

Splash of Color, Stroke of the Brush

There isn't much of anything in the way of outdoor advertising that grabs your attention quite like a big fluorescent window splash. Merchants who use them almost always find they increase their business. Ask any large auto dealer how effective this kind of sign is. Splashes also make real money for the sign painter who has a little imagination. If you have an eye for layout, some basic hand lettering skills, and you are willing to spend some time practicing, you will find these aren't that hard to do.

An eye catching layout carries far more weight for this kind of work, than picture-perfect lettering. Large color panels and shapes draw attention



to the message the client wants to get across. Loose, casual lettering is more appropriate than formal text type fonts. Convex lettering gives them a bit of class, while outlines and shades make them jump out at you.

I'm not going to try to make this a lesson in layout. There are plenty of good books on that subject, and, with just a little practice, you'll begin to find your own imagination taking over. This is not a lesson in lettering. Remember: Just make the main message big, bold,

Window splashes prove it: all that



Jon applies the basecoat.



glitters can become a sign builder's gold.

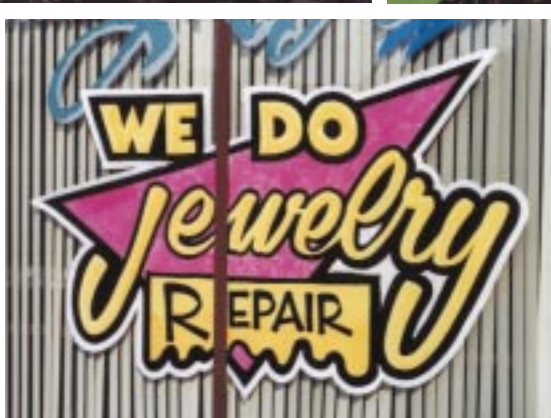
and easy to read. After you have done a few of these, you will begin to see what works and what doesn't, and hopefully you will develop your own unique style. I'm going to try to cover the nuts and bolts of this type of work, in this article. If I do my job correctly, you should learn how to do this kind of work, from this article, and maybe pass on a few hints and tricks.

The sign painter who did our project for this article is Jon Peterman. Jon, along with his wife, Tammy, and their five children, owns and operates JP Graphics in Grants Pass, Oregon. Jon also works as an artist and mural painter



and has built a reputation, in our area, for his elaborate and original airbrushed tee-shirts. Like many little shops, Jon doesn't have a vinyl plotter, and he depends on his hand lettering skills. Window splashes fit into this kind of operation very well. You can see examples of Jon's work on his web page at <http://www.jpgraphics.cjb.net>, or contact him at signjon@cpros.com.

Our project is a small window that Jon does on a monthly basis. Fluorescent window paint has a rather short life, and you need to be sure your customer understands that the sign you build for him has a short life span; it is a temporary sign. A window that gets a lot of sunlight fades in just a few weeks. Your customers need to look at window splashes as something that they have to maintain and that changes on a regular basis, much like they would a newspaper ad. Old, faded fluorescent window lettering is not a sign of prosperity. On the other hand a nice bright window splash is an excellent way to advertise seasonal promotions, sales, new model



releases, or any other special event.

If at all possible, get your customer to take care of cleaning the window. A simple trick that seems to work well: tell them that you are sure they can get someone to clean their windows for much less than a skilled sign painter's wages. These are quick, knockout, temporary signs and don't require the squeaky clean surface that a permanently lettered sign would require.

Jon seldom uses any kind of pattern, unless a logo is involved. He does the layout directly onto the glass with a lumber crayon. These crayons are inexpensive and readily available at any builder's supply shop. They come in a variety of

colors. Water soluble marking pencils don't work well, for this line of drawing, because rolling over the layout with water base paint obliterates the markings.

In the next step, apply a white base coat to everything that gets color. Without a white base coat, the fluorescent effect doesn't show up. Jon uses an acrylic blockout white house primer

paint. Regular acrylic house paint will work, but it takes too long to dry. Rollers seem to be the best tool to apply the base coat, but you may want to use a flat lettering brush for areas too small to block out with a roller. The little three-inch short nap disposable rollers seem to work about the best. They'll do eight or ten jobs before they finally give up. Jon's favorite brushes are Langnickle Nocturna flats and Golden Takalon quills. There are other brushes that will work, but you'll be much happier with the results you get from regular lettering brushes, rather than artist-type brushes. Good lettering brushes are a bit on the expensive side, but they hold a

lot more paint, retain their shape much better, and are a lot easier to use.

Once the white base coat dries, you can start applying the florescent colors. Don't rush this part of the process. If the primer base coat hasn't dried, the top coat will cause the primer to lift and make a mess. Drying time takes longer, sometimes, in the cold weather. Jon uses Radiant Florescent Temptra fluorescent paint. It is available through sign-supply houses. Jon uses supplies from Product Sign Supply, in San Jose, California, at (800-540-9199). These guys are the headquarters for the Northern California Letterheads, and they are very knowledgeable about sign materials. There are some other fluorescent window paints on the market, but some of them have a problem with the pigment settling and hardening in the container, if it is stored for very long.

Radiant fluorescent only comes in gallon cans and sells for a little under thirty-five dollars per gallon. It is available in nine colors, but with yellow, pink and blue, you can mix a wide range of other colors. Regular acrylic lettering colors can also be used for tinting. You will find that if you add too much white to a color, to lighten it up, it will lose its fluorescent characteristic. It is not waterproof, so if you need to do a job located where it is going to get wet, you need to top coat the temptra with a clear coat, also made by Radiant. The clear coat does cut down on the brightness of the color however.

The material is extremely thick as it comes out of the can, so you may want to thin it a little with water. Don't over-thin it however. If you thin it too much, the colors prematurely fade. With a little experimenting, you can find the right consistency for brushing and rolling. Add a few drops of liquid dish soap in the mix to make the paint flow a little better and help prevent the edges from crawling. Adding a little white glue, such as Elmer's Glue, makes it somewhat waterproof.

Jon uses plastic storage trays as roller pans. Nothing wrong with that. Unless you are going to store them for a long period of time, you don't have to clean them after every use. Just snap the plastic lid on the tray and put it away until the next job.

Don't be afraid to use big, bright color panels in your layout. When you roller or brush in the florescent panels or letters,

Felony Sign Snapping

It was the summer of 1966 when I began my criminal career. I was just out of the army with nothing tying me down in any way. It would still be another three years before man walked on the moon, and neither I, nor anybody I knew, had ever seen a computer.

The idea of traveling a little struck my fancy, so I loaded my sign kit and the rest of my worldly possessions into the back of my 1958 Ford pickup, and, with sixty-three dollars in my pocket, I headed East from San Diego to see the country. I had just become a snapper, the term used to describe an itinerant sign painter who traveled around snapping up jobs. About 120 miles down the road, I found my first job lettering a ninety-foot water tank. Another fifty miles across the border into Arizona, I found a couple of days' work repainting the signs at a truck stop, as well as lettering a couple of trucks that were passing through.

And so it went, on through New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and up through the Midwest, until I found a virtual gold mine in a little town in Indiana. I'll let the name remain anonymous to protect the innocent. There wasn't a sign shop within one hundred miles and almost every sign in town was faded or peeling. I struck a deal with an auto court (another term for a motel) to trade sign work for a couple weeks lodging and the use of an old cow shed for a shop. I was immediately buried in work.

On about my third day in town, I was lettering the front window of a furniture store. I had noticed the town constable looking at my work the day before, and today he came up and introduced himself. "Hi," he said. "I'm Constable Oberdorf, but you can call me Obie."

"Pleased to meet you, Obie. I think."

"I been admirin' your work."

"Oh, thanks."

"You been doin' this a long time?" Obie asked, wiping his bald head with his handkerchief.

"Yeah, since I was just a little kid."

"Well, you do nice work there son. I don't suppose you thought to get a city business license, did you?"

"Um. Do I need one?"

"Oh yes! It's a serious offense to not have a license here."

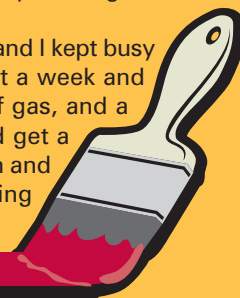
"Where can I get one?"

"Well, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to take you in."

Needless to say my anxiety level was a little high as Constable Obie and I drove the two blocks to the courthouse in his patrol car. It got even higher when Obie had to wake the judge from his after-lunch nap to hear my case. I was preparing a rather feeble defense in my mind when it began to appear that the only one who was going to get to say anything at all was Obie and the judge. That assumption was quite correct. Obie and the judge almost sounded like they were working from a script. The judge pronounced me guilty and sentenced me to either a fifty dollar fine or two days in jail, or, if I would rather, I could work off the fine by lettering the front window of the police station.

Obie was quite pleased with his new window sign, and I kept busy the rest of my stay there. I pulled out of town about a week and half later with new tires on my pickup, a full tank of gas, and a couple of hundred dollars in my pocket. I never did get a business license. I occasionally think of that little town and my good friend Constable Obie. If I ever go snapping again, I'll be sure and visit the folks there.

By Jerry Mathel



don't strive for perfect edges. In most cases, you will want to use quick, one stroke outlines, and that's the easy way to clean up edges and corners. For convex letters, just add a little white or black acrylic lettering enamel to the basic color for highlights or shadows. When the base coat has been over coated with your colors, add your outlines. In most cases, the edges dry before the centers, so you can begin outlining while the centers of the color panels are still drying.

Jon says that he usually outlines the panels and letters with black or blue acrylic lettering enamel, then draws a white outline around that. A takalon quill or lettering flat works the best for this. The added white outline really makes the splash stand out. He prefers Dekalac acrylic lettering enamel, because that's what he uses in his airbrush work. However, almost any water base lettering enamel will work. You may find that you want to thin the lettering enamel too. When the fluorescent has completely dried, you can add the lettering in the panels, again using a takalon quill or lettering flat. Black, blue, and white seem to be the best choices, but there are no hard fast rules on colors in this kind of work. It's supposed to be bright and gaudy. You'll find that some customers want something a bit more sedate; that's alright too. It is their business they're advertising. Whatever makes them happy. If you can develop a quick casual lettering style, you'll add a lot to your profit, since time is money, in this kind of work. You'll also find that type of lettering fits well with the general motif of most splashes.

A window splash may seem a little transparent, when you are looking at it from the inside, but it will be quite



Jon Peterman gets into his work.

opaque from the outside during daylight hours. You may need to think about double coating the base coat if the interior of the store is brightly lit at night. Cartoon characters work great with window splashes, and they attract a lot of attention. A strong word of warning, here, however. Almost all cartoon characters are copyrighted, and you can find yourself in serious trouble, if you use them without the permission of the copyright holders. Studios like Disney and Hanna-Barbera have people who do nothing but look for illegal use of their characters,

and they will prosecute you. Some of these guys have nothing better to do, I guess. Your customer may want a famous mouse that wears pants, or a duck that drives a car, but it's your neck that's on the line if you get caught.

Your customer is going to want to know how to get this stuff off his window, when the time comes. It strips right off with ammonia, water, and a razor scraper. The wide scrapers that use a utility blade work especially well. You can find them in most paint stores. The biggest mess is cleaning up the stuff that

was scraped off. Again, try your best to get your customer to handle that part of the job. Try to keep your paint off the window sills. It's quite permanent on metal or painted surfaces.

There are lots of ways to market this kind of work. Media advertising, or even Yellow Page advertising, probably won't do much for you. Besides word of mouth, your best bet is probably knocking on doors and showing a nice portfolio with color pictures of your work. Auto dealers seem to particularly like this kind of advertising. A nice little auto dealer sideline is mini splashes on the auto windows. These have got to be pretty cheap, but be careful how you price this work. Make sure you have some kind of agreement on the minimum number of vehicles you will do at one time, so that you don't find yourself running clear across town to do one or two cars. The ideal customer is the one that has you come every four to six weeks and paint their store windows.

Painting window splashes is possibly the last form of the sign trade that lends itself to going snapping. The snappers of years past were itinerant sign painters who traveled around the country snapping up jobs in small towns that didn't have a sign shop. They have all but disappeared. With the advent of computerized signs, there is hardly a place in the country without a vinyl shop. It still might be a nice vacation to travel around a bit and just paint a splash here and there, out of the tailgate of your RV.

One last bit of advice. Don't try to price your work strictly on an hourly basis. You are not just selling your time. You are selling a product, and you need to price it accordingly. The fact that you can do a window splash in two hours doesn't necessarily make it worth less than \$150. Also be careful about offering cheap prices to get started. It's sometimes hard to raise your prices later on. I can't tell you what the market will bear in your area. You are going to have to figure that out for yourself. But remember you have a product that not everyone can do. The vinyl quick-sign business may do excellent work and be very competitive on some kind of signs, but there isn't one in ten that can, or is even interested in, painting a window splash. ☒