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JULY 2008

## Installation Insights

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# Imparting Installation Insights

BY JEFFREY STEELE

Wide-format-imaging professionals take justifiable pride in printing outdoor advertisements seen by thousands, if not millions. But doing their work the right way is only half the battle involved in outdoor advertising. The other half is the art and craft of installing vehicle wraps, sidewalk graphics, stadium signs, and other outdoor elements.

For insight into the world of outdoor installation, we turn this month to two experts who have forgotten more about installation than many of the world's installers will ever know. Al Chieco, president of Ardsley, NY-based Application Unlimited, and Rob Ivers, president of Raymore, MO-based Rob Ivers Inc. have a combined six decades of experience, have both done extensive training of up-and-coming installers and are both integrally involved in their respective organizations granting certification to installers.



Application Unlimited recently installed this graphic for a trade show at the Jacob Javits Center in NYC.



This truck wrap was installed by Raymore, MO-based Rob Ivers Inc.

## Practice Makes Perfect

Both Chieco and Ivers come by their insights through long experience. How long? Put it this way: Both were installing vinyl way back when Carter was in the White House, disco was in its heyday, and double-knit polyester was still a fashion statement.

Chieco's Application Unlimited was launched in 1979 as a business that installed company-identifying signage and advertising graphics on tractor-trailers, trucks, buses, and other conveyances. It remained that kind of company until 1989, he recalls. "When computers came into the industry strong, we were able to do the four-color process without a lot of prep work, and we started wrapping buses in New York City," he says. "Before that, if you

had 100 trailers, it was very expensive to do the color separation.”

Today, Application Unlimited handles jobs ranging from vehicle wraps to wraps of aircraft hangars and vintage tugboats floating in New York Harbor. “We wrapped an airplane hangar up in Boston for United, we did the interior and exterior of train cars, and we put graphics on the exterior of a 747,” Chicco observes with evident pride.

Ivers also has a solid three decades of experience behind him. “I started applying vinyl in 1978,” Ivers recalls. “For the most part, I’m self taught. Back at the start, I found myself working for a friend who had started a car windshield repair business franchise, and he and I built his company up in this area. We were constantly on used car lots and truck lots.

“And while waiting for this windshield repair fluid to dry, I started looking around for other things to do on the same lots. I saw an interest in body side striping. When that took off, I quit the windshields and went right into the vinyl.”

By 1980, Ivers was hand cutting vinyl graphics for the trucking industry. And two years later, his business was flying high on the tractor-trailer graphics business, which he served by installing graphics on thousands of trailers a year. By 1983, the digital revolution had begun in earnest with the first electrostatic machines, and the next year Ivers completed his first-ever full vinyl wrap of a vehicle.

A quarter century later, 75 percent of his time is spent training installers, but vehicle wraps still are part of his business. “We’re still seeing a lot of computer cut vinyl being done,” Ivers says. “Many people want to wrap a truck. But when they hear the price, they often want to go back to computer cut vinyl, partial wrap, or combination of the two. Not everyone can afford to spend \$3,000 to \$5,000 on a vehicle wrap.”

Ivers also handles installations of vinyl graphics on business windows, wall murals, and temporary or “barricade graphics,” the kind seen on walls covering empty mall storefronts while a new store is being readied behind the façade. Floor and wall graphics appearing in stadiums across the US are another profit area.

## Customers: I Need It Yesterday

When it comes to the evolution in types of customer requests, both veteran vinyl installers say customers want the work completed ever more rapidly.



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# outdoor

"The biggest demand is, 'I need it done yesterday,'" Chicco says. "But when a customer calls us and he's in a jam, they'll ask, 'What can you do for us?' That's an area where we excel. I have lots of staff, and we can put out fires quickly."

Asked why turnaround times are ever shorter, Chicco points to the example of the retail industry's requests for vinyl graphics supporting new store openings.

"There's a short window after the work is done by the carpenters and painters in a [soon-to-open] store," he says. "And then the graphics have to be done last minute. I don't know why they wait, but they do. Here's

all the artwork, print and install it in a week, and that's where the scramble comes in. There are people who have the foresight not to do that, but there are lots of others who don't."

From his standpoint, Ivers sees dangers in ever-shorter deadlines for installation. There are companies, he says, that "will fuel that fire" by offering to do jobs quickly and for a much lower price than reputable veteran installers charge. The quick and shoddy workmanship of the installation generally is proof of that installer's lack of ability.

"I try not to fuel that fire, because after 31 years, I know how long it takes to do a quality job," Ivers says. "I say if you want the job done right, this is how much it's going to cost, and this is how long it is going to take."

## Getting Into Training

Both Chicco and Ivers feel strongly about the issue of training, and aren't shy about speaking their minds on the topic. The underlying message from both is that the installation of vinyl is a talent not to be mastered without considerable time and effort.

"There's a certain personality or aptitude you need to do this work," Chicco says. "When I'm hiring, I interview about 10 or 12 people for every one I hire. In the begin-



Iver's company offers a number of hands-on training installation programs.

ning, they do the cleaning and the prep work. If that's not right, you're going to have problems in the installation. They work side by side with a master installer."

After these newcomers have spent a few weeks to a few months on the job, Application Unlimited allows them to begin running the squeegee over the vinyl.

After about a year at the job, on average, the new installers begin to master not only the craft itself, but the problem solving that is a part of the job, Chicco says.

"I have guys who have been doing it for five years, and I still have to stand over them," he adds. "And other guys at it for five months who are doing a great job."

As he views the training issue, Ivers reports there are considerably more training courses available to beginning installers than there were even two or three years ago. Almost all of the best-known training programs are two- or three-day courses. Because they are of very short duration, these courses can be nothing more than introductory in nature. Yet they are promoted as more, and Ivers has a problem with that.

"We tell people they will learn the basics, and learn whether they want to do this on a full-time basis," he says of his own introductory training.

Of the programs of which he's aware, Ivers believes only Louisville's Digital EFX and his own company offer truly high quality, hands-on training. This kind of training doesn't come cheaply, he adds, noting that when he visits a company to spend 40 hours training three installers, the firm is presented a \$10,000 invoice at week's end.

## Benefits of Certification

Two certifications are recognized as the standard setters in the vinyl installation industry. There is the UASG-3M certification program, with which Chicco is associated, and the PDAA certification, created and overseen by Ivers. To become a UASG-3M certified installer, applying companies must have been in business for three years, and their principal officers must sit for an interview with USAG board members like Chicco.

"We have a list of questions we ask to make sure they fit the criteria of the UASG," he says. "And then there's the testing. They go to St. Paul, Minn. for two days of hands-on and written tests. If they pass, they are certified...You can imagine what it would be like being an individual installer working out of a station wagon, compared to being a 3M-certified installer. The latter gives you a lot more credibility."

The PDAA certification is equally rigorous, Ivers says, and has been adopted by such 3M competitors as Avery, MACTac, Arlon, and FLEXcon.

"Both of these certifications have meaning, because there are both written and hands-on proficiency tests that have to be passed to gain the certificates," Ivers says.

## The Future of Wraps

We asked both Chicco and Ivers to gaze into their crystal balls and give their thoughts on the future of vinyl installation. For his part, Chicco believes vehicle wraps have hit their peak and are on the decline.

"I'm in a great market, so there's always something new or different happening," he observes. "When things slow down in one area, we'll just pursue another."

In his remarks about the future of the segment, Ivers voiced his opinion there are more than enough installers today to meet market needs, but that only five or 10 percent are really good at their craft.

"I'd like to see more people become better educated about their chosen profession of installing vinyl," he says. "You don't become a brain surgeon or a master plumber in a week. I could teach you to put a Band-Aid on in a couple minutes, but I wouldn't want you operating on my kid." ♦



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Application Unlimited's Chicco says turnaround times are shorter and points to the retail industry's requests for vinyl graphics supporting new store opening's as an example.