



Stick it to 'em By Phil Sasso

It's a perfect time to capture the success and profitably in making work truck decals.

A while back, my son and I built a model race car. He had the most fun decaling it. I told him there were grown-ups that put decals on real cars for a living. His eyes lit up. (So, in about 10 or 12 years, you might have some tough competition.)

Decals on commercial vehicles might not be as lucrative or fun as a wild ad-on-wheels full vehicle wrap, but managed wisely, they still can be profitable and an enjoyable throwback to that childhood sense of creativity.

Magnets, painted emblems and partial wraps have a place, but often decals are a better choice for work trucks and vans.

There are many aspects commercial vehicle owners will take into consideration when making a choice on their vehicle graphics, but many restyling shops agree:

Short of a full wrap, decals can be the best choice from a business point of view.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECALS OFFER FEWER UPSIDES

By their nature, magnetic signs are viewed as temporary or transient. They aren't commonly used to mark professional fleets. For example, imagine seeing a police trooper passing you in a vehicle with magnets on the doors. You get the picture.

"Magnetic signs can be handy when they need to be put on multiple vehicles," says Charity Jackson of Visual Horizons Custom Signs in Modesto, Calif. "But unlike permanent decals, they can also blow off of vehicles, they can be stolen and they need to be kept on a flat surface to maintain their flat shape."

Some contractors can "get away with a nice door magnetic sign ... as

this style is more for identification than a high impact advertisement," says Troy Downey of APE Wraps in Coronado, Calif. But a contractor or business owner that wants his or her vehicles to generate sales should consider more visually high-impact decals, since they're "advertising to the consumer wherever they are, wherever they go. A nice, balanced graphic carrying a clear, concise message of who and what they offer will do wonders in helping make that phone ring with leads."

"For a lot of clients their work truck is their personal truck," says Rod Voegelé, president of Gator Wraps in Ontario, Calif. "They don't want to advertise when they're out to dinner with their family. So, that's more of an advantage of a magnet." Otherwise, a decal or full wrap has more advantages.

WANT MORE DECAL? >>>

Our pros share some of their insider tips, exclusively on *Restyling's* website. Just go to <http://restylingmag.com/decal-tips> to read "Streamlining the Vehicle Decal Process."



Facing page and above: A partial wrap graphic can be created to draw attention to a business. Added decals can be placed on side windows. As well, other informational decals can be added over a graphic or wrap, for example a website address. And don't forget the decals that go on tailgates. Photos from APEWraps.

Painted emblems can be visually stunning, but also can be cost prohibitive, especially for a small business on a shoestring budget. And painted emblems are permanent, which brings its own issues. Decals can be removed, returning a vehicle to its original condition. That's a lot more cost-effective than repainting a vehicle to remove or change the painted emblems.

"A lot of company vehicles are on a lease program," says Downey, "so they'd have to have them painted back to the original condition to turn them in [to the leasing company] or to sell them. They have to remove their logo, so decals are a lot more cost-effective at the end of the life cycle of the vehicle."

Partial wraps are nice, but the standard for many government, utility and other large fleets continues to be decals. They don't damage a vehicle's paint job, are less expensive and can reproduce high-quality, detailed images consistently.

"They're relatively easy to install when compared to paint or partial wrap," says Vic Beisel, Ubersmart Inc., Calgary, Alb. "There is rarely any reason to 'cut on the car' with decals, so there is less chance of cutting [into the] paint."

Adds APE Wraps' Downey: "On a decal you can take a company logo and put a background behind it and give life

to it. With today's technology, you can have printed graphics on a decal, where once you were tied to only what you could cut from vinyl.

MONEY IN THE DECALS

Pricing a decal project is an inexact art. There are many different aspects to consider when quoting, including the obvious cost of materials and labor. What is the average pricing and profit on a decal job?

"There's no specific answer," says Downey. "Each project is different ... priced on complication, time of year, geography, condition of surface ... and the list goes on."

Says Visual Horizons' Jackson: "The installation charge depends on the size of the graphics and complexity of the installation. Decals also typically require installation by a professional, which creates added profit for the sign shop or experienced installer."

"Vinyl is very inexpensive compared to a lot of other films," says Beisel. "Because they're 'easy' to install, labor is minimal compared to what can be charged. Decals should be one of those products where 30 cents per square foot film yields \$30-per-sq.-ft. installs."

Most agree that the biggest challenge to profits is runaway customer revisions.

"If the customer is 'allowed' to make multiple changes in the design phase, a lot of time can be wasted, and profitability diminishes significantly," says Beisel "In order to keep costs in line, customers need to be educated as to what can and can't be done. And their company logo files need to be in vector format when received."

PARTNERING FOR PROFITS?

Can partnering with a local sign shop be a profitable arrangement? It depends on who you partner with and who in the industry you talk to.

"The pairing of the expertise of a local sign company and the contacts of an aftermarket shop can be beneficial to both companies since business can be sent both ways," says Jackson. "The aftermarket shop should take the time to find a sign company that is experienced, reliable and good at design."

"Sign shops are a logical place to get decals produced and applied," says Downey. "Reach out and cut them a deal. There are so many gates in production that, with the buying power of some sign shops, the up-fitter may be pleasantly surprised on the pricing of outsourcing to a sign shop."

And, adds, Beisel, "It really depends on the sign shop. I've dealt with sign shops that want the same price for the



Vinyl decals, work especially well for all trucks, with door signage one of the most common application areas. Magnetic signs, on the other hand, can blow off of vehicles, be stolen and need to be kept on a flat surface to maintain their flat shape. Photos from Visual Horizons Custom Signs.



Painted emblems can be visually stunning, but cost prohibitive, especially for a small business on a shoestring budget. And painted emblems are permanent. Decals can be removed, returning a vehicle to its original condition. Photos from Visual Horizons Custom Signs.



decal whether they install it or not.

The other business angle is to partner with such local businesses as truck and auto dealerships and body shops, allowing you to generate a new profit center by being both the decal production and installation expert.

"I have a paint shop right across the street from me," Voegel says. "We have a good relationship with them. Just last week they were repainting a box truck that was damaged on the side. ... The customer just wanted their logo put back on the doors. In the process of talking to them, we wound up talking to them about doing their logo on the box. ... We ended up putting the logo 6' [tall] on the box instead of just 12" on the doors. So there was an opportunity to upsell — and that job came from the body shop that was repairing it."

INVESTING IN TOOLS

If you decide to get into the decal service, you need to figure out whether you're going to go solo, partner with another business or outsource. If you partner, you have to decide a division of labor for all the pieces of the puzzle: design, production and installation.

If you decide to partner with a sign shop, you need to decide whether you want them to do both production and installation or if your shop will be doing the

install. If the sign shop is installing your decals, you then need to decide whether they'll do it at your shop or theirs. And finally, if you are shuttling a vehicle between shops, you need to decide who is going to provide the driver and cover the insurance liability if the vehicle is damaged in transit.

Or you could commit to do it all in-house.

"If a company is really serious about getting into business," says Beisel "they should really purchase the required equipment and get on with it."

"A big part of my business is setting up shops/dealerships to do PPF [paint protection film], tint and decaling," continues Beisel. "I have consulted for business from Russia to Saudi Arabia and all over the U.S.A. and Canada. A lot of tint and PPF shops already have what they need — aside from the vinyl."

But, if you decide to produce and install printed vehicle graphics in-house, you'll need to do enough business to cover your overhead, says Downey. "You have to have a designer that's dedicated to doing the design, you have to have the printer, and unless you're printing daily, the inks could dry out."

EQUIPMENT, MATERIALS AND OTHER MATTERS

The added equipment you'll need to launch in-house decal design and produc-

tion can be a relatively small investment. It depends on your current operations and equipment.

"A good plotter doesn't need to be expensive if you don't want to print, as well," says Beisel. "I would stick with the tested and true brands such as the GCC Jaguar, a Graphtec 7000 series or newer, or a Roland GX400."

Downey suggests a 64" webbed cutter for a low-production shop and a high-end laser-type for a high-volume production shop. Downey also suggests considering a color printer. "Ideally it'll be a solvent-based printer for maximum durability and color gamut." If you're printing graphics, you'll also want to get a durable laminator.

"As for software," says Beisel. "If the shop is already cutting tint or PPF with a program such as film and vinyl designs or Xpel, they do not need more software to cut decals — simply import the file you want in EPS format, size it, cut it and, Viola!"

The hand tools and supplies required to do the actual installation are even simpler. The real investment is in training and gaining experience in working with various media.

"As for tools, a good Olfa-style knife and some hard cards will do the trick," says Beisel. "You will also need pre-mask or transfer tape to complete the manufacture and install of the decal. I prefer



Vehicle decal maker, and window and paint protection films installer Vic Beisel lets his own business truck be a rolling billboard for promoting his work.

Not only does this PPF installer's truck showcase its clear product and the window and paint protection films it uses, the decal door and fender logos can be added over PPF. Photo from Ubersmart.

the cheaper stuff that resembles masking tape, as it works well in wet applications of bigger decals.”

Materials and media are a variable expense that will be based on how much business you do. There is no need to inventory a wide array of colors or a huge volume of vinyl.

“For durability ... only cast type medias should be used as well as the manufacturers matching laminates,” says Downey.

“The amount of film one needs to keep in stock will depend on your volume and budget,” says Beisel. He suggests starting out by stocking 30”-wide rolls of black, white, yellow, red and a few other common colors and having swatches from your local supplier to show customers for special orders.

“Don't forget to charge a little more for special orders and, remember, your supplier may have to order it, too,” says Beisel. Keep in mind that on special orders, you'll likely have to buy a whole roll even if you just need 10' of media. You'll want to price your job accordingly.

“I teach people to do installs using a 75% water/25% isopropyl alcohol mix,” says Beisel. “This allows the installer a little bit of grace when placing the decal.” It also eliminates a trapped air under the vinyl. Once the vinyl is in place, spray the pre-mask to soften the glue so it will come off easier.

Overall, whether you decide to outsource, partner up or do it all in-house, decaling commercial vehicles can be a worthwhile new profit center to consider.

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