Danthonia Designs

Custom dimensional signs from “Down Under”

By Joe McKernan

Where: Inverell, New South Wales, Australia

Shop size: 3000 square feet

Graphics equipment: PC with Signmate Pro, and a Roland CAMM-1 pro cutter

Market area: Australia / North America

The sign business is our main source of income here at Danthonia. When I say “our,” I’m speaking of the Danthonia Bruderhof (see www.bruderhof.com), where over 50 of us live together in a “Christian community.” Generally we have about eight people in the shop, but over 15 people in our community have the skills to jump in and help as needed. There is a lot of job overlap and “all hands on deck” opportunities. We do enough cross training so that each staff member can do a number of tasks proficiently.

As a team, we have experience in the following areas: marketing, sales, graphic arts, woodworking, metalworking, manufacturing, R&D, sandblasting, hand carving, hand sculpting, gilding, fine arts and illustration. Together, we can tackle major projects that no individual among us could accomplish single-handedly.

Equipment

We use three PC computers for our sales, office and design work. An Olympus E10 digital camera and Epson stylus 1270 printer are used to create our promotional material. We also have a Roland cutter for sandblast and carving masks.

Other than that, we have sandblast equipment and simple woodworking machines:

This 22-by-24-in. sign is part of a system that hangs on a number of houses in our Bruderhof Community here. Each of our houses have a name and we wanted to make signs that even the youngest children would be able to recognize and enjoy.

Standing left to right: JoAnn Fischli, Tony Fischli, Ben Zimmerman, Steph Barth, Stella Barth, Phil Wipf; Seated: Nancy and Joe McKernan

This is a 16-by-42-in. “portfolio sign” that we hung outside our shop to test the UV resistance of certain acrylic paints. It draws a lot of interest and enthusiasm from our customers.
This 48-in. diameter sign hangs on a small restaurant in Glen Innes (Celtic Capital of Australia). The manager printed up “sign T-shirts” that he sells for souvenirs and he has begun to set tables out under the sign in “sidewalk café” style. Based on customer response from the first few weeks, he told me this sign will double his business.

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Profile

Joe McKernan on the Danthonia team: Together, we can tackle major projects that no individual among us could accomplish single-handedly. Selling effective signs: A sign is not just a pretty picture; it has a job to do. Ask the user questions to identify their marketing needs. The marketing value of signs: We like to create signs that are really effective as marketing tools. I love it when a customer tells me our sign “doubled his business.”

table saw, panel saw, band saw, etc. There’s no CNC router—all of our carving and sculpting is done by hand with chisels and gouges. Most paint is brushed or rolled on. Gilding is handwork. We really emphasize the “handcrafted” aspect of our work, and each sign is approached as a serious piece of original artwork.

We do not get into the vinyl/plywood category at all. We generally carve 22-lb. high-density urethane board (and some redwood occasionally for indoor signs).

All the signs shown here are 22-lb. high-density urethane board laminated to a PVC panel. The PVC adds thickness and holds hardware for hanging. We use low sheen acrylic latex paint for backgrounds, usually in dark colors to contrast the gold. Carved lettering gets gloss acrylic latex, usually light colors to show off the carving shadows. For the pictorials and sculpted elements, we use acrylic artist paints. We are continually testing products that are available here in Australia for durability.

This was an exciting challenge. The fascia sign was 24 feet; the total system was 70 sq. ft. Mayfair’s opening day was approaching, but we managed to turn this project around in 12 working days.

Here is another job that was “more than a sign.” This customer turned our design into a landmark. They’ve used our 26-by-26-in. sign as an icon on all of the maps and brochures they have distributed. When the “landmark” sign shown on the map comes into view, they know where to turn. This approach not only increased business but helped them to win a tourism award.
We spare no expense on top materials. Our goal is to offer a dimensional sign that is the best money can buy. We also have a metal shop for creating hangers and post systems.

**A broad market** We sell locally, nationally and internationally. Rather than doing a wide range of types of signs for a small-town market, our business plan is to specialize in a very high-end dimensional niche for a much wider marketplace. Our style of hand-carved and hand-sculpted signs is scarce in Australia, so we have a lot of opportunity here as well as some pioneer work ahead. People here are investing in tourism, so that is a perfect entry point for us. Once the concept catches on, we may even start a sign school for sign writers who want to learn to carve signs.

In addition to retail work, we make our product line available to other sign makers. We anticipate that about half of our sales will go to North America as a result of the very favorable exchange rate. If any sign shop in the USA or Oz wants to sell the “Danthonia look,” they can land the sale; take a markup on the project management, customer service, installation, etc., while subcontracting the design and fabrication to us. Doing it that way means we enter the industry here as a potential vendor rather than another competitor.

Even for wholesale work we find it important to be involved in the design. A sign is not just a pretty picture; it has a job to do. I like to ask the end user a few questions to identify their on-site marketing needs. It is important for our marketing people to draw the right bull’s-eye before our designers start to shoot at it.

**The roots of the business** I personally got into dimensional signs in the mid 90s as cofounder of Acorn Enterprises, a redwood panel shop in Minnesota. We had an excellent reputation with customers in 40 states. Everything was going great, when suddenly the ownership of the factory building we were using changed.

Many of our customers hire us for a “sign and logo” combination. This upscale B&B used our original design on brochures, space ads, Web site and key chains. This sign is 46 by 53 in.

The local Inverell Shire council is a good customer of ours. This kind of hand-sculpted 40-in. diameter sign helps brand the town as a quality destination.
We created this 26-by-36-in. sample sign to show potential clients what gold leaf looks like up close. I had it in an elevator in Brisbane, when a fellow passenger began eyeing the sign closely. I asked if he was interested in dimensional signage. “No,” he shot back, “but I love a good cup of coffee. Where are you going to hang that thing?”

The challenge on this 72-by-72-in. project was to create a message board that looked classy enough to fit the rest of the sign. We came up with a system that uses letters that are custom-cut from refrigerator magnet material behind a hinged polycarbonate window. Letters are “kern-able” and we can use any font that we want to make them.

This 24-by-36-in. sign is part of a sign system we shipped to a coffee shop in the USA. The business is located along an historic road in Pennsylvania. They tell me a large percentage of their customers make the decision to stop based on the signage.

This is a 32-by-40-in. property sign that also represents the clients cattle business, which is on a 10,000-acre “station” — the Aussie word for ranch. City slickers might think all “Black Angus” look alike, but this customer sent us photos of her favorite bull and our artists sculpted a recognizable portrait that she was very pleased with.
hands. To make a long story short, the business had to be sold. Ouch!

The silver lining was that I learned a lot about the sign industry and marketplace during that chapter. When a new Bruderhof community in Australia was looking for a way to make a living, several of us suggested we try dimensional sign making. Due to zoning delays, Danthonia Designs has only been officially open since October 2001. So, we had to hit the road with our wheels spinning, and managed to win the shire’s “Best New Business Award” for 2002.

A niche, plus a knack for innovation We like to do the kind of work that does not look machine made—designs with large hand-sculpted and hand-painted elements, designs that use stained-glass pictorials, designs that are unique. I believe there will always be a niche for hand-made artistic signs and we would like to establish our place in that niche.

We like to create signs that are really effective as marketing tools. I love it when a customer tells me our sign “doubled his business,” or that “40 people came in on opening day just to comment on the new sign…. " When we hear things like that it means we did our conceptual stuff well before we ever picked up a chisel.

We also like to be innovative. We recently had a request from a high school for a really classy carved and gilded sign. But in addition, they needed a message board. We were unable to find a commercial message board with the right “look” for this project. So we created one from scratch, a totally new concept in message boards with “kern-able” letters, custom fonts and custom colors. We have gone through three prototypes and a lot of R&D to perfect this new concept, but we saw an unmet need in the market place for a beautiful message board.

We love to jump on a project like this and create a winner. It not only makes one customer happy, but also a well-designed product will bring in many more orders in the future.

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