

Two markets that can expand your shop's profits

Laser engraving and digital garment printing are a perfect fit for a sign shop

There are several related markets that sign shop owners can reach into to broaden their base and deliver new products. We're always looking for shops that have done this successfully, and we've lined up two for you to consider here: laser engraving and digital garment printing.

Each of these is an easy add-on sale for many sign customers. It's also easy to start offering each of these. If you don't want to set up to do them in-house, you can easily outsource both laser engraving and short-run garment printing while you test the waters. If you can see the market is there, though, it may be time to add the equipment to your shop and start selling the work.

The laser also gives you a production cutting tool that can be used to cut graphics from acrylic sheet and other substrates. That opens

up new markets for interior signage and other graphics that require precision cutting. It fits well with CNC signage, too.

The market for short run t-shirt and other types of garment printing has always been there, but it's not been practical to produce this work—especially in anything other than one color. Digital garment printing not only makes it possible, but it puts a sign shop in the ideal position to provide shirts for staff and promotional use.

That makes a great additional product to offer a customer who otherwise might have only bought a sign or had a truck lettered. Often you don't see such a customer again until they buy their next truck. Garment printing can lead to ongoing sales—keeping customers coming back for more.

Both of these products give you a way to increase your sales to your existing customer base, which is always easier than finding new customers. At the same time, they can also bring you customers looking for engraving or t-shirts who are potential sign customers as well.

Here's what three shop owners have to say about how these products work with their businesses. If you've found a related market that fits well with your sign business, we'd like to hear from you. Drop us a line at signcraft@signcraft.com.



Here we cut out acrylic letters and finished them with Matthews Paint's metallic silver. Then I recessed the background panel so the letters dropped in and painted it black. Then it went on the wood panel, which is always a nice look.

John Ralph Quail Run Signs, Hamilton, Virginia

The laser is pretty astounding. I tell customers it's a high-tech eraser. You can erase a little of the material, a lot of the material or erase all the way through the material. You can erase in a very controlled fashion.

For example, you can paint the back of clear acrylic then burn the paint back off so the lettering and graphics appear. If you want, you can paint another color on the graphics and have this beautiful subsurface sign.

We've had our Epilog laser [www.epiloglaser.com] for about four years. I didn't have a big plan for it—I just thought it might be a useful tool. Now, if it disappeared, though, I would have to buy one immediately.

Having laser engraving capability is another way to keep your customers. That's why I bought a 54-in. Roland Soljet printer [www.rolanddga.com] a few years ago. I don't want to tell a customer, "No, we don't print banners...." They may go somewhere else and never come back. We don't really push banners, but since we have the printer, we can do them all day long if they need them.

You can do some pretty cool stuff in no time with the laser. It enables us to do raised letters very fast. I can start a sign on the router,

then start the letters on the laser. Everything gets primed and painted the same day with Matthews Paint [www.matthewspaint.com], and the next day you assemble this great-looking 3D sign.

Plastics come off the laser with a beautiful polished edge. There's no prep to do—it's ready to install or to paint. So sanding, no priming, and acrylic is really durable.

You can do all the graphics for a reception area sign in a day—not that you'd want to tell the customer you could that. But it really speeds production. And a lot of these signs just couldn't be done practically without the laser.

We do some plaques and the occasional award, but they're generally neater than what people can get from a plaque shop. We can combine other technologies like CNC and the paint work.

Another thing that's been great for us is creating these customers who keep coming back to you for more work. Golf courses have been awesome for us in this way. We've done bag tags, locker tags, plaques, engraved leather and wood—all sorts of neat stuff. They just keep bringing us projects. It's terrific.



We've done thousands of these bag tags. We paint the sheet of acrylic with Matthews Paint, which absolutely does not come off of plastic, then we cut them out as bag tags as they need them.



You can see that we cut all the components for this rather complex door sign on the laser from a single piece of acrylic—even the standoffs.

