

This Was Printed From Memphis Business Journal

Sign of the times

Premium content from Memphis Business Journal - by John Scruggs

Date: Monday, June 4, 2007, 12:00am CDT - Last Modified: Thursday, May 31, 2007, 11:19am CDT

It's his job to grab people's attention with a message, but Jason Green knew he would have to set his company apart to compete with sign companies in Memphis.

Working out of his house at first, Green started working for Signs First during his last semester at University of Memphis, where he studied graphic design.

Striking out on his own, Green purchased a computer, a vinyl plotter and some inventory for total start-up costs of about \$15,000.

Think Signs' first customers came from word-of-mouth referrals, but Green then revamped the company Web site as a way to showcase the company's work and reassure potential customers.

Think Signs focuses primarily on vinyl signs that are printed out and made by hand, but Green knew that he could offer people a more informed and involved experience with his shop.

His sole location on Germantown Road is inviting. The work area is open in the back, but two desks with large Apple iMacs flank the front of the space.

"We're fortunate to get a lot of walk-in traffic with this location," Green says. "In trying to differentiate ourselves, we've focused on the graphic design aspect of sign making."

Think Signs, in its fourth year, now averages 100 orders each month and Green estimates he gets 50 new customers each month.

Offering a more interactive design approach, Green says customers are able to see what they're getting before the finished product.

Spinning around the large flat panel monitors, Green is able to tweak designs, colors and sizes for customers while they're in the shop.

Think Signs also projects the images from a projector onto a screen so that buyers get a sense of the sign's size and visual impact.

"It helps people get a scale sense of what it's going to look like out on the street or on a building," Green says. "The process makes it more personal like an advertising or graphic design agency."

Green knows that the quality of his product and his level of customer service are the only things that will keep people coming back instead of switching to another company.

He sends out tailored satisfaction surveys and seriously considers the comments and rankings that he receives.

Turnaround time is one of the biggest issues in the business and Think Signs' business hours reflect its dedication to getting product from the design phase to implementation as quickly as possible.

Think Signs is open from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. during the week and 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

Green has tapped the local real estate and distribution industries for work and business continues to grow.

"Someone who had used us before knew someone at CB Richard Ellis Memphis and recommended us," Green says, a newly finished sign for the real estate company propped up behind his desk. "We've done quite a few signs for them."

Designing and making signs for warehouses and distribution centers has been a solid source of income for the company.

Think Signs designed and made all of the interior signage for Technicolor's distribution facility on Holmes Road and has found a market for commercial vehicle signage, rebranding work trucks at Nonconnah Corporate Center.

Green says average gross sales have increased about 45% each year since 2003.

To date for 2007, Think Signs' average monthly sales are \$32,000.

"The best thing I did when starting this business was wait and do things right, taking time to analyze the market," Green says. "It was important for me to see what I could offer that other companies weren't."

Travis Davis, sales representative for Mid-South Signs, says the front-office layout of Think Signs and Green's customer interaction during design sets the business apart from its competition.

"His sales are good and they're very accommodating to their customers' needs," Davis says. "And he does everything in his power to get his jobs out the door on time."

Turnaround time for most of Think Signs' jobs is 24 hours, Green says.

"We're going to continue to focus on the jobs that we can do in-house," he says. "And if we don't do it, we'll refer the customer to someone who can. This job is about getting the customer exactly what they need as quickly as possible."

From a one-man operation in his house, Green says the turning point came when Think Signs landed a deal to re-badge more than 200 vehicles during the Time Warner transition to Comcast.

"That was a big deal. It took two months of working until 9:30 at night and on Saturdays and Sundays, but we got it done."

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