

A picture is worth 1000 words: That's 995 too many for a vehicle

Simplicity is always more effective for branding a small business

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I distinctly remember reading about some of the great sign painters who graced the pages of *SignCraft* back in late 80's. They were masters of layout and effective vehicle design. One term that was used back then was "Supergraphics."

I don't know who coined the term, but it was an effective technique for using the entire vehicle as a canvas. I was struck by the simplicity of the designs, the brand integration and the clear, concise, brand messaging that

these master ad men put out there.

Perhaps they were so good at vehicle design because many of them were also billboard painters. An effective billboard designer had a greater understanding of the importance of creating simple-to-understand messaging. They knew the average viewing time is short—and that the average viewing distance is great. So they designed their billboard layouts around these key elements: distance legibility, brand integration and limited copy.





Fast forward twenty-five years or so and we see the sign world inundated with digital printers and this new idea called a vehicle wrap. Many business owners had never seen this technology. A new line of business was created for sign shops. Instead of brushes and a solid understanding of layout, all a shop needed was the cash to buy a printer and some Photoshop fills and effects, and they were ready to go. Or so they thought.

And the business owners loved the wraps. Or so they thought, as well. Sadly, what you often see on vehicles today does relatively little for that small business, because their vehicle advertising does not do what they thought it would.

Ironically, most small business would be better served by not wrapping their vehicles at all. What the old timers used to do with paint and simple pictorials—Supergraphics—would deliver more advertising value.

I understand the goal of many wrap designers: to design something that stands out. But it's usually at the expense of poorly integrating the brand and the brand message. So that colorful collage of Photoshop fills and carbon texture is really eye-catching—but I don't know who the advertising is for. Or worse yet, I don't even know what the business does.

The glamour of putting a large photo on a vehicle is so passé today, that it's reverted to merely just fitting again and thus it's simply blending in. As I look over the various sign message boards and drive around observing what is happening out there, it frankly makes me sad. Sad that the designers don't know any better, and even more sadder still for the businesses that have just wasted their money—and don't even know it.

Just because he can add a bevel, or photo, or some diamond plate, a designer must still ask why those elements need to be there in the first place. I wonder sometimes if the designer's goal is to impress other designers



Design tips for effective vehicle graphics

- Try not to use photos as a crutch to carry a weak message. Instead reinforce branding as a means to build name recognition.
- Make sure Photoshop is not necessary to make the layout work. Nearly 95% of all our vehicle designs are vector based, because we don't rely on glows, bevels or heavy outlines to make the message legible. Try to design like you don't have a digital printer and see what you come up.
- Convert to grayscale. If you convert your layout to grayscale and there is no focal point to the message, and no priority to the copy, you can be sure that full color will not help or improve that.
- Keep the copy sparse. This isn't a yellow page ad. One or two simple points should be made, at most. The client's website is the most important call to action—not their phone number. People are far more likely to remember a web address. And no more than one phone number should be used.
- Create a memorable, easy-to-digest brand integration. If the branding is weak to begin with, then that needs to be first addressed before you consider a wrap or other type of lettering. This is critical. Adding a photo to mix won't increase brand recognition. To the contrary, it will actually decrease it. Ask yourself: Why are we advertising this photo if there is no direct tie-in to the brand of the small business?



with all the “cool effects” they can add to a design. But they should really be trying to impress the customer’s target audience instead.

What’s impressive for a small business owner is when their customers say how they’ve seen their trucks “all over town.” They think the business has a fleet of them because they are always noticing them. Those are the companies that have built brand equity in themselves by having vehicle advertising that resonates with the consumer. It’s memorable and it continually reinforces their brand. That’s powerful and worth every penny.

I can’t fault sign companies for trying to sell wraps after all their investments in machinery. But I do question whether they sometimes do their clients an injustice by advocating this as a design solution when there are ways to advertise a small business with more impact.

I’m sure there are times and places where

a wrap is needed or even advisable. But you’re not going to convince me that a plumber needs a wrap, ever. Not at the expense of building their brand.

The irony is that most of our clients are trying to look bigger, more reputable and professional. And most of the wraps I see for small business do the exact opposite—they make them look smaller, like their trying too hard, or that they’re unprofessional. •SC



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