

Vehicle lettering can do a great job of promoting a company's image

Truck lettering: An advertising and promotional bargain

by Tom McLtrot

The project usually begins when someone brings by one of the 42 million trucks on the road today to see about "putting a sign on it". (That's right - there are nearly 42 million trucks and vans registered in the 50 states.) They come in every

possible size, shape, and color - each with an owner with different needs, wants, and budget.

In most shops, the truck lettering classification covers most anything on wheels - cars, pickup trucks, vans, tractor-trailer cabs, and even

trailers. Most of these pose similar design and production challenges. But since they are used for a variety of purposes, the approach to graphics for vehicles ranges from basic identification to powerful advertising, with considerable territory in between.

The purpose of the graphics, of course, is determined by the client. An engineering firm may only want to identify its vehicles in the field, since they get most of their work through a bidding process. A home remodeling company, whose trucks are frequently parked at neighborhood job sites where other homeowners may be planning to remodel, may want to capitalize on the advertising potential of the right vehicle graphics.

Even when the purpose of the graphics has been determined, there are a variety of possible approaches. Does the engineering firm want basic computer-cut vinyl lettering or must a logo be matched? Is the home remodeling company thinking about a bold but simple design, or a more complex job that may involve painting some special panels or even repainting the entire truck?

One thing is certain - the sign shop must somehow provide the right graphics for the client's needs and wants, fit it within the budget, and do it at a profit. It's a type of work that some shops specialize in (or would like to), and others handle only occasionally.

As for the actual production of such projects, the sign shop has quite a few options, including hand lettering, vinyl graphics, screen printing, cut-and-roll (or spray), and combinations of these. Vinyl graphics are typically computer-cut, but can be hand-cut also. Screen printing is popular for fleet work, especially when a complex logo is involved. Cut-and-roll is favored for large lettering, especially on light-on-dark or corrugated surfaces. For cut-and-roll, a computer-cut mask can be used, or a mask can be applied and hand-cut. For hand-cutting, either paper masking or liquid masking (which is sprayed or rolled on) can be used. (See *SignCraft* Jan/Feb 1986 and Nov/Dec 1986.)

Design approach

If the job was sold as a basic lettering project, the task is straightforward: you provide clean, appro-



Doug Downey, Sun Signs, Gadshill, Ont.



Craig Bjerke, Bjerke Sign Service, Alexandria, MN



Artisan Signs and Designs, Brampton, Ont.



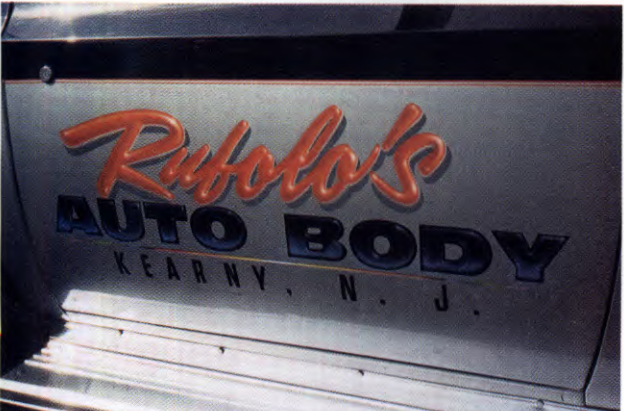
Brian Scholfield, Lines & Letters, Bridgewater, NJ



Rich Dombey, Somerville, NJ



Carousel Signs & Designs, Richmond, VA



Jules Braet, Mr. J Signs, Lyndhurst, NJ



Steve Bell, Graphic Detail, Piscataway, NJ



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fairly tall usable space below the window on the cargo door. By using it for more than just incidental copy, the layout will work effectively on the other side. This sometimes requires a little more thought than staying behind the window, but still uses a single pattern for both sides.

Other times you may be able to use another element – say a graphic or pictorial – on the driver's side, but leave it off the other side. Plan the lettering so that it looks appropriate on the passenger side, then add the graphic to increase its effectiveness on the driver's side. Again, you can use one pattern for the lettering.

The approach is determined by the customer's budget and the situation. If you're working without patterns, or if you're using computer-generated patterns or lettering, doing a second layout for the passenger side may be no problem.

Beyond these differences, there may be as many approaches to the design of a certain vehicle lettering project as there are sign artists. SignCraft's *Design/Cost Workshop*, such as the one in the March/April 1988 issue on lettering mini-vans, bears testimony to this. Usually, there are scores of possible and effective layouts for a certain situation.

The photos that accompany this article show an assortment of vehicle lettering samples, each for a different set of client needs, wants, and budget. As always, the photos show only the finished product, not the story behind the signs – the nature of the situation and the flexibility (or inflexibility) of the client. Photos always rely on your ability as a sign artist to perceive the job in that light.

Working with the client

There you stand beside the client's new pickup truck as he or she explains that the doors need to be done. The space is three feet wide and just over two feet tall, slightly convex, and broken by a few horizontal crimps (and maybe even a molding). Two mirror braces cut across the upper left corner, complimented by a door handle in the upper right. Your job is to put a sign on it, so the owner can drive it past thousands of distracted, disinterested motorists at

50 miles an hour. You may start to wonder if you are a sign artist or a magician.

In the best scenario, the customer will explain what he wants to achieve with the sign and give some idea of budget. Unfortunately, sometimes the owner's idea is to have these distracted, disinterested motorists read his business name, in Old English Text, all capitals, examine the unique logo he has designed, then chuckle at his clever motto. Thus inspired, our motorist friends will immediately copy down his address and phone number, which the owner is going to have you "put on there REAL BIG".

Most clients fall somewhere in between. Usually they are a bit unsure of what they want the signs to do or how to do it best. This gives you the opportunity to help them find out what they want to achieve with the lettering. This usually only takes a few moments, and often helps them gain confidence in you.

For most small businesses, truck lettering just serves as advertising rather than just identification. For many of these businesses, their vehicles and Yellow Pages ad may be their only forms of regular advertising. Big companies who take advantage of the advertising value a vehicle can deliver – like Federal Express, for example – are not doing so because they have money to spare. It works, it's inexpensive compared to other advertising, and they know it.

Next, or even at the same time, you can try to get an idea of what their budget is for the job. If they seem reluctant to say, it helps to explain that the cost of lettering such a vehicle may run from a certain figure to ten times that, depending on the approach. It's far more efficient for you to give them an idea of what type of job you can provide for what they plan to spend than to guess what type of job they want.

Once you have an idea of budget, you can go on to show a few photos of the type of work that can be done for that figure, or you may choose to do a quick thumbnail sketch. In either case, don't overlook the opportunity to "sell up". Offer an improved design at a little more, cost-wise. Budgets are usually flexible,



Steve Mysse, Sign and Design, Billings, MT



Vince Balistreri, Vince Balistreri Signs, Orlando, FL



Bert Quimby, Bert Graphix, Pompton Lakes, NJ



Ernie Giordano, Jordano Sign Company, Royal Oak, MI



Dave Knoll, Bender Signs, Elkhart, IN



John Minogue, Springfield, OH



John Cox, Thorough-Graphic Signs, Lexington, KY



John Cox, Thorough-Graphic Signs, Lexington, KY

and this is your chance to sell a better job. It helps to remind the customer of the benefits of effective vehicle lettering at this point.

If necessary, negotiate the copy to avoid clutter in the layout. Telephone numbers are seldom needed. Consider the plight of viewers (and sign artists!) in an area like Larry Hansen's. The telephone area code changes two blocks from his shop, Lettermen/Signage, in Mokena, Illinois. Many local businesses have two phone numbers – one in each area code. That's 20 numerals per side just for the phone numbers.

When pricing vehicle lettering – especially when it is designed to provide advertising or promote a business's image – remember to price it accordingly. You're selling more than just paint or vinyl, and your time to apply it. You are selling your ability to turn that time and those materials into effective long-term advertising. In estimating the time involved, don't overlook the time spent dealing with the customer and working out the design.

A value for everyone

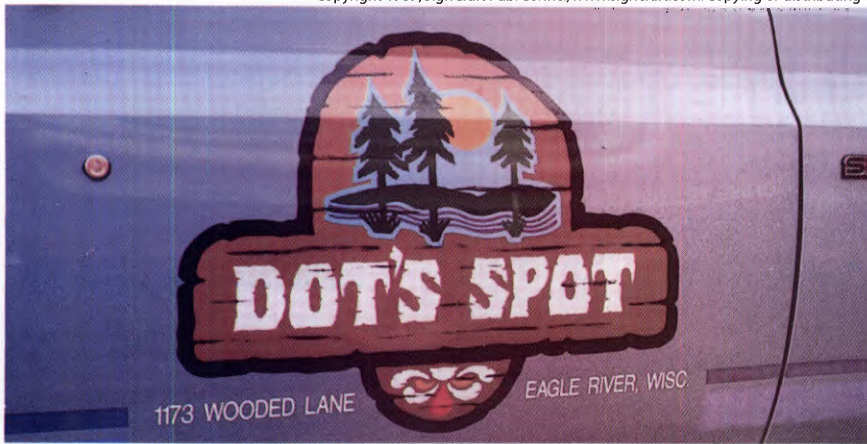
Properly handled, vehicle lettering can do a great job of promoting a company's image and delivering genuine advertising at a very low cost. Effective vehicle lettering can also provide the same advertising and promotion for the sign shop that created it. As always, the public notices good graphics and businesses often seek out the shop based on the work they have seen.

To see and hear how different sign artists handle vehicle lettering, SignCraft contacted a few. In the following pages we share their comments, along with photos of a variety of vehicle lettering samples.

Special thanks to the many sign artists, manufacturers, and suppliers whose information, ideas, and questions helped in putting this article together.

SignCraft's first "Truck Issue" was the Winter 1981 issue. The sign artists whose work and comments were included in that magazine are among those that follow.

TRUCKS!



Tom Kelly
The Signery
Orland Park, IL

Truck lettering is often very price-oriented. The customer may have been shopping for a price already, and sometimes is confused about what he's going to get for his money. I've also noticed that there are more logos to deal with over the past few years than there used to be. It seems more customers are coming in with a logo that they want to incorporate into their vehicle lettering.

Another fact is that in many cases you have to match the layout used on the rest of someone's fleet on a new vehicle – even if it's not a very good layout. Some customers just don't like to be told that their truck doesn't look as well as it could. They feel that it's "their look" and "all my customers know me by the way my truck looks now".

I really enjoy coming up with a nice layout for someone's truck, though. It's best when the customer is someone who can recognize the value of good-looking trucks. That's when you can really help them get their message across.



TRUCKS!

Monte Rogers

Vince Rogers Signs
Elkhart, Indiana

We don't do many of the masterpieces. Most of our truck lettering is pretty basic. The fact that the lettering is an important part of the customer's advertising is always brought up. The old lines about it being the cheapest form of advertising, and being a "mobile billboard" are as true as ever. If you break down the cost of the truck lettering over the life of the truck, the annual cost is low.

About five years ago, we lettered three 40-foot Fruehauf trailers – in three-foot-tall letters with an eight-inch stroke. On their first trip, some of the letters actually blew off. You could touch those letters and slide them around.

We contacted a Fruehauf dealer and explained the problem. As it turned out, Fruehauf had changed metal suppliers, and the new supplier had used a paint that contained some type of silicone. The dealer had received a technical bulletin, and he told us to wash it down with toluol, then use an additive, butyl celusolve. This was obtained locally from a paint and chemical supplier. It solved the problem, but we had to repaint all three. I don't know of a similar situation recently. You really never know what you're going to run into.



TRUCKS!

David Showalter

Signs by David
Bryan, Ohio

For me, truck lettering is just a part of my work. I'm not a volume truck letterer by any means.

After prepping, but before I put a pattern on, I always touch a little paint to the cleaned area to see if everything is okay. If not, I clean and prep the surface again.

One thing I've been doing lately is pictorials or graphics on vinyl, then applying them to the truck after the lettering is done, like the house on the Rhodes van. This way, you can do the graphic on the bench at your convenience. You don't need the truck as long, either, since all you have to do is letter it, adhere the vinyl, and it's done.

When the customer doesn't want to turn loose of his truck while it's being lettered, you can always do the lettering on a sheet of vinyl, then adhere it in a half hour when the truck is available.



Terry Wells

Mariner Signs
Santa Cruz, California

I wish there was some secret that I could share on doing effective trucks, but it's about the same as doing most any layout. I usually treat my truck doors like a showcard. I leave quite a bit of border around the lettering, just like you do on a card. Before I even start the layout, I'll plan on a four- or five-inch margin on all sides.

Since there is so much computer-cut lettering being used in my area, I've been putting more emphasis on hand lettering with more flair. I don't use the projector, and I don't even tape my top and bottom lines anymore. I want to avoid any stiffness in my lettering, so I'm sort of going to the extreme other end. I want it to look hand lettered. I one-stroke my lettering pretty quickly and, as I end a stroke, I flick the brush to create a very fine point in the corner. This effect has to be very delicate because if it's exaggerated, it looks awful. Done right, it enhances the letter.



TRUCKS!

Pat Smith

*PS Lettering & Design
Anaheim, California*

For trucks, the "canvas" is different, but basics of design are the same. I get a fair amount of truck lettering, from the very straightforward to what I'd call creative work.

I've also painted several big trailers over the past year, including a 27-footer and a 40-footer for one company. Rick Flores helped me on this job, and it was his suggestion to use cut-and-roll technique. There were several reasons - the size, the corrugated surface, light lettering on a dark surface, and the fact that we were doing them on location out on a construction site. We rolled on two coats of a liquid mask - we used Stazon MaskOff - then cut and peeled the lettering and rolled on the paint, working on the shady side. Each trailer took 16 man-hours to complete, including cleanup.

Steve Parochniak

*Mountain Signworks
Fairfield, Virginia*

I'd like to do more trucks than I'm doing right now. I've been hung up on some other big projects lately, though. Design-wise, I've been trying to use bold lettering and good colors on the trucks I've done.

I always try to get rid of copy that isn't important. I usually tell my clients that the person who sees the truck wants to know who they are and what they do - that's about it. With just that to work with, I have more room to make the copy bolder and more readable. I think the first task is getting the public to see the sign, then to read it. Sometimes customers think you're trying to get rid of copy to make it easier for yourself. You have to explain that you're trying to make the sign more effective for them.

By the way, a great source of new design ideas is the coupon section that's included in a lot of Sunday newspapers. They are meant to be bold and attractive, so they provide a lot of great letter styles and color combinations.



TRUCKS!



Phil Vecchio

Sam Vecchio Signs
Rockford, Illinois

You have to base your design on what the customer has to spend. We just did a truck this morning for a young fellow who is going into the painting business. He didn't have a lot to spend, so I lettered his name in a script and the rest of the copy in computer-cut vinyl.

I have other customers who spend a little more on their trucks. Now, they would prefer to spend less, I'm sure, but they get a good response from customers on the truck, so they stay with it.

Once you arrive at a budget, you can decide on a layout. I go along with "the simpler the better" philosophy. The signs are easier to read. I don't outline lettering or add much gingerbread very often, outside of a rule or a panel here or there.

I'll lay out a truck using somewhat the same rules as a show card - punch up the main copy, minimize the secondary copy, leave plenty of margin, and maybe add a panel or some stripes. Keep it simple and legible.

We have a graphic computer and use it a lot. By starting with the same rough pattern or thumbnail sketch as I would make for hand lettering, the vinyl copy can look quite natural.

I like the "one-coat coverage", the durability, and the quality appearance of vinyl. With the number of typestyles and variety of colors available, plus the latest digitizing and scanning equipment, I think the designer will have more options, not less.



Ken Millar

*Quill, Hair & Ferrule
Columbia, South Carolina*

Some people hear the customer describing the copy, then look at the size or type of truck and decide that the job is worth so many dollars. That's not really the best approach. You have to start with what the customer will spend.

The customer usually says "I want to..." followed immediately by "What's it going to cost me?" I think before they can ask that, you should try to qualify what they want to spend. If the person only wants to spend x dollars, and that amount is within reason, that's all you give them. You take that, and give them what they paid for.

Say you feel that you need to get \$500 for a very effective job on a certain truck. But if that customer only wants to spend \$300, you should take that and deliver a job of that value. I'm not saying you do the \$500 job for \$300. No - you offer a job that you can do profitably, and still stay within his budget.

Three hundred dollars may seem like a lot for this customer, even though he may have spent \$10,000 for the truck - and thinks nothing of spending \$200 for some fancy trim or special lights. For him, the lettering is strictly for identification. A lot of the truck lettering that gets done is basic, meat-and-potatoes stuff.

So you do a little pencil rough or show him a picture of what he might get for \$300. You can also do a quick rough of what he might get for 50 percent more, and motivate him to spend a little extra. This is a good idea, because that nicer job isn't going to take 50 percent more time - and you're going to be better compensated for your ability to convert a basic job to one that's more effective.

If you want to do a lot of truck lettering, you can't oversell - you have to meet on the middle ground. Find out what the customer's budget is, and sell the job while he is there. If he goes home to "think about it" and to decide if he wants to spend more than he planned for the job, there's a good chance he won't come around again.

Be wary of the guy who says he

has three trucks and wants a good price on doing them all. Explain that you'll charge full price for the first two, and give him the total discount on the third one. If you're giving 10

percent off to someone with a fleet of ten trucks, explain that there will be no charge for the last one.



TRUCKS!



Bob Behounek
Van Bruggen Signs
Orland Park, Illinois

We paint a lot of trucks here at the shop - 20 or so in a week isn't unusual. Of course, some are repeat projects as when a customer adds or replaces a vehicle, but some are new designs.



Since trucks are in motion when most viewers see them, the copy must be minimized for quick readability. Driving down the highway, we have two to four seconds to read a billboard. The same holds true as we watch a truck speed by. Since we cannot read and recall everything we see, I feel it is my responsibility to create some interest and a lasting impression.

Not every client is receptive to the idea of minimum copy or interested in justifying the value of vehicle lettering. Helping the customer see the results and benefits over a given time span can help.



It's amazing how truck lettering can captivate a large number of viewers sitting at boring stop lights. When you consider what an advertising opportunity this is, it's a shame not to take advantage of it. And, that's just one type of exposure truck lettering can provide.



TRUCKS!

Gary Anderson
Bloomington Design
Bloomington, Indiana

I don't do a lot of trucks, and it may just be the result of my approach to them. First of all, I want to do them nicely. I also want to have them for a certain period of time, so that I can work them in, and I want to do them during the week. Around here, the normal premise is that you have to do them on Sunday, or in the evening, and you can only have them for one day. And, the customer only has a hundred dollars to spend. Those are three limitations I just can't allow.

With the rest of my sign work, I've turned people around on a lot of things, like spending a little more for a better job, or giving us adequate time to do a quality job. But I haven't been able to do this with trucks for some reason. Even though they may have spent \$15,000 for the van, they're reluctant to spend \$400 for a decent lettering job. No one has ever spent \$1000 for us to letter their van - but I regularly do other signs that cost that or more. So, we do six or eight trucks a year, but they are nice jobs. Most are done after we have done a logo design and a main sign for the customer, and they want us to put their logo on the truck.

As far as selling and designing, a truck is just another sign. We take the same approach as we do to any other sign. One thing about trucks is that they are often oddly shaped. On some, like mini-vans, the usable space on one side is three times larger than the other. That makes it a little harder. Plus, people usually don't want phone numbers, addresses, and other ex-

traneous copy on a storefront sign - but they want it on their truck.

I usually talk them out of the excess copy and the phone number. I know that I have never copied down a phone number from a truck, and I doubt most other people do. I may note the name of a business from their truck, but I get their number out of the phone book.

Of course, there are times when phone numbers are appropriate. We

often try to handle these so they don't interfere with the sign itself - like pulling a phone number up to the door and away from the lettering on a van. A carpet cleaner, for example, may be parked in front of a home all day, and a neighbor might just copy down a phone number. So we might put that and the address on the door, and save the whole side of the van to play up their logo and their business.



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TRUCKS!



Pat Finley
Finley Sign Co.
Aurora, Illinois

Truck lettering is one of the mainstays of my work. I average 12 to 18 trucks per month, though sometimes I may top 20. I enjoy them. I feel that I have a little more freedom on a truck than most other commercial signs. There's a lot of variety in it, too – from basic lettering on the doors of a pickup to vans that are even lettered on the roof because they're used in the city (*Chicago*) and seen from above.



A lot of my approach to trucks comes from what I've done on race cars. If it's appropriate, I like to use a bold letter on the important copy – something with a thick stroke. And I like to include some nice "whippy" scripts sometimes, too. I don't use many outlines or shadows.



The fellow I learned from didn't believe in using the edges of the truck door as a boundary. I always thought that was sort of unique. Nowadays, you have a little space on the fender in front of the door, and usually some more on the cab behind the door. You don't have to limit yourself just to the door, and many times I use the whole area.



I prep the surface by first washing it down with water, followed by a cleaning with R-M 900 Wax and Grease Remover. After that, I go over the area to be lettered with a gray Scotch-Brite pad, which is a very fine abrasive. I seldom have any adhesion problems as long as the customer lets the paint dry before washing or abusing it.

Now you can't use this on a show car with a deep, glossy finish, or even on one when the owner is very fussy, because it does make very fine scratches in the surface. In these cases, I wash thoroughly with R-M 900. In either case, I also give them Bob Arrigo's handout on proper care that ran in the March/April 1985 issue of SignCraft.