

The wonderful on-site quick sketch

It's delicious—and made from scratch, just for you!

By Bob Sauls

Certain aspects of our craft are so basic that we can easily take them for granted. They become so familiar to us that we cease to appreciate their value to the customers we serve, and to ourselves as artisans. We ignore them to our own detriment.

If sign making has become increasingly about typesetting and weeding, and we, as sign makers, grow bored with the day-to-day, it is no wonder. Did you go in to this field to become faster and better with computers or was it a compulsion to use your gifts as a designer and craftsman? In spiritual parlance this is known as *losing your first love*. The cure is always to go back and take stock, to become reinvigorated by what is important. For me, that means the fulfillment of sharing my craft—which, at its core, is drawing.

Let me share with you my thoughts on producing acceptable quick sketches and their ability to showcase your know-how, on the spot. But first let us rekindle some romance

by taking a fresh look at our gift. *We surely cannot expect prospects to be excited about what we can do for them, if we are not excited about it ourselves.*

Get fired up I recall my tenth grade Humanities teacher presenting slides of prehistoric cave drawings and saying the first definition of art was magic. The drawings were crude depictions of hunters slaying their prey. The cave artists apparently believed that by drawing on the walls, they would



be granted a successful hunt. While I am not ready to go quite that far, I am convinced something extraordinary does happen when we express ourselves through art. It is so simple that we can overlook the wonder of it.

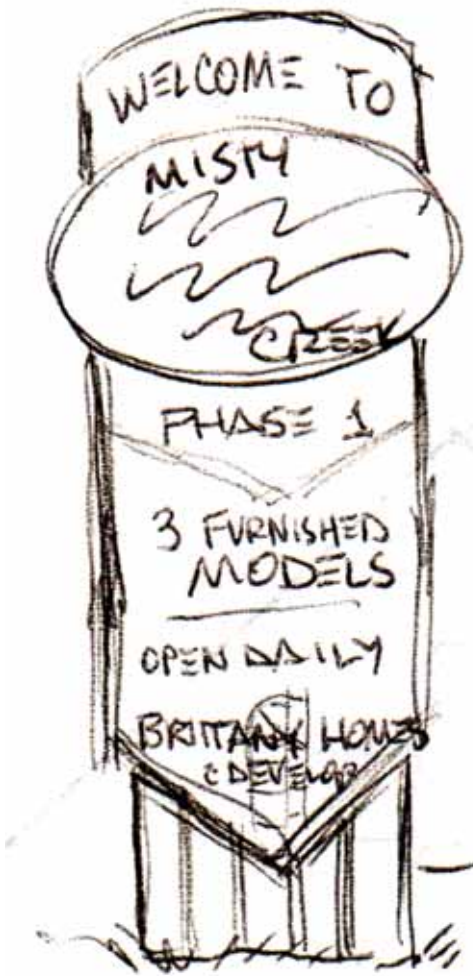
While I believe that only the Almighty can take a thought and speak it into existence, I am convinced we have been given the *student-version-with-training-wheels* aspect of this gift. The ability to conceptualize and record a thought on the page or build with available mediums is a large part of what it means to be fully human.

While we can only produce with what is available, I must add what we do bring to the show: all we have seen, what we know, all that inspires us, and the awareness of the process itself. Often while sketching I'll find myself in a certain "zone" where the creativity is flowing like a river, one idea sparking another. This is what I mean by the process itself. In mythology, this has been referred to as the muse.

The loose, quick sketch is a record of the creative process, because even a rough, drawn-over mistake documents vitality.



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I stand in awe at the genius of the great masters' finished pieces but I feel a kinship as I am allowed to see the studies behind the finished work. Before you dismiss my comparisons of sign makers to great masters, consider this: they drew from the very same sources and used the same basic tool. That tool, of course, is the line.

Your unique ability As a children's Sunday school teacher, I was trained in the differing ways that children learn. Some respond best to games, drama, writing, music, nature and art. I was warned of the dangers of stagnation, of teaching repeatedly from our comfort zone. As you have correctly guessed, my kids drew a lot. This led me not only to a great frustration but also a better understanding of our abilities as individuals.

When I asked the children to illustrate



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a story, I was prepared to help them along. I was not prepared for this question: "How can I draw?" My first thought was, "Child, are you missing a piece? You simply pick up the pencil and do it! See? Like this! It's easy!"

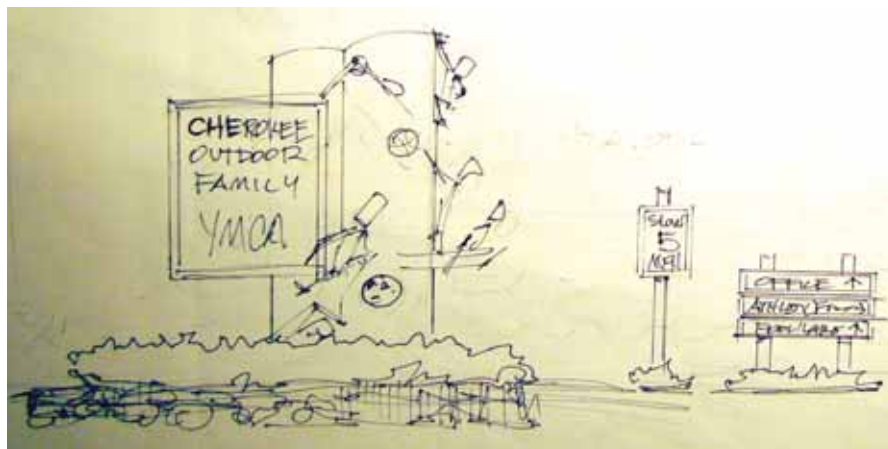
The fact is, I might as well have just asked them to fly around the room. How could something that comes so natural for me, as inherent as remembering to breathe, be so difficult for others? I had glossed over all of my years of patient practice and was unaware



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of something else, too.

The question of a natural-born ability verses a skill attained by much practice has always fueled speculation. The fact that a poor draftsman can be taught to improve tells us that it is not all natural. (Granted, this type of improvement will be mechanical in nature, by applied principals.) Likewise, the certainty that a good draftsman can be inspired by improvement, even far beyond his or her own expectations, affirms that the spark or passionate desire is a rare and powerful thing. It is not necessarily *taught* so much as it is *given*. Both types can be nurtured. One will internalize and take off at warp drive while the other has just endured an art appreciation lesson.

The uninitiated seldom read publications of this type. I will assume that you do carry that passionate spark, so I will speak bluntly. Let us treat it for the gift that it is. Honor it and Heaven by its application. We help ourselves only as we help others. Who would want to be held to account for sitting on such a treasure? It's time to draw on the cave wall!

Our quick sketch Many salesmen utilize the talking pad as a tool. They hold that if a prospect sees something written down it carries more credibility. We too can use it—but ours is much more effective because it is magic. It showcases not only our knowledge and products but our skill as well.

Never underestimate the value of your gift. More than likely your client has wished they had your ability and will be quietly impressed with your demonstration of it.

Another advantageous quality of the hand-drawn sketch is that it has a certain vigor that the computer-generated sketch will lose. In a recent thread on this subject at www.creativesignmakers.com, John Byrd of Ball Ground, GA Posted this:

“There is something difficult to define but hard to miss about the effectiveness of a hand-drawn sketch. I have gone back to them lately and the response from the client is always favorable. The impression that you are so creatively able that the idea you have for them can come right out of your hand is a wonderful thing when you’re trying to win over the client. I do still use computer-generated work for sketches, but when I can, hand-drawn ideas communicate something transcendent to the actual sketch. There is a life to it that is, as I say, hard to define but impossible to miss.”

Enjoying what is happening Our procedures will be as varied as our personalities. Some trial-and-error will be involved, especially for those new to sales. I can add this to the mix

for you who may be gun shy in this department. In most cases the prospect has called you because they have a real need. By now you know much more about sign making than you even imagine, and certainly far more than your prospect, so relax and be helpful. I do not consider myself particularly good at multi-tasking, so if I can talk and draw at the same time you should be fine.

Whenever possible, I go to the client's location. There are several reasons for this. We can observe the actual terrain and architecture, which I find very helpful because like many sign designer types, I am very visually-oriented. And by going to the client, we also demonstrate genuine interest in the prospect's needs.

When you are there with the client, do more listening than talking. Always get permission before you begin to ask guided, qualifying questions, such as asking for a budget. In most cases the client will tell you exactly what you need to know in order to sell to them.

In short order we can discern if the on-site sketch is a good option, based upon the rapport established. At its best, the sketch is done with good give-and-take between you and the client. Be enthusiastic about making the sketch. Let them see your enjoyment of the process while addressing their need. Your love for the craft is infectious and can take the edge off their guarded feeling that you are going to sell them something, even though that is precisely what you will do.

Take the information that the client offers and incorporate it into the sketch. In a secondhand way they will be taking part in the creative process and will hold some ownership of the drawing.

Our quick sketch will remain loose and vague by intention. The client may not have a good mental picture of their design. That does not mean that they have small expectations for it.

Let me make an analogy. When our children arrive they are a clean slate, full of potential. They could grow up to be anything! Each sign project is like that—at the outset it is full of potential and it, too, could be anything.

As genetics, environment and choices alter children, so does each decision we make on the sketch. We want to keep the sketch alive and full of potential by staying as vague and unfinished as possible. We want this thought to occur to our client sometime during the sketching process: "If he can do this on the spot, just imagine what his finished sketch will be like!"

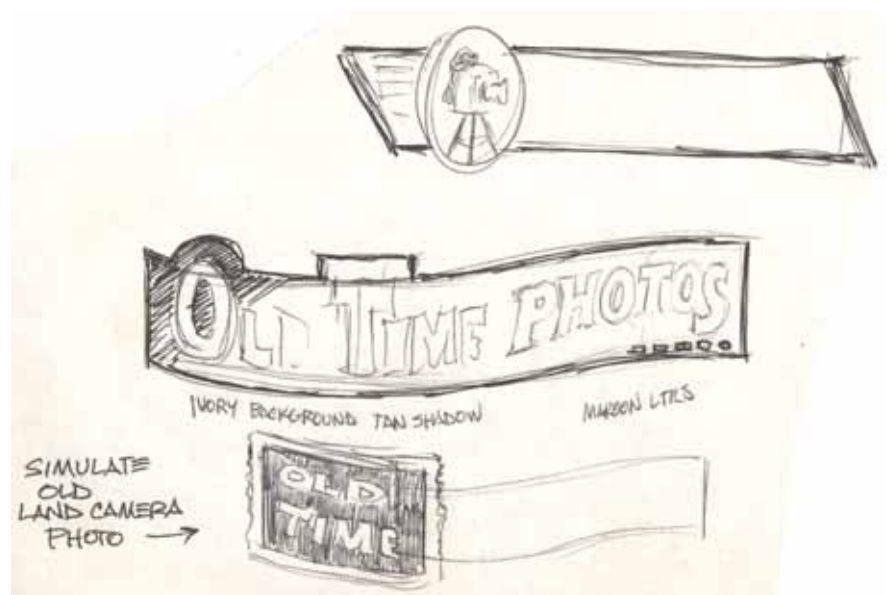
Oftentimes your rough sketch will be enough to gain the client's confidence and

the sale can be closed at this point. This can include getting the deposit now, rather than when finished sketches are presented. Depending on the scope of the project, a finished sketch may not even be necessary. This is one more benefit of the on-site quick sketch—it can eliminate steps and get you and the client to your mutual goals sooner. Back at your shop, you can make the myriad design decisions necessary, away from the client and heat of the moment. The short wait for the finished sketch will only add to the client's anticipation.

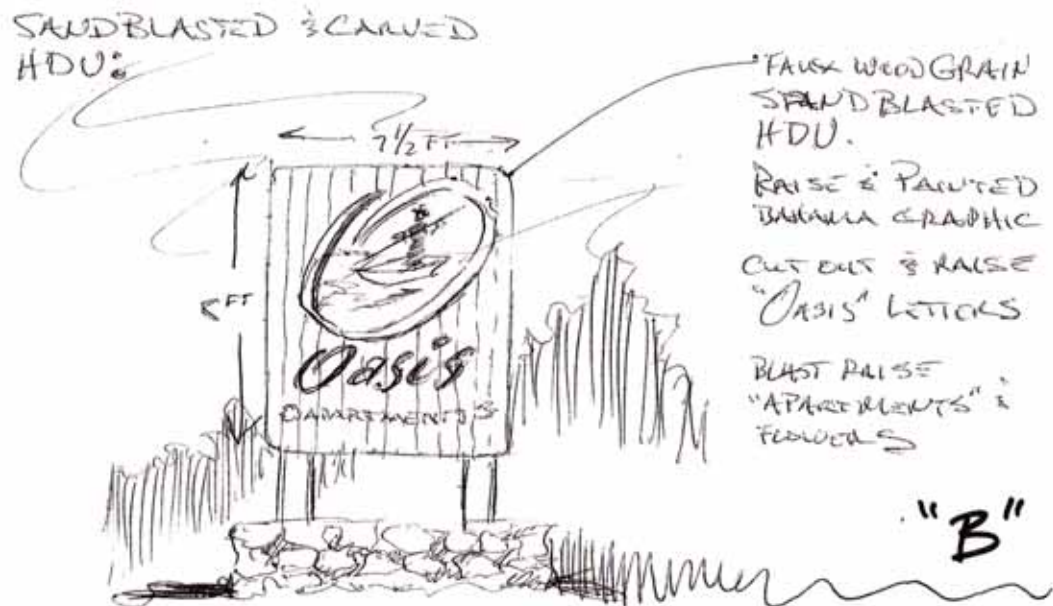
Much debate takes place among sign artists over the issue of charging for our sketches. I hold that the quick sketch is a nice bridge between the two schools of thought. In many cases the sketch itself affords the opportunity to nail down the sale or at least gives you an opportunity to establish a budget.

The effective use of the quick sketch will accomplish helpful things for us: It will gain trust in our abilities; it will confirm that we are on the same train of thought as our prospect, before valuable computer design time is invested; it will help the client move from a *prospect with a need* to a *customer being served*.

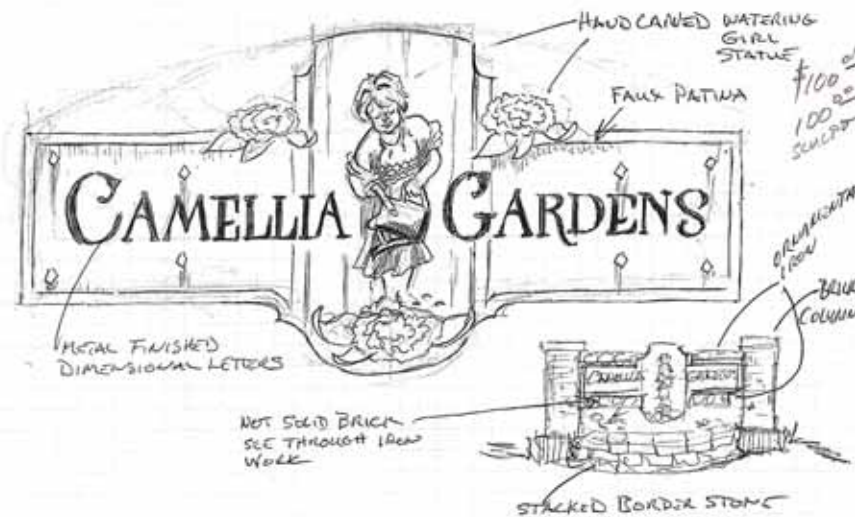
Humbly tie the knot You will have your own technique and develop a sense of when it is appropriate to close the sale. Prospects may give you just the right nod of the head or an approving smile. They may even compliment your talent. Here I would like to add a word



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of caution: don't be smug about it. Very few appreciate an ass, no matter how gifted he might be. When a prospect compliments my work I usually look down and say that after 30 years in this business it was time I learned something. I then glance up and smile or wink.

Successful quick sketches When I began selling signs in 1980 I turned to my father for advice in sales. I'll always remember his pithy admonitions. Dad barely made it out of high school but he did make a very good living in sales and running small service businesses

for over 40 years. One of his favorite sayings was, "If you can sell it by saying, 'Blah' don't say, 'Blah, blah'."

The quick sketch is not intended to be anything other than a sales tool—use it to clarify your customer's wishes, demonstrate your skills and hopefully help you gain the customer's trust and a deposit—all in one meeting.

The quick sketch can be artful and scratchy at once, but should never be over-drawn or too specific. Remember, just say "Blah." I know that when I'm sketching, I have to make myself stop at the right time. I enjoy sketching so much that it's easy for me to overwork it. If you overwork a quick sketch you'll kill your baby's potential and she'll become cluttered. Strive for loose, flowing lines. Think of the quick sketch as just a taste of what the finished design may be like.

Often I have nailed down a sale by simply scratching out the shape of a panel and indicating it hanging below a bracket arm—no text, no graphics, just the basic concept of the sign shape. Finally, never feel locked in by the quick sketch as presented to the prospect, since your best work and ideas may come to you later at the office. •SC



Bob Sauls' shop, Sauls Signs & Designs, is in Tallahassee, Florida.