

A professional, well-organized shop pays off

It boosts customer confidence, smooths production and improves your efficiency

On the About Us page of the Brushstrokes Signs & Awnings website, www.brushstrokesigns.ca, there's a heading that says "First Impressions Count!" Owners Tom and Jodie Marsh not only tell their customers that, but they show it in action in their own business—inside and out.

Tom designed and built their 2000 sq. ft. shop in 2000, about 12 years after going into business. He had been working out of an 800 sq. ft. shop and had a pretty good idea of what he needed.

"It has worked out pretty well," says Tom. "We've been in here over 15 years and there's nothing major that I would change. The shop makes a good impression on our customers, and projects go through the shop nicely.

"We're in the image business and that's what we try to sell. You want the customer to see you as a professional. That starts when they see your storefront and your own signs. When they walk in the door you want to send that same professional message. It builds confidence in your abilities and makes them



much more likely to buy from you. Your image is very important in the sign business—and that’s for almost any business.”

The shop is a fairly compact setup. Tom likes having separate workspaces for major tasks, rather than having two or three big rooms. There’s a showroom adjoining the front office where Jodie works. Next to that is Tom’s office, which is off the design/computer room. Then there’s a separate room for application and laminating. Upstairs is the screen printing area.

All the fabrication, woodwork and welding is done in the 32-by-36-ft. shop in the rear of the building. The large projects, including illuminated signs like the 12-by-15-ft. flex face sign they just finished, get built out there. There’s a storage yard out back.

Organized workspaces Outside of a few things that came from the previous shop, most of the fixtures—the cabinets, work tables, organizers and racks—were designed and/or built by Tom.

“The 5-by-10-ft. weeding table has a steel frame and there’s storage beneath it,” says Tom. “Above it is a rack that holds all the materials you use regularly for application. It works really well. You always have a clean table to work on, whether you’re laminating a big print or doing several small signs. Everything you need is within reach.”

The organized workspaces make the shop more efficient. It minimizes waste—of both time and materials—and boosts productivity.

“You know where to go get something and you know where something will be,” says Tom. “That saves a lot of time and frustration. You also know what you need to order, because all the film, foils and substrates have a place. When you’re ready to place an order you can look through things in a few minutes and know what you’re running short on. There are no local suppliers here—supplies come via two-day delivery.

“I like to know what I need and what I have on hand. When a customer places an order, you have to know that you have all the



The showroom area and sales counter



Tom at work in his office



Design workstation in the computer/printing area. Foils for the Gerber Edge printer are stored on the shelves.

There's more on SignCraft.com: This article is online with even more photos of Tom's shop at www.signcraft.com.



Laminating/weeding workspace



Computer/printing room; Tom upgraded to a Roland VersaCAMM VS-540i since this photo was taken.



Upstairs screenprinting room



Substrate storage rack

materials before you give them a delivery date. If I have someone on the phone and they need something the next day, I can just take a look in a minute and see if we have everything we need for the job.”

Tom controls the clutter by having a place for just about everything—and keeping everything in its place. Usable vinyl scraps are organized in drawers in the cutting/printing area. Substrate scraps are cut into commonly used sizes and stored in a rack where they’re organized by material type—ACM, corrugated plastic, aluminum, etc.

“If you’re doing some boat numbers or something small,” he says, “you can find a scrap of the proper color vinyl in the drawer and use it up. It’s not just all laying around where you’d have to dig through a stack to find something usable. We write the dimensions on the corner of larger scraps so that you can take a quick look and see if it will work for what you’re doing. Because it’s pretty well organized you can use up that material rather than throwing it out.”

Everyone benefits, everyone contributes Because the shop’s organization is so convenient, everyone in the shop—five people in all—works to keep it that way. Everyone benefits when things are easy to find. A busy sign shop can get cluttered in a hurry, so staying organized has to be a part of the daily routine.

“It doesn’t work when the guy who used a tool last knows where he put it,” says Tom, “but no one else does. You go looking for it and can’t find it. You may remember seeing it somewhere, but you have to keep looking. It’s frustrating, and such a waste of time.”

Sixteen years later, Tom says he’s still very happy with the layout of the shop. The building’s design still looks creative and contemporary, and he gets a lot of compliments on that. Inside, the shop is very functional and efficient.

“When you design something like this,” Tom says, “you’re always wondering if it’s going to work out the way you imagine it. But it really has. There’s not much that I would do different.”

“There are still a lot of small things I’d like to do but haven’t had time to get to. And it’s always hotter upstairs, but there’s not much you can do about that.” **SC**

Photos by Victoria Skofteby Photography, Salmon Arm, B.C., Canada