

How To Make Money Making Magnetic Signs

Making magnetic signs in your garage or shop not only profitable -- it can be fun! Magnetic signs are vacuum formed, 3-D sheets of plastic with two-way foam or magnetic strips on the back to hold them in place.

The "book" on magnetic signs has not yet been finished because each every new entrepreneur discovers new innovations, such as "cast iron" finish or metallic paints and relief cameos. The primary products, magnetic car and truck signs, are widely accepted but there is still plenty of room for your creative talents!

The initial investment to go into this business is approximately \$1,000 for some basic no-frills equipment and startup supplies. The cost of making a pair of 12 x 24 inch (the standard size) is about \$7.00 with 10 -15 minutes labor. A pair this size sells for about \$40 (\$24 wholesale).

The magnetic sign process is performed by placing a 28 by 16 inch start white vinyl plastic into a vacuum machine, heating the plastic until it softens, then "pulling" it down over an arrangement of letters with a vacuum pump.

The vacuum machine looks something like a suitcase -- with heating wires in the top perforated baffle about 4 inches below the rim of the bottom. The vacuum motor is underneath the baffle and the controls are on the outside front. The plastic is laid across the bottom half and sealed when the lid is closed.

The heat is turned on a couple of minutes (until the plastic begins to sag), then it is turned off and the seconds, during which time the plastic is pulled down onto the perforated baffle.

When the vacuum machine is opened, the resulting sign has a raised impression of whatever design was placed on top of the baffle. The rough sign is then removed, trimmed, magnetic tape applied, and the raised portions are "painted" with rubber rollers (brayers) and vinyl "ink" (Paint). Minor errors are scraped off with pocket knife and PRESTO, a finished magnetic sign!

The magnetic sign "art" is fashioning and arranging the models (letters, logos, etc.) that create the sign. Letters and logos are about 1/8" thick (thicker for large items). They are arranged or laid out exactly as the sign should appear.

A wide variety of letters (sold in sets or "fonts"), Logos and various special effects such as borders, corner embellishment and arrows are available commercially in magnetic, metal or composition material.

Magnetic are the most expensive and are used for designs laid out directly on the baffle. Their magnetism helps them stay in place as the hot plastic forms over them. Metal letters are also expensive, but long lasting. Composition letters are used for the clipboard process (see below), and are quite easy to make yourself.

There are two basic methods of laying out copy. The first (and fastest) is to arrange magnetic letters directly onto the baffle and "pull" the sign down over them. This method, however, often results in slippage -- letters on the outside are moved slightly as the plastic catches them in the pulling process. It also is difficult to keep everything "together" for more than a couple of pulls.

Other drawback are the cost of magnetic letters, that only the old, two-way cellophane back magnetic tape can be used (foam backed would melt) and, that the baffle holes show through onto the sign (although few customers seem to mind).

The other, (chipboard) method involves gluing magnetic OR ANY OTHER TYPE LETTER or design onto pieces of chipboard that are the exact size of the desired sign.

Chipboard is a gray composition material like that found on the back of writing tablets -- its is porous enough to let the vacuum process work, and smooth enough to give the sign a nice, satin finish.

Most sign operators have many different styles of chipboard patterns -- all cut to shape, with rounded corners even custom shapes. Lines are drawn on them with FELT TIPPED PENS ball point leaves lines that show on the sign!) as layout guides.

Some even have circular lines so the letters of top line of the sign can be laid out in an arch. As the letters are placed onto the chipboard pattern, a touch of glue is added (white, or gluestick), to hold them in place (use more glue for more impressions). Once the sign is laid out, place the whole thing in the machine and make as many signs as you need.

When finished, pick off the letters and use a piece of sandpaper to smooth the remaining glue on the chipboard. Occasionally, you may have to wash the letters -- but not often.

Chipboard signs do not show the tape lines because the tape is applied after the sign has been formed. They are especially desirable in cases where several sets are needed -- and for those little space-fillers, because the letters stay in place. They also offer the advantage of custom shapes. Any shape you can cut out of the chipboard can be the shape of your sign, which can be used over and over again (thanks to the sandpaper technique).

Finally, the chipboard sign is now every bit as durable, due to the advent of foam backed magnetic tape.

Several years ago there were problems with the magnetic tape coming off, even for signs molded in the machine (where the tape and plastic are hot when they "meet").

This problem was sometimes caused by improper molding or the use of mold release spray in the area. The proper way is to frame the desired sign on the baffle with the magnetic tape, then pull off the protective cover at the last moment before the sign is pulled. Signs made this way show both the baffle holes and the magnetic tape impression.

Signs not made this way (e.g., chipboard) should ALWAYS have foam backed magnetic strips or full magnetic backs. Otherwise, there will be detachment problems.

Full magnetic back material costs about twice as much as strips and is half as thick. It does make a nice, sturdy sign, but probably won't last any longer or perform any better!

Some sign makers use styrene plastic sheets, which are much cheaper than vinyl (or clear butyl) -- but they will not last outside. Styrene should be use for experimentation, molding and inside signs only. It is wise to keep a few sheets around for these purposes.

Note that styrene will not stick to vinyl and vice versa. Styrene works fine for molding and will keep for months if kept flat and out of the sun. Many sign makers keep impressions in styrene in case they need to mold more letters or logos.

There are several ways to mold your own letters and logos. You can mold from impressions you make, or copy one from another sign (clean the back and spray it lightly with mold release first).

Although you can use temporary material, such as fiber glass, most of these will not hold up in the vacuum machine for more than one or two pulls (due to the heat), and some will require lots of mold release (or baby powder).

Molding compound (two part) is expensive, but yields very inexpensive fonts. If you want to save money, buy a font of PLASTIC letters, make an impression of them in styrene, then mold your own letters with a good quality molding compound. You will be able to save about 85%!

Another way to save money is to make your own models out of Masonite or chipboard (two ply). You can make arrows, lines, flowers, whatever (#8 copper wire makes excellent parentheses; model airplane balsa strips are great lines and boxes).

If you want more copies, make an impression in styrene -- or unused portion of a sign that you are pulling -- and mold as many as you need.

Selling magnetic signs is a matter of getting out the word. If you want to wholesale, take a few (small) samples around and call on stationery stores. Tell them about your service and how long it will take to get a pair of signs they order (since you are local, you can beat out-of-towners).

When they agree to take orders, leave a price list and your phone number. If you also retail, you must sell at the same "suggested" retail prices (or your accounts will leave you flat). Put signs on your truck or car (sides and back), a small ad in the paper, and have a few cards printed.

Set up a record-keeping system, get some sales books from the dime store (stamp them with your company name), and start cranking out signs.

Although anyone can learn to make magnetic signs, the best advice is to get an outfit, invest in some styrene and an 8 oz bottle of

styrene paint, and "ruin some plastic."

It takes a little practice to become proficient at spacing letters and painting the rollers, etc. but you will catch on surprisingly fast.

An easy way to keep track of orders that come in by phone (usually from retail accounts) is to keep a bound notebook next to the phone, and make a little box beside each order.

List the date, account and full details of the sign ordered. When the order is finished and delivered check off the little box -- this will let you see at a glance which orders are still pending at any one time.

The biggest potential problem area is that you might make mistakes that result in lost time and money.

Make sure all of your "copy" is written down and keep a dictionary handy. When taking orders by phone, be especially careful to get the correct message, spelling, colors, etc.

When laying out the work, pin the order at eye level above where you are working -- and double check the sign against the order before putting your finished layout into the machine... If there is the SLIGHTEST doubt in spelling or wording, check before you pull!

One other thing be aware of is the size of your vacuum machine. The standard sign is 12 x 24", so your machine should be big enough to make one OR TWO signs at a time. With odd sized machines, you may have a lot of expensive waste.

Tip: If you consider buying a second machine, get one that will use the same size rolls of plastic, so you can buy in bulk and use the same cutting boards, etc.

You can also make customized plates in a standard vacuum machine (3 at a time in a 12 x 24 inch model). This simply requires three chipboard patterns upon which you lay out and glue the desired copy. And, you can make impressions of almost anything.

One sign maker glued bolt heads on his chip board and painted them so the sign look like they are bolted on the vehicle! Another trick is to cover the chipboard with fabric (use 3-M spray adhesive for this) for an interesting background. There are thousand of other variations that you will discover in this fascinating business.

Note also that once you are in the magnetic sign business, the same customer will be interested in printing, engraved signs, and all sorts of things that are associated with starting and promoting small businesses.

Tips: to make "metallic" paint, add an ounce of aluminum to seven ounces of regular color. For a cast iron appearance, form over sandpaper, paint black and apply metallic rub 'n buff.

BUSINESS SOURCES

EL DO PLASTICS, INC., 451 El Dorado, AR 71730, 800/643-1556.
Magnetic sign equipment and supplies; logos, letters fonts,
engraving equipment, self-stick letters. Holds annual spring
seminars (highly recommended!). Very reliable.

NATIONAL BANNER CO., 11938 Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, TX 75234.
Flags, pennants, custom printed and standard banners, etc.
Reliable.

JOHNSON PLASTICS, 10809 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55437,
800/328-3778. Magnetic sign, engraving equipment and supplies
(has styrene plastic sheets). Very reliable.

STOP-LOOK SIGN CO. Box 20447, Los Angeles, CA 90006,
800/447-4467. Stock signs, specializing in reader boards and
large (18 x 24" open/closed signs).

THE REFLECTORY, box 1031, Newburg, FL 33685. Reflective stickers
and decals.

CREATIVE PLASTICS, Box 260635, Tampa, FL 33685, 800/885-4257.
Plastic letters, frames and plates for font license plates. Has
the small plastic letters, logos, zodiac signs, etc., that can be
molded and copied.

FRANZ SIGN CO., 8 Glover St., Portsmouth, OH 45662. Stock signs.

THE TREMBIE CO., 8044 W. 3rd St., Los Angeles, CA 90048,
213/655-9635. Wholesales sets of reusable static-hold letters for
store windows.

BUMPA-TEL, INC., P.O. Drawer A, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701,
800/334-2211. Magnetic sheeting for full-back magnetic signs.
Excellent prices.

THE KELSEY CO., P.O. Box 941, Meriden, CT 06450. 203/235-1695.
Art, printing and craft supplies. Old reliable company that has
things many suppliers no longer carry. Free catalog.

DICK BLICK CO., P.O. Box 1267, Galesburg, IL 61047-1267.
800/677-8192. Art supplies including paints that work on magnetic
signs. Write for catalog.

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 31 East 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11051.
516/294-7000. Discount books, clip art, stencils, etc.

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

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.