

Who Really Owns the Artwork?

There's a lot of thought and planning that must go into a well-designed advertising sign. The most important element is the enticement that triggers the impulse to buy in potential customers. This is usually accomplished with a carefully designed pictorial showing the products one wishes to sell.

We've all heard the statement "a picture is worth 1,000 words," and truer words have never been spoken. Images sell. Great artwork sells. But who really owns the artwork?

If the customer furnishes you with a "ready-to-use" piece of artwork—and I mean an image file that's immediately useable in the form supplied by the customer—then the customer retains the right to that individual piece of artwork, in that size and shape.

On the other hand, if a customer gives you a torn off corner of a sheet of letterhead showing their full-color logo, and you have to rebuild the design from the ground up, the customer still owns the original version of the artwork. What the customer doesn't own is the recreation of the artwork to a form that's useable in the creation of their signs and graphics.

Let's say we have a customer who owns a chain of garden centers. She furnishes a very small logo image that we'll have to scan, enlarge (and perhaps convert to an Adobe Illustrator file), re-size to create a suitable image for a sign, process for digital printing, and then print, cut, and laminate to a finished sign product.

Did we spend a considerable amount of time, effort, and money to recreate the image to a useable form for sign production? Absolutely. Does that client have the right to the free use of that art for other advertising media? Yes. For a fee, they can use the artwork you recreated for other projects.

But wait! Why should they be expected to pay a fee for the artwork image they supplied to us in the beginning of the project?

For starters, the artwork supplied was useless in its original state. Only by our talent, labor, and time did the artwork become useable for a new sign product. The time, labor, and talent is a billable event for that given piece of artwork.

Now what if the client wants numerous copies of the same artwork created in various sizes and in various formats for production by other sign, printing, and

graphics companies? Are we supposed to give away our original files?

Even though the customer may believe they've already paid us to convert the artwork for sign production, our efforts were concentrated on creating the art files for a given size and a given product.

File sizes are important for different sized sign products and the viewing distance from which the sign will be read. If you're dealing with .bmp, jpeg, and .psd files, increasing the file size will degrade the image. Only true vector images can be resized to large shapes and retain their design integrity.

Art files created for your sign projects are your property. They don't have to be given away to your customers. Of course, you may sell your artwork in various formats, so the customer can buy other graphics items that aren't sign-related.

Giving any customer your full-size vector art files is like giving them the opportunity to cheat you out of several hundreds of dollars of design and creative time!

Rather than agreeing to a practice that could ultimately hurt you and your business, why not ask the customer

why they want copies of your art files in the first place? The common response is that they need them in order to create fliers and postcards. Your response should be to inform them that your sign company can create fliers and postcards too, which will save them time and money and prevent them from having to go to another vendor.

If they still insist on obtaining copies of your art files, inform the customer that you can create their artwork in various sizes, formats, and colors. Then offer your fee schedule, and let them decide.

Even though they may have supplied you with the original pieces of artwork, you're **not** required to give it back to them in any enhanced or perfected form. Doing so will only hurt your profitability. Educate and inform the customer about the perils of switching sign companies just to save a few dollars here and there.

If you have any track record at all with a client that's now "shopping your prices", why not ask them the real reason for a sudden interest in your full size art files? I'd like to know, and I'm sure you would too. There's a 100 percent chance that it'll be price-related.

—Mark Roberts

