

Sue Dillon

Northville, Michigan

Shop name: Graphic Visions, Inc. **Shop size:** 7000 sq. ft. **Staff:** 12 **Graphics equipment:** FlexiSIGN PRO and ArtCAM Pro software, 4-by-8 Gerber router table, Mimaki JV3-160SP printer, Mimaki CG-130 FX plotter, Seal Image 62 Plus laminator, and Gerber Edge digital printing system **Web site:** www.graphicvisionsinc.com

Our company started out in 1985 as a sign shop with a single Gerber Signmaker IVB. At that time, we were one of three companies in the area that had a computer-

driven plotter. It was a great tool and soon we were doing quite a bit of fleet work.

When I say we, I mean Mike and me; he can build almost anything I design, using almost any material

Our shop is located in Northville, which is considered part of Metro Detroit.

It's a vibrant economic com-

munity and a very good business area. The shop itself is a big industrial pole barn that is just under 7000 sq. ft. and it's perfect for us.

I have a graphic design degree and a minor

in marketing, so I'm naturally drawn to business graphics. Even though our business has grown to include a range of graphics-related services, we're still a sign shop at heart. We think of it like the spokes on a wheel; at the hub we're a sign shop and everything else we do evolved from that. As clients needed logos,



32 by 72 in.



36 by 76 in.



10 by 20 ft.

“I love the challenge of using traditional sign making techniques and low-maintenance materials to help a community express its character.”



12 by 24 in.



30 by 188 in.



80 by 12 in.; 43 in. tall



"Carved HDU, full color graphics, and other materials and techniques," says Sue, "lets every design have its own personality."

we added a Mac station and that grew into what I call our design house where we do marketing, branding and brochures.

Our staff has grown along with the business and most have been here many years. It seems that once they come on board they stay—we encourage them to grow and all of us wear many hats. There are twelve of us here now and we do a lot with twelve people. A lot! They're smart, energetic and creative, and we work together very well.

What we've found is that as someone grows and changes, there may be a better place for them in the organization, so people move around depending on their skills and interests. One of our creative team members, for instance, is a wonderful copywriter with a background in the magazine industry and another is an excellent photographer. That's how we've become who we are. If you visit our Web site, you can see that we do branding and packaging and Web design, in addition to sign making. We're a small company, but everyone has a multifaceted way they work within the company.

The sign shop continues to grow in terms of its capabilities. We still love to do gold leaf with hand carved details, airbrushing and hand lettering, but we build on our traditional sign techniques while utilizing new technology. We have integrated both Mac and PC stations (yes, we have more computers than people!), a fully-equipped metal and carpentry shop, a Gerber router table [www.gspinc.com], a Mimaki printer [www.mimaki.com], a Mimaki plotter and a Gerber Edge. We use Adobe CS4, ArtCAM Pro [www.artcam.com] and FlexiSIGN PRO [www.saintl.biz] software. If something's beyond our skills we'll partner with another company.

One of the biggest challenges for us is





35 by 128 in.



20 by 97 in.



32 by 80 in.



36 by 36 in.



72 by 110 in.

trying to balance great design with a client's budget. Sometimes start-up businesses—and we're a great fit for those clients—have to do things in stages and that's okay with us. We're interested in building long-term relationships with clients. In many cases, once we work with a customer, we're involved in that process over many, many years. In fact, the very first account we ever had is still our client.

It's great to see one of our clients grow their business into a national company and, in a lot of ways, we've grown with our clients. Our company expanded our services because clients were asking for more. It's the idea behind what we do; we don't just believe in selling a sign, we believe in making the sign work for the client.

A few years ago we began focusing on working with new and emerging businesses, specifically in branding and web development. What we've found is that with those types of services, we can work anywhere—unlike sign customers, who are typically local, the branding and web development clients can be anywhere. So we've done some pretty nice things with clients from all of the United States, and have even established some international accounts.

We've decided to focus on finding ways to re-think what our clients need in this economy. And what matters most, we've learned, is helping clients develop business-building strategies in a smart way, without spending excessive amounts of money. We're hearing our customers say things such as, "Gosh, I'd like to do this, but is there some way you can cut the price back," or, "I can't afford that, maybe we'll just do the cab doors and not the trailer." In a creative setting it's more challenging to execute a great idea when there are all sorts of restrictions. But it can be done and that's what we're here for.

We were able to move into all of these other areas because our customers were asking for more and because I allowed my staff to grow. Other sign companies can diversify by partnering with other companies, but we've grown because everyone here thinks beyond the project they're working on. As a team, we work hard to maximize the unique characteristics of each company's brand by combining design techniques and quality materials. My staff helps keep me enthused. I still love what I do and I love working with signs; signs are the foundation of who we are. The sign side of our business has always pushed the creative envelope and that's what brings out the best in us. •❧

—From an interview with John McIltrout



Top panel is 24 by 156 in.; hanging sign is 23 by 28 in.

