Here's a step-by-step look at a popular way to add dimension to cut-out letters

Step-by-step: Letter trim for plastic letters

by Barbara Perry

A great way to give dimension and appeal to otherwise flat letters is letter trim—a flexible plastic-coated metal strip that can be formed around the edge of a cut-out letter. It's used with acrylic letters since the two plastics are easily bonded together.

On channel letters, the trim serves another purpose beyond decoration—it provides a way to attach the letter face to the fabricated aluminum cabinet. This is one of the most common uses for letter trim.

The trim is available in a variety of colors and comes in several widths to accommodate different letter thicknesses. It requires only typical hand tools to install. (See the *Tools and Materials* checklist.) The letter trim is bonded to the face with an adhesive designed for this task. We use WeldOn #14 and #16 [IPS Corp., 310-898-3300, 800-421-2677; www.ipscorp.com]. With a basic understanding of how the trim is applied, you'll be on your way to adding a new twist to your cut-out letters.

There are four methods that I am aware of to do letter trim.

Hand-held method:

This is my least favorite. You literally hold the trim in place and bond the letter trim as you go. Although the cement dries quickly, it doesn't set fast enough for me. I find this method clumsy, slow, and unprofessional.

Pegboard method:

This method uses an inexpensive work surface that anyone can make, and it lasts for years. You can make the work surface by cutting a 1/4-in. thick pegboard in half and stacking the halves together to form a 4-by-4-ft. work surface. Or for a larger surface, you could stack two 1/4-in. thick pegboards together. Run beads of glue between the rows of holes and place the other board on top. Line up the holes, and place a few pegs in to keep the holes aligned until it sets.

Then all you need are a hundred pegs or so and about half as many wooden wedges and you're ready to start. This method has one major limitation: sometimes you need to support the trim where there isn't a hole to put a peg in. Then you have to work the letter around so that you can find a hole to put a peg in, or you could use a wooden wedge to get a close fit. It takes some practice to get this method down.

Nail method:

Here you use a plywood work

Tools and Material Checklist

- ✔ Tin snips
- ✔ Cloth tape measure
- ✔ Heat gun
- ✔ Weld-on No. 4 (in a bottle with a needle-like spout)
- ✔ Weld-on No. 16 (in a small squeeze bottle)
- ✔ File
- ✔ Flat plastic letters
- ✔ Letter trim
- ✔ Metal table or metal sheet
- ✔ Magnets
- ✔ Metal scribe
- ✔ Notcher
- ✔ Denatured alcohol

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Figure 1. Once the letters are cut out, remove the protective paper from the plastic sheet. To avoid errors, write "FACE" on the front of each letter. When wrapping letter trim, the letter must be face down.

Figure 2. Clean the back of the letter with denatured alcohol. The alcohol dries quickly, removes dirt and oils, and doesn't leave a residue. Thus, the trim will fuse better to the plastic.

Figure 3. Slightly round the corners of the letter. The letter trim can't give you a sharp crease—it's too thick and flexible—so, by rounding the corners of the letter you will get a closer fit.

Figure 4. Starting at the top of the letter, measure the perimeter and add two inches. This overage will cover any variance in the length. (You can also use this small leftover piece later for Figure 13.)

Figure 5. Cut the letter trim to length with the tin snips. We buy it in 10-ft. strips or in 100-ft. rolls. Precutting the trim into a smaller size, of course, makes it easier to work with.

Figure 6. Support the letter that's to be wrapped with a couple of magnets on each side. Begin the trim at the top of the letter so that the seam of the letter trim will be on top of the letter. The trim is wrapped with the flat side on the outside and the bevel side on the inside, with the bevel resting on the face of the letter. Note: If doing the inside of the letter such as for an 0 or an A, the seam should be on the bottom of the letter. The seams won't be so noticeable if done this way.

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Figure 7. When you need to make an outside bend, use a metal scribe to scratch the trim where you need to notch it. Taking a little extra care to mark the bends accurately is well worth it. You'll get a neater job, plus save time and material, too.

Figure 8. Remove the trim and make the notch. Caution: When cutting the notch with a notcher do not cut too deep. You don't need to remove the entire bevel of the trim to get enough space to allow a sharp crease. Removing about half should be enough. If there's a gap in the crease of the trim, you removed too much. Experiment with a scrap to get the correct notch. This step will be repeated several times on common letters, such as E or T, so it won't take long to get the hang of it.

Figure 9. For an inside turn, simply press your thumb against the trim where you need to make a turn and bend the letter trim. This step will also be repeated often on many letters.

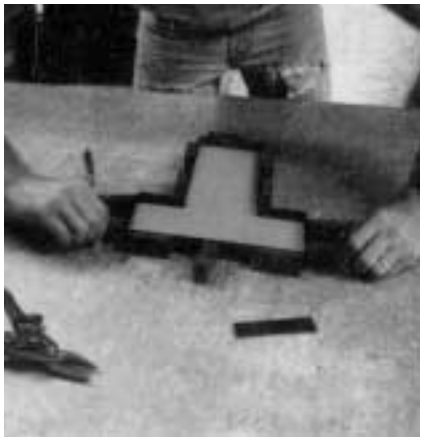

Figure 10. When wrapping the letter, use just a few magnets to hold the trim in place. The fewer magnets you use, the less work. It's faster, too. Once the trim is fitted, press several magnets against the trim to ensure a close fit.

Figure 11. If the trim is too stiff or won't stay next to the letter, use the heat gun. A few seconds of heat will soften the trim, and allow a tight fit. Be careful—overheating may cause damage to the trim.

12. When the wrapping is finished, and the trim is secure, press down on the plastic letter to make sure the face of the letter is resting on the bevel of the letter trim. Don't press too hard. Plastic letters crack easily at times.

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Figure 13. Now cut a ½-by-½-in. square from the piece of trim you have left over after wrapping the letter. Remove the bevel and the rolled edge so that it is flat. Place it on the seam on the inside of the letter. This will be used to strengthen the seam.

Figure 14. Using Weld-On No. 4, bond the piece on the seam and run the glue around the inside edge of the letter. Use the applicator with a needle-like spout. The glue is actually a powerful solvent that fuses the plastic coating of the trim to the plastic letter. Be careful not to use too much as it will deface the trim.

surface, and simply drive a nail wherever you need support. The problem with this method is you must remove the nails and re-nail every time you have to remove the trim to make a notch for an outside turn. That's too much like work for me!

Magnet method:

As you may have guessed, this is my favorite, and the only method I use. It is efficient, professional, and economical. With this method, you work on a sheet of metal and use powerful magnets to hold the trim in place. These particular magnets are expensive, but they last forever and are extremely easy to use. Here at Miller Signs, we have firmly attached a sheet of metal to our work table, so the metal does-

Figure 15. Look the letter over carefully. If there's a mistake, now is the time to correct it. You can still pull the trim away from the letter if it hasn't had too much time to bond. If all is well, run a bead of Weld-On No. 16 around the inside edge. Again, be careful not to apply too much. This will ensure a tight bond.

Figure 16. Finally, wipe the face clean, and give the trim a final inspection to make sure it is seated against the face of the letter and bonded to the plastic. If everything is okay, your letter is complete and it's time to get started on the next one. With practice you'll find that the process goes quickly and smoothly.

Source list for letter trim material

E & T Plastics, Michael Singer, 45-45 37th St., Long Island City, NY 11101; 800-221-9555, 718-729-6226, Fax 718-392-6277

Lido Plastics, Inc., 15204 S. Broadway, Gardena, CA 90248; 213-321- 6070, 310-323-0330, Fax 213-321-6074

Standard Neo-Lite Co., Inc., Gladys Miller, 200 Rodeo Dr., Edgewood, NY 11717; 516-242-1700; Fax 516-242-7913

Wagner Zip-Change, Inc., James Leone, 3100 Hirsch St., Melrose Park, IL 60160; 800-3230744, Fax 800-243-4924

For a video on doing jewelite letter trim, contact **Jewelite Signs**, 106 Reade St., New York, NY 10013, 212-233-1900, Fax 212-233-1998

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n't lift up every time you remove a magnet.

These photos show our letter trim procedure, using the magnet method to apply trim to $^{3}/_{16}$-in. letters cut from acrylic sheet. However, these same steps can be applied with the other methods.

Of course, if you don't want to do your own letter trim, you can buy the letters already trimmed from a wholesaler. Many wholesalers offer this service. Hopefully these photos will at least give you a basic understanding of the process.

The letters shown in this series of photos were the faces for a set of channel letters, but don't see it as something used only on channel letters. You can use letter trim on any flat plastic letter. It always adds dimension and appeal to the letter.❑

Barbara Perry works with Miller Signs in North Charleston, South Carolina.

The set of letters that were made in the step-by-step photos were faces for a set of channel letters. Letter trim, though, can be used on any flat plastic letter, graphic, or panel. It always adds dimension and enhances the sign. If you want, you can buy your letters with trim already applied from many wholesalers.