

My “Gary Anderson Theory”

Could it be that you can sell quality anywhere?

By Mike Jackson

How many times have you heard someone say as they looked at another sign maker’s portfolio, “Yeah, that work is nice, but I can’t sell that kind of work where I am....” Over the years, I’ve heard it a few hundred times. Sometimes they were talking about our work, and sometimes they were talking about above-average work in general—the kind you see in books, contests and magazines. After visiting Bloomington, Indiana, a few times and viewing the work of Gary Anderson, I developed a theory to rebut those people making that statement.

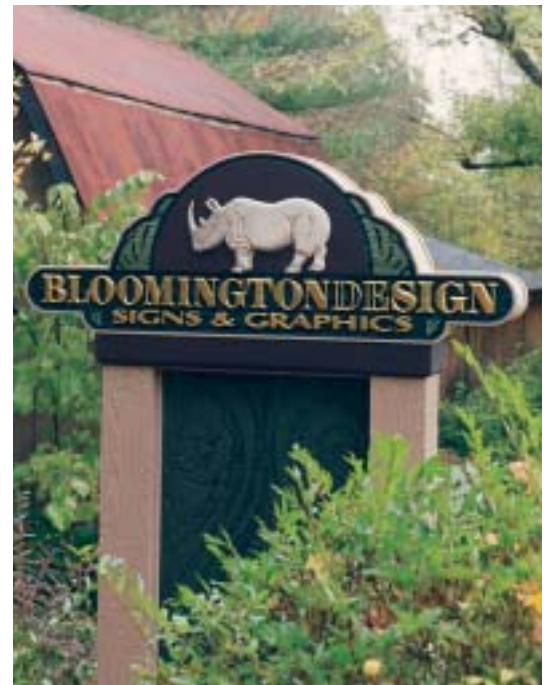
If you keep on top of what’s happening in the commercial sign trade, you can’t help but run across Gary Anderson’s name. In my opinion, he is one of the most gifted sign artists of our time. Actually, it is not just my opinion. He has probably won more sign

design awards than any other single person. He shows up in all kinds of articles and has two outstanding sign design books under his belt (*Signs, Graphics & Other Neat Stuff*, and *More Signs, Graphics & Other Neat Stuff*—both published by *SignCraft*). He is also very active in the Letterheads movement, and hosted the national meeting in Bloomington in June 1998. Like I said, you’ll recognize the name if you keep up with things.

Check out this theory My point is not necessarily to pat Gary on the back, but to illustrate a point—I call it my “Gary Anderson Theory”. It is only a theory since I can’t prove it, but can only speculate that it would work! It goes something like this: if you grabbed Gary Anderson and his shop, and plunked them down in the very cities where people say they



His office walls provide plenty of samples.



Gary's shop sign, with shop in the background



3-by-16-ft. high-density urethane sign, with carved, gilded letters applied to the sandblasted background. Graphics and background have an acrylic latex finish.

can't sell top-quality work, soon he would be selling Gary Anderson quality signage in that town, too. The exception to this would be a few impoverished towns and some very small communities.

Usually, when I spring the theory on one of those people expressing that viewpoint, it sets them back and they get quiet for a few minutes. It's a shock to their system or something. If that person could accept the possibility that Gary could come into their town and make it happen, then their reply is invalid. The problem might be something more internal to their operation than external—not a result of their town.

Bloomington, Indiana, is not really that special—it's sort of Anytown, USA. It has a nice downtown area, growth around the center sections with large malls and lots of strip malls. There is an artist's community nearby, which does help showcase his ability, but still it is not that different from many mid-sized cities in the U.S.

While driving around the country, you sometimes pass through a very small town or community and see where one lone sign maker has left his or her distinctive mark all over the town. Drive another thirty miles and the next town lacks the look. I'll bet that in that town, some sign maker is telling himself (or herself), "you can't sell good work in this town."

Is it Bloomington that makes Gary click or is it Gary that makes Bloomington click? Gary's work speaks volumes for itself. Great design, great color schemes and a seemingly endless supply of creative ideas to make it all work. Guess what? He is nice to speak with, knows his products, knows his business, and creates a strong sense of confidence in the customer. When dealing with Gary, you would be sure you were going to get a wonderful product when the project is finished.

Was he born with all this talent? Did it just fall into his lap? No, he worked for it—and worked hard. I've seen his "artist's morgue" and his library of inspirational books. He works hard for what many people might assume is only a gift.

In several issues of *SignCraft*, Gary's residential signs are featured. He does hundreds of them. Now think about it. What makes the Bloomington area such a hot spot for small residential signs? Gary. Move him to Tulsa, Boulder, Santa Fe, Phoenix, Muskogee, Eureka, Cleveland, Hershey or Scranton, and I think he could sell them there, too. I can guarantee you he wouldn't continue to make them if he weren't making a profit on them. Is the theory making sense?

It might take him, or someone like him, a while to start from scratch and develop a reputation and following in a new town. But I think it would happen. If you put him in a four-seasons-destination tourist area, it would happen quicker—but that would stack the theory heavily in his favor.

What if Gary moved to your town? Most sign people don't get to choose the city where they will set up their shop. They have to make the best of where they are. Just close your eyes and visualize Gary moving to your town. If it gives you cold chills thinking about having to compete with him on a daily basis, then you probably have room to improve conditions at your end.

Visualize a portfolio-quality sign project showing up on every corner in town until everything starts taking on his distinctive style. It starts with a bookstore and a couple of antique stores, then a family market. Eventually you see a glass job on the historic bank downtown and eventually along the driveways of all the residences in the nicer neighborhoods. Next thing you know, one of



2-by-16-ft. high-density urethane sign, sandblasted and hand carved with acrylic latex finish and gold leaf details



Another section of walls in the office



3-by-3-ft. high-density urethane sign, with acrylic latex finish on lettering area and hand-carved, gold-leafed letters. The carved prismatic sunburst has a sprayed copper finish, sprinkled with gold glitter. Wings are carved with bronze spray finish.

the signs is on the front cover of a national trade magazine or featured in a few books. It could happen!

Okay, open your eyes! If you would lose sleep thinking that Gary might show up in your town, then you could be the one standing in Gary's shoes in your visualization. The comment that you might have made about not being able to sell that kind of work in your town would be lying by the wayside right now.

I can't say that it would be easy. I can't say there wouldn't be a few rejections and set-backs, either. There are always "Yes, but'ers" out there who will hear something that might make life and working conditions better, but will reject the idea because they immediately search their memory banks for a single example of when the new concept might not work. That single example might require a simple work-around, but they dismiss the entire concept because of it. Believe me, "Yes but'ing" is easy and you have to be on your guard to keep from falling into its evil trap.

It's not about technology At the Bloomington meeting a few years ago, Gary gave four of us the key to his shop and we got to visit it on our way to the nearby town of Nashville. His shop is a converted barn, so you can imagine some things were a little unorthodox. We had to search to find all the light switches. We spent a couple of hours there, milling around, missing lunch at the meeting, and never making it to Nashville. It was an eerie feeling for me walking around there—something like... "so this is where all the greatness happens!"

His showroom is overwhelming with walls and walls of beautiful examples of his work. Many of them are Letterheads meeting projects and quite a few of them are menu examples seen in *A Magazine About Letterheads*. Well, great work abounds there.

With all the stunning pieces around, the one thing that struck me the hardest was that he was doing so much with so little technology. There were a couple of old computers tucked in the corner. One of them might have been connected to an ancient, taped-together Gerber Signmaker® IVB. He had a few basic power tools, like a table saw and radial arm saw, but that was about it. No big state of the art router table and no sophisticated screening press—just the basics. Talent and skill honed to its max! The people saying they can't do that kind of work because they can't afford a \$60,000 router, are being proved wrong in Bloomington every day.

His market may be no different from yours

I don't know how much Gary gets for a nice

4-by-8 construction sign. Let's say he gets \$400. (We got more than that on a consistent basis five years ago.) Still, I bet there are people there who will *paint and install* a 4-by-8 for \$125 or less.

Is Bloomington so different that customers line up to spend \$400 or more? I doubt it. Gary has learned through experience, hard knocks and dedication how to sell and promote his products. It takes a lot of work!

I feel that many of the people using the line "You can't sell that kind of work in my area" are copping out. Maybe they are just looking for an excuse instead of confronting the problem and doing their best to solve the problems they discover. Once "bucked off the horse" or rejected by a customer, they drop the new concept without really giving it a chance to succeed.

While I used Gary Anderson and Bloomington for my example, I could probably have chosen many other towns and sign makers. I've never really been to Cornwall, Ontario, but I hear it is nothing special. Yet Nancy and Noëlla at Sign-It are turning out great work and growing a successful shop. How about Raymond Chapman? He is in Killeen, Texas. I have been to Killeen and I can guarantee you it is not on Triple AAA's "top-ten-destinations" resort picks—but, it has some great signs. There is a bunch of wonderful work coming out of Elkhart, Indiana, from Monte Rogers and others. How about David Showalter in Bryan, Ohio?

Are Denver or Boise such unique towns that Mark Oatis and Noel Weber "have it made", or



4-by-8-ft. high-density urethane sign, sandblasted with acrylic latex lettering, background and pictorial. Border has acrylic glaze and carved leaves.



2-by-3-ft. high-density urethane sandblasted sign, carved and gilded with acrylic latex finishes



42-by-42-in. high-density urethane sign, with wiggle-carved letters that are gilded and sandblasted

is it that they make it because they work hard at it? Look over this current issue of *SignCraft* and a few recent issues. Look at the names of the towns associated with the other great work. With the exception of a few tourist towns, most of them will be “Anytown, USA.” Those sign makers are making it work where other doubting sign makers say it can’t be done.

If you want to argue this topic and you insist on telling me, “I can’t sell that kind of work in my area” you’re probably right! Yes—but I think you are missing out on some great opportunities. □

Gary Anderson’s book, *More Signs, Graphics and Other Neat Stuff* is available from *SignCraft*. To order, use the order form bound into this issue, or call 800-204-0204, or send \$19 plus \$6 shipping and handling to *SignCraft*, PO Box 60031, Ft. Myers, FL 33906 or use our Web site: www.signcraft.com. □



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