

# Pursuing a Different Rout

A relative newcomer shares his thoughts, hopes and experiences.

By Gary Johnson

In our December 2012 issue (see page 64), we featured some of the winners in the United State Sign Council's annual Sign Design Contest. The Best of Show award went to Gary Johnson (The Great American Sign Co., Basking Ridge, NJ) for a whimsical, routed sign that could make any Scrooge smile. We were pleased to meet Gary at the USSC Sign World Intl. tradeshow in Atlantic City in early December, and he readily agreed to share his experience, hopes, thoughts and practices with regard to routing. Gary readily admits his equipment is "old," but he aspires to own better equipment, such as a MultiCam 3000. Nonetheless, he can still produce exquisite work.

Gary Johnson is quick to spread around the credit. Despite his success, as indicated above, when questioned, he mostly talks about all the people who have helped him along the way. Being teachable is one of the most valuable character traits anyone can have.

For my first five years in business, I ran a vinyl shop. Then, in 2005, I attended a beginner carving workshop at Sign World. The instructor, Jay Cooke (from Stowe, VT) made it look so easy and fun, I just had to try it. Oddly enough, I had my first opportunity just a month later when a local college wanted to replace its peeling entrance signs. At the time, Jay had an instructional CD, which I quickly purchased. I studied each demonstration until I was confident enough to pick up the chisels. The signs turned out great and, as a result, what began as a three-sign job, turned into a 10-sign job.

A rival university in the same town was so impressed with the signs, they contracted me to make seven



carved signs for them, along with hundreds of parking, directional and building signs. At this point, the volume was too high to hand-carve, but I couldn't afford a CNC router, so I subcontracted work to a friend, Chris Stone at Stone Graphics (Farmingdale, NJ). When Chris himself got too busy to handle my overflow, he suggested that I purchase a used Gerber Dimension 200 router he'd seen advertised.

I took a look and bought it on the spot for \$6,000. I learned to use it by reuniting with Jay up in Stowe. He no longer had his Vermont Sign School, but he

agreed to tutor me over a long weekend. Jay got me off the ground with Gerber Artpath software, but after that, it was all trial and error.

It took some time to get everything set up and working properly, and so the router sat unused for several months until my wife's office needed some flat-cut letters in a rush. I knew I could handle that, so I reviewed all my notes and powered everything up, and it cut the PVC letters like butter. With that, I caught the bug, and I was spending weekends making samples to inspire my customers.

I remember making three identical 30-in. college seals on spec because I was convinced the university would fall in love with them. It was a typical college seal with the college name in a circle around a crest. I made the university's name 23K goldleaf prismatic, surrounding a hand-carved crest with ribbon.

I sold the first one to my customer for \$700. They loved it so much, I sold the second one six months later for \$1,400, and the third one, which sat proudly in my showroom for a year, I sold for \$2,000. Last year, the University changed the seal, and now that same seal is back in my showroom, looking as good as the day I made it.



(Opposite page) One of the largest signs Gary has created, this private-school sign features Gary's hand carving in the middle and subcontracted routing provided by Stone Graphics (Farmingdale, NJ). The crest shown above is for the same school.

(Left) Gary's shop sign was slightly damaged this winter. He used the opportunity to add a smaltz background after he regilded (in 23K gold) and repainted the prismatic letters.

## Teacher #2

Also, I met Dan Sawatzky [Imagination Corp., Chilliwack, BC, Canada], who has been teaching seminars at the Sign World show for several years now. Long story short, I took two of Dan's workshops and purchased the EnRoute 4 software that would allow me to do the kind of heavily textured, 3D work Dan does so well. I had trouble getting past the learning curve, but, with some help from Dan and the tech-support guys at EnRoute and Artistic Automation [the developers at Enroute], I was on my way. Thanks, Eric Nodurft (SAI product designer), Rafael Lima (Artistic Automation), Tom Penner (EnRoute dealer) and Jeff Hartman (Artistic Automation president), for your patience!

Transitioning from two to three dimensions proved to be an obstacle. I can imagine what I want the sign to look like, but if you push the wrong button, input the wrong number, or do something out of sequence, you may get a pile of mangled substrate. It takes awhile to push through the learning curve and understand how the hardware and software can accomplish what you imagine they're capable of.

I had some serious problems integrating my new EnRoute software with my old Gerber router. The D-200 had a nasty habit of drilling through my bed when I cleared material using the island, as opposed to the horizontal format. I wasted a lot of time and

material figuring out that workaround. It's always difficult to introduce new software to an old machine, which is one of the main reasons I'm looking to expand my new facility. I want a new, full-sized router that's better suited to the challenges of 3D carving. I have my eye on a Multicam 3000, if I can still afford it after my expansion.

## Learning from customers

I don't really have a typical or "signature" routed sign. So many variables affect how the sign will eventually evolve: the time frame, sign size, colors, the customer's willingness to be daring, etc. I try to keep it fresh and challenge myself with each new job.

When I initially take on a project, I ask the customer what, if any, signs they have seen that have inspired them. Most customers are clueless, but you have to start somewhere -- a style, a color, a size and, most importantly, the budget.

Recently, a representative from a local gallery approached me. I was excited about the possibilities. After all, there is more potential for creativity with a local gallery than some franchise with a logo standards book in hand. So I thought. From the beginning, my customer simply asked for a cheap swinging sign with their dated logo inside a rectangle. Instead of listening, I drew up a half dozen, really creative possibilities,



No, this isn't a sign for a locksmith. It actually hangs above the door of a library as a reminder. The HDU material is decorated with a metallic latex paint.

and offered them some price incentives, including trading for some paintings. It was all for naught. In the end, they wouldn't budge on the logo, or the budget.

You have to listen to the customer, even if they are making the wrong decision. Otherwise, you may just be wasting your time. Another lesson I had to relearn the hard way.

#### My preferred tools/equipment

I do prefer specific tools and equipment:

- Gerber Dimension 200 router and a Porter Cable 1001 hand router, plus chisels, gouges and V-parting tools, files, orbital and belt sanders
- Gerber Artpath software for simple carved signs and cut out letters, Enroute 4 for the more complicated 3D projects
- Materials: 18- and 30-lb. Precision Board® HDU, PVC, acrylic sheet and Dibond® composite material
- Bits: Gerber Gold Endmill, Ball Endmill and Onsrud Endmill
- For assembling multiple pieces of HDU, I use Coastal Enterprises' PB Bond-240.

As for finishing, I've typically used automotive finishes on my HDU in the past, but I'm moving in the direction of hand-applied latexes for the future. With automotive paints, I try hard to make the sign look perfect and glossy. I add one coat after another to make it more smooth or shiny, or to cover up some defect and, before you know it, there are a dozen coats with all the fumes, overspray dust and time spent that go with it. For PVC, I apply Gerber vinyl and carve through it. I will then paint or gild the carved lettering/graphics.

For installation, I prefer double mounts, followed by wall-mounted and hanging signs. Typically, I fashion "L" brackets to mount panel to post. I don't like to see fasteners, and I find this the best way to hide hardware.

I purchased a Millermatic 211 welder and intend to offer custom brackets and exposed decorative brackets/hardware in the near future.

Nevertheless, things can go wrong. I'm still a newer fabricator without the best equipment. Here are some of my suggestions:

- Mistakes are expensive; double check everything before pushing the start button.
- Stay within earshot of your machine so you can shut it down should things go wrong.

- Don't use a longer bit than you need, and adjust the height if possible so it can't drill through your bed.
- Wear dust and ear protection
- When in doubt, keep your finger on the abort key.

#### Make the price nice

My pricing, like my signs, fluctuate based on numerous variables. I generally charge from \$100-200/sq. ft., depending on the complexity of the project, how soon they need it and how busy I am at the time. I don't use estimating software or any standard markup.

I believe a sign is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. An Andy Warhol painting's pricetag is not worth the canvas, paint and effort expended to make it; it's worth a million because someone is happy to pay that much. I can make just as much money mindlessly cranking out vinyl, rather than fussing over a carved sign, so I won't do it unless I am getting as much money as I possibly can, with two possible exceptions.

If there is new customer with the potential for a long-term relationship, like a university or a local government, I will keep prices low in the beginning to cement the relationship. Once a customer is confident with the performance and quality of your work, they overlook the cost, and prices can rise over time. My Achilles heel is those rare jobs when it's a customer with big ideas, an open mind, a perfect location and, of course, a small budget.

The sign that won the USSC Best of Show is a perfect example. My customer wanted "welcome" and "do not" type signs for a new community and children's garden at the local public library. It occurred to me this is a place of fun and relaxation, an escape from the legal warnings and restrictions we have to wade through every day, so why not make it fun?

The customer was thrilled with the designs, but could only afford a third of what I proposed. I knew the signs would be awesome, and I didn't want to compromise on the result to stay within budget, so I called it charity and put two conditions on the deal.

These depictions of Gary's capabilities hang on his shop wall, but he's also taking them with him to a homebuilders' show as he seeks to get more involved in the retail market.

There would be no deadlines, and the signs would be fabricated as I saw fit, with no further reviews.

Every once in a while, it just feels good to make a sign the way you think is best, without someone putting in their two cents. My one weakness is when it comes to price. Fortunately, for my checkbook, this kind of opportunity doesn't present itself very often.

Surprisingly, for someone who routs signs, virtually none of my clients are tourist-oriented. Instead, most of my business comes from professionals, government, churches and universities. Consequently, my clients' goals are much different than those of retailers; it's branding and creating impressions rather than generating actual sales.

I enjoy university work the best, because you can imagine some of your work still decorating their walls a century from now. There is also a lot a variety involved, everything from simple door numerals, ADA signs, building identification, wayfinding and corporate logos to decorative, finely detailed crests. It can also be challenging in terms of numbers, as was the case recently when one university client altered its seal, which required the majority of signs I'd created over the past decade to be adjusted. ■