



With Gerber, Signs Now Makes Signs Nonstop

Product Spotlight:

GERBER EDGE®

**Signs Now
Tulsa, OK**

It takes some tough and well-made sign making equipment to keep up with the demands of a one-day sign shop. How about a chain of one-day sign shops? The Signs Now franchise began in 1986 and has grown to 250 independently-owned stores worldwide. Along with her family, general manager Jennifer Swanson owns four of the stores. They opened the first one in 1989 and have always used sign making equipment and software from Gerber Scientific Products.

Swanson's parents are regional managers for a five state area. They own three stores in Tulsa,



Jennifer Swanson with a full-color graphic for a local espresso bar. Company: The Coffee Grinder

Okla., and one in Wichita, Kan. Swanson says all four stores use only Gerber, but it wasn't always that way. "We encountered more problems with the other software and plotters that we sampled. So we are all Gerber; we update it, and we just opened a new store with all Gerber."

Each Signs Now produces about 200 signs per week. The stores run their equipment at least twelve hours a day, six days a week. Most stores have just enough equipment so that if any one piece breaks down, production grinds to a halt. Keeping going is the challenge. With Gerber, it's a challenge met.

Reliability

Opening so many new stores gave Swanson room to experiment. In one store, she tried a different brand of software and plotter. She says, "We bought that at the time because it was something new that was on the market, and we heard some really positive things about it. After working on it for about a year, I went back and bought Gerber stuff. Increasing productivity is my main reason for having Gerber products in my stores."

In her store in Tulsa, she has a GERBER EDGE® digital color printer, two HS15plus T sprocket-fed plotters, and one GS15plus T sprocket-fed plotter.

"I can leave my plotters cutting all day long and not ever have to worry about them. With other plotters I've tried, really big jobs or long signs will make them jump off track, or the plotters will crash," she says. "With Gerber, I can put the vinyl in and walk away from my machine and know that it's not going to crash. I'm not going



Eye-Catching graphics on the store's front window promote the EDGE at Signs Now.

to have any problems with it, and it doesn't matter whether I'm cutting a foot-long sign, or a 50-foot long sign. All of the Gerber plotters that I have run and run and run."

Swanson cannot overstate the importance of being able to depend on the equipment in her shops. "Especially in a store like ours where your signs have to be ready in one day, I don't have time to have problems. If any piece of my equipment is giving me problems, I'm shut down because most of my stores operate on one computer, one plotter, and one EDGE™ each. Then you're not making money. That's a nightmare. You're in this business to make money.

"Luckily, with Gerber, I don't have to worry at all. We run all of the equipment really hard, put it through the wringer. It lasts beautifully. I know that I can come in in the morning, turn on my computers, my plotters, and my EDGE, and leave them running all day long. It's such a nice, secure feeling. To be able to have the peace of mind that you can get with all of the Gerber equipment and software is well worth any amount that we can think of. We put a big burden on the computers, and that's a great testament to their performance level. There's no downtime, to speak of, at all with any of Gerber's equipment."

Creativity

Swanson's store uses Gerber design and output software. Some of her favorite features of the software include shadows, special effects, distortions, the polygon tool, and its over 200 different fonts. She says, "Our creative level is pretty high with the Gerber software. It has incredible capabilities. I can play with the fonts and come up with the right letter style to match the type of sign, for example, an Italian restaurant sign.

"I can add really fantastic graphics. The libraries have been really helpful because there are terrific symbols and fairly simple graphics that I can just pull up and add to my font to totally change the look of a sign. I've run into limitations on other computers and software that I've worked with. Gerber has a better and more well-rounded software program. We've been able to put out great looking signs since we've updated and gotten the latest version of software."

Signs Now used to do cut vinyl exclusively. Using the EDGE, they can now enhance those signs by printing on the vinyl. What used to be difficult or impossible to create with cut vinyl is a snap with the EDGE. "When the lettering or graphics became too small for us to cut and weed, we had to turn the jobs away. Now I can do tiny decals, letters that are 1/10" tall, shading, color photographs, and radial and linear fades. We do lots of boat lettering with matching fades. I can do so many more things that I couldn't before. We can show some of those same customers that we couldn't help five years ago what we can do now on the EDGE. They can see how small we can print things and how beautiful they turn out. They immediately order," says Swanson.



**8' x 9' banner with four-color process
EDGE graphics. Company: Impressions on Hold**

"It's opened lots of doors for us. We can reach customers we could never reach before, including screen printing customers. If somebody wanted a hundred decals, that would have been very difficult for us to do just in vinyl. I can do it on the EDGE in relatively no time at all and make great money off of it," she says. "If they sent that job to a screen printer, they would probably have to wait two or three weeks to get the job back. I can do it here in 24 hours. It impresses my customers that I can make any size decals, large or small; put photographs on them; add color shading and effects; and do it all within 24 hours. It has increased our

popularity with our customers and has made them go back to their own businesses and think about more options. When they come back, we can make them that much more satisfied.”

Swanson says the EDGE, the newest equipment in the stores, is her favorite piece of machinery at the moment. She says, “We let it run all day long, and we are having so much fun experimenting with the creativity of it and trying new things out. It’s been fun for the employees, not to mention the customers. We’re thoroughly enjoying it, and it’s been a great addition to all of the stores.”

Swanson’s store also offers EDGE service to other Signs Now stores. For example, a newer store in Springfield, Mo. had some customers come in that were real estate agents wanting to put their photographs on the seat backs of benches at bus stops. The store had no way to put color photos on outdoor signs. So they called to ask Swanson’s store if they could do it with their EDGE - and she said ‘absolutely’! After the color photographs were overnighted to her, she scanned them in, and printed them all out on the EDGE. Swanson has been doing at least ten of them per week for several weeks. “It’s been a great service because Springfield would not have been able to get that business if they didn’t have access to the EDGE through us, and we’ve been making money off of it, so that’s been a nice extra for us.”

Since they’ve started helping the Springfield store, their own customers have noticed the finished products being prepared for shipment. Real estate agents started asking to have their color photograph on a sign, too. Says Swanson, “It adds a personalized, custom touch; and other sign companies don’t have that option. We’re the only ones in town where you can come and get a sign with a color photograph that’ll be weatherproof. Our customers have been thrilled with that.”

Easy to Learn or Teach

Swanson trains on Gerber software and equipment almost every day, either for her own store, or in new Signs Now locations. She even traveled to a store in Madrid, Spain, to train the owners.

Although some of these people have experience with graphic design software, most of them are not familiar with Gerber software because it’s unique to the sign industry. Swanson says, “If I have a new employee, I train them probably at least five full days on the software and let them go to town after that. They do a good job. It’s easy for me to train because it’s set up to make sense. It’s all very logical. I enjoy training because it’s so much fun to play on those computers and to see all the different capabilities.”

She has also trained people that know absolutely nothing about computers. Though it may seem surprising, she says, “There’s not that much of a difference in the learning curve for those that are novices and those with some experience because the software is so user-friendly.”

Service and Support

At first, Swanson had some concern about doing business with a large manufacturer like Gerber Scientific. “Sometimes when you buy from a big company, you think you’re going to get less service. When you deal with big companies, a lot of times you don’t get the phone calls back quickly; and when you do get to talk to them, they’re not very eager to help.

“With Gerber, we’ve had very good response. I’ve called both their corporate office and our local distributor, and they both do a great job for us. They have been right there every time we’ve called them. Yesterday morning, two reps from the distributor came in just to make sure

everything was running smoothly and to show me new Gerber products. That's a nice deal for them to visit you and say, 'Any problems?'. Normally, they don't come to you."

She continues, "Solving any problem is as simple as a phone call. The tech reps call you back immediately and get you a quick solution. That's what you need in this business. You need fast answers and reliable products, and Gerber has definitely offered that to us."

Staying with Gerber

Swanson first heard about Gerber from the Signs Now corporate office. There are members of their research and development department who solely research new products. They constantly test new software, plotters, and other products. Any time a new Signs Now opens, its owners ask the corporate office for recommendations.

"Corporate knows what's on the market and what's the best of the best," says Swanson. "They even have the products in their corporate office, so you can go in and sample all of them and see how they work. They tell you the pros and cons of all of the different pieces of equipment. Especially when you're a brand new store, it's so important to have some kind of support system that can tell you what's good and what's bad. Luckily, corporate recommended Gerber, and it's worked out great for us."

Regarding other Gerber products, she is considering investing in a router for a recently opened, larger store. In planning the 3600 square-foot shop, she purposely left room for a router. They intend to get one within the year and have looked at the Sabre™ router from Gerber.

The store in Madrid, Spain, invested in an EDGE, and they're going to be getting a router as well. Swanson says, "A lot of the Signs Now stores do have routers. We've been listening to them, and they've all had wonderful things to say about them. They say the Gerber routers do a beautiful job and have resulted in even more sales."

Swanson has definite opinions about what materials to use in the EDGE. "I use only Gerber products with my EDGE. We've always used only Gerber foils, and we won't use any others. We also use Gerber specialty items, like GerberMag™ magnetic material." She and her family have discussed adding more graphics libraries, but she says they don't feel rushed because the standard software package comes with such an extensive array of graphics.

Her commitment to Gerber is easy to explain. She says, "This is what runs all of our stores. We've got to have the best software and equipment in order to make the best signs. In a 24-hour sign company, there's more competition by the day. So we really have to stay on top of things and make sure we have cutting edge technology and the best that's out there. I think more of the companies are wising up and investing in the best. It's been a good investment for us."

Over the years, Gerber products have helped this family's stores to grow and succeed. "Our customers love all of our signs. Seventy-five percent of our business is repeat business," says Swanson. "The reason we've been able to open four stores in the past ten years or so is because we do such beautiful signs. I wouldn't have those capabilities if I didn't have Gerber. The fact that I can get almost all of my customers to come back after they see that first sign means we're doing something right. We'll use Gerber as long as we're in the sign business."

Visit the Signs Now franchise web site at www.signsnow.com.