

Focus on Corporate Identity



BANKING ON...

One of the most encouraging aspects of this year's Sign Industry Awards Competition is the number of smaller signmakers who received recognition for their work. One such company, Staffordshire Signs, was a runner-up in the Retail Sign of the Year category, in respect of the stunning signage that it has created for Bank, the exciting new fashion store. Val Hirst reports.

Whichever way you look at it, Staffordshire Signs qualifies as a small signmaker. Based in Burntwood, Staffordshire, this family run business employs just eight people, yet amazingly, it has managed to scoop one of the UK's hottest new retail contracts. Over the last year, Staffordshire Signs has been responsible for the manufacture and installation of the corporate identity signage for Bank, a rapidly expanding clothing retailer which stocks all the latest height-of-fashion brands so coveted by the young and hip. However, despite its sudden rise to prominence, Managing Director Richard Keasey is quick to dispel any notion of an overnight success story. In fact, the company is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, having originally been established in 1975 by Richard's father, who ran it as a typical 'one man band' operation. "We were known as DK Sign Studio in those days and in keeping with the times, my Dad was more of a signwriter who spent a lot of his time gilding and painting vehicle liveries," remembers Richard. He adds that his own first hands-on signmaking experience was gained at the tender age of 13, when he used to help out in the sign-shop after school.

Staffordshire Sign's first level of expansion actually occurred in 1983 with its acquisition of the first computerised signmaking machine

– the Graphix 3 from Spandex, following which it morphed into a general signmaker, tackling 'anything and everything' sign related. "We gradually kitted ourselves out with the full complement of plotters and, as soon as it became available, the Gerber Edge, which certainly helped us to expand our repertoire," says Richard. The only hiccup to the company's steady progress occurred during the late 90s when it had a brief flirtation with the furnishing and interior design sector. "More than anything else it confirmed that we should stick to doing what we know we do best – and that's signmaking," comments Richard.

Over the years Staffordshire Signs has completed an impressive body of work, which includes one off signs for local businesses, complemented by on going contracts with national companies such as Westbury Homes Nottingham Division and, most recently, for signing 87 depots of HomeServe, the domestic repair and maintenance service. However, the Bank signing probably remains its most high profile project to date.

As with many such projects, the company won the contract as a result of work it had already carried out for another client. "It was a bit of luck really," Richard confides modestly. "We had made some signs for a charity clothing shop run by the Birth Defects Foundation, which caught the eye of the fashion chain River Island, who asked us to produce a prototype of a neon sign for them. We

cover story



actually ended up making and installing 18 projecting signs, work which was noticed and led us directly to the Bank job."

Bank, who wanted something stylish yet edgy, declared Richard's original illuminated box signs as just "too perfect." "They wanted a more unstructured look with wires showing," laughs Richard, who, on this occasion at least, was more than happy to accede to the request to make his prototypes look a little less polished and perfect. "I'm always happy to oblige in the name of artistic endeavour," he quips.

Staffordshire Signs has now signed 12 Bank stores and so far, each has comprised a variety of both internal and external signage and display elements. These include some particularly arresting pre-programmable LED units which span the exterior frontages of some of the stores and whose continual movement does much to alert passers-by to the full scope of the brands that lie within. Richard reveals that he had to undertake quite a bit of research in order to source the right components for these signs. He says: "The whole idea was to create a sign package that is interesting and lively enough to appeal to the sort of customers Bank is trying to attract, and we've really enjoyed combining different materials and processes to ensure that each store meets that ideal." Whilst he agrees that such projects are a gift in that they allow him to give free reign to his creativity, he insists that all customers, are entitled to the same unwavering degree of care and attention, whether they require cutting-edge design or something more pedestrian.

To achieve the requisite level of perfection, that he feels is their due, Richard ensures that Staffordshire Signs does as much in-house as humanly and fiscally possible. A quick tour of the new 3,700sq.ft factory, which the company expanded into last February, reveals that it not only has the facility to produce its own moulded letters, it also boasts a small screenprinting resource too. "We either do it well or not at all," says Richard summing up his signmaking



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philosophy. He also agrees that having learned the business from the bottom up, he has a particular view about signmaking. He elaborates: "When you've learned about signmaking in the traditional way, you gain an intrinsic understanding as to what constitutes a good sign and good signing practice that never leaves you. That's not to say that you shouldn't adopt modern manufacturing methods or embrace new technology – far from it. But there are certain values that you hold dear and that you expect to maintain. Luckily, I've got a really good team here who feel the same as I do and I believe in looking after them, which means paying top rates and adding all the extras, such as pension and private health care schemes. We also keep up with all of the latest health and safety regulations and staff receive proper training. Obviously, we do have to sub-contract on occasion, but when that happens it's to companies who share a similar ethos to our own."

To make his operation even more efficient, Richard enrolled for the Sensei Programme run by the Centre of Engineering Excellence, which he claims has really helped him to drive the business forward. "It taught me to focus on our core profitability and to re-examine our whole modus operandi. Now by keeping a close eye on costs, reducing waste and doing everything in the most effective and practical way possible, we are already noticing a big difference." And whilst Richard dedicates his time to ensuring that the operational side of the company runs smoothly, wife Lisa is similarly enthusiastic about overseeing administration and controlling the finances. "In that way it's a real family business and my Dad also maintains a keen interest too," he adds.

At present, much of the company's profits are reinvested in new equipment and facilities. In addition to its trusty Edge, Staffordshire Signs is now also the proud owner of a Gerber Elan, a digital printer which may have had its issues, but which, none the less, Richard swears by. "It's been great for us and I've absolutely no complaints. I never expected digital printing to be easy and in that I wasn't disappointed. But the Elan delivers everything we were promised and what's more it's been a real boon, opening all sorts of new avenues for us. Better still, when we aren't keeping it busy ourselves, we operate a bureau service for other local businesses, so one way or another, it has been a constant source of revenue."

When asked where he feels the company's future lies, Richard welcomes further expansion, but states that he wants Staffordshire



Signs to remain compact enough for him to maintain an overall sense of control. "I still get an enormous sense of satisfaction out of tackling customers' signage problems and in being able to come up with the right solutions for them," he says. "In an ideal world, I'd love to have the challenges associated with top line work, whilst at the same time staying small enough to care and to deliver the sort of personal service I think everyone deserves. I'd also like a bit more time to indulge my hobby of motor racing, but all in all, I'm pretty pleased with the way things are going." And, just as importantly, so are his customers, both big and small! ■

