

# Somewhere in the Middle

BY DAVID MCDONALD



*Thoughts and techniques on the sale and production of a "nice" sign.*

OF COURSE it would be nice if we could sell our best work all of the time but this is simply not the case — at least it isn't for us. Like most shops we offer signs ranging from very simple to very elaborate with all the bells and whistles.

We find it best to break it down into three categories: plain, nice and fancy. Because every sign is different it is difficult to expect a client to understand the differences between these groups even if the shop is adorned with all kinds of samples for them to view.

We have made signs that were very simple in design and fabrication yet a customer would argue that it looked like a very high-end piece of work.

By the same token the reverse has happened where we knocked our socks

The amount of labor that will be required to produce the sign and the advertising value for which the sign is intended should reflect the price more than those three vague and non-descriptive words.

In our shop it would probably be best said that we use those words more for our own benefit than in direct dialogue with the customer because of the possible misunderstandings that can happen.

My wife and partner, Robin, can say to me, "This sign needs to be simple," and after working together for 15 years, I am confident that we both visualize the same finished product in our mind's eye.

The sign for this step-by-step article is not plain! Neither is it elaborate or fancy. It's somewhere in the middle.

Robin would have a harder time selling a sign if she told the customer, "Okay, so you have a limited budget. We can make you a sign that's somewhere in the middle."

To a paying customer even a *plain* sign should be referred to as a nice sign. It makes them feel better. If a customer cannot afford the best work they should at least be left with the feeling that they deserve the best.

Even though it's just a description, choosing the appropriate words can make or break the sale — and for that matter, the comfort level and trust of the customer.

## ORGANIZING THE PIECES

After designing the sign it occurred to me that I could cut and stack the ovals and banner as separate pieces and stay within a 4x8 piece of 3/8" Medex. This would keep me way within budget.

It would have a dimensional appearance and allow for some gold leaf as the customer requested. When cutting panels with any kind of shapes I use the Gerber router. Considering this, a router path was created to cut out the shapes and incise the word *Treasure*; the incised areas would reflect the gold nicely.

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Camera-ready art was designed for this customer. This rendering was used for customer approval to start production on the sign.

off on a sign only to find that the customer didn't really appreciate it in the first place.

A plain sign to one person might be a whole lot nicer to another because of their individual perceptions and the signs that they have been surrounded by in their everyday lives.

Frankly, plain, nice and fancy — or whatever words we use — are just words and are sometimes not the best tools to describe what the customer expects for the money they're charged.



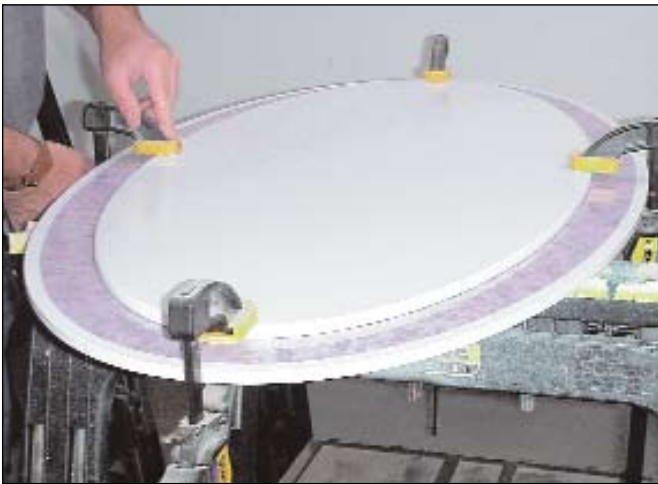
Using the router, all shapes were cut from one 4x8 sheet of 3/8" Medex. The word "Treasures" was V-carved using a 150-degree bit.



To keep the outside border white it was taped and masked. Both sides were done at once so that I could move the sign through the next stages.



A light lavender color was rolled out past the viewable area after which a darker shade was sponged on for a nice textured border.



After applying silicone adhesive, the ovals are clamped in position.



The panels are pre-drilled, countersunk and screwed in the areas where vinyl dots will cover the screw heads.



I can be as messy as I want with the gold size knowing that the incised letters will be the only areas seen. A foam brush was used to make quick work out of this step.



23-karat loose gold was laid and rubbed down with a wad of cotton.

The banner panel was set in place and the contour was traced. This saved me from having to place all of the printed dots that would not be seen.







The lavender dots were printed on the Gerber EDGE and placed on the pre-marked grid. Purple vinyl was cut and applied for the copy.



To add dimension 1/4" plastic spacers were glued on the back under the pre-drilled holes.



The EDGE print is laid into position, which will leave only the black border and letters exposed on the panel.



Through bolting these brackets to this hanging sign will serve as a strong and stable support system.



All dressed up and ready to go! The finished sign.

After cutting the shapes Robin prepared the panels and got them ready for paint (see *Panel Prep Fundamentals*, *Sign Business* July 2000, page 26.)

All three ovals were painted white with 1 Shot lettering enamel to give us a base to work with. The only things that would be visible on the two banner panels after applying the EDGE print were the edges and the gold leaf and because the finished edge was to be black we painted those panels black.

### PAINT IT, SPONGE IT, SCREW IT!

The center panel was taped off on both sides using 3M fine line #218 tape. The outer white border was then masked to keep it white. The appropriate lavender color was mixed with 1 Shot and rolled onto the surface beyond the area that would be seen (about 2").

A slightly darker lavender color was mixed and by using a plastic plate as a palette a texture was applied to the wet paint with a sponge.

Because only the outside area would be seen it was easy to immediately flip the sign while the paint was still wet and do the same procedure to the other side. The tape and masking were removed right away.

The two smaller ovals needed to be affixed to the center oval shape. To accomplish this I used silicone adhesive and screws. Before applying the ovals I first marked them out in a 2" grid so I would know where the dots and secondary copy would be placed.

This was done first to facilitate where I would set the screws to hold the ovals

in place. The idea was to have the dots cover the screws so they would go unnoticed. The panels were carefully centered, clamped and screwed into position.

#### **GOLD, VINYL AND ROUND DOTS**

While the silicone was drying on the ovals I mixed up some 1 Shot quick size and quickly covered the incised lettering on the black banner panels with a thin film of size. The letters would be the only part of the gold that would be viewed; therefore a foam brush was used for speed.

After an hour when the size was ready, I laid some loose gold from the book on to the sized area and swirled the gold into the letters with a soft brush. The gold was then rubbed down with a wad of cotton.

The black panels were placed on the ovals and using a blue Stabilo pencil I traced the silhouette. After tracing the

panels it was clear where I would have to place each dot.

The areas that would be covered by the banner panels would not be seen, so those areas of the dot pattern would be neglected. To create the dots, an area of

**We chose our words and communicated well - this time! To them, "It's a great sign."**

white vinyl was printed on the Gerber EDGE and 1/2" circles were cut from the print. The purple copy and lavender dots were then applied to the ovals.

#### **SPACERS & THE PICTURE**

To give the banner panel more depth it was raised from the oval surface by 1/4". Gluing plastic spacers to the backside of the panel did this.

The panel was placed over the area that was traced earlier and screwed into place. The image of the banner and gift box were set up and printed on the Gerber EDGE and after contour cutting, the word *Treasure* was weeded from the print. Using extreme care Robin and I placed the print into position and rubbed it down with a squeegee.

Hanging brackets were installed to finish the sign. When we delivered this sign the customer was very pleased, to say the least, and it's safe to say that their expectations were met. We chose our words and communicated well — this time! To them, "It's a great sign."

To borrow from the dialogue within our shop, "It's somewhere in the middle."

Until next time, thanks for listening.

*David and Robin McDonald own and operate Avila Sign & Design, a custom sign shop in Grover Beach, Calif. They may be found on the Internet at [www.avilasigndesign.com](http://www.avilasigndesign.com). ©*

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# Digital Printing for Dummies!

BY DAVID MCDONALD



*An honest, no BS assessment of digital printing in our sign shop, from the heart.*

**B**ECAUSE THIS ISSUE of *Sign Business* has a focus toward the digital attributes of the industry, I felt it was a good time to reflect on how adding digital printing has affected our small business.

We have had a Gerber EDGE in our shop for about two years now and it has been a positive experience straight across the board, although there was a time in the beginning when I was ready to throw the thing out the window.

As I worked my way through the learning curve I was able to put my childish tendencies aside and move forward with excitement. Prior to purchasing the printer I had no intentions of implementing digital printing into the

mix of work we do here at Avila Sign & Design. At the time I didn't think we could have that much use for the new technology. After all I used a brush to get the job done!

As far as I was concerned we didn't do that many pictorials on the work we offered and I'd heard that was what the EDGE was good for doing. For small text, heck my plotter cut little letters just fine! Prior to owning a digital printer I had also heard that it could print little decals for clients. I thought, big deal — that wasn't the kind of thing that we would offer from our shop. Wrong!

Wrong to all of the above.

## TWO PLUS TWO

I stand corrected, very corrected. In fact I now offer all kinds of illustrations with my designs such as scenes, pictures and images specific to the design. The digital printer has opened me up to design things that would take too long using a brush to produce and make a profit.

The Internet can be a great help in finding copyright-free clip art so that you don't have to take a lot of time illustrating these objects yourself, especially if the job doesn't warrant this amount of labor hours. As far as decals go, yes we are now offering small as well as larger decals to our clients and they love it.

When I design a logo for a client and generate their work, of course they want some small decals of the logo. Wouldn't you?

It's amazing how much of that market we sell. Small text? Sure I don't weed little letters that much any more because I print them, but I print large letters just as often. Letters with a blend, textures, outlines and all the extras are for the most part printed now. Sure I still get to use a brush but I'm talking about the day-to-day work going in and out of the shop — the *bread and butter*. Because the digital printer has elevated the *bread and butter* to a higher level, it's also elevated the profits.

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This screen capture shows how I printed the windows for the candy store pictured below. The crop tool was used in composer to eliminate the unwanted areas of the logo. The red lines represent the contours to be cut. Both files are shown for illustration purposes only, they were sent to the printer separately (stacked) to save printing time and vinyl.





SINCE 1988

Handmade

**Salt Water Taffy**

• COFFEE & CANDY HOUSE •

*Open Daily*

**Decals were printed and cut for the two-entryway doors, quick and simple!**



The Internet can be a good source for clip-art. I used these images to help design the salt-water taffy logo. Although the original idea starts in my mind's eye, much time is saved by utilizing these resources rather than rendering from scratch.



**I chose to use vinyl lettering on this menu sign. Note the added value created by incorporating the print of the taffy clipart as a leader which ties in to the overall theme.**

I mention *bread and butter* signs with a higher degree or level all in one breath and this sounds like a contradiction doesn't it?

Absolutely not!

Bread and butter work might imply to some that it is quick turnaround and therefore cheap. This is not the case for us — not any more. When I design a sign and incorporate an illustration or add outlines, shadows and dimensional tricks, I charge the same as before digital printing but the turnaround time and labor invested is much less.

The value to the buyer is what is important here. The time saved is so profound that the work could be easily disrespected and therefore cheapened by charging the customer a lot less.

Any sign maker who would behave in this way is not using good business sense and is acting irresponsibly toward the industry in which they belong. I don't believe the average customer is worried about how much time I spend on a project as much as being concerned with the results of the finished product.

Because I can turn it out so quickly, what used to be our bread and butter work (cutting quickie vinyl signs) has been superseded with digital printing. This equals more profits in my pocket and as a whole I can report that the customer is happier as well.

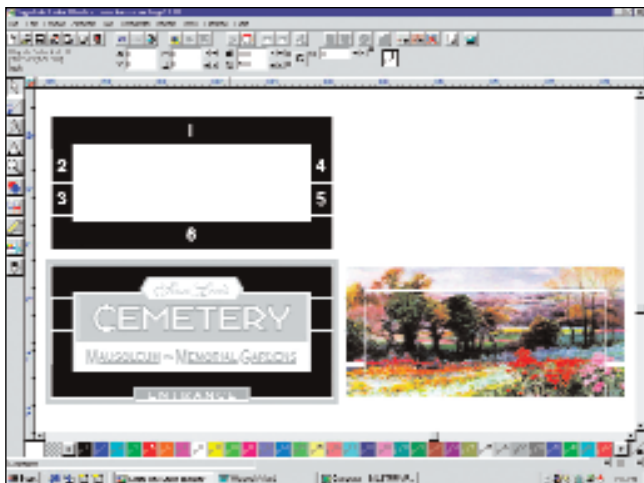
Just last week we did a project that involved camera-ready artwork, six 4' x 8' panels, five 4' x 4' panels, two 3' x 4' panels and 15 18" x 24" bootleg corrugated plastic signs. The client requested a monarch butterfly to be incorporated in the design for this new housing development so I decided to keep it simple and have the butterfly landing or resting on some informal type. The image of the butterfly was found on the Internet and after working with the type in SignLab, everything was sent to Adobe Photoshop to be rendered in color.

My wife Robin met with the client on site and they decided on the amount of signs, based on location, that would be needed. The only catch was that the signs had to be up by the end of the week!

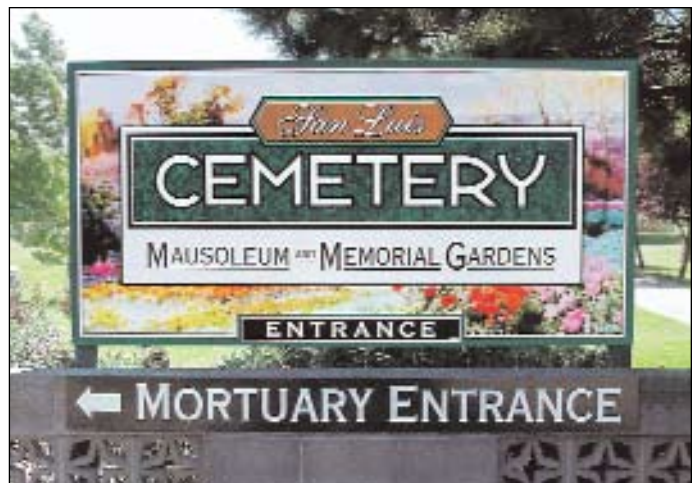
Yes — although the funding was late on this project, the principles or powers

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I incorporated a garden scene into the design for the San Luis Cemetery. Rather than print the whole image, I elected to use the crop tool and set up a series of tiles with cut lines. There were five of these signs and I saved a lot of vinyl setting up in this fashion.



The "San Luis" panel, entrance panel and the garden scene were all EDGE printed. The cemetery panel is painted, hand textured and outlined. "Mausoleum and Memorial Gardens" copy is high performance vinyl.



This design rendered in Photoshop would be a real pain in the kazoo to paint by hand! I could do it — but I don't have to anymore.



A large number of panel signs of various sizes were required to be installed in a short amount of time. The digital printer helped us to complete this job in three working days — translating into a very high profit.



that he would be perusing the site that weekend and it was mandatory that the signs be up!

As you can imagine, prior to us utilizing digital printing in house it would have been literally impossible for us or any two-man (or two-person) shop to accomplish that amount of work in that amount of time.

To make a long story short, we would have had to pass on this highly profitable contract. It was the end of the day on Monday when Robin returned with this information. The panels were cut Tuesday and while Robin prepped and painted them I was busy setting up the prints. The vinyl and prints were applied on Wednesday and Thursday and a subcontractor installed the job on Friday.

Because the client wanted the artwork reproduced on the panels in their full integrity and color we were able to charge a premium price. That project was close to \$15,000, which needless to say, would not have been received without the digital printer.

### YOU BIG DUMMY!

It's funny when I think back on how I acquired my printer two years ago. We were hosting a Letterhead event in 1999, which Denco Sales was attending. After the dust settled and we got back to work, my plotter decided to die. I made a phone call to Denco sales to see about getting a new plotter. The plotter that I wanted could only be purchased on the used market because it had recently been replaced with a new model. The salesman, Steve Bible, worked hard to find one, but every model that he found came as a package which included the Gerber EDGE. As he reported on each phone call, I kept telling him that we were not interested in a printer, just the plotter.

What a dummy I was then!

Needless to say, he found the right deal, and yes it came with the EDGE and I have never been happier!

Until next time, thanks for listening.

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