

Profile:

The Sign Depot



Pictured clockwise from left are Dave Hoover, Ben Snider, Amos Werner, Rob Irwin, Steve Bundscho, Lisa McDonald and Peter Moir.

Photos courtesy Sign Depot

By Peter Saunders

The Sign Depot's nearly 18-year history is illustrative of the changes the sign industry as a whole has faced in recent times. The custom sign manufacturer, retailer and wholesaler in Kitchener, Ont., was founded by Peter Moir at a time when design software, plotters and vinyl were still new to many shops—and when his own professional background had primarily focused on carved and dimensional signs.

"I had worked for Treen Graphics in New Dundee, Ont., for a few summers, into my early 20s," he says. "I loved the creativity and craftsmanship I experienced there. When I went to the University of Guelph, I ended up in fine arts. After university, I went back to signmaking and that's when an investor approached me, wondering if I wanted to start my own shop. I was young and dumb enough to say yes!"

The one-man operation gradually grew, adding staff and equipment to meet its changing business needs.

"I knew the sandblasted wood products, but didn't have clients in that niche," says Moir, "so at the beginning, it was basically a vinyl shop running SignLab

and a plotter. My first customers were gas stations and car washes in the Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W) area. Within a year, I hired my cousin, Isaac Cull, to help with the design and production side of that business. The company progressively moved from the first 56-m² (600-sf) shop to a 297-m² (3,200-sf) facility. Within the first five years of business, we went up to five or six employees."

Diversification

Over time, the shop honed its craft and diversified its output. When Moir was commissioned to create signs to denote the Kitchener Farmers Market area, for example, the work got him back into sandblasting wood signs.

The Sign Depot also established a wholesale division in 1996 to sell carved western red cedar signs, finished or unfinished, to other sign shops across the country and in the U.S.

While the wholesale business grew quickly, Moir continued to seek out opportunities to produce more distinctive work. The goal was to position the company in the market as a custom sign manufacturer, rather than a vinyl print shop or simply a wholesaler.

SHOP TALK



The Sign Depot's diverse client base has included everything from breweries (left) to universities (centre) to restaurants (right).



Although the Sign Depot began as a vinyl shop, it now specializes in more highly customized dimensional signs.

"In the beginning, I had more passion than business sense, but the care and detail came across to potential clients," says Moir. "We were eager to please. Over the past 10 to 15 years, lots of other companies have come into the business through computers and software, but those aren't the factors that make a good sign shop. It's a matter of creativity and esthetics, not equipment."

Indeed, many eye-catching Sign Depot projects have won industry awards over the years, including *Sign Media Canada's* 2007 National Sign Competition honours in the Building Signs category. Moir attributes the company's strong reputation to its willingness to continue tackling new types of work, such as Captain Jack's pirate ship, a dimensional piece recently installed in Niagara Falls, Ont. (see pages 24 and 25).

"We enjoy a challenge," says Moir. "Our favourite jobs are those that stretch our abilities. The pirate ship started with an artist's rendering,

leaving us to make the sign structure. After three-dimensional (3-D) scanning, we used computer numerical control (CNC) routing to build it, with expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam and plastic coatings. It can be hard to put a price together for a job like that, as there are many unknowns at the beginning, but as a result, we continue to differentiate ourselves in the market and can attract more requests in the future for dimensional signage projects. The question will be whether or not we embrace those opportunities."

The Sign Depot's clients throughout Ontario have included clothing retailers (Eddie Bauer, Tilley Endurables), post-secondary institutions (Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Waterloo, York University, University of Guelph), restaurants (Wayne Gretzky's, Williams Coffee Pubs, Moose Winooski's), breweries (The Premium Beer Company, Molson), municipal governments (Cambridge, Niagara, St. Marys) and casinos (Rama, Windsor), among others. It has also sold to clients on a national and international basis.

"I have a difficult time saying no," Moir says. "Our geographic area of coverage has become larger and so we are now competing for work further afield."

Despite the increased level of competition, however, the diversity of customers has been key in maintaining steady operations during economic ups and downs.

"Our customer base is broad, so we're not susceptible to any one type of business," says Moir. "At times, the sandblasted wooden sign business has been our bread and butter, but it's cyclical. Golf courses, for example, were all ordering those signs eight to 10 years ago, but now they are focused more on cast aluminum or sandblasted stone instead. In another eight to 10 years, wooden signs could become popular for them again."

SHOP TALK



This project for a restaurant in Streetsville, Ont., won in the Building Signs category of the 2007 National Sign Competition.



Captain Jack's pirate ship represented a new type of craftsmanship for the Sign Depot to attempt.



In what might become an annual tradition, the Sign Depot recently held an open house, giving clients a look behind the scenes.

Changing with the times

Another key factor in the company's success has been adaptability. Staffing levels, for instance, have never fully settled.

"We fluctuate between six and 10 employees," Moir says. "I've pulled back a bit in the last year. I didn't replace some people that have moved on."

Also, rather than attempt to do all types of work in-house, Moir has learned to rely on outside service providers.

"I used to think we had to do everything ourselves, including installation, which was my least favourite part of the job," he says. "You need special equipment we didn't want to invest in, so now we outsource that work to reliable installation companies."

Other outsourced tasks include the welding of larger sign frames and certain types of finishing. Moir says he plans to investigate further such options, which could help add more sign types to the list of services the Sign Depot provides.

"I think it's a good idea for sign companies to partner on projects," he says. "In some cases, we design a sign's components and then hire a local company to produce them. Then we're more like the project manager. This is the reverse concept of our wholesale division, where other sign companies are using us for their outsourcing. If we remain flexible and keep an open mind, we can change our focus fairly quickly and pursue alternative opportunities as they arise."

Indeed, outsourcing is another reason the Sign Depot can continue to thrive in a modest facility and during economic downturns. Last May, it moved from a larger leased space into a smaller but fully owned building. The move was partly in response to the increasing capability to farm out some types of work and help keep overhead costs under control.

"We were in a 557-m² (6,000-sf) building, which was a bit too big," Moir says. "We were sloppy with the extra space. I prefer a neat and tidy approach to the business. Now we're in a 418-m² (4,500-sf) shop and the size fits us better."

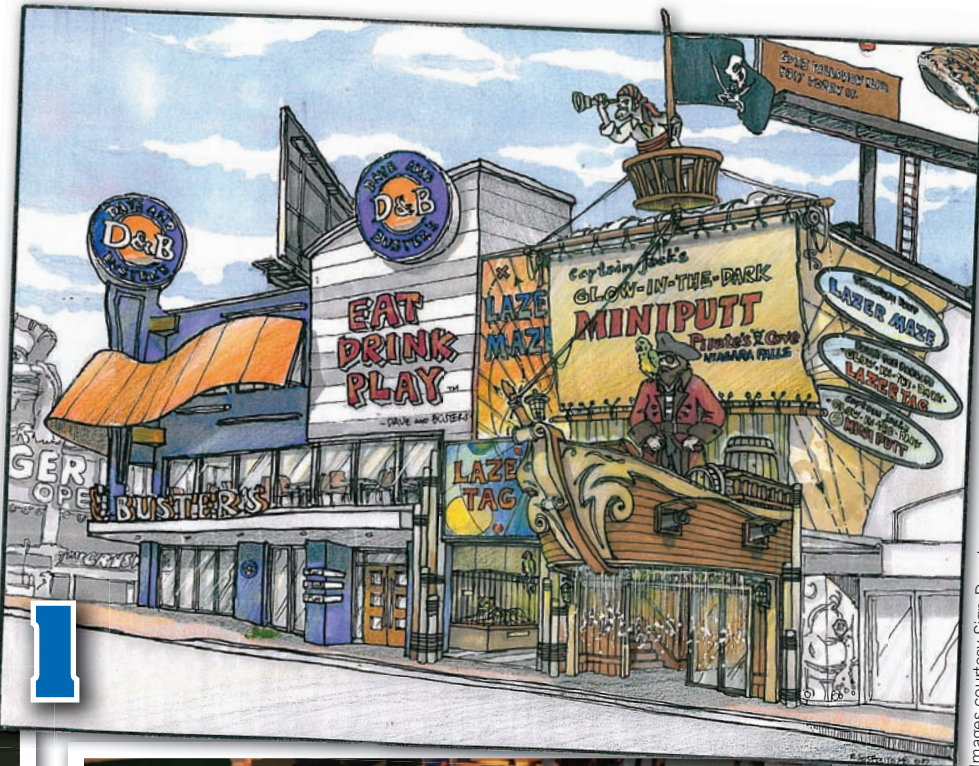
The Sign Depot celebrated the move with an open house. Guests included Kitchener's mayor, Carl Zehr, as well as clients, other trade professionals, friends and relatives. The guests got to tour the shop to see how its signmaking processes unfold, from computer design through manufacturing and finishing.

"We arranged the open house so we would have a due date to move in and get set up," says Moir. "For our clients, it was a peek behind the scenes. In addition, it was healthy for our employees who are normally one step removed from our clients. I think we may do this on a yearly basis."

For more information, visit www.sign-depot.on.ca.

Bringing Captain Jack to Life

Toronto-based Mackay Wong Strategic Design supplied the project's visual concept.



Images courtesy Sign Depot



A 0.5-m (20-in.) tall figure was carved as a sample, to check the details of the three-dimensional (3-D) file in miniature.



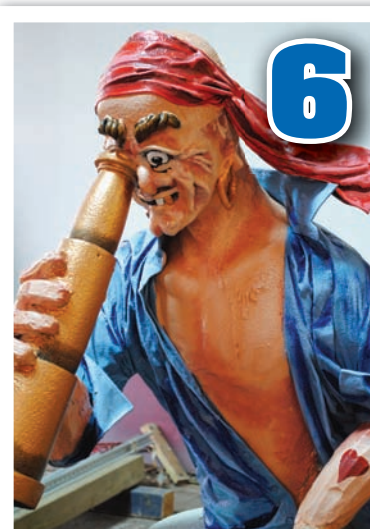
The full-size 4.3-m (14-ft) tall pirate comprised a series of 102-mm (4-in.) thick slices, carved with a computer numerical control (CNC) router.



Further details were sculpted and added to the face, using a two-part epoxy putty.



The full figure was painted in colour with exterior latex-based coats.



A similar process was used to create a second pirate for the crow's nest.



Plywood bulkheads were assembled to create the skeletal shape of the pirate ship.



Embossed foam was glued to the plywood.



Many layers of latex washes were needed to sufficiently weather the appearance of the ship's outer surfaces.



A faux-rust paint was specifically used on the anchors.



The entire unit was assembled in the sign shop before the installation date, to ensure everything would fit together.



Signature Signs in Niagara Falls, Ont., helped install the signage in the Clifton Hill area, which is known for restaurants, hotels, shops and themed attractions.