

Two markets that can expand your shop's profits

Laser engraving and digital garment printing are a perfect fit for a sign shop

There are several related markets that sign shop owners can reach into to broaden their base and deliver new products. We're always looking for shops that have done this successfully, and we've lined up two for you to consider here: laser engraving and digital garment printing.

Each of these is an easy add-on sale for many sign customers. It's also easy to start offering each of these. If you don't want to set up to do them in-house, you can easily outsource both laser engraving and short-run garment printing while you test the waters. If you can see the market is there, though, it may

be time to add the equipment to your shop and start selling the work.

The laser also gives you a production cutting tool that can be used to cut graphics from acrylic sheet and other substrates. That opens up new markets for interior signage and other graphics that require precision cutting. It fits well with CNC signage, too.

The market for short run t-shirt and other types of garment printing has always been there, but it's not been practical to produce this work—especially in anything other than one color. Digital garment printing not only makes it possible, but it puts a sign shop in the ideal position to provide shirts for staff and promotional use.

That makes a great additional product to offer a customer who otherwise might have only bought a sign or had a truck lettered. Often you don't see such a customer again until they buy their next truck. Garment printing can lead to ongoing sales—keeping customers coming back for more.

Both of these products give you a way to increase your sales to your existing customer base, which is always easier than finding new customers. At the same time, they can also bring you customers looking for engraving or t-shirts who are potential sign customers as well.

Here's what three shop owners have to say about how these products work with their businesses. If you've found a related market that fits well with your sign business, we'd like to hear from you. Drop us a line at signcraft@signcraft.com.

Source list

Laser engraving/cutting equipment

Epilog Laser: www.epiloglaser.com

Gravograph: www.gravograph.com

Jamieson Laser: www.jamiesonlaser.com

Kern Laser Systems: www.kernlasers.com

Laser Pro: www.laserprona.com

Trotec Laser: www.troteclaser.com

Universal Laser Systems: www.ulsinc.com

Vision Engravers: www.visionengravers.com

Xenotech: www.xenotech.com

Digital garment printing equipment

Anajet: www.anajet.com

Brother: www.brother-usa.com/garmentprinters

Epson: www.proimaging.epson.com

We try to make all source lists as complete as possible, but errors or omissions sometimes occur. If so, please let us know so that we can pass the updated information along.

Steve Shepherd

Custom Signs and Engraving
Richmond, Virginia

Lasers are very practical tools in a sign shop. Sure, you can engrave photos in granite with them, but that's not what's going to be really profitable for you. We cut a lot of acrylic on our Trotec laser [www.troteclaser.com]. We also use them for ADA signs, interior signage and custom work.

A laser lets you speed production of a lot of everyday sign projects. It lets you do things in-house that you would otherwise have to order and wait for. You can cut them today and install the sign tomorrow. Turnaround times like that give you a real advantage when you're selling the job.

Having the potential to do this incredibly accurate cutting and engraving also opens you up to a whole new market, too. We just recently built an assembly fixture for a client, using our laser. Once we learned what they were doing, we told them we could also cut the fabric for the product they were assembling. And this was for an existing client who knew we had the laser.

You'd be surprised how many of your existing clients that you can reach and get other work from when you have a laser. It lets us expand our business by doing more work for our current clients. When you letter a van for an electrical contractor you let them know you can do the engraved tags for the commercial electrical panels they install.

The world moves really fast today, and being able to turn work around quickly gives you an edge over the competition. When everyone else has told the client it will take three weeks to do their sign and you say you'll do it in 10 days, they like that.



Besides engraving, lasers are impressive cutting tools, which is handy for sign work. It leaves acrylic with a smooth, finished edge as you can see here.

John Ralph Quail Run Signs Hamilton, Virginia

The laser is pretty astounding. I tell customers it's a high-tech eraser. You can erase a little of the material, a lot of the material or erase all the way through the material. You can erase in a very controlled fashion.

For example, you can paint the back of clear acrylic then burn the paint back off so the lettering and graphics appear. If you want, you can paint another color on the graphics and have this beautiful subsurface sign.

We've had our Epilog laser [www.epiloglaser.com] for about four years. I didn't have a big plan for it—I just thought it might be a useful tool. Now, if it disappeared, though, I would have to buy one immediately.

Having laser engraving capability is another way to keep your customers. That's why I bought a 54-in. Roland Soljet printer [www.rolanddga.com] a few years ago. I don't want to tell a customer, "No, we don't print banners...." They may go somewhere else and never come back. We don't really push banners, but since we have the printer, we can do them all day long if they need them.

You can do some pretty cool stuff in no time with the laser. It enables us to do raised letters very fast. I can start a sign on the router, then start the letters on the laser. Everything gets primed and painted the same day with Matthews Paint [www.matthewspaint.com], and the next day you assemble this great-looking 3D sign.

Plastics come off the laser with a beautiful polished edge. There's no prep to do—it's ready to install or to paint. So sanding, no priming, and acrylic is really durable.

You can do all the graphics for a reception area sign in a day—not that you'd want to tell the customer you could that. But it really speeds production. And a lot of these signs just couldn't be done practically without the laser.

We do some plaques and the occasional award, but they're generally neater than what people can get from a plaque shop. We can combine other technologies like CNC and the paint work.

Another thing that's been great for us is creating these customers who keep coming back to you for more work. Golf courses have been awesome for us in this way. We've done bag tags, locker tags, plaques, engraved leather and wood—all sorts of neat stuff. They just keep bringing us projects. It's terrific.



We've done thousands of these bag tags. We paint the sheet of acrylic with Matthews Paint, which absolutely does not come off of plastic, then we cut them out as bag tags as they need them.



You can see that we cut all the components for this rather complex door sign on the laser from a single piece of acrylic—even the standoffs.



Here we cut out acrylic letters and finished them with Matthews Paint's metallic silver. Then I recessed the background panel so the letters dropped in and painted it black. Then it went on the wood panel, which is always a nice look.

Andy Buchholz

Eastern Shore Signs
Cape Charles, Virginia

I started out doing vinyl and CNC 3D signs, then added a Roland 54-inch printer. I work alone and am in a small market, so I was looking for a way to broaden things a bit. I knew there was a market for short-run t-shirts with my sign customers, but I didn't want to get into screen printing. At the time, my shop space was limited and I just didn't have room.

I had heard of digital garment printers, so I did some research and bought the Anajet [www.anajet.com]. It's given me the ability to do smaller runs profitably. It lets you take a design for their sign and repurpose it into shirts. The Anajet printer literally doubled my business overnight. I wasn't expecting that.

There are a lot of small businesses—the same ones you do signs for—who benefit from having t-shirts. All you have to do is offer it to them, because they may already be thinking that they want them.

And if client goes elsewhere for their shirts, that company may offer signs, too, and you lose the client. A lot of t-shirt shops and printers are moving into signs. It's the trend. If a client can get everything they need from you under one roof, they won't go elsewhere.

Sometimes they just want a nice shirt with a pocket print. I've done as many as 200 on the Anajet. It only costs you 30 cents or so to print it. They get a great-looking shirt for their staff and it keeps their brand in front of people.

I've printed canvas bags and other things, too. If you use your imagination a bit, you'll come up with more opportunities. When some of the orders started getting larger and I had moved to a larger shop, I set up for one-color screen printing.

The t-shirt work often leads you to some interesting sign projects, too. All this work is tied together. Right now, I'm waiting on a new Roland VersaUV LEF-20 printer, because I'm getting into promotional products next. It's a UV printer that will print all sorts of promotional items.

There's a learning curve with any new equipment, and also in learning how to market it. But it can really pay off. You have more products to offer your customers besides signs and that can really help—especially if you're in a smaller market.

For a sign shop that's looking for another revenue stream, a digital garment printer is a no-brainer. It doesn't take much space, and you don't have to do big runs to make it pay off like you do with screen printing. **SC**



This project started with an order for a sign and resulted in a t-shirt order as well.

