

# John Ralph

Hamilton, Virginia

**Shop name:** Quail Run Signs

**Website:**  
[www.quailrunsigns.com](http://www.quailrunsigns.com)

**Age:** 41

**Staff:** Four

**Shop size:** 3500 sq. ft.

**Graphics equipment:**  
Epilog Mini 45 laser engraver  
Gerber Sabre Sabre router  
Gerber Edge printer  
Gerber GS15 Plus plotter

I found my way into the sign industry in 2001, after I sold a technology company—not for the kind of money where you get to retire, but for the kind of money where you get to take a little time to sort out your options as far as what you want to do. I have a sculpture minor, but I never really thought I'd do anything in the art field for a living.

But after selling my business, I started doing a few projects with a friend who had been a sign maker since the '70s. After we'd only worked together a few days and I'd done some really neat metal work for her, she said, "I really feel uncomfortable about this..." I thought I was getting the boot. But then she added, "I feel like you're more of a partner." We worked together for a year or two, then she

decided to retire. I took over her business.

**Growing the business** For a while after that it was just me working out of my garage, but eventually I added a printer and a plotter, then a router. Adding the router was the game changer—as soon as it was online, we tripled our capabilities and doubled our sales.

About six or seven years ago I built a shop, then almost immediately outgrew it. We moved into an industrial park, then two years ago moved into an old fire department, which is a really fun building—tall ceilings, big bay doors, and it still has the siren on it. It has a great atmosphere—people always ask if there's a pole, but there isn't.

It's around 3500 sq. ft. We have offices and



production rooms, and the big bay is the dusty production area. The smaller two-car bay is the clean area where we paint. We're artists who hand carve and hand paint, but we're also like a body shop—we've got a paint booth, and we mask and spray and paint.

Two years ago we switched over to the Matthews paint system [www.matthewspaint.com], and that stuff is amazing. We can prime, paint and finish a sign in a few days. The days of spraying oil-based paint and waiting days for it to cure are over. There's a bit of a learning curve, but it pays off.

We use a lot of Extira Treated Exterior Panels [www.extira.com], which are a terrific substrate for signs. I'm surprised how many sign people don't know about it. It's strong and easy to work with. We can get a glass-smooth finish on Extira with Matthews paint.

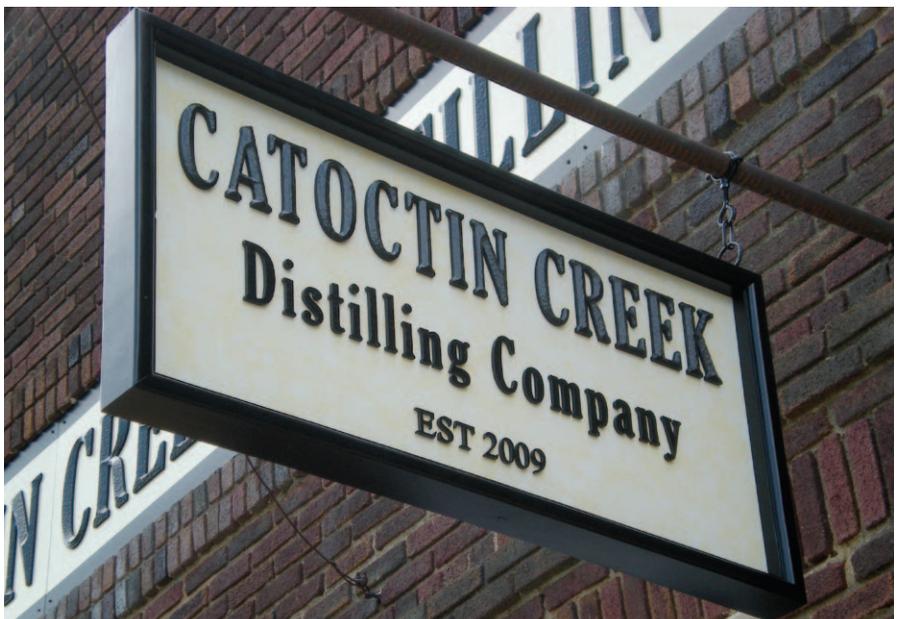
A couple of years ago we bought a used Epilog laser [www.epiloglaser.com], and the number of crazy applications we've found for it in sign making is mind-boggling. We're not an award and trophy company, but you can do a lot of sign work with a laser. It has saved us so much time that we can't imagine not having it.

We recently added all new welding equipment. Until now we've been outsourcing all of our welding, but we decided that we'd just rather have the control in-house. The one thing that I would love to fit in, but we just don't have room for, is a powder-coating oven. We sub out all of our powder coating, and sandblasting, too. We have a relationship with a sandblaster who picks up panels then brings them back to us the next day.

**Where the work comes from** One of the things we've enjoyed, in addition to word-of-mouth advertising, is a steady stream of referrals from the little historic towns in our area. Often the town's architectural review board gives out our name. They've worked with us, they like our signs, and they know our projects get through architectural review with no issue.

As the shop has grown, we've focused on a few different things—adding people, getting more organized, being more efficient and developing the business-to-business aspect. We like working for other sign shops, and there are quite a few sign and print shops in the region who use us for their carving and router work. Those are terrific projects because it's always fun to create from someone else's concept. All we need is the design and we're off, without a lot of complicated interaction with the customer.

A few relationships like that can keep a shop pretty busy. Right now we're working on jobs for a franchise sign shop, a couple independent





sign shops and a promotional printing company.

What I like best about marketing this way is that it drastically expands our geographic area with very little effort. In other words, I can market to ten sign shops in Fairfax County, or I can market to the million people who live here.

### The staff and the workflow

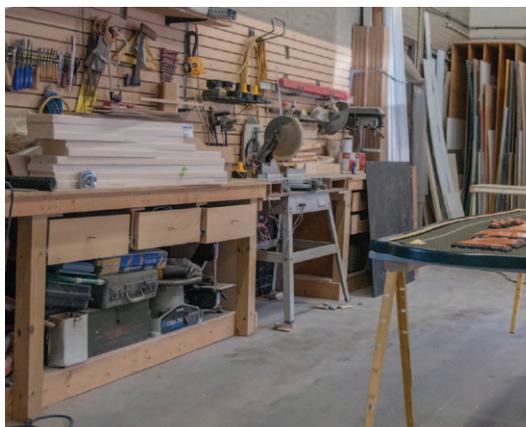
There are four of us here at Quail Run. Chris McMinn has been here for five years. He has a fine art degree and is a really amazing asset. Like me, he can carve, gild and paint. We often call the shop “Chris’s Room” because that’s where the magic happens.

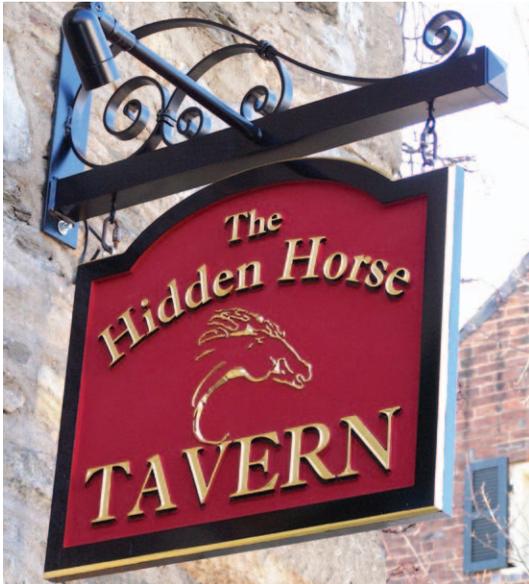
Phil Ralph has been with us for three years. He does most of our installations and keeps the shop running smoothly—sanding and prep on signs, maintenance on the equipment, and things like that.

This January, we added Jen Daniel. That’s a risky time of year to add another person, but we were going to start annoying people by falling behind—we definitely needed help with organization. Jen stepped in and pretty soon we had a website, brochures, a Facebook page and a level of organization that keeps everything moving the way it should. She has really taken a lot of the administrative and design pressure off of me.

Now Jen usually designs, sells and interacts with the customer; then I make the sign—the parts and pieces, the routing and carving. Then it goes out to the shop floor; then Chris and Phil take it from there.

What tends to happen in many shops—and I think sign people everywhere will understand this—is that you’re looking at a \$5,000 project





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and you've got ten little \$50 boring things to do. Most of us tend to ignore those small jobs, and that annoys customers.

Now, by having Jen as a filter, I'm able to focus on those major jobs. Jen is a highly organized person, which I am not, so now we have really great filing and record keeping, and we're not getting behind with customers. Now we're more of a turnkey, full-service shop. I see prints and real estate signs going out the door that I haven't been involved in at all. We're more efficient than ever, but we're still having a lot of fun.

We enjoy those creative, one-off projects the most, of course. The customers who give us general parameters then let us do what we do always get a better sign because then the ideas start bouncing around the shop and everyone gets invested in it. And we do a lot of commercial sign work, too—basic signs that we can turn around in a few days.

The other aspect I enjoy, because I'm originally an engineer, is efficiency of production. I love the fact that we can turn out a perfectly crisp sign, even a simple, run-of-the-mill sign, quickly and beautifully and efficiently. It'll come off the router, go straight to Phil to get sanded, then straight in the booth to get primed. The next day it gets sanded, then it's back in the booth for paint. Two days later it's lettered and done. I love the automation, but I love the fact that the work is always different. That's what keeps it fresh.

### Managing the marketing

Jen's work on our website is definitely paying off, although I don't know that I could quantify it. I'm used to the majority of our customers being referred or somehow having a history with us, but now they're coming in from





greater distances. People are calling and saying, “I was just on your website, and you’ve made every one of my favorite signs that I drive by every day. You’re the people we’ve been looking for.” That always feels pretty cool.

Things are going well. In terms of gross receipts, we’re going to beat our best year ever this month. We’re at a good point, and we’re having a lot of fun working together. We’re making plans to get a bigger printer and a bigger plotter.

Last winter we worked aggressively to create business-to-business marketing material for the other sign and print shops and related industries in the area. But work picked up so much this spring that we never sent any of it out. We’re at capacity right now, so until I feel comfortable adding another person, I don’t want to market and sell things that we can’t complete at a reasonable pace.

I view Quail Run Signs as us, and never me. I never throw my name in front of anyone else, because I feel that this is something that we all do together. Similarly, if one of the guys does a great job making a sign and somebody comes in and tells us how great it is, I send them straight out in the shop to tell the person who made it. We’re a team. **SC**

