

Industry **NOVEMBER** **TRENDS** 2019



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THE INTERNATIONAL SIGN ASSOCIATION

3 Ways Sign Manufacturing Day Pays Ongoing Dividends

Sign Manufacturing Day was never intended to be one day on a calendar. Instead, it was intended to be the foundation for ongoing relationships with local schools and teachers and a pipeline to the workforce of the future.

The annual event—which opens sign manufacturing facilities to local students—has done just that for many of the participating companies. Ramsay Signs in Portland, Oregon, has participated in the event since the beginning. The annual event allows Melanie Gillis, human resources manager, an opportunity to “stay in contact with the instructors. It reminds them that there are still jobs for their kids here. We are happy to bring them on. College isn’t for everybody and that’s ok. College isn’t the only way to a successful adulthood.”

That’s just one way that sign, graphics and visual communications companies have used the event throughout the year.

Providing a Showcase

Ace Sign Company in Springfield, Illinois, first participated in Sign Manufacturing Day 2018 and drew less than three dozen students for its first outing. But that led to development of an internship program in conjunction with the Capital Area Career Center, which serves several area high schools.

Four students spent one day a week at Ace during the spring semester where they were able to get the full experience of a sign project. Ace donated materials and selected a local nonprofit to receive a vehicle wrap. The students created concepts and pitched the client. When the client selected an option, they worked to create and apply the wrap. Students received school credit—and one ended up with a part-time job in the graphics department. He’s expected to go fulltime after graduation, said Jane Mosey-Nicoletta, business development and community outreach professional.

Welcoming students in can help the next generation envision the possibilities of their future, she said. “Kids get it into their heads that they’re going to do one thing, not realizing all the things that they can do with that skillset. The more things that they can experience to showcase potential careers is hugely helpful. By touring facilities and talking to people in the industry and doing the job shadowing—it doesn’t have to be as extensive as the internships— they can make the determination if it’s something they’re passionate about.”

Cummings Resources also developed a co-op program with Wallace Community College, near its Dothan, Alabama, manufacturing facility. Students got out of school an hour early and headed to jobs at Cummings. Two years later, several of those students are fulltime—and one has moved into a team lead position. “Getting one team lead out of that program was a huge accomplishment,” said Sarah Norris, Cummings’ human resources director, said.

Sparking Conversation

Matt Baker, co-owner/operator of Bakers’ Signs and Manufacturing Inc. in Conroe, Texas, brings a rather unique approach to Sign Manufacturing Day. Before the day begins, he seeks out participating high school principals to ask about where they might like to place a sign in the lobby or somewhere else in the school. His team designs the sign. When the students arrive for Sign Manufacturing Day, they work to build an illuminated logo, which will be installed by Baker’s team and put on display in the school.

“The kids who come have the ability to show off their craftsmanship,” Baker said. “Every time somebody walks by that sign in the hallway or cafeteria, it allows us to continue the dialogue.”

The conversation continues in other ways, too. A co-op teacher at one of the local high schools invited Baker to participate in National Signing Day. Like a high school athlete signing a letter of intent for a college scholarship, National Signing Day allows technical students to announce career plans and sign a letter of intent for a job, apprenticeship or advanced technical training.

“One of the students who was participating had toured during Sign Manufacturing Day. I set up an interview and went over the stipulations of going to work and what we would offer him. He committed and signed up to work for our company.”

The new hire is learning the industry from the ground up. He’s currently working in the crating and shipping area, getting completed signs ready to be loaded onto a truck. He also works in the yard, where he is responsible for disposal of old products.

“It’s one of the lower positions on the totem pole here,” Baker said. “But it gives him the opportunity to reverse-engineer a variety of signs. It will help him get a better of idea of what his next step will be.”



Sign Manufacturing Day 2019 is in the books. Read about the successes enjoyed by participating companies or learn more about the 2020 event at www.signs.org/mfgday or contact us by email at workforce@signs.org.

Building Relationships

While the new hires solve an immediate need, developing a relationship with the educators can pay off for years to come.

Jason Buxton, owner of Midwest Light and Sign in Farmington, Missouri, has “really enjoyed getting to know the teachers. Not only are they trying to help their students; they’re trying to help us. And we’re doing the same. The teachers have come to our events and they ask us to come to the school to share about our industry.”

Those ongoing conversations have deepened understanding of the sign, graphics and visual communications industry. “One school bought a plotter and thought they were going to teach the kids to make signs,” Buxton said. “They didn’t realize just how many types of vinyl and signs are out there.”

Cummings representatives sit on the board for a sheet metal program. An ongoing relationship with the K-12 technology center is also on the table. Students there take some technical training and the coordinator will post notices of job openings and events at the Cummings plant.

“We are open to people who are just graduating high school and want to get their feet wet in manufacturing,” Norris said. “Building a relationship with the schools within the community has been powerful for us.”

Sign Manufacturing Day offers a great opportunity not only to tell that story to potential employees, but also to provide a “morale boost” for the staff, Gillis said. “We’re showcasing what a beautifully complicated job they have and that we want to show other people how interesting it is. My hope is that it makes the staff feel proud. They’ve expressed how good it is to have students come in.”

And they, like most of the industry, certainly hope those students stay.