

The quick-change artist

Looking your best in the sign trade often requires careful planning

By Frank Spino

Boy, is my bedroom a mess. There are clothes in the bureau, clothes on the bureau, clothes under the bureau, clothes on pegs, doorknobs, chairs and, of course, in piles on the floor.

Okay, I have to be honest. It's not just the bedroom that's a mess. Check the bathroom and the office.

Some would say that I'm just a messy kinda' guy, but that's not the way I see it. What the world would mistake as just another heap of clothes is, in fact, the carefully arranged wardrobe of my profession—the “quick-change artist,” otherwise known as the owner of a one-man sign shop.

It's really quite simple. I have a small shop behind my home. And as the operator of this one-man shop, I am required to perform a multitude of tasks, each requiring its

own particular costume.

There was a time when I walked down the street with pants that doubled as paint rags. I think my hair was a little longer then. I looked at each paint stain on my clothes the same way a boxer would remember his fights by the stitches on his chin. But times are different now.

Categorizing your wardrobe Another man might be able to put on a suit in the morning and then hang it up at night. But as owner, designer, salesman, lettering artist, collection officer, prep man, husband and daddy around here, I need to be able to change clothes to fit the job—and do it quickly. Hence the mess (I mean the specially arranged groups of clothes). It's really quite simple. Let me break it down for you.

See, you've got your two basic divisions of clothes: good clothes (G), clothes to be seen in; and paint clothes (P), clothes to work in. Now each of these divisions can be broken down a little further.

In the “G” category, you have your “very good” (G-1) and your “every-day good” (G-2). G-1s are so nice and so new that when you're wearing these, you try not to think about paint, thinner, or anything that has to do with the sign industry. G-2s are what you wear to do the regular things in your life; like going to the grocery store or meeting a potential customer.

Next, there are the “P” clothes. These break down into your “still-almost-good” (P-1), the ones you letter in, but would never wear to coat-out boards. These have a few paint stains, but you try to keep them as clean as possible for as long as possible, because they are still respectable enough to be seen in when people drop by the shop.

After that there are your P-2's, the “pretty-doggone-bad” group. You wear these for the dirty work—coating, spraying, yard work and so forth.

There is one last group that I hardly dare



mention, the P-3s. These are the ones that have made it all the way through the clothes chain, from the Gs down through the Ps. They should have been in the rag bin long ago, but you keep them around for those days when paint is flying everywhere, and you know you won't see or be seen by anyone.

See, I told you it was simple. You've got your G-1's and 2's, and your P-1's, 2's, and 3's.

A day in the life of... Consider the fact that I may wear each of these categories of clothes every day. Then consider that I may have two or three sets of clothes for each of these categories, with still more in some unchartable, metamorphic state in between, and you've got yourself a whole bunch of clothes that have to be ready to go at a moment's notice.

"Okay," you say, "that still doesn't explain the mess." Well, let's look at a typical day.

I wake up. Hm-m-m, let's see, what's first today? Well, I definitely have to letter that board today, and I've got to meet what's-his-name at 10:00. Gee, it finally quit raining. I'd better coat-out those boards first thing.

So, I put on some P-2s.

Before I get out the door, my wife informs me that she has to go to work early so I have to walk the kids to the bus stop. I can't walk through the middle of town in P-2s. Change to G-2s.

Are you with me so far?

Okay, back from the bus stop. Let's see, forget the coating-out; I've got to finish that lettering. Change to P-1s.

I letter for a while. The phone rings, stop and talk, back to work, phone rings again, and again, and again, oops, it's time to meet that fellow downtown. Do I know him well enough to get by with P-1s? No, better play it safe. Wash up. Change to G-2s.

All cleaned up and heading for the door, I realize I've forgotten to clean my brushes.

So, I say to myself, "Clean them or leave them?" Better clean them. But I'm wearing G-2s. Better be careful.

So I'm cleaning my brushes, trying not to splash anything on my good clothes, and I'm thinking, "This is great, here I am all cleaned up, wearing nice clothes, and when I go to meet this guy I'm gonna smell like mineral spirits. Oh, what the heck." As my mind begins to wander...SPLASH! G-2s become P-1s. Go change.

Has this ever happened to you? I'll bet I have four pairs of otherwise decent pants or shorts that I can't wear anywhere because they have this sort of weird-looking paint stain right there in an unmentionable place that looks like I—well, never mind. I can't wear them without getting the strangest looks. And I can't go around explaining to each person I pass that it's not what it looks like, but rather oh, forget it—they're P-3s.

A P-3 day Speaking of P-3s, one hot day last summer I had a ton of "dirty" work to do. I wasn't expecting anyone to come by. It was a P-3 day. So, I put on some rags and jumped into the paint up to my elbows. Come midday, I'm dripping wet with sweat and covered with paint. I've got on a T-shirt that makes some of my rags look good, and a pair of shorts so worn out that the front pockets are hanging out through holes in the legs like limp, white balloons.

I hear a cough and turn around. Here stands the "main man" from the local university in his three-piece suit. He looks me up and down, turns to his assistant and gives him a look that says, "This is the guy you recommended to do all our work?"

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Frank Spino owns and operates Spino Signs in Melbourne, Florida.