

How To Start Your Own Sign Distribution Business

A potentially profitable business that can be operated from the home is a retail and/or wholesale sign route.

Every business needs signs -- from the OPEN/CLOSED and HOURS OF OPERATION on the doors to the flashing arrow or neon sign outside. No merchant can afford to operate a retail establishment these days without signs.

Many of the signs small businesses have, especially those on main streets and highways were purchased from route salesmen, or one just passing through, who made approximately 50% profit on each one.

A few years ago, the only way to get a sign was to call or go to a professional sign painter and have him paint you one. Then, you waited until it was finished to find out what your sign would look like. Today hand painted signs are but a small fraction of the sign industry.

Quite a few of today's "sign men" don't even know how to hand-letter, they use pre-formed or press-on letters! Some of those who do paint letters apply patterns and then fill in the lines. A ready-made or "stock" sign that a merchant pays \$25 for probably cost the sign salesman \$5 to \$10, and he might sell 2 or 3 to the same merchant!

If you think about it, there are not many places to buy signs - they aren't like vacuum cleaners, where every department store has a line of them.

Retail businesses buy almost all of their signs from sign companies and route salesmen, who buy directly from the manufacturer.

Going into the wholesale or retail (or both) sign sales business requires a relatively small investment -- about \$50 to \$200 worth of samples and initial stock -- things you think will sell.

This business is suitable for male, female; young or mature people, since it involves calling on established businesses during normal working hours. It is possible to sell from a catalog, better to have samples, and best to have signs for delivery NOW, when the customer really needs them.

The sign supply companies will be happy to provide suggested retail prices, catalogs and sales literature, but you are free to sell at whatever prices you feel are best for your area and profit needs. If you decide to sell at other than the company suggested prices, make sure you change everything that your customers can see before starting out.

The next step is to get in your car and start calling on retail merchants. Sell them the signs they need (if you don't someone else will). Keep track of who you call on, when, whether they bought something, and a short note on the gist of the conversation -- especially things you said you would do.

Keep a small notebook in your car with a page for each customer,

and update it EACH TIME you call on that customer (include the names of people you talked with as well as notes on the visit.

This record will also come in handy when it is time to figure up (and substantiate) the tax deductible business mileage for your car! Keeping your customer pages in the proper order will reflect your route because they are in the order that you call on them.

And, you review each and every page just before going into their place of business to refresh your recollection of the last visit. You will "remember" their name, what they bought, what they said, they liked, etc.,)

This "little trick" will pay handsome dividends!

As you approach each potential new account, notice what signs are There, and which ARE NOT.

For example, if they already have a nice OPEN/CLOSED sign, don't try to sell them another, even if yours is slightly better. When you enter and ask if they would like something that you think they could use, they get the impression you may be there to help them -- not just "sell" them.

Do the same with established accounts, expect much of the "sizing" up is done from your notes of previous visits. This way, you really are there to help them! after all, you call on many businesses and are in a position to make intelligent recommendations in this area where you specialize.

Each time you visit a customer, take in their order (if you are bringing it) and show them one or two different or new (to them) items that you feel they might be able to use - in the course of your short, polite and friendly (but intimate) conversation.

Don't try to show or tell them about too many products or they will feel "bombarded". Above all, don't discuss religion, politics or other accounts. Always be presentable: look, talk, and act like a business person.

When the customer talks, LISTEN. Find out what the merchant thinks, what products he would like to move, and some of his interests. Your intent is not to change his mind, it is to work with his line of reasoning to improve his business.

When you come in and show him one or two products that "fit" his situation, he will sense that you are trying to help him to accomplish HIS objectives - he will REMEMBER that you listened.

Establishing a retail route will take some time because ordinarily you will not call on any one client more than once a month. This may mean traveling long distances between towns, or in different districts, but there are two very important objectives to keep in mind.

The first is to make a given number of calls each day. Never quit early because you have "sold enough."

Make yourself a schedule and stick to it. The second is to be reliable.

When you tell a customer you will be back about the same time next month. BE THERE! If the customer feels he knows you (as result of your personality, backed up with your customer page in your notebook) and expects you back, he will wait to buy his signs from you!

When your customers start telling you about others who need signs, you will know that your business is on course.

Wholesaling is similar, except that you sell to businesses that might be expected to retail signs -- stationery stores, office supply stores and small department stores. Your stock items may vary a little for wholesaling -- perhaps more for rent and garage sale signs, and fewer hours of operation signs. You sell to these in quantity for lowest prices, but do not have to make so many trips or worry about collecting (these accounts should pay monthly).

If you wholesale only, you can make strictly wholesale price lists that include quantity breaks and the like, or simply give them discounts from the retail price list.

If you wholesale AND retail, it is best give everyone the retail price lists and tell your wholesale accounts how much of a discount they get (make sure to give them all the same prices).

The objective is to make it EASY for the store clerks to sell your products by giving them "ready to use" prices, so they don't have to make up their own or get out their calculators.

The retail prices you give your customers are actually "suggested" (you have no control over what they sell them for), but this MUST be the price that YOU retail them for.

Wholesale accounts who suspect they've been undercut by their own supplier get MAD. then, they get ANOTHER supplier.

Although you do not cut routes short, you can schedule your routes so that you have time for other things. You can make signs (see below), place ads and take orders, have one day per week for local deliveries, or spend one or two days a month building new accounts.

You might decide to set aside an hour or so every other day to update your books; one day a month to have your car serviced. The important thing is to have a scheduled that you keep, so your customers can depend on you. And, don't forget to take along a supply of signs when you go on trips or vacation -- why not let them help finance your trip?

If you live in a sparsely populated area and need more "mileage" from your business, consider making (not painting) some of the signs you sell yourself.

For example, you can build a signboard and apply vinyl self-sticking from 1/4" to four feet high -- in a variety of colors, including reflective letters.

Or, you could install plastic 3-D letters on the sides of buildings with plain, clear silicone! For more information on this aspect, see B264, SIGN FABRICATION - THE FAST LANE TO

SUCCESS.

BUSINESS SOURCES

NATIONAL STOCK SIGN CO. Box 145, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Indoor stock signs, free sales plan.

JOSEPH STRUHL CO., 195 Atlantic Ave., Garden City Park, NY 11040, 800/552-0023. Wholesale stock signs, free catalog

PRISMATIX DECAL, 244 Scoles Ave., Clifton, NJ 07012. Wholesale car signs (Baby on Board, etc.).

ST PUBLICATIONS, 407 Gilbert Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45202. Publishes SIGNS OF THE TIMES, the major trade magazine of the sign industry.

THE TRENBIE CO., 8044 W. 3rd St., Los Angeles, CA 90048. Wholesale static cling letter sets (they adhere to the inside of show windows).

TACTYPE, 127 W. 26th St., New York, NY 10001. Wholesale dry transfer letters and symbols.

JOHNSON PLASTICS, 10809 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55437, 800/328-3778. Self-adhesive and 3-D plastic letters, plus magnetic sign, engraving and related supplies.

STOP-LOOK SIGN CO., 20447, Los Angeles, CA 90048, 800/447-4467. Stock signs (reader boards, letters, open/closed signs). Reliable company.

NATIONAL BANNER CO. (NABCO) 11938 Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, TX 75234. Banners (pre-printed & custom), decals, flags, pennants. Reliable.

FRANZ SIGN CO., 8 Glover St., Portsmouth, OH 45662, 614/353-1470. Manufacturer and wholesale: stock indoor signs.

CARRIDEN-BEHLER INDUSTRIES, Box 645, Santa Ynez, CA 93460. Wholesale indoor signs that retail for \$1 to \$50 in English or Spanish; will drop-ship. Free sample and info.

THE REFLECTORY, Box 1031, Newburg, NY 12550. Reflective stickers from \$6 per 100.

ASSOCIATED ELECTRICAL ADVERTISING, 1547 N Western Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90027. Wholesale signs: reader boards, flight light readers, open/closed, etc.

TESTRITE INSTRUMENT CO., 135 Monroe, Newark, NJ 07105, 201/589-6767. Wholesale "neon" blackboard signs.

CAB PLASTICS, 40-40 College Point, Flushing, NY 11354. Custom made signs, nameplates, badges for commissioned salesmen; free catalog.

KAUFMAN COMPANY, Centertown, MO 65023. Teaches sign painting, cartooning and pinstriping. Free catalog.

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC. 31 East 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11051.

Discount books, clip art, stencils, etc.

QUILL CORPORATION, 100 Schelster Rd., Lincolnshire, IL 60917-4700,
312/634-4800.

IVEY PRINTING, Box 761, Meridan, TX 76665. Letterhead: 400 sheets
plus 200 envelopes - \$18.

SWEDCO, Box 29, Mooresville, NC 28115. 3 line rubber stamps - \$3;
business cards - \$13 per thousand.

ZPS, Box 581, Libertyville, IL 60048-2556. Business cards (raised
print - \$11.50 per K) and letterhead stationery. Will print your
copy ready logo or design, even whole card.

WALTER DRAKE, 4119 Drake Bldg., Colorado Springs, CO 80940. Short
run business cards, stationery, etc. Good quality, but no choice
of style or color.