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# DIGITAL GRAPHICS

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## Building Opportunities



A new player's proactive approach yields big success

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NBM

THE BUSINESS

# Big Time

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A new shop in Michigan is hitting the big time, winning big jobs with big clients.

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BY KEN MERGENTIME

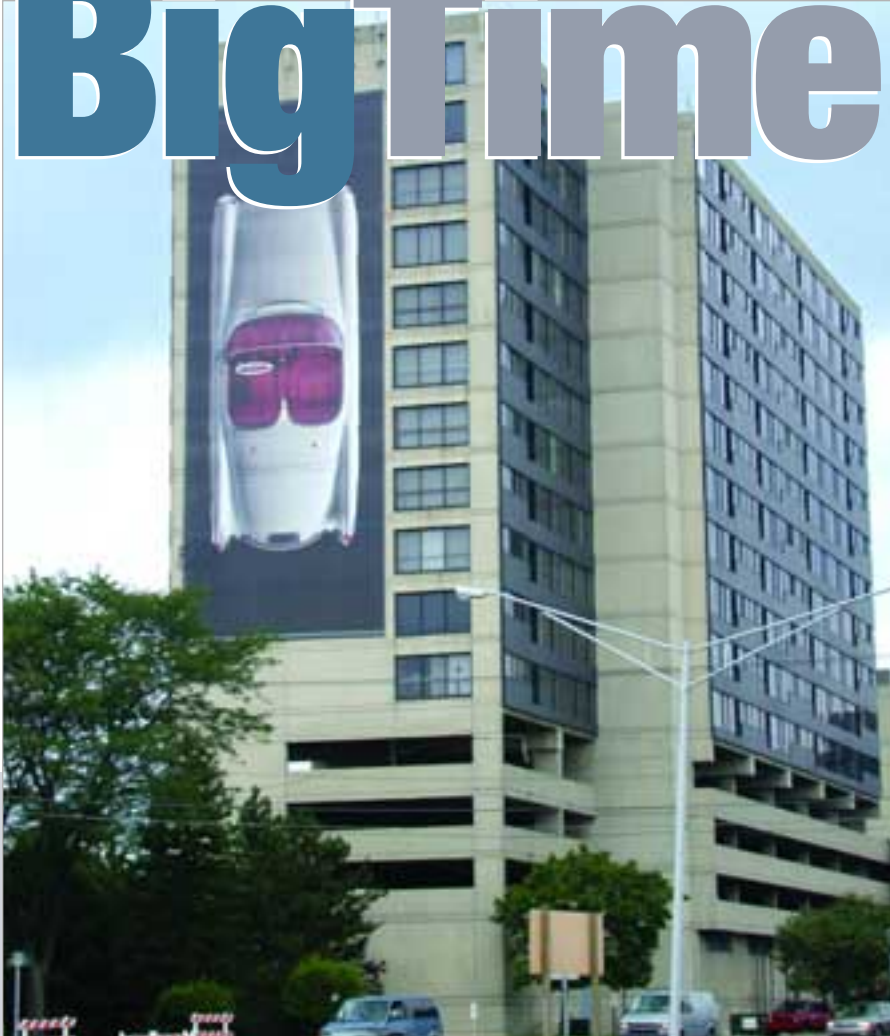
In Detroit everything's about cars. In the home town of the Big Three automakers there are more American-made vehicles on the road than in just about any other city in the country. For Northstar Imaging Solutions LLC, Troy Mich., producing gigantic color graphics for the Motor City's automotive industry has helped propel this relatively new company into the big time. Among their big-time clients are automakers Daimler Chrysler, Ford and General Motors, the Detroit Pistons basketball team, the Detroit Thanksgiving Day Parade, NASCAR and NHRA automotive associations.

## STRANGE BEGINNINGS

Prior to getting into the graphics industry Mark Small, president and founder of Northstar, spent 23 years working as a litigation lawyer. Having made up his mind to change careers, he began working with headhunters who started offering him positions with dot-com companies, but Small turned several down until he found a position as CEO of a local wide format graphics house. Along with his legal background he brought a flair for problem solving, business planning skills and the art of delegation.

"I loved the business the second I got into it," Small says of his transition into big color graphics. However, he soon found himself at odds with the business's ownership and decided to form his own company. So, in 2001 he formed Northstar Imaging, along with three graphics designers and some installers. Initially he ran the business from his home, outsourced all the printing and rented an installation facility.

After three months he'd found a permanent business location in Troy, ordered his own printing equipment and things were looking up. Then, on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, as he was in the process of taking delivery of a 27-foot VUTEk UltraVu 5300 superwide printer, he got the phone



A silver '53 Corvette convertible adorns the side of the 555 Building in Birmingham, Mich., as part of Detroit's Dream Cruise event, the largest one-day classic car parade in the country. Commissioned by Chevrolet, the 30' x 80' graphic was printed onto mesh vinyl and gets lit at night with halogen lights.



Inside the Detroit Auto Show Northstar created this 25' x 174' graphic for Dodge. It's mesh vinyl with special backlit lighting.

call telling him that a plane had hit the World Trade Center building in New York.

“It was such a bittersweet day,” recalls Small. “I was so excited — I’d dreamed of getting this equipment. Yet, this was about the saddest days I can remember. I was really getting pulled in two directions. It was awful.

“After that, of course, everyone closed their checkbooks and we headed into a very difficult economic time. However, things loosened up in ’02 and we’ve been growing great-guns ever since.” The firm specializes in building graphics, but also does a large business with trade show and fleet graphics applications.

## INSPIRATION

Despite these strange beginnings, Small remains upbeat about large format graphics — the bigger the better. “What truly inspires me about this business actually stems from the love I have for a particular artist,” he says.

The earthworks artist known as Christo is who he is referring to. New York-based Christo Javacheff and his wife/partner Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon are famous for creating truly monumental graphic art pieces, including a giant fabric curtain that spanned a valley in mountainous Rifle, Colo. in the 1970s. More recently he’s wrapped the Reichstag building in Berlin and created a miles-long arrangement of huge yellow umbrellas in a valley about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

“Christo takes familiar objects and wraps them in a big way,” Small says. “He gives them focus and a look that you aren’t used to seeing. The audience is almost forced to become interactive. It’s so big it’s awesome.”

## THINKING BIG

You might say that Small likes to think big. Big building wraps and big fleet graphics are his favorite applications, together accounting for about 50 percent of the business. However, trade show graphics are also important, bringing in the



Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit is the annual site of the Detroit Auto Show. Northstar created six 27' x 54' vinyl mesh banners for the event and plans to continue outdoor branding for the Auto Show.



Vehicle trailer for a car that was driven by Vin Diesel in the movie XXX.



This 20' x 38' wrap was commissioned by Ford to promote an event that was part of Detroit's annual Dream Cruise.

other 50 percent of the business. Northstar does all its own design, printing and installations, even with the big building stuff.

They also fabricate all their own hardware for the installation of building wraps, “but it’s non-intrusive,” Small says. “We don’t drill into buildings.” The system includes aluminum tubing that fits into pole pockets at the top and bottom of the graphic. Winches are clamped to the building’s parapet which can pull up the

graphic by long cables. There are backup pigtail cables attached that are cut to size and clamped to the poles in the banners. For extra strength, a third cabling system runs down face of building, attached to grommets on the sides of the graphic to keep things taught. Cabling at ground level is anchored into poured concrete footings.

Typically, on very high building applications, installers will work from the roof, or, in the case of very high window-perf instal-

# Shop Tour



Northstar's graphic designers use Mac G4 computers to work with very large files (up to two or three gigabytes) often needed to create huge building graphics.



Finishing banners sometimes requires the use of a heavy duty Juki sewing machine.

lations, hang from window-washer's scaffolding.

The 19-person staff at Northstar includes four full-time designers, two production/printing personnel, two finishers, four graphics installers, four sales and three administrative staff.

The 17,000 square foot facility houses a huge installation area that can hold three 53-foot semi trailers at one time. Northstar's tools of the trade include the big VUTEk printer, a 60" Hewlett-Packard DesignJet printer, a Seal thermal/cold film laminator, a 48" Gerber Odyssey plotter, a Xerox Phaser laser printer for proofing, a Gerber Edge thermal transfer printer with Envision cutter/plotter and a heavy duty Juki sewing machine for fabric finishing. The designers are using Mac G4 computers.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

So how does such a new graphics company win contracts such as the Detroit Auto Show? Well, it boils down to being more than simply a print output house. Northstar is big on branding and understands marketing.

Jim Jagger is Northstar's vice president of sales and marketing (soon to be a partner, according to Small). He says it's often a matter of getting clients to see marketing opportunities, and then to help them share your vision.

"The executives at the automotive companies simply hadn't seen this kind of thing



This 40' x 62' banner was created to honor the anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. Although the face of the building is curved, Northstar's custom mounting hardware allowed the banner to follow the curved surface without it actually touching the building.



This 45' x 75' mesh vinyl graphic graced a parking facility on the opposite side of Cobo Area, at the same time as the Auto Show. After the show, the banner was taken to Darlington, S.C., for a NASCAR event.

# Shop Tour



Vehicle graphics make up a good portion of Northstar's overall business. The firm does all its own fleet graphic installations using 3M vinyl.



One of our first projects Northstar did with its own equipment was this huge building graphic announcing a uniform color change for the Detroit Pistons basketball team. It is an 84' x 117' foot graphic of Pistons' star Jerry Stackhouse, seen on the side of the Southfield Town Center, Southfield, Mich. It is created from 712 4' x 10' horizontal panels of 3M window perf film, and was installed by Northstar using window washer's scaffolding.



Northstar president Mark Small says he gets his inspiration from earthworks artist Christo. This giant fabric curtain spanned a valley in mountainous Rifle, Colo. in the 1970s. (Photo from the official Web site of the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, [www.christo-jeanneclaude.net](http://www.christo-jeanneclaude.net))



Northstar's workhorse printer is the VUTEk UltraVu 5300, used to print all of its building-sized graphics, fleet graphics, and much of its trade show work.



This 17' x 30' graphic for the opening night of opera season at the Detroit Opera House (sponsored by Daimler-Chrysler), was created with frontlit solid 13 oz vinyl.

before,” he says. “To get the Auto Show business, we decided to start at the top.” To the CEO of each automaker, they sent a canvas artist’s bag containing an easel and two 14” x 20” mounted Plexiglas Photoshop mockups of the graphics proposal. “I think it was so unusual that it really caught their attention,” says Jagger.

The idea was to sell each of the automakers graphic space to cover the front of Detroit’s Cobo Arena where the Auto Show was to take place. The curved front of the building offers several huge spaces, ripe for graphics. Northstar worked with each automaker, providing design and a common template of each of the graphics to maintain consistency in the overall look.

“It was a great success,” says Jagger. “I think they’ll be fighting over that space next year.” The effort also won the company a graphics job inside the auto show for Dodge.

“We’re the new kids on the block, but we have some exciting things to offer,” says Small. “These companies are looking for new ways to advertise and brand. This adds a new color to their pallet, you might say. We’ve been very fortunate.

It’s the creative attitude of staff and the

company’s proactive approach that results in the best contracts, Small says. “We create some of our own work by helping clients look at opportunities they may never have thought about,” he says.

### CITY RULES

Learning the ins and outs of building graphics, however, requires working with city and county officials in order to rent building space, obtain permits and learn what must be done to meet building codes.

To help him negotiate the maze of rules and regulations (that vary from city to city), Small formed an outdoor media company called Citiscap Media to obtain the rights to space for his building wrap projects.

“I can’t generalize,” Small says, “but grand format graphics are so new to this area that there are practically no municipal ordinances covering this kind of signage. To make this work it takes cooperation and staying in the good graces of the city in which you’re working.”

It also takes some gentle persuasion and a good understanding of the graphic style sensitivities of various communities, Small adds. City officials in Detroit, for instance,

have different needs and limitations than those in the upscale, conservative suburb of Birmingham. There are plenty of laws governing traditional signage, but building wraps are still new. In one case, Small, drawing on his legal background, helped write a sign ordinance for the community of Auburn Hills, Mich., so that Daimler Chrysler could do some very large signage.

### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

At the end of the day, it’s a positive attitude, a willingness to go the extra mile and the ability to offer just a little bit more that will distinguish any business that expects to make it today, Small says. “We believe we’re doing things a little differently here, that the industry is young enough that it can still be shaped. Yes, we take on some big jobs, but we can turn on a dime because we’re a fairly small company.

“People talk about our stalled economy, but we’re growing. I don’t think that’s an accident. We’re not sitting around waiting for the work to come to us. You have to be proactive and find your work, and you need to be creative about it.”

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Truck trailer graphics make up a good part of Northstar’s business. Their installation facility can house three 53’ semi trailers.

