# Setting up CorelDraw for sign design

by Bob Darnell

*This is part one of a four-part series that is intended to help you analyze how you work with your design software, particularly CorelDraw.*

The secret of producing good design on the computer is to realize that the computer is only a tool. Much as using a brush requires many years of practice and patience to accurately realize your initial vision for a layout, so does our design software.

Many people (including myself sometimes) tend to let the computer dictate what the final product will be. This isn't the way it should be. Sometimes we settle for compromises because we don't know how to easily achieve what we want. Other times, compromise is due to the simple negligence of applying our specialized knowledge to a computer-aided design.

A case in point: letter spacing (kerning) on a computer is so easy to do, but many times I see even traditionally trained hand-lettering people settle for automatic kerning. If those same people had done the work by hand, the adjustments would have been made as a matter of course. It has to be a very conscious decision when working with a computer, though.

I've often told people—who were perplexed with why their computer wasn't producing the expected results—that a computer is a very stupid thing. You have to "tell" it exactly what you want; give it every detail that is important to you. Gaining the famil-

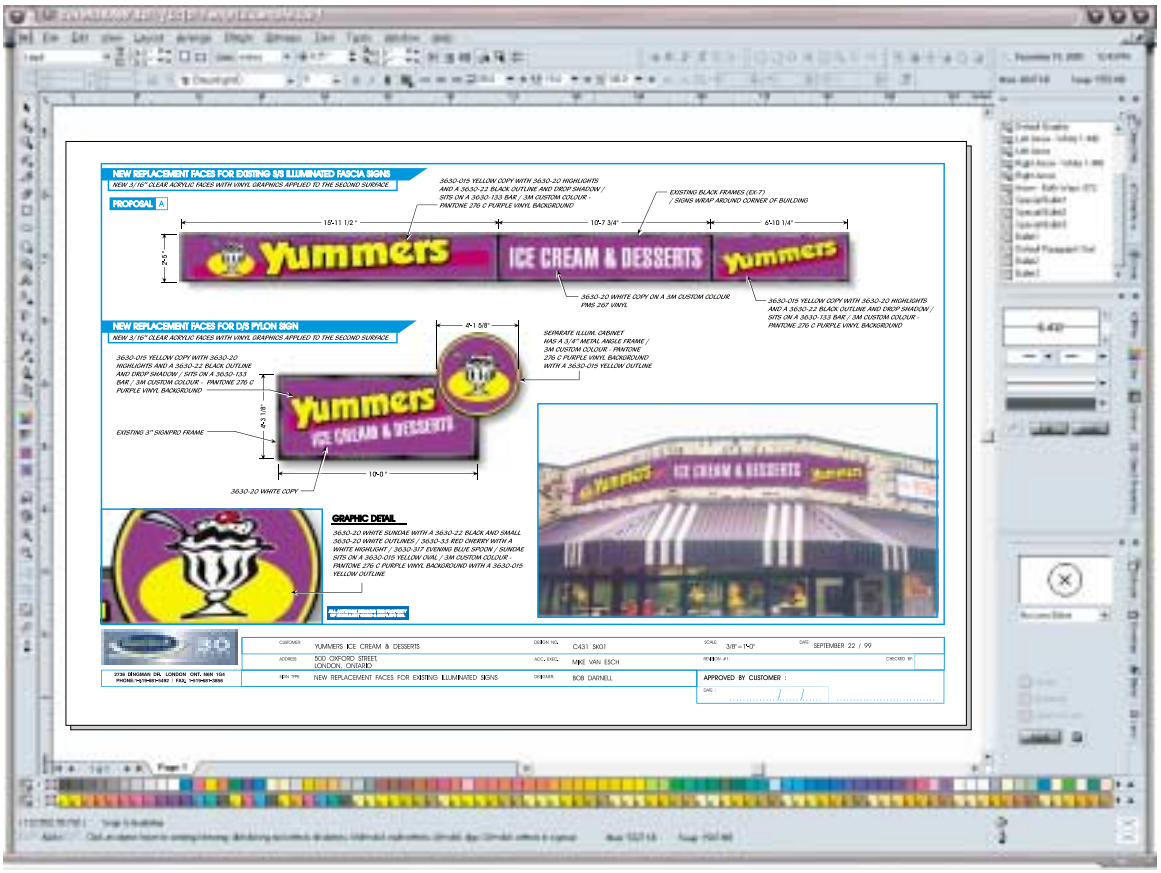


*Figure 1: Here's what my workspace looks like*

iarity and control of all the tools at your fingertips is no small feat, but you'll get great satisfaction and increased quality when you have a full grasp of the tools available. All that is required is the will to master them instead of accepting what the computer spits out by default.

CorelDraw has evolved to encompass many applications, but wasn't created specifically for the sign designer. Fortunately, Corel created this program to be extremely flexible. It is the most customizable design software that I have ever seen. I cannot understate the importance of this. It empowers us to create a work environment tailored exclusively to our needs, instead of forcing us to use it the way the developer dictates.

Here the developers have given us the means to optimize how we work. It makes sense to spend the time to customize the program around your needs. Although the number of features you can change may seem a little intimidating at first, the time invested here will repay itself over and over as you use the program daily. I see many people use CorelDraw in its default form, and I believe that they are missing out.

I suspect that I use CorelDraw differently than many of you. I am not saying, "This is how to work in CorelDraw," but merely presenting the methods that I employ, which should help you compare and analyze how you work.

I am continually fascinated when I watch others use this program. There are so many ways of doing the same things, and none of them are wrong. With so many versions of CorelDraw out there, you may find that some things I mention aren't in the exact location I say they are. With a little detective work, you should be able to locate them. Read the help files or manual if you get stuck.

**Working in high resolution**

Many of us have to look at our computer monitors for hours at a time, so it is worthwhile to invest in a good quality monitor. The eyestrain isn't worth the money you might save with a cheap monitor, and they don't become obsolete as fast as the rest

of the computer system. You can always take your monitor to the next upgraded system.

At work, I have a dual monitor setup. One is a 19 in. and the other, an older 15 in. The bigger monitor allows me to work with a 1600-by-1200-pixel screen resolution. Many people have a problem with things being too small at the higher resolutions, but it has its benefits. At a higher screen resolution, you have a larger work area. Since there are more pixels defined in your work area, vector graphics appear smoother and more detailed than at lower resolutions. This larger workspace allows you to have more tools available to you for quick access, and you will also have to scroll and zoom around the screen far less than at lower resolution.

At 1600 by 1200 resolution, I found some things a little too small, so I increased the default system text size under the Windows control panel (Control Panel | Display | Appearance | Items). I also boosted the size of the borders around CorelDraw's tool buttons (Tools | Options | Customize | Button Sizes and Border Sizes).

**The workspace**

You may think my workspace is very cluttered (see Figure 1). It would be if I didn't use these tools all the time. I use this program for a lot of technical illustrations and construction details as well as for graphic design, so my needs may be a lot different from yours. I've found that by having almost all of the tools that I use frequently displayed on the screen all of the time, I am able to work with more efficiency. I even leave the dockers out all the time and just work in the remaining space.

The important thing is to set things up the way you want them to be. I often hear people say that CorelDraw is too complicated, and that there are too many ways to do the same thing. Besides my belief that it is not a bad thing to have several choices on how to do something, it is also possible to hide any of the options, buttons or features that you find annoying. You could strip this program down to the look of CorelDraw 4 if you wanted to.

**At higher screen resolution, you have a larger work area and smoother vector graphics.**

Much of this can be achieved by going to Tools | Options | Customize | Toolbars and navigating through all the tools available. You can drag and drop any of the tools between this dialog box and your workspace. It can be a little complicated, so consult the help file if you're having trouble. There are slight differences on how this is done between the different versions of CorelDraw, but you should be able to find what you want.

You might want to save your new workspace so that you can revert to the default workspace without problems. I've saved my workspace on my Internet Web server so that I can download it from anywhere.

**Working in scale**

Whether it is in Architectural or Metric Ratio Scale, working in scale allows me to design everything on standard sizes of paper. Since we print out all of our proposals, working in scale allows us to measure things on the print with a scale ruler. You don't have to be at the computer to be able to tell what size a design element is. When you're working in scale, you still work in real world measurements, but CorelDraw handles the scale.

So, if you worked in 1-in.-equals-1-ft. scale, you would draw a 4-by-8-ft. rectangle, but it would actually only measure 4 by 8 in. on the printed page. You can also have multiple scales on the same page. If you wanted to enlarge a specific detail, you would change the scale you're working in and keep drawing. Always label what scales are used on the page to avoid confusion. This lets people away from the computer accurately measure things off your sketch.

A quicker way to access what scale you use is to right click on one of the rulers, select "ruler setup" and then click on the "scale" button. Some people work full size and then scale it down to print. Working in scale just reverses the process—you enlarge the sketch when you go to produce it full size. This also allows you to keep a consistent look between your sketches, which I will elaborate on in the next issue.❑

*Bob Darnell is a sign artist/designer for Excellent Signs and Displays (www.excellentsigns .com) in London, Ontario, Canada. You can view his personal online portfolio at www.members.home.net /bob.darnell.* *Portions of this article first appeared on the Letterville Web site, www.letterhead.com, and are reprinted with permission. If you have a question about this article, posting it on the Letterville Bulletin Board will ensure a prompt answer.*