

Q&A: Succeeding as a design-oriented sign shop

What's it take to make it work?

An interview with Dan Antonelli, President and Creative Director, Graphic D-Signs, Inc. and SignShopMarketing.com

When we first featured Dan Antonelli in *SignCraft* in the May/June 1998 issue, he had left the world of advertising design to run his own sign shop, with a focus on vehicle lettering. Before long, he realized that many of the small businesses that came to him needed a logo first, then a sign or truck lettering. His shop began evolving into a design studio that offered signs as well.

Two excellent books, *Logo Design for Small Business Volume 1* and *Volume 2*, both published by *SignCraft*, came out of that. In them, Dan outlines his approach to both creating and marketing logo design for sign shops.

His business has continued to grow and

evolve. Today Graphic D-Signs is a seven-person design agency offering a full array of design services for Web, print and vehicle advertising. He has also helped many sign shops develop their image and position themselves in the changing marketplace. *SignCraft* recently interviewed Dan to get his current perspective on the industry, and what sign shops can do to be more profitable.

SC: What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing sign shops today?

Dan: Aside from increased competition from other sectors, I think the biggest challenge for most sign shops is their image and marketing of their shop. Specifically, I see two key issues here.

■ First is failure of the shop to project a professional representation of their business. As a company whose main mission is to professionally present brands and identities for other businesses, what does it say when their own image is not projected professionally? After decades of the sign industry being seen as people who stick on vinyl letters, the public



Rich Dombey, Rich Designs, Hillsborough, New Jersey, does a lot of designs for contractors like this one—first creating their image and business card, then producing their vehicle graphics and stationery.

doesn't perceive most sign companies as professionals who know a lot about outdoor advertising. Of course, there are many shops who aren't professional, and this does not help. So right off the bat, you're up against a perceived prejudice.

■ Second is failure of sign shops to address that their own image may not accurately communicate who they are as a company or the type of markets they are trying to break into. My own brand identity has gone through several redesigns since our start ten years ago. Each change was done to reflect what I wanted to communicate about who we are.

Shop owners sometimes get into a rut when it comes to their own image and logo design. They get a certain comfort level with it, and probably because they designed the logo themselves, cannot look at it objectively and identify its shortcomings. It's not easy to take a hard look at your own image. But a smart business owner will understand that success, in spite of poor image, is an illogical reason to perpetuate it. Just as you look at a client's logo that's ready for a redesign, take a look at your own brand identity. What does it really say about you? Take your ego out of the equation and try to really look at it from a potential client's perspective.

SC: If a shop owner asked what three things they should consider to help boost their bottom line, what would they be?

Dan: One would be diversification. The key to building a long-term and viable sign shop, in my opinion, lies in diversification—offering related services, such as business cards, letterheads and envelopes. Sign shops lack residual opportunities from existing clients. Signs and even truck lettering can last five to ten years. That's great for clients, but not so much for you. By selling them products with a shorter shelf life such as stationery, you can establish a residual income from existing clients.

Second, hire the right people. I see a lot of shop owners who either hire the wrong people, or won't hire anyone to help them. Every business is unique, and so are the goals for each owner. But if you find yourself working 50 or more hours per week, and spending less and less time working on the things you enjoy, perhaps it's time to consider hiring someone.

A good employee should compliment your own existing talents, or bring into your shop another skill set that you do not have. Even adding an employee to handle some of the

Putting it into practice: Rich Dombey



One of the first shop owners to connect with Dan's approach for sign shops with strong design skills was Rich Dombey, Rich Designs, Hillsborough, New Jersey. He was looking for a way to better market the work he enjoyed best and could produce most profitably. Since 1980, his business has evolved from a general commercial sign shop to a vehicle lettering shop to a design studio that does logos and vehicle advertising.

"We're doing most of what Dan recommends for a design-oriented shop like ours," says Rich. "It's working great. It started with Dan's overhaul of our Web site about three years ago.

"The Web site does generate tire kickers and people with what I call the "eBay® mentality"—they want to click on *Buy It Now* and get it tomorrow. But many others are good prospects, and are already sold—thanks to the site. They saw what we do and that's what they want.

"Virtually every new customer comes from our Web site, or was sent there first. Often they've printed out some of the images to show us what they saw and liked. They're here because they like how we approach design. They sometimes find photos of their competition's vehicles on our site and that helps sell them. We turn about one-third of the inquiries into customers.

"Staff-wise, it's still just Carol Laine and me. This is the business size that works for me. I do a lot of design work, and I still stripe fenders for body shops and do big trailers—including hand lettering and pinstriping.

"About six months ago, we started offering letterheads and envelopes. Customers like it because they get something custom that's consistent with their signs. If they go to a printer they either get something generic or need to provide artwork and deal with the hassles. Now our customers get a powerful image package with one phone call.

"And that's what our work is all about now—creating an image for the customer rather than just lettering a truck. I can do a version of a design for a truck door, a business card, a letterhead or an envelope. The only difference is the format.

"Customers love a design that works. You can't believe the response we get from some of them. I had one stop in the other day. He's a real by-the-numbers guy, and we started off doing his truck and trailer, and business cards. Then we did a nice storefront sign. He said he saw an instant spike in sales. He shook my hand and said, 'I have to thank you—you put me on the map. . . . That was great. I did my job and that feels good.'"

everyday tasks like running the plotter and weeding vinyl may make your shop much more efficient. I've seen many instances where small shop owners have brought people in to handle some of the more routine tasks. They've been more profitable—and happier—since they are able to focus on the more fun and creative tasks.

Again, ego plays a role here. It's easy to believe you can, and should, do everything. It's hard to really examine your skill sets, and identify your own weakness. In my own company, I try to hire people that are better than I am in certain areas. They compliment my own skills, and the end result is a stronger company with more capabilities. At this stage it's not about how great I am, or how great my work is, but rather how great my company's work is. I've assembled a good team. There's no secret formula I used other than looking

for people to further our goal of creating good design for our clients.

Third, develop an aggressive online strategy. I've witnessed firsthand the results of this for sign companies. For many, their Web site becomes the only advertising they need. They get most of their leads and inquiries through a professional site that has been properly optimized for the search engines. Sadly, I also continue to see sites that are either poorly designed, and/or have no search engine

strategy. Sites built entirely in Flash are a classic example. People spend thousands of dollars on them and think they're cool to look at. Unfortunately, Google can't discern how cool your Flash site is or how high it should appear on their search engine. Few people truly understand Web marketing, and how it can affect their bottom line.

Recently, a sign company hired us to design their logo and redesign their Web site. Their current Web site was being promoted through paid clicks (pay-per-click) to the tune of \$3000 per month. They needed pay-per-click because their site was built entirely in Flash. There was little chance it would show up naturally on the search engines at no cost. They were getting some leads, but the number of people clicking off the site and the time spent on the site, strongly suggested that their current site was not effective, and their paid clicks were being wasted.

Our own Web site generates about 25 inquiries per week. Why would I ever need a salesperson? Our site does all the selling we need. The amount of money we spend on paid clicks is zero.

SC: On the flip side, what should a shop owner avoid? What are the most common mistakes?

Dan: I think the biggest error I see is sign makers not knowing when it's time is to reach out to other professionals to help them grow and market their business. Many see it as a failure on their part - or have the mistaken impression that they are experts in all areas related to marketing. I know I've learned that when I don't know something about a subject, it's best to work with an expert who does.

It's interesting to see the turnaround in companies once they decide to be aggressive and market themselves in a professional manner. You see their success and it's very rewarding to have been a part of it. But these companies start out like everyone else in that predicament—afraid to spend money when the outcome is unknown.

Another common pitfall is complacency. Things are moving along, and the owner gets comfortable. The minute you rest on your laurels is exactly when you leave yourself open for others to start taking a piece of your business. It may not happen immediately, but if you're not trying to stay ahead of the curve, in terms of what the market is asking of you, design trends, etc., you stand to lose a foothold on your business.

Here's a case in point. Our newly redesigned site (www.graphicd-signs.com) just launched.



Rich has a strong online presence, with a Web site that's all about selling what he does best and enjoys the most. There's plenty for prospective customers to see, including galleries of his work that are grouped by category.



Rich's own marketing efforts reflect one of the products he offers his clients. He uses four-color stationery and business cards.

It has taken our designer nearly 200 hours to complete it. Assuming that all of that time was billable time at our design rate of \$125 per hour, our site cost this firm roughly \$25,000 to complete.

What was wrong with our old site? Nothing, really. It was still a selling machine, but it did not represent the degree of design that we were currently producing. Instead of being complacent, we chose to redo the site. I've made the decision that nothing is "good enough" in terms of our own image. We sell image, and I can't have anything but our best out there.

SC: What do you see as the primary reasons sign shops are not more profitable?

Dan: I'd say not selling design as a service, and selling signs as a commodity. The whole philosophy of selling signs based on square foot or time-and-materials does not assign a value to the actual design. For shops not interested in design, time-and-materials is the only way to sell their work. But that reinforces the problem inherent in the sign industry, which leaves clients with the perception you sell the same commodity available at five other shops down the road.

Most sign shops are also unable to think outside their particular business model and see opportunities in related services. They are sometimes too scared to admit they don't know how to do these other services, or unmotivated to learn how. They may fear an employee who would know more than them on any topic.

SC: If you still had a conventional sign shop, what would you be looking at or preparing for?

Dan: I'd be diversifying the services I offered, and making a concerted effort to market my shop as a design shop, not a sign shop. I'd be very aggressive about learning about vehicle wraps and how to design them for effective advertising. And I'd be looking for employees who had skill sets to compliment my own. I'd also be looking for ways in which technology could aid my sales and marketing efforts, and could increase production in the shop. •SC



Dan Antonelli owns Graphic D-Signs, Inc. in Washington, New Jersey. He is the author of *Logo Design for Small Business I and II*. His Web site: www.signshopmarketing.com caters to the marketing needs of sign shops. He can be reached at dan@graphicd-signs.com.



Here's another example of one of Rich's clients who wanted to revamp the image of his business. Rich designed a new logo then stationery and signage—including this A-frame sign.



Like many of Rich's contractor clients, J-Lo Painting didn't need a storefront sign like a retailer would. But they did need an effective design they could use consistently on everything from their business card to yard signs to vehicles.