

John Oliva

Bedford Hills, New York

Shop name: C&M Sign Company **Shop size:** 1200 sq. ft. **Age:** 50 **Graphics equipment:** SignLab software, Ioline30-in. SmarTrac cutter, Roland VersaCAMM SP300 V printer/cutter **Website:** www.candmsign.com



I've been making signs since 1985. After graduating from the State University of New York at Oswego with a degree in technology education—that's what is known as being a shop teacher—I found my way into the sign industry without ever working as a teacher.

I worked for four different sign companies before buying C&M Sign Company in 1990. I was able to be around and observe some very talented people when I first started in the sign industry. My two other key inspirations have been John H. Belt, one of my college professors, and my friend and fellow sign painter, Stephen Weston.

Even though the shop has moved three times

over the years, we've always been here in Bedford Hills. We're located about two hours north of New York City.

I'm the only full-time employee here at C&M. There are some part-time people who come in when we need them and like most small business owners, we have our family—my wife, Maribel, is vice president of the company, and is a school teacher. Our kids, Anna and John Paul, both college students, help out when they're around. I have some great suppliers and other self-employed sign people like myself, and we often work together.

Two months ago we moved from our 2500-sq.-ft. shop, where we had been for seven years, into this new 1200-sq.-ft. space. It's set up very well but downsizing was a necessity to cut our overhead. Ever since the economy changed in 2008, it's been a real challenge.

The type of work we do has changed, the scale of the jobs has cut back and towns are more restrictive with signage legislation now. As long as I've been in this business, there's no doubt that this last recession was the worst I've ever seen. It's still affecting my area and my business, even though this is a fairly affluent area—a lot of people here commute into New York City, so real estate prices and rents here are still very high.

In the early days, I promoted the shop through phone book ads—back then, that was just how you promoted your business. In retrospect, I don't think it really brought in all that much work, especially when you consider the cost of Yellow Page ads.

These days I don't advertise at all; every job comes in via word-of-mouth or recommendation. I rely on my website for people to see what we're about. And it's great. A good website is a great way to promote yourself. I've actually had jobs where I never met the customer in person—





Carved 1½-in. high-density urethane board finished with acrylic Polyurethane paint; landscape graphic is multiple layers of ¾-in. HDU board. Each section is 2 by 8 ft., with a cedar framework, posts and roof.



Pebble-blasted 3-by-5-ft. panel of 2-in. HDU board, finished with acrylic polyurethane paint and mounted on custom-made roof brackets



Vinyl graphics and digital print logo on 6-by-15-ft. single-sided aluminum pan-construction sign with aluminum trim



3M Controltac film with overlamine



Carved, sandblasted and raised copy, all HDU, with acrylic polyurethane paint



3-by-5-ft. carved panel of 2-in. HDU; lettering finished with 23k gold leaf



Custom cap made of HDU



Two layers of 1/4-in. acrylic with vinyl graphics on back of the clear panel; mounted on stainless steel standoff hardware



Copper cap finial on PVC post; 1/4-in. flat aluminum stock bonded to HDU sign for post mounting



Digital print logo on HDU panel over carved HDU background



Illuminated lettering with perforated translucent film; sanded aluminum with clear coat



Multiple layers of 3/4-in. HDU board



PVC posts and finials with 2-in. HDU sign

emails and a phone conversation or two were all we needed to close the deal. I've had my site up for almost five years; it's a custom-made site that I put a lot of time and money into.

Our market requires that we do a little of everything. We used to do more electric and channel letter type jobs, and little by little that's changed. We do trucks, we fabricate and we probably do a little more carving than we did in the past years. People's tastes change, and towns are now more restrictive with the channel letter and electrical signs. The trend is more toward dimensional signs and frankly, that seems to fit the look of the area much better.

We're also doing more monument signs for schools, churches and real estate developments. I like doing them because there's a lot that goes into the details—the brackets, the posts, the overall design of the sign. I have a background as a machinist, so I guess I'm a little bit precise with things in that regard. You have to be good at everything to do them, including digging holes, which is something most people take for granted. Installations in general are challenging, but that's what makes them rewarding.

We also do a fair amount of vehicles, but I've seen that drop drastically in the past few years. Contractors have been hit really hard by the recession, and they're not buying new trucks. There are fewer people buying new trucks, and businesses aren't spending on advertising—most of them are preoccupied with trying to make money.

I've always believed in servicing a smaller community with more products, rather than a large area with a few specialized things. I've always marketed myself as the shop that is able to be everything to a small audience. That doesn't mean I need to make everything myself—it means I'm able to help my customers in a lot of different ways because of the relationships I have with other craftsmen and manufacturers.

Sometimes it may be something as simple as recommending them to a printer, or helping them figure out the best way to advertise their business. In other cases it means getting some other tradespeople or suppliers involved.

You can put out a lot of product without having a lot of people and a huge facility. You just need to surround yourself with the right people, and to have faith in subbing out things. If you're trying to do everything yourself, you're going to fall behind.

We've been able to put out some big projects and some really great things just by leaning on the skills of others—whether it's another sign shop or a supplier or a craftsman from another trade. The sign business is funny because one day you need a lot of help, then the next day you don't need any. I've found that working with

John believes the details make a difference--a little trim, dimension or an interesting graphic adds a lot to a sign.



Carved lettering on double-sided 18-by-24-in. panel of 1¼-in. Extira. Graphic is a digital print on 1-in. HDU board.



Carved graphics on 3-by-6-ft. panel of 1½-in. HDU, finished with acrylic polyurethane paint and mounted on PVC posts



Carved lettering on double-sided 30-by-38-in. panel of Extira, finished with acrylic polyurethane paint. Graphic is a digital print, and sign is mounted on powder-coated, custom-made steel brackets on PVC posts with 4- to 5-in. transition.



Waterjet-cut 1/8-in. aluminum panels with extrusion frame, mounted on half-round extrusion posts. Lettering is done with perforated translucent film and has internal LED illumination. All the aluminum on the 16-by-60-in. sign was sanded then clear coated.



Digital print on ¼-in. white acrylic, mounted on stainless steel standoff hardware



The 4-by-6-ft. base with painted aluminum composite panels over an all aluminum structure, with ¼-in. stainless steel flat-cut letters. The HR is 24-in. fabricated stainless steel letters; tree logo is ½-in. aluminum.



3M Controltac with overlamine



Laser-cut acrylic lettering in black and silver; digital print flower is mounted to black acrylic. The sign is 3 by 10 ft. overall.



Carved lettering on 1-by-2-ft. panel of 1¼-in. Extria Treated Exterior Panel with beveled edge. Logo is flat painted.

others can resolve this.

I'm suffering now from what I think other businesses in general suffer from, which is cash flow problems. The business itself is doing okay—I'm busy, I have the future to grow, I have plenty of upcoming jobs. But I had to spend more money than I wanted to by making the move, because we had to build out the place. The correction I made by moving, though, has turned out to be a good decision. So it's a weird thing—I moved to save money, but I had to spend money to do it. But I have some nice upcoming projects, and it will all even itself out in the next few months.

I'm 50, and like a lot of people in my position, I've been working for myself for a long time. So what do you do with your business at the end? Do you sell it? Do you just walk away? I'm curious to know how that works out for other sign people. It's really hard to sell a small business that's so personal.

When I think of most of the people I've known in the sign business, it's sort of like they can never get out of it. Retirement probably isn't easy for any small business owner, but I think the sign business is especially difficult. Who would you sell your shop to? Most young entrepreneurs would rather get their own customers and phone number, rather than come up with money to buy it from someone else.

As I get older I think more of other things I could do. It could certainly be something related to the sign business, because small sign shop owners have a lot of great skills. We have all this enthusiasm when we're young and starting out, but the hard part comes once you've been doing it for a long time. We're not great at having a master plan when it comes to those things. We're talented people and we love what we do, but how do we go about moving on and doing other things?

Today I feel like we're just a little shop trying to do nice work, which is a pretty common theme in this industry. We don't do outrageous, over-the-top signs, but I'd like to think the signs we make help the small businesses we work for. I think like most small companies, you don't get any credit for doing little things really well—you come back after a big installation, you're tired, but you're really proud of what you did. Those are the little celebrations you need to savor, because

—From an interview with John McIltrout