

The Sweet Path of Directional Signs

If you're going to produce directional signage, it doesn't hurt to have an enticing scent lead the way. This is exactly the scenario that sign company D.E. Gemmill Inc. (www.degemmill.com) found itself in this past June, when it was awarded the opportunity to complete a directional signage project for The Hotel Hershey.

For D.E. Gemmill, the project was a unique opportunity to work on one of America's most popular brands in a setting that overlooks the famed town of Hershey, Pennsylvania. "Built on Chocolate" is the town's motto, where for over one hundred years the chocolate factory has been more than just a business—it's also a popular resort destination for candy-craving tourists.



As part of a recent \$67 million expansion for The Hotel Hershey, the Red Lion, Pennsylvania-based D.E. Gemmill manufactured and installed handcrafted directional and identity signage. There were ninety-nine signs in total: The project included signage for the resort's main entrance, its new luxury guest cottages, a new restaurant, and the Outfitters building. Completion of the signs (mostly made of wood) involved priming and painting, as well as engraving.

Founded in 1986, D.E. Gemmill produces a wide range of standard and custom signage products (including banners, yard signs, static cling signs, and posts). Today the company features twenty-five staff members and twenty service trucks.

Originally focused on pavement marking, the company expanded to include signage when its clients expressed a need for it. At first, D.E.

Gemmill bought signs wholesale and sold them to its clients. After a few years, the volume increased to a level that required the company to begin manufacturing the signage. Its next stage was to introduce traffic signs, and later, they started producing banners, aluminum signs, vehicle lettering, and any other types of signage they could manufacture with cut vinyl.

In the past several years, D.E. Gemmill moved into the digital age. "We now have the capabilities to print anything from signs to banners, window graphics, magnets, stickers, and vehicle graphics," says Vice President Cary Gordon. "We're now offering specialty signs from lighted to wooden, overhead, Sign Foam™, and anything that has a challenge to it."

D.E. Gemmill first began working with Hershey when they were invited to produce signage for the community's Giant Center (home to the

Hershey Bears hockey team). The project involved removing all the existing special panel signs and replacing them with special aluminum wrap panel signs. The company sheeted all the signs and letters with reflective blue background and 3M™ High Intensity Prismatic Grade material.

For the installation, D.E. Gemmill employees mounted the signs onto steel tubing posts concreted into the ground. (Note: To meet the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's specifications, the signs were required to be breakaway.)

While working on this project, Hershey requested that D.E. Gemmill also supply special brackets and signs for their light poles in the Giant Center parking lot. To meet the client's need, the company created special aluminum frames for the Dibond® signs (known for a combination of tough aluminum on both sides and a plastic center section).

Content With Digital Signage



Take a look around, and you'll see that there really is no industry that's untouched by digital sign technology. This medium has attracted the attention of onlookers, which in turn should attract the attention of sign shops. "I don't believe that there's any part of the sign industry that's already been touched that can't be touched again with this technology," says Charles Kelly, Jr., president of signage systems provider Clarke Systems (www.clarkesystems.com), a company that is focusing on interior dynamic digital signage with its new modular e™ digital signage software.

(Note: Clarke Systems' modular e allows users, via the Internet, to modularly break up digital real estate into a variety of segments portraying different elements of information.)

There are two categories of digital signage displays: Those that are dynamic and those that are not. "Dynamic digital signage are units that are updatable by the Web. There's constant change, as opposed to a Powerpoint® loop," says Kelly. "You'll typically find those in areas of waiting—such as lobbies, elevators, directories at the entrances of buildings, etc. This is one area where static signs can be replaced. Obviously a sense of movement captures the pedestrian's eye. Obviously it's a variety of information that would be portrayed versus singular or static information."

The important phrase to remember is that "content is king." According to Kelly, content on a dynamic digital sign can mean a variety of things. "It can feature scrolling text, live tv feeds, full video feeds, and weather information," he says. "And it can also include branding and scheduling information."

Kelly believes that it's also important that the information portrayed on digital sign systems be relevant to the reader(s). "Suppose a majority of men are walking through a facility, but the shoe advertisement on the displays is geared toward women. You can forget it. It's just irrelevant," he says. "Content should be relevant to those coming into the facility."

Repurposing is also popular for digital display content. For example, information published on a corporation or organization's Web site can also be incorporated (repurposed) into the dynamic digital display. "If we were doing a project for a bank, for example, we can take their branding ID (which we'll call a 'banner') and put it at the top of the digital sign. Not only are the sign companies using skills that they've already learned, but



there's also the re-use of art and/or graphics that have been created already for signs," explains Kelly.

When it comes to designing content for the digital display, the same principles employed within traditional visual-oriented sign projects still apply. "You'll still need the letter to contrast with the background. You want a lighter letter on top of a darker field or darker text on top of a light field," explains Kelly. "You don't want to marry any colors that would blend together and be indistinguishable from a distance. Also readability and legibility rules come into play. For example, a one-inch-tall letter can be read as far as twenty feet away, so this will help you understand the font size that needs to be used. People in the sign industry have spent their lives learning the sign industry, and these principles can still be applied in the digital side of things."

The sign shop selling and/or installing the technology should also get involved with the client and help them place the display where it will be at its most effective. Determining this placement is an overlap of principles within the "static" sign world. "If I'm going to put a directory in the lobby—whether it be static or dynamic—I'm still going to put it in the place that's going to give me the most space for the most people to read at the same time," says Kelly. "It's also going to be positioned at a height level that's appropriate for the text that's being displayed."

Similar to inkjet printing technology (which has evolved today to include sign shops, FedEx-Kinkos®, office supply chains, and photography studios), the digital signage industry has evolved over the past ten years to where it's now overlapping into the sign industry and leading to a convergence. "If you go to a tradeshow outside of our industry that's digital display-focused, you'll see that the two industries that are overlapping now are audio-visual and signage," says Kelly. "You've got more competition differing in capabilities and techniques, and it's one where I think our industry should be looking at and jumping on the bandwagon sooner rather than later."

The important thing for sign makers to realize is that *now* appears to be the ideal opportunity to get involved with digital sign technology. "There's still a sense of newness on the digital sign side," says Kelly, "because the masses are starting to move toward it. However, even graphic designers can start getting into formatting content so don't wait around."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLARKE SYSTEMS.

Once this project was complete, Hershey formally asked D.E. Gemmill about The Hotel Hershey project. "After receiving information about the project, we only had a few days to respond," says Gordon. "The project required several special items, so I returned a letter to Hershey thanking them for the invitation but told them I couldn't pull together a proper proposal in the time frame given."

To the company's surprise, Hershey called back asking for a price quote and offering to give D.E. Gemmill additional time to pull everything together. "Of course, we happily agreed to do so," says Gordon.

After the contracts had been signed, the company found itself in a race to get everything manufactured and installed in six to eight weeks (in time for the grand opening).

Since the project was a design-build, D.E. Gemmill at the outset received some rough sketches of what Hershey wanted to achieve. They began by choosing the materials and outlining the manufacturing process. They then designed layouts and fabricated some samples.

The company presented their samples to Hershey executives, hotel management, project managers, the art department, and the project engineer. After the team agreed on the materials and colors, they began manufacturing.

D.E. Gemmill's official tagline is "Team Imagination"—a term also used to describe its project management group, which for this particular project included Gordon, Shop Manager Gary Bloomfield, and Sign Division Field Supervisor Jared Dutt. "Talent and the ability to stretch our imagination to its limits is what keeps us running," says Gordon. "Working as a team—and thinking outside the box—we've been able to succeed on all the projects that have come our way. This open way of thinking has been our lifeblood and has propelled our company to where we are today."

This design-build project included forty-one site and landmark wooden signs. These were carved, hand-painted, and then mounted onto handcrafted wooden posts to match the color and scheme of the hotel. "They also wanted fifty-eight traffic signs with the same scheme, so we decided to place them on handcrafted posts and cover the back of

the signs with vinyl to match the posts," says Gordon.

Wood was the primary sign material choice for this project—in particular Clear Douglas Fir, since it's known for its resilience under tremendous loads. Another advantage: Everyone liked the tightly knotted grain of the wood.

D.E. Gemmill hand-painted the posts and signs with 1-Shot®, since it covers in one coat and dries to a hard finish. Using this one product, the company achieved all its color choices.

For grounding the signs, the company used a galvanized steel base. "The base is shaped like a giant arrowhead with four fins and driven into the ground," says Gordon. "We attached the post to the pocket at the top of the base. This process helps with post spinning and makes it very easy to replace in the event of damage to the sign."

While the project went smoothly, one of the biggest hurdles the company had to overcome was time constraints. "We had approximately six to eight weeks to design the signs, get approvals, manufacture everything, and install the majority of the ninety-nine signs to coincide with the grand opening," says Gordon. "The problem was working around all the other construction going on at the same time. We had to make sure that we didn't impede their operations or place signs where construction equipment might've caused damage—all the while trying to meet our schedule."

To pull off such a time-sensitive project, project management played a key role. Gordon agrees that their team effort made all the difference in the world for this project. "If everyone from the top to the bottom hadn't worked as a team, this project could've been a total disaster. With the time constraints, trying to get materials from vendors, and moving through manufacturing—it just wouldn't have happened," he says. "Coordination is what you need to make any job a success. Although keeping the client in the loop along the way is also necessary, teamwork is overall what turns an idea into reality."

D.E. Gemmill hopes to continue to work on both "sweet" projects for Hershey and diverse signage projects for other clients. "In the end, the project looked great, the customer was happy, and the possibility of future work remains," says Gordon. ☐

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