this sign for long-standing friend Lakeside Forest in neighboring Westerville, OH. The primary panel and secondary logo were cut by a fiber laser. The panel of Corten steel at the top that's meant to rust was brushed silver, which contrasted a sheet of DiBond cut on Atchley Graphics' Summa F1832. The logo was laser-cut from ½-in.-thick, powder-coated steel. "There were multiple 'cooks in the kitchen,' which led to some unanticipated bottlenecks," says Derek Atchley, the shop's owner. The choice of Corten confused clients initially as well, resulting in some "interesting phone calls."



 **CALL FOR PROJECTS!** Want to see your print or wrap project here? Send a few pics and a brief description to editor@signsofthetimes.com.



Recite along with me: "There once was a young wrap pro who drove in a shoe..."



This Vans sticker bomb under the VW emblem was a little "Easter egg" that the owner of the vehicle wanted to include.

MARK KISSLING ON PRINTS AND WRAPS

IF THE SHOE FITS, WRAP IT

A Florida wrap shop gets its kicks with an employee's affinity for Van's footwear.

Every once in a while you see a wrap that's so unique, so well done, you just *know* the shop was involved way beyond printing a customer file and installing it. That's exactly what happened when an employee of Redline Designs (Tampa, FL) who's a Vans shoe and apparel enthusiast 'to boot,' wanted their VW Golf Sportwagen wrapped to look like a big Vans sneaker.

The design called for the roof to display the shoe top: tongue, eyelets, white laces and insole branded with the Vans logo. The sides feature a wavy stripe textured — by design, not material — to resemble leather or suede and 'stitching' across the front and rear quarter panels. The rocker

panels land the design on solid footing by mimicking the sides of foam-rubber soles.

Redline's art department created all textures, stitching and other elements from scratch using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. The process took about eight hours to design the files and break them down for production. No proofing was necessary — wouldn't you love that? Just the input of the vehicle owner was needed for the color and style of shoe.

Once everything was ready, the shop printed the wrap on General Formulations GF 830 AutoMark Cast with DRIFT Technology using their HP Latex 570. They then applied GF 840 AutoMark Matte Laminate by way of their Graphic

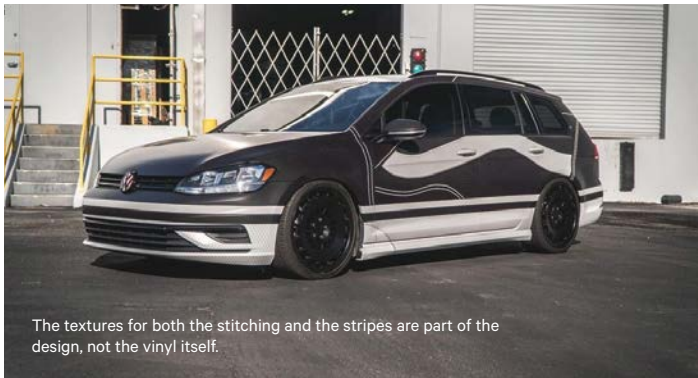


MARK KISSLING is Signs of the Times' Editor-in-Chief. Contact Mark at mark.kissling@smartworkmedia.com.

Finishing Partners Gfp 463TH Laminator.

Another indication this originated within a signshop: The wrap was designed to look good as well as be easy to install, so it required almost no lineup points from panel to panel. Nothing to have to shoe-horn here! Four installers completed the job in an eight-hour day.

The car gets a lot of attention out in public, Redline Design reports. People are always wanting to touch the leather stripe or the suede to feel if it actually has a texture to it. Never stop being creative, the shop says.



The textures for both the stitching and the stripes are part of the design, not the vinyl itself.

MAGGIE HARLOW ON THE BUSINESS OF SIGNS

NEW OFFICE

Who dis?

I recently moved from my sign company office to another newly built-out office in our building. It was exciting, as I had the chance to fully design the new space to meet my needs and desires! But I was immediately daunted by the idea of moving *everything* in my office, including dusting it off, tossing things out and moving into a new desk and office arrangement.

The assessment of my office contents, and relocation of all of them, turned out to be very illuminating. They gave me a chance to really consider the day-to-day work I'm doing, the work I want to be doing and probably most importantly, what I want to *stop* doing day-to-day.

All of that sorting, cleaning and tossing got my mind focused on four really great questions that helped me envision my future role as CEO.

The good news is you don't have to move offices to really assess the "contents" of your actual work — you can walk through the same questions anytime you are ready to examine how you might change your work effort and results!

What should I do more of? Ask yourself what is working well. What do you love to do? What roles are you playing that are working well and moving the needle

in the right direction? How could you design your work to give you more time and energy to focus on what draws you in? Consider calendar redesign, delegation or even hiring fractional help where needed.

What should I do less of? Look for things you do less of, or look for things you seem to always put at the bottom of your 'to do' list every time. For me, writing estimates was something I had to commit to do less of, as it ended up sucking me into the maelstrom of project management when I really was supposed to be leading the entire organization. What things can you let go of and stop doing? Be honest with yourself here. Maybe you do certain things because you don't trust others to do them. Have a deeper conversation with yourself and your team if you don't trust others to do work they really *should* be doing!

What should I stop doing? This is different from doing less of something. Maybe it's an activity like volunteer work. Maybe it's hunkering down in your office and not getting out to see your team. Maybe it's working late or on weekends rather than figuring out effective solutions to your overburdened to-do list. Whatever bad habits or activities you have that you really know you shouldn't do, consider a



MAGGIE HARLOW is the CEO of Signarama Downtown Louisville (Louisville, KY), one of the largest and most prestigious locations for the global sign franchise Signarama. Contact Maggie at maggie@signaramadowntown.com.

hard stop and free yourself.

What should I start doing? There's almost always *something* in my work I've been avoiding or not doing when I should. Things like getting to the gym, doing performance appraisals or long term business planning work — there are things we know we *should* do, that we just don't. Invite yourself to make the effort (maybe again?) to do the things that you know will improve the health of your business or even yourself.

I'm still getting settled in my new office and desk. It's a work in progress, but the feeling of a fresh start, a new way and new results have me motivated to keep working at it!

- ➔What should I do *more* of?
- ➔What should I do *less* of?
- ➔What should I *stop* doing?
- ➔What should I *start* doing?

These questions can help you, your coworkers, your team or even your family develop new ways of thinking, planning and working!

LINE TIME



"ALL I ASK IS A CHANCE TO EXCEED YOUR EXPECTATIONS"

It's a way to remind the customer how hard you'll work for them. Source: **Stephen Satterwhite, Signs Designed of Charlotte, Charlotte, NC**



WOULDA COULDA SHOULD A

Things you wanted to say to frustrating clients, but didn't.

"HERE ARE \$20 AND DIRECTIONS TO MY NEAREST COMPETITOR."

With some customers, I'm tempted to incentivize them to move on away from my company.

Woulda Coulda Shouldas are collected from the Signs of the Times Brain Squad and shared anonymously. You can join the Brain Squad at signsofthetimes.com/brainsquad

ERIC E. LARSEN ON ILLUMINATED SIGNS

PODCASTING CALL

“The Sign Industry Podcast” will debut at the ISA Sign Expo.

Now is just as good a time as ever to make an official announcement. One of my recent columns mentioned the idea of a podcast, which generated some interest from readers and got me to do some serious thinking since my son Jacob and I own a podcast production company, Bourbon Bay Productions. Jacob runs several podcasts out of the studio. People either record a podcast and send it to him for edit and upload, or he runs the boards for people looking to start a podcast but not wanting to invest in all the equipment upfront. He also teaches podcasting for the local Boys and Girls Clubs where the kids get to create their own shows.

So here it is — the official announcement! I will be debuting a podcast on April 10, the first day of the ISA International Sign Expo 2024 in Orlando, FL. The podcast will be called “The Sign Industry

Podcast” because it will be about the people of the sign industry. *Signs of the Times* will be our media sponsor, which will allow us to cover all aspects of the sign industry and get the word out about the show. Our first commercial sponsor is Van Ladder, “The bucket truck that simplifies sign work.” (See what I did there?) We plan on having six episodes ready to roll out in the debut and some special things will be happening at the Sign Expo as well. We will be stationed at the *Signs of the Times* booth (2900) with a full podcast setup recording live.

For each episode, I plan to interview sign people, the oddball kids at the general contract-



ERIC E. LARSEN is the lead designer of the Historic Theatre Marquee Division of Wagner Electric Sign Co. (Elyria, OH). Contact Eric at eric@wagnersign.com.



ing playground. I want to talk about your history in the sign industry, how you got started, what your specialty is and any crazy tricks you can share that make your projects go smoother. If you have equipment that is used in the sign industry, let’s talk about how you came up with the ideas or go over the ins and outs of your product.

The Sign Industry Podcast will be dropped twice a month for starters. I have a day job so first things first. But if we find it to be popular, we will be expanding to three or four drops a month. Each show will be recorded in the evening so as not to disturb our busy sign working days. Most interviews will be by phone to start and later we will be getting into video.

The podcast will be available on signsofthetimes.com as well as all podcasting outlets including Apple, Spotify and others. We are going to see how things move along and then look at expanding our reach with YouTube. As signmaking is one of the world’s oldest professions, the possibilities are endless of what we can talk about with you. I will explain later in episode one of the podcast...

In the meantime, if you have an idea for a podcast subject, or would like to be considered for a podcast interview at the Sign Expo or on a future episode, please reach out to me at ThoseGuysHaveAShow@gmail.com.

Happy listening.

TRUE TALES

RESUMES AS COMIC RELIEF

This was at the bottom of a cover letter: “With me you get a motivated employee who is used economically, process oriented thinking and taking responsibility and self- directed. *Keep in mind i don’t take the first offer - I just look around. I think your company is not the right fit for me. You have not the right to save my CV on your computer, notebook tablet or smartphone or other electronic devices !!!! Kind regards.*” On another: “I have grate attention to detail. I am looking to re-enter the work force after the recovery of my sugary so now I am looking for another job.” I wonder how ‘grate ‘ that ‘sugary’ went...

Source: Dawn Homa, Signarama Brighton, Brighton, CO

signsofthetimes.com



DALE SALAMACHA ON SHOP OPERATIONS

BALANCE \$#!+

Monitor your financial statements every month, people!

I was just thinking, Rick and I have been in this business a looong time. And then realized that June 1, 2024 will mark my 40th year in business! Four decades ago I was 16 and hand-painting signs out of my mom’s garage. Now, clients we still have to this day walk through our new, beautiful, 30,000-sq.-ft. facility packed with equipment, a horde of employees bustling about, and ask, “Did you *ever* think it was going to be this big, Dale?”

“Hell yeah,” I answer. “I just didn’t think it was going to take this damn long!” *Where did all the time go?!*

Yet here we are, all these years later, and you’d think Rick and I would have this whole deal down to a science... But nope, that is not the case. We still learn lessons every single day.

2023 was far from an excep-

tion. It very well could have been our worst year ever. We took on too many large projects, didn’t take care of our best clients, had employees who weren’t pulling their weight, took too long to finish jobs, and had clients flat out refuse to pay us — prompting last month’s column, “Word of 2024: NO!” (see ST, *February 2024, page 41*).

But saying no to loser projects was just the beginning. We had to make drastic, culture-changing decisions to fix our business. Yep, even after all the years of hard-earned experience.

A business’s one and only “job” is to turn a profit. As owners, we are merely stewards to facilitate that goal. When times are difficult and the cash is not flowing in the proper direction, you



Scan this code to watch “What Makes a Successful Company?” Then subscribe to the “Media 1 Wrap This” channel on YouTube for more episodes featuring Dale and Rick.

For months last year, Dale and Rick neglected their P&L and that came back to bite them hard in their back pockets.

your Profit & Loss statement *with* a percentages column! Massively important because percentages are what we all need to focus on. “Income” represents 100% of your loot (duh), then start subtracting... cost of goods sold (COGS), payroll, overhead, etc. I can’t speak for your company, but we traditionally had a 28% material cost: \$10,000 job, we spent \$2,800 on vinyl, paint, aluminum, etc., to build that sign.

Payroll is our highest cost. Shoot for 32% (although we rarely get it under 36%). Those two eat up 60-64%, leaving about 36%. Subtract your rent, insurance, taxes, loans, etc., and whatever is left is your net profit (very simplified).

What we discovered is that 2023 ate up 41% on COGS, and 41% payroll. 82%?! *Way too high! We were dying!*

Too high a COGS means you need to *raise your prices!* You’re too cheap!

Too high a payroll means you have too many employees. Gotta let some go.

We did both at the end of year, and January immediately showed 20% and 35%, respectively. Wrangling in a 30% net profit. *Oh yeah!*

And if this was done throughout 2023, months of anguish and heartache could have been avoided.

#StillLearningLessons



DALE SALAMACHA is the co-owner of Media 1 Wrap This (Sanford, FL). Contact Dale at dale@media1signs.com.

THE CASE OF THE

RELUCTANT RETIREE

A signshop owner perhaps should, but won't, let go the reins.

Tim Smith, owner of Smithy Designs in Johnson City, TN, opened his just-delivered copy of *Signs of the Times*’ 2024 Big Survey and immediately turned to the section on retirement plans. Tim had participated in the survey. “Ha!” he exclaimed out loud as he sat at his desk in his otherwise empty office. “I’m not so different!”

He was referring to the set of questions and responses on the age at which the survey takers planned to retire, their exit strategies, the states of their retirement plans and what they’ll do on their first day of retirement. “See,” he said to no one in particular. “About 14% don’t plan to retire.”

Neither did Tim, though several external forces were exerting pressure on him to do just that. Not least of all, his family, especially his wife often said to him, “I’ve had it up to ‘here’ with your complaining about work!” His daughter also let Tim know he wasn’t spending enough time with his grandchildren — even on weekends — because he was logging 50 hours per week or more at Smithy Designs.

But it’s not as though he was spending his time at the shop designing signs — as he had at the start of his career — or fabricating them or really almost anything productive. Tim fancied himself as a King Henry V-type manager. “I like to walk amongst my troops and inspire them,” he often said.

Regarding that: “Mostly, it’s

a bother,” said Jayla McCreedy, the second in command at Smithy Designs. “Tim thinks he’s pumping people up but most of the time he’s taking them off task.” Over the past few years, some employees even developed a game and system of code words to “hand Tim off” to someone else when having to get something done right away. They even kept score.

Tim had taken his first job in a different sign company 40 years before, and then in 1986, with the publication of Mike Stevens’ landmark text, *Mastering Layout*, he began training on the ‘old tools’ as a sign designer, just as a design revolution was starting to take place. The Stevens classic closed with a chapter on the future of sign design, stating, “Computers will soon be used to design signs...” Tim had scoffed at that.

Having started his own company a quarter century before, now the designers at Smithy were asking how Tim wanted AI to be integrated into their workflow. AI was something that simultaneously annoyed, unnerved and overwhelmed Tim. He had laughed at his father’s hurried retirement from running an auto parts com-

pany at the end of 1999 to avoid the “certain chaos Y2K would bring.” But something about AI was different.

Tim complained to everyone and anyone who would listen that AI would never, ever match the skill and creativity of a human being, but just two weeks before, his lead designer had a laugh showing him two designs for an upcoming project: one hers and one generated by AI. Tim had not been able to discern which was which. Even so, the comparison left Tim unmoved by the role AI might play at Smithy Designs. “Am I the only one who’s seen

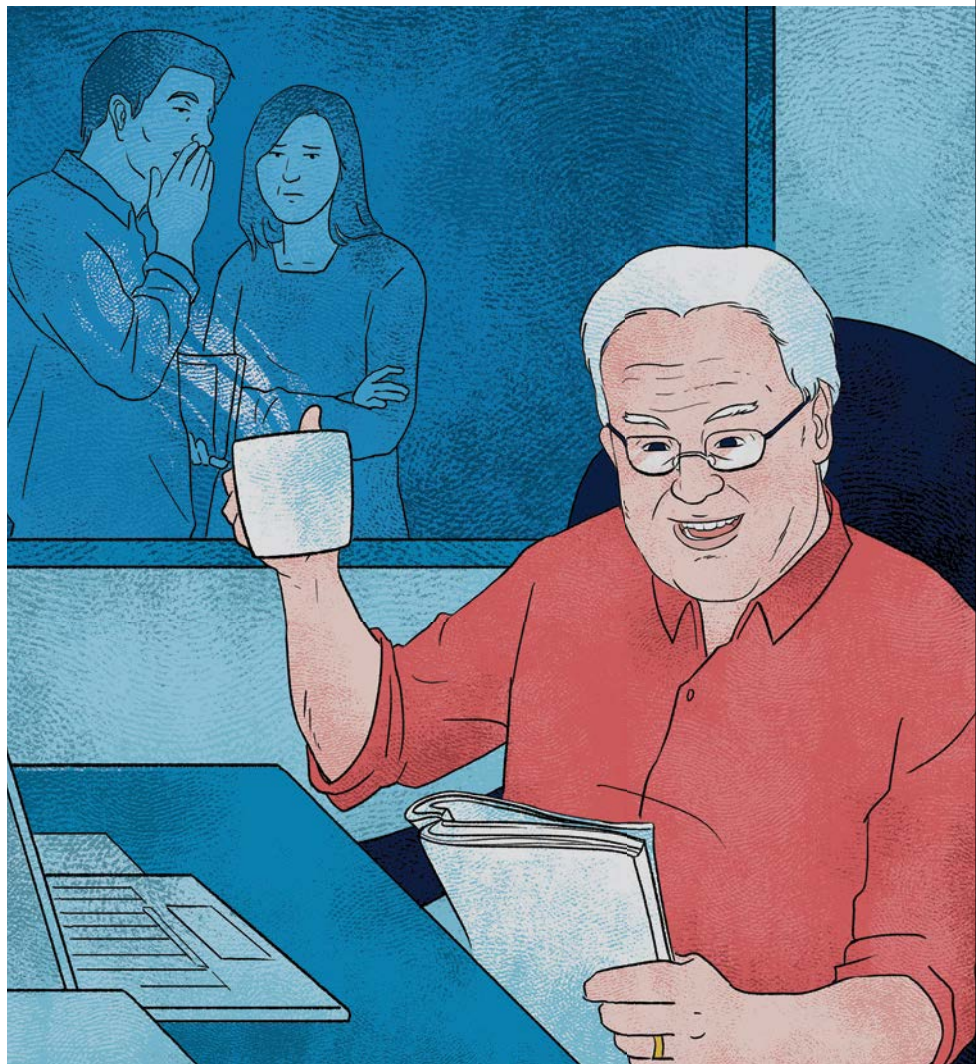
Terminator?” he sometimes asked.

Jayla and half a dozen other employees had spoken many times about buying Tim out, which seemed the best not only for Smithy Designs but for Tim as well. But each time they broached the subject with him, Tim’s reply remained as predictable as a computer-generated response:

“I’m not going anywhere!”

Real Deal scenarios are inspired by true stories, but are changed to sharpen the dilemmas involved and should not be confused with real people or places. Responses are peer-sourced opinions and are not a substitute for professional legal advice. Please contact your attorney if you have any questions about an employee or customer situation in your own business.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KARINA MARGA CUIZON



THE BIG QUESTIONS

Tim owns Smithy Designs and is ‘only’ in his early 60’s, so should he not stay on as long as he wants? **How can Jayla, the other employees and Tim’s wife convince him it’s time to step aside?** What have you done if you’ve encountered a situation similar to this?

SUSAN J. HAUSSMANN-COLLINS

SOUND REPROGRAPHICS INC.
BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WA

The staff should consider buying Tim out or proposing a plan whereby the employees buy the business in increments, that outlines the evolution of responsibilities from Tim to the employee shareholders.

STEVEN LENDE

OKOBOJI GRAPHICS
SPIRIT LAKE, IA

If you have an old boss like Tim at Smithy Designs and are tired of the place, come to me. I have a great sign and design business you can purchase and use AI to advance your career here. I am Steve and ready to step out and retire from Okoboji Graphics.

PATRICK H. CLIFFORD

CLIFFORD SIGNS INC.
KOKOMO, IN

Well, I am 70 years old and I think I may have the same type of signshop operation as Tim has. Being frank, I am troubled to read Tim is missing out with the grandkids’ ‘quality time.’ Those times will never come back. They are a gift to cherish and honor. The memories they will hold will be with them when they are gone. I am fascinated with the kids’ memories. They are truly a sponge wanting input. My favorite age is between 7 and

11 years old. They are glowing for information if you can make it a story. Not a lecture. They love it! My suggestion? Read *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael E. Gerber. He is “addressing a significant need in the small business market: business owned primarily by people with technical skills but few business skills, and no place to go to get meaningful help.” If I were in Tim’s position, sell it and retire. Enjoy the kids while they still have him. They need his values and love.

VITTORIO NERI

ROLAND DG
EMEA
ITALY

This is a tough situation. My father left his business because he was tired of struggling to get reasonable sales margins. After six months, he fell into a sort of depression, but eventually started another business. I believe Tim may follow a similar path, which would create a new problem for his family and the company. Tim is not refusing new resources like AI because he doesn’t understand their potential. He simply feels that he’s not in control since he didn’t build them

himself. One solution could be to assign Tim a specific project that is separate from his current business. Alternatively, he could offer his experience to an association. However, if there is a way to make him aware that he’s damaging his own company by refusing to leave space for others to grow, he may be more receptive to change. Tim is quite sensitive about the company he built from scratch, so speaking with an external consultant may be the best way to approach the issue.

BUDGET SIGNS

Tim’s retirement should be entirely up to him, but he is working too hard. Someone should suggest that Tim might enjoy more “Tim time” if he cut his hours to four or

“**It’s his business to do with whatever he wants. Retire, stay working, either way it has to be Tim’s choosing.**”

ROBERT D. BURKE
BURKE ENTERPRISE
OAKDALE, CT

six a day. He’s earned himself a reward for his years of hard work, and his staff can do without him for a few hours a day. He may find he likes being more part-time, and decide to go full retirement on his own, eventually...

JIM SHAW

SIGNARAMA SUNNYVALE
SUNNYVALE, TX

I’m in my early 60’s and just started my own sign business after a career in the sign industry in other areas. I plan to work another 10 years then turn the business over to my wife who’s 20 years younger. I can’t afford the Henry V model. That said, it’s his business to stay or leave at his discretion, even if he runs it into the ground in the process. Tim’s team should take some time to talk to Tim about

what matters immediately — that he is a distraction in the business. It’s a courageous conversation that needs to be had. Getting the founder of a business to accept they’ll need to step aside is a challenge that should be approached gently and incrementally. As far as technology goes, his team needs to “sell it” rather than “say it.” I wouldn’t hand over my business to managers who didn’t take the initiative to show me how it made sense. Sometimes initiative requires acting and asking for forgiveness rather than permission; just better be right!

KEVIN OBREGÓN

BROWN GRAPHICS INC.
DALLAS

Get the family, grandkids included, to force a four-week-long vacation for Tim. Then let the team pursue AI whole-heartedly. In the interim, open the floodgates to AI and with results in hand, invite Tim back (for a day, hopefully) so he can see how the team has integrated AI to the point where it brings in more jobs, decreases design time, decreases overhead costs and makes workflow more fluid. If it starts to replace humans, call Sarah Jeanette Connor ASAP.

MARK R. ESTES

VISUAL SOLUTIONS
SAN ANTONIO

To me, retirement is primarily a financial question. If he can financially afford to retire, he should seriously consider a buyout from his employees. One of the toughest things to do from my perspective is sell a business. If he has buyers ready to purchase and it is a fair proposition, he should seriously consider it.

Want to comment on Real Deal scenarios, too? Sign up to receive the stories by email each month before they’re published at signsofthetimes.com/research.

DO YOU OR
DON'T YOU

Do you
currently use
AI for anything
related to your
sign business?

YES 49%

ChatGPT for writing letters, responses, sales, marketing posts, etc. We also use AI for some minor design renders. **Shaun Ensign, Legacy Sign Group, Westville, IN**

For ideas and inspiration mostly. **Sara Geiger, Fox Cities Sign, Appleton, WI**

Just about in any way possible. Mascots, photos, design direction, content, backgrounds, marketing the business, and many many more. **Edward Shinn, Ed Shinn Signs, Mt. Morris, MI**

We use AI for some marketing materials,



newsletters and job postings. **Scott Muller, Trademark Visual, Phoenix**

Some clipart stuff... still trying to figure it out as I am old. **Geoff Orlick, Quality Designs Ltd., Campbell River, BC, Canada**

NO 51%

AI has no application in

our business currently. **Vince Cvijanovic, Graphic Components, Greensboro, NC**

I'm not yet but I'm thinking about it and may start a trial subscription to see how it works. **Steve Rowe, Speedpro Affinity Solutions, Sarasota, FL**

Not something we have yet explored, but will be looking for pro-

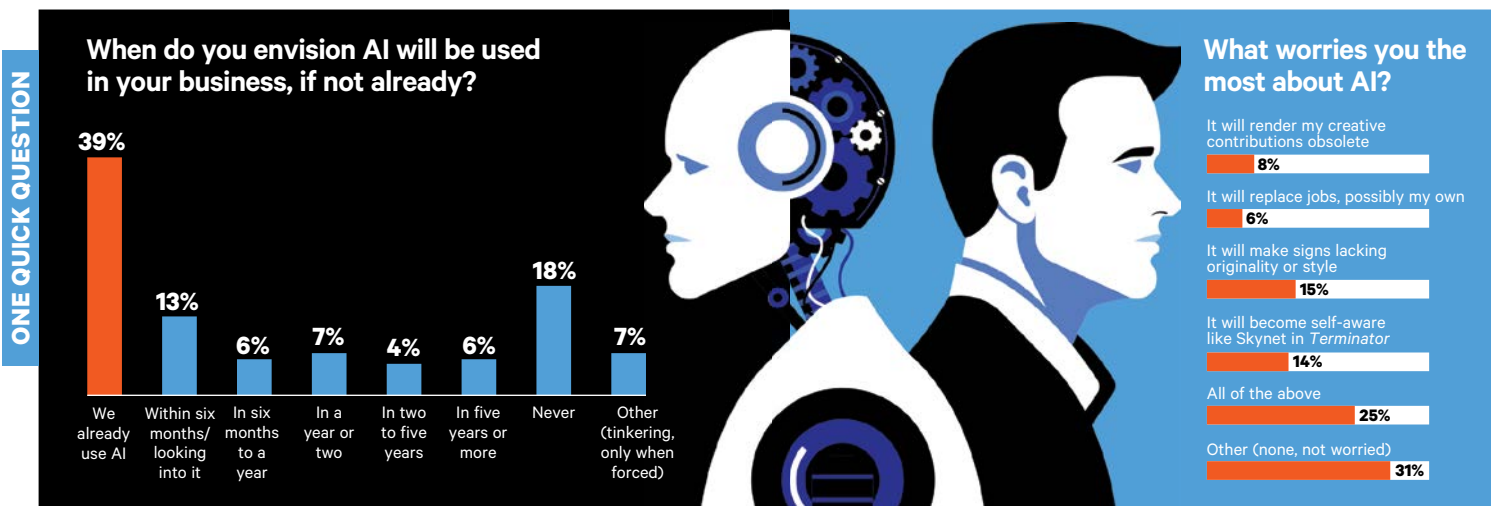
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ductive uses. **Stephen Russ, Ortwein Sign Co., Chattanooga, TN**

Only an idiot would push the proliferation of this incredibly dangerous technology. **Jake Zani, Rule Signs & Graphics, Randolph, VT**

Scares me and no need. **Raychel O'Donoghue, Lexington Signs & Graphics, Burlington, MA**



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We will announce the five recipients in our April issue and online. Also, please join us at the ISA International Sign Expo in Orlando on Thursday, April 11 at 4 p.m. in Booth #2900 for a cocktail reception to honor the winners!



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When I consider ADA signage, there are a lot of variations and pricing has been all over the place. How do we try to avoid this becoming a commodity like so many other products over time?

➔ The keyword lies within the question: variations. Many signs that have become commodities over time are fairly standard in design, size, shape, color and more. Think restroom signs. Sure, custom restroom signs exist that depart from the familiar pictograms in white on a blue background: stylized “Cowboys” and “Cowgirls” signs in a Western-themed restaurant, for example. Are these more expensive for customers? Of course, which is why the cheap commodity versions dominate the market. The thing about ADA signs, however, is that once they accomplish their ADA goals — the necessary information, braille dots, etc. — there’s room

and reason to customize them. ADA signs can complement a design or color theme, reinforce branding, and also just plain be more interesting than commodity versions. Read about five design and production guidelines in “The Basics for Beautiful ADA Signage” by Diane Goforth, owner of Goforth Signs in New York (see ST, October 2020, page 22).

Interested to hear how everyone’s 2023 compared with 2022.

➔ While we didn’t quite hear from *everyone*, a representative cross-section of your peers has already participated in our 2024 Big Survey. And as fortune has it, the Big Survey mailed with the March issue (and was also posted on our site at signsofthetimes.com/big-survey). In the opening section, The Basics, we report on sign companies’ total

sales last year and compare them to 2022. In Earnings and Retirement, we ask about personal income last year and expectations for 2024, and if people feel their earnings are keeping up with the cost of living. Finally, in the State of the Industry section, we examine sales volume and net profit changes from 2022 to 2023 and expected changes from last year to this.

How do other successful signshops find more outsourcing and subcontracting opportunities to grow their businesses?

➔ Savvy sign companies, we like to think, consider the wholesalers who offer outsourcing and subcontracting services *and* also advertise right here in *Signs of the Times*. Check ‘em out! Meanwhile, our Illuminated Signs columnist Eric E. Larsen also took up this

question in “To Wholesale or Not to Wholesale?” (see ST, November 2023, Page 44). You may not find the best companies to work with on the first page of your Internet search, he advises. Similarly, you may find some companies that look a bit “fishy.” Eric likens the experience of finding qualified, reliable outsourcing outfits to buying a used car. You’ve got to check out any subcontractor thoroughly — get behind the wheel and kick the tires, as it were. Find out how long they’ve been in business, projects they’ve contributed to and what their facility and equipment look like. Ask for references. As is often the case in life, the cheapest is rarely the best. Submit fabrication and instructional drawings with a list of materials you expect to use. “Honest wholesale companies will have no problem dealing with your demands and might even work with you on cost,” Eric says.



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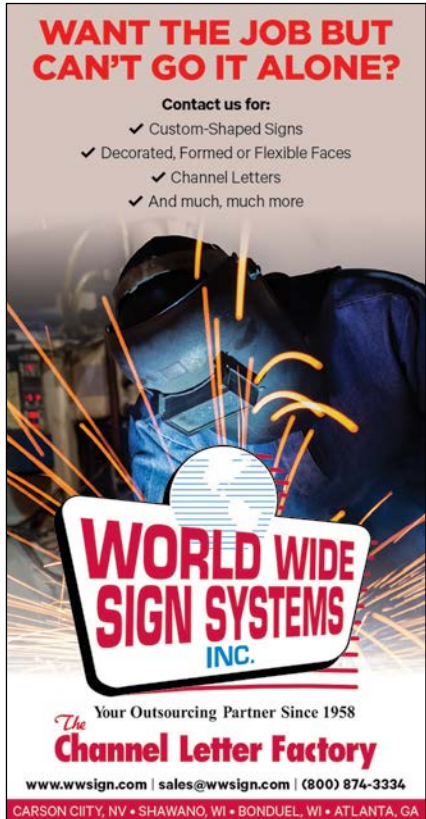
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AS SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

If you're in New Brunswick, NJ, you might run across this PVC- and handcrafted sign. The blue, yellow and white sign was created and installed by Gary Johnson of Great American Sign (Basking Ridge, NJ) for a candy store at a new adventure park, Rock 'N' Air. See more signs like this on Instagram [@greatamericansign](https://www.instagram.com/greatamericansign).

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A LOOK BACK

CLOSER LOOK

This guy, Mr. I. H. Sawyer, wasn't a signmaker. Dude was the advertising manager for Brown Shoe Co. in St. Louis. Please don't ask us to feature your client's portrait on our cover!

IRON MAN

An announcement inside this February 1911 issue reads thus: "Beginning with the March Issue *Signs of the Times* will publish a regular department devoted to Metal Signs. This Metal Sign Number [issue] demonstrates the activity in the Metal Sign field. *Signs of the Times* will keep this department filled with live articles and information concerning metal signs." Live articles? By early radio or carrier pigeon? See this and other issues dating back to 1906 at signsofthetimes.com/archive.



THE BALLAD OF "BUD" ATKINSON

Page 28 of this issue includes a 12-stanza ode to "The Champion Sign Writer," Frank H. "Bud" Atkinson. A sample couplet: "At 'spacing,' Bud seldom erred / But if he did, he never cared."

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