

Profile

Leon Yoder

Shipshewana, Indiana

My dad had a welding repair shop, and my older brother started restoring antique carriages. I helped with that as I was growing up. At about 13, I started pinstripping carriages.

Rocky Weaver was a local sign painter and my mentor. He didn't stripe, but got me started with the right brushes and paint. I didn't have much to learn from, but we did have a few old books with vintage roman scrolls and examples of carriages, which became my inspiration.

I went on to work in a few other areas, but kept pinstripping. Then in my late 20s, I decided to start my own business. I knew that most pinstrippers also did signs, so I talked to Rocky

about it. He was in the process of retiring, so I began helping him to learn to make signs.

I wanted to learn how to do vinyl signs and again Rocky got me started. I bought a computer, FlexiSign and the 24-in. Graphtec plotter that's still running great after 18 years. A few months later I went into the sign business full time. We've been busy ever since.

Rocky helped me learn the fundamentals of layout. He was really strong on readability. He showed me that if you can't read something on a sign, it distracts the reader and hurts the whole sign.

I started getting *SignCraft*, and bought Mike Stevens *Mastering Layout*. That had a big influence on my layouts. I also bought both of Gary Anderson's books *Signs, Graphics and Other Neat Stuff* and *More Signs, Graphics and Other Neat Stuff*, which were very inspiring. Those were all really significant in my work.

Later I bought some glass smalts from the

Shop name:

Legendary Designs

Shop size: 5,500 sq. ft.

Staff: 5

Age: 45

Graphics equipment:

3 Graphtec plotters
Fletcher substrate cutter
FlexiSign Pro

Online:

www.legendarydesigns.com



Gold-leafed dimensional high density urethane [HDU] letters on overlaid plywood panel painted with One Shot bulletin enamel [www.1shot.com]

late Rick Glawson. I had the opportunity to work on some reproduction popcorn wagons and wanted to try glue chipping glass, and Rick helped me learn that. He was a remarkable guy who would really take time to help you learn.

Rick later invited me to his annual meet, the California Conclave. My business was still young and I didn't think I had the time or money to go out to it. I told him I'd come out the next year. Rick died a few months later, and I learned a valuable lesson: Never say "I'll do that next year...."

I've met so many awesome people in this business. Through Rick, I met David Butler [Butler Design, Syracuse, Indiana]. I had always admired David's work, but had never met him—even though he wasn't too far from me.

I've always had the desire to create something beautiful—more than just letters on a board. The beautiful work on those old carriages, and the sign work of people like Gary Anderson really fueled that passion. I never had the opportunity to get proficient at hand lettering, but I have done a lot of hand carving.

The owner of Blue Gate Theater had the first gold leaf signs in the area. He was already sold on the appeal of gold leaf carved signs. I love the look of gold leaf on letters and did more gold leaf signs for him. Once they saw how beautiful those signs were, other local businesses started stepping up their game.

Working with customers I think it's important to help the customer find a solution that works



Gold-leafed Gemini letters [www.signletters.com] on aluminum composite material painted with OneShot bulletin enamel



Lettering is 22k gold leaf sign vinyl on painted aluminum composite material



A systems approach to the sign business

Early in the business, I had an outstanding employee who didn't require much management from me. As the business grew and I no longer had that employee, I discovered I wasn't as good a businessman as I thought. I got in touch with Action Coach and learned some concepts about business.

But I believed my business was different, though, and thought those concepts wouldn't work because my business was about me. I had to do the designs and I had to do the work. But another consultant really challenged me and got me thinking.

I began to realize that with the right training, others could do what I needed done with the right training. I've learned to break my business down into systems and develop them. I hired a new designer and other staff, and they're doing great. It's grown the business and has also given me more freedom.

I started with pricing. I developed a pricing system based on *SignCraft's Sign Pricing Guide*. I spent some long hours on that, but it lets my employees price work accurately without me having to do all the estimating. We price our work on three levels of complexity.

We've used this for several years and keep tweaking it. It really works well. It was the first system I got set up, and that really moved me towards working on my business more.

The next system was managing the jobs. You have to be able to look up past jobs when you have to repeat one. I tried a lot of different things, but I've settled on using Evernote. It's a Cloud-based program that comes in a free and pro version.

I literally run my business in Evernote. I create a note for each job and put in the job number. Everything else related to that job goes into Evernote tagged with that job number. Contact information, screen shots of drawings—anything drawn or written gets photographed and goes in there. I print a preview of the invoice, take a screen shot and that goes to Evernote. I've got six years of history that I or any staff member can access instantly, even from my phone.

I use the paid version because it does OCR [Optical Character Recognition], which means if I scan a handwritten note, it converts that into searchable text. They also give you a lot of extra data storage, too.

We also create a written work order for each job. It's very detailed and it goes through the shop with the job. Everything the staff needs to produce the job is on there.

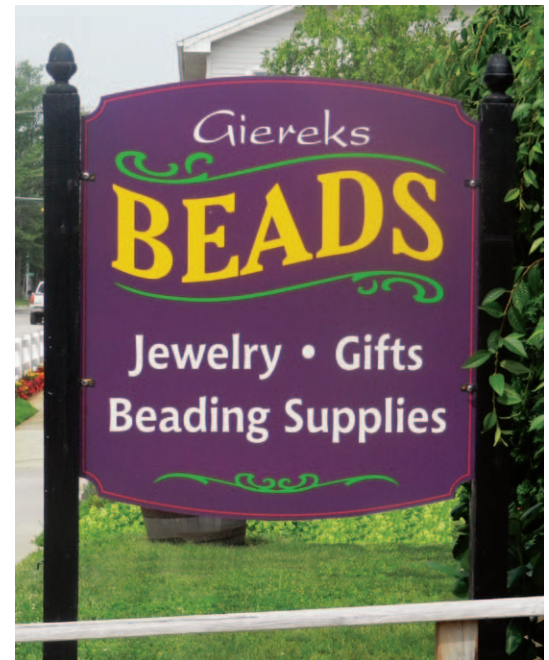
The third system is training. If you have employees, you need the right people and you have to train them in your approach. We're working on creating a better training program and a performance-based earnings approach.

We're breaking our training down to skill sets in levels. So we have a skill like Basic Sign Production or Office Skills, level 1 and level 2. We define what needs covered in each one, then the employee knows what they have to master to get paid at that level.

We're developing sales scripts that help staff determine not just what the customer thinks they want, but what they need to achieve their goal. We have narrowed it down to the three Ps of the sign: purpose, placement, permanence.

Asking those questions helps us learn what the customer really needs and expects. Sometimes what they think they want isn't what they really need—or what is even possible. Then we can educate them to what we can do.

Our hope is to make this third system work to continue to grow the business. It's a work-in-progress. I'll let you know if this works next spring. —Leon



Vinyl lettering on painted aluminum composite material



Paint and vinyl on aluminum composite material, hung on custom-made bracket

for them. Not everyone can afford a gold leaf sign, but they can still usually have a beautiful sign. I've had people come back and say they went with something cheaper but it didn't

work, and now they want me to do their sign. That's gratifying.

I love working with new businesses. Growing up in business, I have enough of an



Gold-leafed HDU letters and logo on painted aluminum composite material



Printed vinyl on aluminum composite material



Vinyl film on painted overlaid plywood



Gold-leafed HDU letters on painted aluminum composite material



Gold-leafed Gemini and HDU letters on painted aluminum composite material, with custom steel posts and changeable copy panel

entrepreneurial spirit that I get excited about my client's business. I feel like I have a part in it. I love that—developing their image, helping their business grow and talking about their marketing. That led to my starting another company, Black Anvil Media, which does marketing, including web design, for small businesses.

You can help people get enthused about their sign and their business. They don't buy a sign every day. They don't really know what to expect when they come to you for a sign. They're impressed that you take that interest in their business.

As sign people, our expectations are usually different from the customer's expectations. We have to explain our process to the client. It gets them on the same page. You have to stay in control of the design process. If not, it can become an ordeal—revision after revision and there's no end in sight. We have a sheet that explains our design process to the customer so that they know what to expect from us.

Your people are your business Our future is to increase our focus on the staff. They create the work. When you have employees in your business, your company really comes down to your people.

Harold Partridge, the small business coach for the Zig Ziglar Organization says there's only one reason your business exists: to help



Gold leaf and vinyl on sandblasted HDU sign with black glass smalts background

you achieve your life goals. I think that's true. And if you have staff, you want to help them achieve their life goals as they help you achieve yours. We've started implementing that.

I'm excited about this aspect of the business. I want to help our staff achieve their goals as we achieve ours. I get as much excitement now out of seeing my staff design and produce a beautiful sign as when I did it myself.

We have a mission statement that guides our business. It says: "To provide effective signs and graphics that build a legendary identity of our clients. Our success is defined by how well we accomplish the goals of our clients and how we affect our community. We exist to help every employee in achieving their life goals and ultimately to further God's kingdom."

We keep learning new ways to make that statement a reality. And it really is about continuing to learn. For me, these past 18 years have been quite a learning experience. And it's been fun. **SC**

—from an interview with Tom McIltrout



22k gold leaf sign vinyl on painted aluminum composite material on a custom steel structure



All hardwoods



Gold-leafed, hammered-face HDU letters and vinyl film on painted aluminum composite material with a painted fade



Gold-leafed Gemini letters and cut vinyl ornaments on painted aluminum composite material