



Imagine Graphics' new building, a 10,000 square foot facility, was transformed from a cinderblock edifice into a showstopper.

Moving On Up

BY ERIKA LEAF & CHRIS MEEKER

Small Oregon sign shop morphs into a large format digital printer.

Erika Leaf and Chris Meeker are co-owners of Imagine Graphics, a sign and graphics company based in Eugene, Oregon.



The current staff of Imagine Graphics.

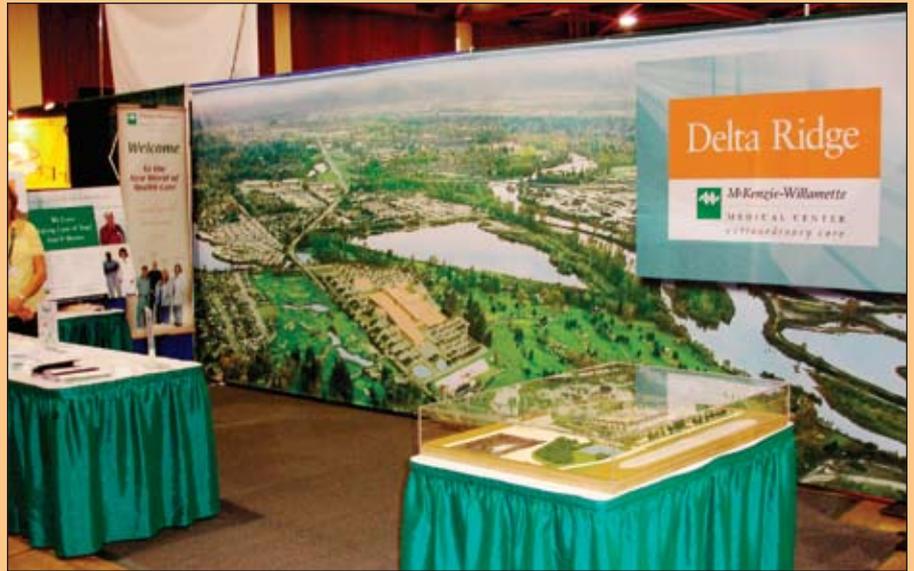
Our story began 14 years ago, in June of 1993, when we opened a vinyl sign shop named SIGNS of the Times, in a commercial strip mall here in Eugene, Oregon. We started with one wonderful employee (Jon Bogart, who is now our operations manager), three computers and a vinyl-cutting plotter. After spending more hours than we care to remember figuring out how to make our own 4' x 8' main identity sign, we had it hung and miraculously we were in business!

In the beginning we accepted almost every job that came our way in order to keep the doors open. The learning curves were steep and our internal motto was "learn by doing". Not so easy to do when you actually have very little idea what it is that you are doing!

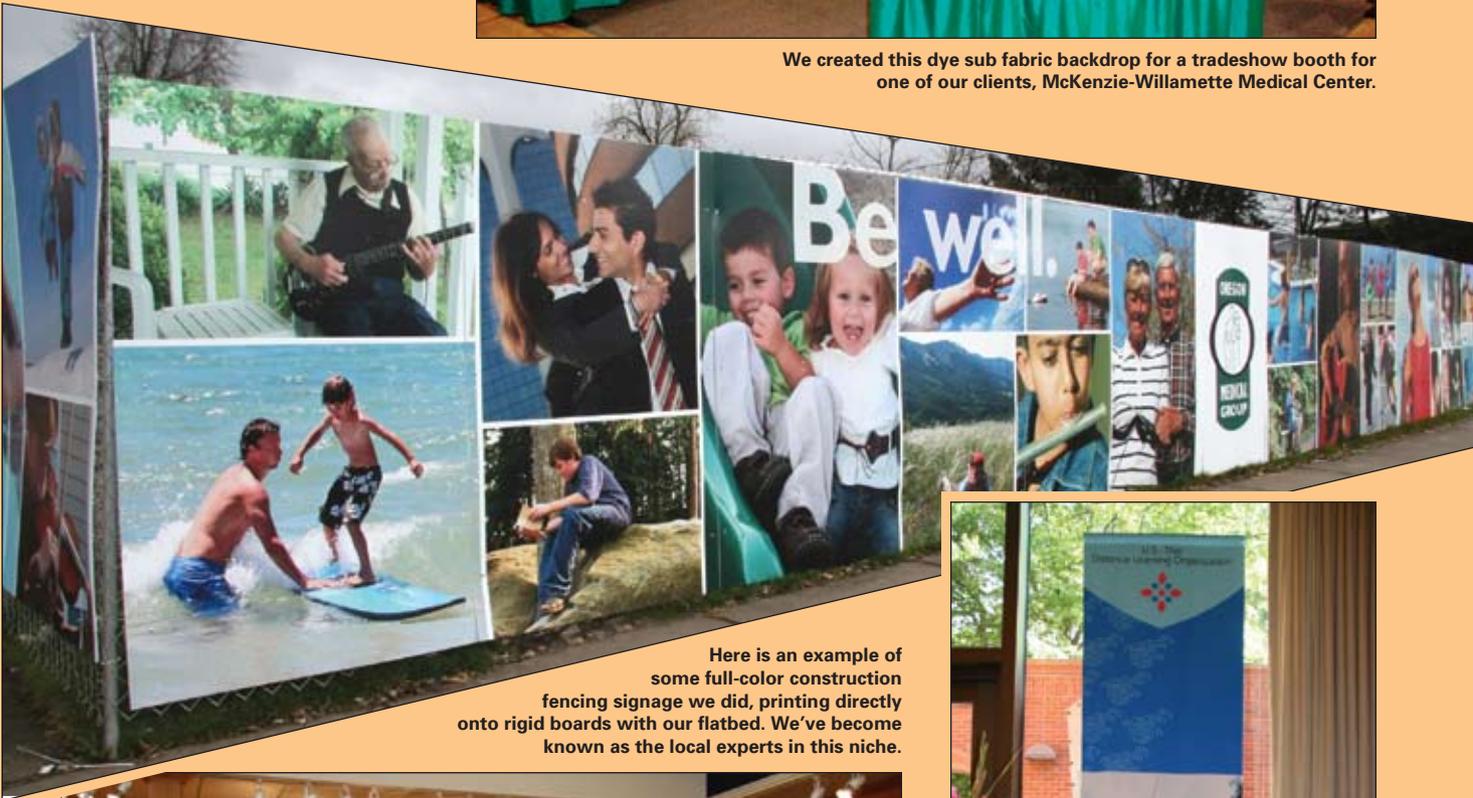
Anything we couldn't make ourselves, we outsourced. Before we knew it, we were selling electric and neon signs along with the vinyl signs. We learned that selling these big signs took a lot of expertise and that working with subcontractors took a lot of time. We also found it difficult to find subs who would come through on the timelines we had committed to and at the quality levels that we wanted. Can you say "stress"?



A very cool and fun project we did recently — a wearable costume for the runners in the Bay to Breakers race in San Francisco. We made them using a PVC frame and fabric “ice cream pints.”



We created this dye sub fabric backdrop for a tradeshow booth for one of our clients, McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center.



Here is an example of some full-color construction fencing signage we did, printing directly onto rigid boards with our flatbed. We’ve become known as the local experts in this niche.



More dye sublimation; this one for an interior retail application.



Here’s a dye-sub fabric banner we did for a formal event for the U.S.–Thai Distance Learning Organization.



Here is a shot of our production area. We used a tremendous amount of interior graphics inside the new facility, especially in the showroom, to help showcase what we can do.



The mayor attended our grand opening event. Here she's seen chatting with Chris.



At the grand opening we printed a life-sized photo of the mayor on the Inca Spyder flatbed, cut her out on the Zünd cutter and presented her with a double of herself.



Needless to say, our financials, which we tracked closely, pointed out the obvious. No matter how much we realistically projected growing our sales, our profit margins would stay the same. Not a pleasant future to think about. More long hours, more stress, not much more money. Hmmm.

BOLD MOVE

So, in early 1997, after much hand wringing, we made what was for us a bold and scary move. We stopped selling most subcontracted signs, which by then had grown to 35 percent of our business, and took a calculated risk that we could replace the gross profit dollars from these signs with the money we could make from digital print output. We took out a business loan for \$70,000 and bought ourselves a spankin' new, fancy, 10 square foot per hour (blazin' fast) large-format inkjet printer for paper posters and trade show graphics: a Rastergraphics Piezo 1000 with piezo printheads shooting water-based UV-resistant

pigment inks. With all that cash, we also purchased a computer station, scanner, and a Seal 600 laminator. We hung our future on digital printing, deciding we wanted to get in early and make a name for our company. These types of signs excited us and we felt we had a shot at getting good at making these types of graphics and signage.

By 1999 our gross sales had increased by \$40,000 and our cost of materials had gone down by \$12,000. While we weren't getting rich, we were making a bit more money and we were working fewer hours. In 2000 we traded in our first printer and purchased an HP 3000 aqueous inkjet for doing trade show graphics. (This baby doubled our speed to 20 square feet per hour. Now we were humming!)

Then the 2001 recession hit us hard. From 2001 through mid 2004 we just kept

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Nikita Filir, our graphic artist uses the cool pass-through built in the wall to receive a sheet that was freshly printed on the flatbed in the next room, and then sets to work cutting it with the Zünd cutter.



Here is our 102"-wide Roland SolJet Pro II SJ 1000 solvent-based printer. We have another one of these babies that has been set up to run with dye sublimation inks.



Jeffrey Kensler of our production department carries a freshly printed rigid sign destined to be trimmed and readied for shipment.

our heads above water. Sales ended up dropping \$80,000 over those years, a huge hit for our small five-employee company. We were eventually forced to lay off two of our long-term employees, which was awful.

By late 2004, however, sales were beginning to pick up again and we hoped the recession was finally coming to an end. So in January 2005 we said good-bye to our HP printer and said hello to our first solvent printer, a Roland SOLJET Pro II 54" with print and cut capabilities. We also bought a commercial sewing machine for finishing banners. New machinery, new products, outdoor durability... we felt like we were getting "back in the game"!

Despite our exciting new purchase, however, we had come to realize that our current business model had grown as

large as it would probably ever get. We felt that both we and our employees, while still enjoying our jobs, needed to grow professionally and would need to make more money if we were to stay together and that meant changing the business... in a big way.

MOVING IN

One of our main long-term business goals had been to buy a building where we did not have to pay rent to a landlord but instead would be accruing equity every month. This goal was planted early on in a business class we took part in, sponsored by the local Business Development Center. A local bank officer was the class speaker one day and he told a story of two florists he knew of who had both been in business for several decades and had just retired.

One couple had purchased the building where their florist shop was located and the other couple had not. The businesses were not worth very much money at the end of their owners' careers and only the couple who owned their building had anything financially to show for all their years of hard work. This story had stuck with us.

So, after waiting many years, in 2004, we started the search for a building that would meet our business needs now and for the foreseeable future. In March of 2006 we finally purchased a 10,000 square foot building (quite a jump from our 2,500 square feet leased space). And let me tell you, this is when things started getting really fun!

In the first meeting with our architect he shared a vision he had of transform-

They spoke about building the business with technology, a sales team, new pricing and even more developed systems.

ing and remodeling our plain cinderblock building into a “show-stopper”. With our architect’s inspiration

fresh in our minds, Chris next met with David King, of Castle Graphics (now MarketKing), who would become our mentor. They spoke about building the business with technology, a sales team, new pricing and even more developed systems. David shared his extensive knowledge of the digital spectrum of the graphics business, and this knowledge helped give us the confidence to take the dive into advanced digital printing technology.

We next met with a local marketing firm, Funk/Levis and Associates, and did a review of our 13-year-old business. During the meeting at our under-construction building, after hearing of all the equipment we were planning on getting and all of the services we would be offer-

ing to our clients, David Funk said to us, “So you are moving to this beautiful new building, with fabulous new

equipment that will provide great new products to your clients...Have you ever thought about changing your name?”

Well we had, but had felt too overwhelmed to deal with it! By the end of the meeting we knew we had to change our name as well. The feeling was one of exhilaration and fear!

The next year was a whirlwind of remodel decisions, re-naming, articulating what our brand positioning would be, developing new marketing materials—from logo and letterhead to printed brochure and postcards—and designing and producing an enormous amount of interior signage for our showroom and our whole facility so that we could display our capabilities to our clients and help them

imagine the possibilities that would help them with their businesses.

Since our outside support/consulting team was formed, we turned our focus to what machinery we were really going to buy. Chris had been reading trade magazines since day one of the business and attending trade shows every two years to keep abreast of the trends in the industry. He had some sense of what machinery was affordable, proven and reliable. In 2005, Chris attended four industry trade shows within six months and filled his brain with information from various vendors and fellow sign and graphic shop owners as well as what he could learn from looking with his own eyes. This was high stakes shopping!

It was time to make the difficult decisions of what machinery to invest in that would give us the ability to produce a much wider array and a higher volume

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of digital graphics than we had ever been able to produce before.

After lots of research, we purchased the following equipment: an Inca Spyder UV-curing flatbed inkjet printer from FujiFilm Sericol, a Zünd 3000 Digital Cutter, a 102" Roland SolJet 1000 solvent printer to complement our 54" Roland, another 102" Roland SolJet 1000 set up with dye sublimation inks, a Practix platen heat press and a Practix 8' rotary heat press to make dye sublimated tiles and fabric, and a liquid laminator. And we recently added, and almost entirely filled up our new building with, a Durst Lambda for making 4000 dpi paper and backlit prints. Zowie, that's a shopping list!

Even with all the months of research and number crunching we had done, it was still a huge leap of faith and we sometimes had to reassure each other that everything would work out and that we were making the right choices. Sometimes, however, there was nothing to do but keep going forward because we were already in neck deep!

MOVING UP

So 18 months of mostly 60-70 hour work weeks later, with the capable help of the Funk marketing team, David King as our technical, strategic large format guru, and our expanded crew of nine amazing employees (three graphic artists, two production, three sales/customer service and one administrative), we now have what we consider to be a dream shop and a dream team! The photos David King took of our shop when he was here show the look and feel of the new Imagine Graphics. Clients walk in the door and are immediately impressed. They know we'll make them look great! And even with the disruption of the move, our sales doubled in our first year. We are confident that if we work our plan and continue to serve our clients with

top-notch service our sales will continue to climb.

We still make signs, banners, stickers and the like, but now we're also able to make full color vinyl and fabric banners, full color digitally printed boards up to 5' x 10', cut to shape signs and graphics, P.O.P. and trade show signs, a much wider array of trade show booths, vehicle wraps, and the ability to produce one-of-a-kind custom projects. By being a one-stop shopping resource for large format digital graphics, we have become a valuable resource for our clients.

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I want to take just a moment to give special thanks to some of the people that helped make this dream a reality. Our business partner, Marshall Leaf, for having a vision of what our business could be long before we did and for supporting and mentoring us

for so many years. All of our clients and our crew here at Imagine Graphics. We wouldn't have done this expansion without them. The team and stores of the Sign Biz network for all of their sharing. Nir Pearlson, our architect, who along with Funk/Levis and Associates, designed a truly remarkable building. And Jason Schar and Stan Davis, of Schar Construction, our builder that was so patient with the changes we kept throwing at them. We are so very fortunate to be a part of this community and this exciting industry.

My humble advice to each of you who might be wondering about your next business move: Evaluate what you're good at and enjoy doing. Partner with smart people who are good at what they do. Develop a plan and a backup plan. Then strap in for the exciting, long, hard ride and...go for it! SB

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