

What's it cost to produce this overlaid plywood sign?

Job costing is the basis for knowing what you have to charge

By David Showalter

If there's anything that can really open your eyes to where your time and money is going, it's keeping track of every minute and every dime spent producing a particular sign. I don't do it as often as I used to, but when I do, it's well worth it. If your shop's like mine, you've got several jobs in progress at once. Working on these jobs—and running your shop—can keep you from accurately knowing how much production time you have invested in a sign.

Materials:
(with approximate costs)

- Two sheets of 3/4-in. double-faced overlaid plywood\$116
- Primer: one quart or less\$8
- Finish enamel: one quart or less ...\$12
- Three 9-in. roller covers\$3
- One 3-in roller cover\$2
- Sandpaper, edge filler\$2
- High-performance vinyl\$5
- Application tape\$4
- Total ..\$152

And that—plus knowing your overhead—is the basis for knowing what to charge. It's safe to say that if you're really in touch with these two

factors, you'll know how to accurately price your work and your shop will prosper.

On this pair of routine 4-by-6-ft. overlaid plywood sign faces, I tracked time and materials carefully. To me, this job seemed like it

involved more time to produce than the roughly seven hours it took. But, we had about eight jobs going while we were doing this one, including a couple that customers needed in a hurry, so it seemed to be in progress for longer than that.

We screen print decals for Lingvai Excavating and letter some of their trucks. They recently moved into a new shop and wanted a sign with their logo on it. We made these two, 3/4-in. overlaid plywood faces and installed them on a simple 5-by-5-ft. base that I designed and they built.

The backhoe graphic came from a truck door painted by a mentor, Jim Johnson of West Unity, Ohio, better known as O'John. He's trying to retire right now, but most of his customers won't let him. O'John is a great sign painter and cartoonist, and when he does graphics like this, they have lots of cool shadowing and highlights. I wish I could match that.

There wasn't a lot of design time involved. These are their company colors. I switched to



4-by-6-ft. overlaid plywood sign by David Showalter (with apologies to O'John)



1. Sales and design: 30 minutes Here's the sales sketch used for the project. The customer asked me to design a simple base that they could build, then we would install the faces on it.



2. Make pattern: 15 minutes We started by laying out the type in my Gerber Graphix Advantage software, then out-putting a pounce pattern on the cutter. Jamie Reynolds does my computer work. (Jamie also shot these excellent photos.—Editor)



3. Cut out panels: 40 minutes
I pounced this on the overlaid plywood, and cut it to shape with a scroll saw.



4. Sand edges: 15 minutes I used a belt sander to smooth the edges, then an orbital sander to ease the sharp edges all the way around the panels. Paint pulls away from a sharp edge, leaving a thin coating where you need it the most.



5. Prime: 30 minutes I primed with an acrylic latex primer, Jay Cooke's All-Purpose Sign Primer [HAR Adhesives, 216-391-1255]. I sand and tack rag off between each dry coat.



6. Fill edges: 15 minutes When dry, I filled the voids in the edges with Minwax two-part exterior wood filler. I've since switched to 35-year caulk. I fill the bare edge before priming, run my finger over the caulk, let dry two hours then razor blade it off the edge. I picked this up from Troy Strane, Signs & Designs, Quincy, Michigan.



7. Apply two coats of finish: 60 minutes Next, I applied a coat of gray enamel and let it dry. The blue finish coat covered better over gray than it would have over white. I used 1Shot [219-949-1684, www.1shot.com] enamel and finished the panels, front and back.



8. Mask and pounce: 15 minutes When dry, I applied the masking—I use R Tape® [800-440-1250, www.rtape.com]—and pounced the pattern.



9. Cut masks for copy and art: 30 minutes I hand cut the mask with a No. 11 X-acto knife.



10. Roll copy and art: 20 minutes With a 3-in. foam roller, I rolled on white enamel.



11. Outline: 60 minutes I removed the mask, and then brushed on the outline and shade.



12. Paint art: 40 minutes The graphic was hand painted with enamels.



13. Paint borders: 40 minutes The border was hand lettered with a #18 quill.



14. Cut, weed and apply vinyl: 15 minutes High-performance Calon®II vinyl [Arlon, 800-232-7161, www.arlon.com] was used for the secondary copy.

a typestyle close to O'John's original hand lettering. I decided to do a cutout to get away from the plain-old-rectangle look.

It's a bit unusual by today's standards in that there are just a couple lines of vinyl lettering, used for the secondary copy. Everything else is paint, because the customer prefers that.

What should this job sell for? You can determine that from your hourly rate (based on your overhead) and your markup on materials. A markup of 50 to 100 percent is typical. If you're not sure what your hourly rate should be, you may want to fill out the worksheet in Jeff Cahill's article, *An accurate hourly rate is the basis for effective pricing* (*SignCraft* May/June 1989), which is available on www.signcraft.com.

The times are for actual labor time for each task, including setup, such as opening paint and setting up sawhorses. Remember that there were two faces involved. Drying time isn't included—or are interruptions, but who has those? •❧



David Showalter's shop, David Design, is in Bryan, Ohio

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