

# Step-by-Step: Airbrushed bevels with Photoshop

Put that twinkle in your eye quickly—here's how

By Dan Antonelli

## Software:

Adobe Photoshop 7.0, EyeCandy Photoshop Plug-In, Macromedia Freehand 10, Roland's Color Choice

## Platform/OS:

Macintosh G5 1.8 GHZ Dual Processor, OS X Version 10.3.6, 2 GB Ram

## Output:

Roland DGA, 800-542-2307  
www.rolanddga.com

With the onset of digital printing, a new type of sign designer has emerged—a digital sign designer. The best of this new breed of designers are folks who embrace the technology available and have the roots in traditional sign skills. This rare combination of experience makes them extremely valuable.

I consider myself fortunate to have been schooled at a young age in the traditional methods of sign painting. From swinging a quill to pinstriping, I learned the basics of sign painting—letter construction, how to handle a brush, etc. Then I went to college and earned a degree in Communications and Advertising.

There I was schooled in computer graphic design work.

I had two foundations somewhat under my belt—traditional sign work and (at the time in 1992) the cutting edge of desktop publishing. Five years later it was easier for me to see how the two approaches could be merged together. With the advent of digital printing in the last few years, the experience of using an actual airbrush makes replicating it in a digital environment so much more intuitive. I certainly don't miss the fumes or mess though!

The future of those who wish to stay on the creative edge of this industry lies with

## An overview of the process

We're importing a vector-based image (the lettering), which was designed in an illustration program (i.e. Illustrator, Freehand, Corel or some sign application), into Photoshop® where it will be rasterized into a bitmap image. We're then beveling that image, adding some simple airbrushed "hot spots" and then exporting it out of Photoshop as an RGB JPG file. Back in our original illustration program, we'll import that JPG back into our file, place it over the lettering and paste it inside of it. The process of beveling *JMV* is the same used for *Landscaping*. For the sake of space, we'll illustrate how the *JMV* was done.



Here are the two bitmap Photoshop JPG images that will be placed into the vector-based logo design. You want to keep the vector-based attributes of the design when you export your file to your digital printer so that it can use the cut line for contour cutting.





**Step 1. Export the lettering** In Freehand I've sized the logo to the size needed for the truck lettering. In this case it goes behind the driver's door, and will be printed at 23½ in. wide by 15½ in. high. I want *JMV* to have a light gray beveled or carved look, so it's colored 10 percent black. Next I selected *JMV* only and hit copy. I'll create a new document in Photoshop and paste it in. (You can also export the *JMV* as an EPS file and import into Photoshop.)



**Step 2. Bring the lettering into Photoshop** The image I copied in Freehand stays in the memory. I can open a new document in Photoshop and it will automatically make it the size of the copied image. Once you set your resolution and mode (RGB) and hit *OK*, a new document will appear. I hit *Paste* and the *JMV* lettering will be dropped in. (If you were importing the image as an EPS, Photoshop would tell you the original size upon import and ask for the resolution to raster the EPS.) Note that we're working at only 144 dpi, which is more than adequate for this type of sign work. Once in Photoshop, you're ready to apply your special effects.



**Here's the vector-based design** before the main and subcopy lettering was beveled in Photoshop. Without any additional bells and whistles, this would be a satisfactory layout and logo design.

I struggled on this logo at first—unable to get *JMV* to play nice together. Initial logos present a challenge because it's unnatural for the reader, and often the letters don't look right next to each other.

Once I got the layout down, I played with some colors. They weren't quite synching up, so I e-mailed the design to Rich Dombey ([www.richdesignsinc.com](http://www.richdesignsinc.com)) for some input. Rich is probably one of the best when it comes to color harmony. We tried a few of Rich's suggestions, and e-mailed it to the client for approval. Thankfully, it was approved with no revisions.

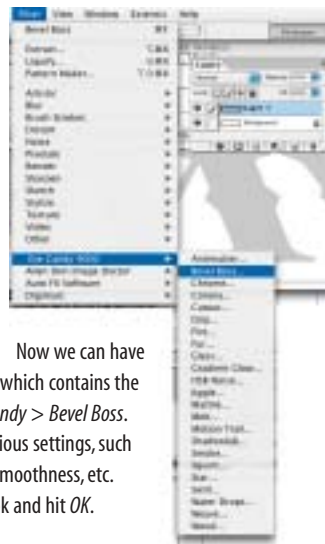
Five hours of design time went into this—two of which were spent trying to get *JMV* to work together. The logo design sold for \$750 and the truck lettering was \$500.

those who are most willing to embrace this new technology and utilize it in a manner that their competitors can't. They need to seize upon their vast design experience and produce the kind of jobs that set their work apart and showcase their abilities. All the technology in the world will not help a poor designer.

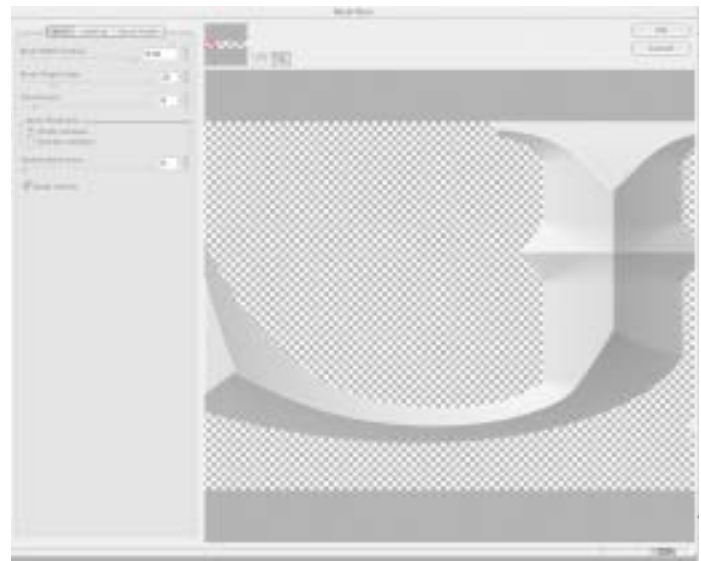
**Customer expectations and the future** I've had conversations with top sign artists whose argument is that their customers would never accept something digitally printed instead of hand painted or airbrushed. I disagree. Perhaps one reason they feel that way is the fear of a machine replicating their custom work. Another reason is that their customers haven't seen this high-end technology at work. And probably the last reason is fear that they'll have to learn a whole new way of doing something. That makes most people uncomfortable.

Well, the times they are changing. You either embrace change or get left behind. And soon enough you'll get some wide-eyed kid who is a pro at Photoshop replicating your customer's custom airbrush job—then printing and installing them in the same time it takes you to mask one door. That customer may also get his custom airbrushed logo printed as decals for all of his equipment. You couldn't airbrush all those for a reasonable price, but now he's got a digital logo that can be printed at any size for a minimal cost.

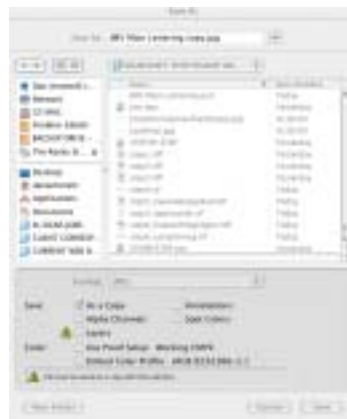
This is the way of the future, for better or



**Step 3. Apply the EyeCandy filters** Now we can have some fun. We're ready to apply an effect to *Layer 1*, which contains the *JMV* lettering. Under the *Filter* heading, select *EyeCandy > Bevel Boss*. This brings up a window where you can change various settings, such as lighting sources, bevel profiles, Bevel thickness, Smoothness, etc. I play with the settings until I'm happy with the look and hit *OK*.



**Step 4. Take out your airbrush but no paint thinner** Let's add some hotspots to the already beveled lettering. This is a simple way to further enhance what the EyeCandy Filter has done. Select the Brush tool, make your "paint" white and fire away, adding little highlights around the lettering. Don't go crazy or it starts looking overdone! I usually like to hit the corners where the bevel meets. It looks like 10 clicks in the corners and it's done. Time to export.



**Step 5. Export as JPEG**

I simply save the Photoshop file as a JPG with an image-quality setting of 10. I'm ready to import the JPG back into my illustration program.



**Step 6. Import and paste inside the original lettering** Back in my Illustration program the JPG should import at the exact size needed (if not, I'd resize it to the same exact size as the lettering). I place on top of the original *JMV* lettering, hit *Cut* then select the original *JMV* lettering. Select *Paste Inside* (or the equivalent in your illustration program). You may need to nudge the beveled graphic a little here and there so that it lays into the lettering as closely as possible.



**Step 7. Repeat steps 1 through 6 for Landscaping** I wanted to also bevel the word *Landscaping*, so I simply repeated the steps I used for *JMV*. Now for the final touch—adding some stars on a few of the hotspots.



**Step 8. Add a few stars and a cutting line, then export** Using my polygon tool, I created an eight-sided starburst. I manually moved a few corners so that it wasn't perfectly symmetrical, copied them, then placed them on top of a few of the airbrushed hot spots. I also created an outline path (shown as a pink rule) to cut the whole graphic on the printer. I saved it as an EPS file and dragged it into ColorChoice for printing on the VersaCAMM printer.



These two logos were done using the same technique.



Here's how it looks printed and on the truck door.

There's more on [www.signcraft.com](http://www.signcraft.com)

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for worse. What you choose to do about it is up to you. Will there always be a market for hand-painted, airbrushed work? Sure, but it's a segment of the business that I think is likely to decrease as the public becomes more accustomed to the capabilities of digital printing. Those that can still offer traditional as well as digital work will be a force to reckon with.

**It's not so hard...really!** So, what are we really talking about with these Photoshop tricks? Is it really that difficult? Why are so many airbrush purists so afraid of the

technology? Let's dispel the myth of it being difficult with a simple step by step for a design used on some truck lettering that was then printed on our Roland VersaCAMM printer. ♦§



Dan Antonelli owns Graphic D-Signs, Inc. in Washington, New Jersey. He is the author of *Logo Design for Small Business* and *Logo Design for Small Business 2*. He's recently started a Web site, [www.signshopmarketing.com](http://www.signshopmarketing.com), which is dedicated to the marketing needs of sign shops.

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