

Start-up Company Thrives in Growing Vehicle Graphics Market

Starting a business is an adventure filled with twists and turns. Just ask Pete LoBrutto, president and founder of Azure Vehicle Graphics of Austin, Texas. In 2003, after fifteen years in the software industry, he decided to take the plunge into small business ownership. In just a year and a half, he has transformed a sound business strategy into a thriving graphics business that is specialized, growing, and profitable.

Like a growing number of small business owners, LoBrutto selected the sign industry and ultimately a specialty within it, digitally printed vehicle graphics, as the foundation for his start-up business. This decision was based on several factors.

"I knew I needed to find an opportunity with certain characteristics," says LoBrutto. "First, it had to be digital in nature because that's where my expertise lies. Second, I was looking for a business-to-business opportunity, something that was not retail-oriented. It had to be affordable to start up. And I wanted to be in a growth industry and not a mature market."

In the beginning, Azure Vehicle Graphics was founded as a full-service sign shop called Azure Imaging & Printing. Initially, LoBrutto and his staff of two produced banners, posters, and signs, all from a standard personal computer configured for graphics production. According to LoBrutto, the cornerstone of this production environment has been a SOL-JET SC-540EX integrated printer/cutter from Irvine, California-based Roland DGA Corp.

With more than 100 customers across the U.S. and Canada and business growing at 100 percent year over year, Azure Vehicle Graphics is well positioned for continued growth and success.

In 2004, LoBrutto added a second SC-540EX to his production environment and soon after that decided to focus on the vehicle graphics market, renaming the business Azure Vehicle Graphics. The company now employs four people and serves primarily small and mid-sized companies. Typical orders range from one or two vehicle wraps to as many as one hundred wraps or more.

"The vehicle graphics market is growing rapidly," LoBrutto says. "Increasingly, companies are looking at

vehicle graphics as an effective means for advertising. Our customers come from a wide range of industries—from beverage companies to resorts and casinos. Full-color vehicle wraps are relatively new, but more companies are becoming aware of them so demand is rising considerably."

One of the company's most unique applications is a wrap completed recently for a "dollar store," which sells a wide range of products priced at one dollar. To drive home the marketing message, the store's delivery vehicle was "wrapped" in a giant one-dollar bill design. "We had to check with the secret service first to verify that we could legally scan a dollar bill," LoBrutto says.

LoBrutto maintains that the most difficult jobs typically involve wrapping highly stylized, curved vehicles. A recent wrap for a Volkswagen Beetle involved a multi-



colored 1960s-inspired design that required tremendous skill to complete. "Picture trying to take rectangular pieces of vinyl and designing and applying them to the contours of a Beetle," LoBrutto says. "In cases like this, the job becomes almost a three-dimensional wrap. Our installers have expertise to handle these contours. It's truly an art."

For most of its work, Azure Vehicle Graphics designs using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop and outputs to the Roland DGA SC-540EX using Roland's own RIP (Raster Image Processor) software and color profiles. Design files from customers can be scanned as well for use as artwork.

Once designed and printed, the graphics are laminated and then applied to vehicles by the company's trained installers. Azure Vehicle Graphics uses 3M cast vinyl and 3M overlamine film, as well as Eco-SOL INK, exclusively for its graphics.

— Laurie Weller