



## Ingenuity of Letter Design & Sign Display Owner Leads to Incredible Success

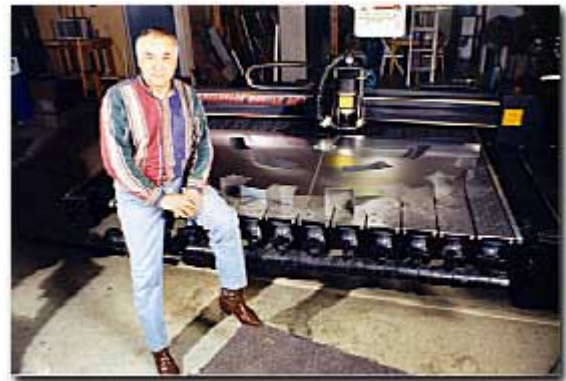
**Product Spotlight:**  
Gerber ADVANTAGE Router™  
400/600  
Gerber Dimension 200® Router

**Letter Design & Sign Display  
Stafford, TX**

In “the old days”, great numbers of immigrants came to America and began successful businesses starting out with very little. Now we repeatedly hear disheartening statistics of new business failures. What you are about to read will sound like an old-fashioned success story from the turn of the century, but this particular brave and innovative newcomer to America arrived in 1983.

Of Italian descent, Hannibal Martin made his way to the U.S. via Argentina, bringing twenty-plus years of sign making experience with him.

When Martin started a graphics company in Argentina 35 years ago, he created a hot wire machine after several attempts to find something that would cut foam well. He used the heated element of this small machine to cut foam graphics for window displays in major department and chain stores.



When he came to the U.S., he noticed that similar stores displayed foam letters in their windows and decided this would be a good market for him. He promptly bought the electric parts to make another hot wire machine.

In those early days, he cut foam letters from his one-bedroom apartment in Houston, Texas. After about seven months, some orders began to come in.



These orders heralded the beginning of Letter Design & Sign Display, which specializes in custom interior graphics, logos, and three-dimensional work. When Sears and JCPenney department stores saw Martin's work, their management started buying from him.

Eventually, he was able to rent an 800-square foot warehouse and hire his first employee. He bought a jig saw and then a scroll saw to increase the number of materials he could cut. It was about this time that the sign industry began to automate.

"When I heard about the computers, I was totally astonished; and when I first saw a computerized router in a brochure, I couldn't believe it," Martin recounted.

A distributor gave him a routed brass letter, and he decided to learn more. "I saw other routers at a convention, and I didn't like the quality. Despite the language barrier, I was very able to visualize what I wanted to do. I knew the router I saw at the distributor was the one I wanted to buy, and that happened to be Gerber's."

Over the years, Letter Design & Sign Display has upgraded its routers and vinyl machines. It now owns the Dimension 200® router, the Advantage Router™ 400, and the Advantage Router 600. One station runs the three routers. Another station is dedicated to vinyl production with the GERBER EDGE® digital color printer, a 30-inch HS750plusT sprocket plotter, and a 15-inch HS15plusT sprocket plotter. Two Gerber computerized design stations are also kept busy.

Martin interjected, "You name it, we have it! We can use all the materials available in the market today: acrylics, foams, soft metals."

He continued, "We are fortunate to have been able to add all these machines to our company at a great advantage to us. When I started, I wore all the hats. I would go out to sell, come back to my apartment and change clothes, and start cutting letters with my hot wire machine... painting in the bathroom so I wouldn't mess up my carpet. Then I would get back into a suit to deliver the product."

Fourteen years later, 99.9% of the shop's work is routed. The machines run all day long, every day. Martin's thriving company in the Houston suburb of Stafford, Texas, now totals 10,000 square feet, employs nine people, and earns up to \$1 million in annual sales.

Letter Design & Sign Display still has many of the same clients it started with, like Sears and JCPenney. Most customers are other sign companies.

"I focused my business on wholesaling from the very beginning," explained Martin. "I offered my services to the sign companies; and it surprised me to see how many of them only offer one thing, like vinyl, and subcontract out all the other work. Because of the versatility our Gerber equipment allows us, we have been able to keep all of those sign companies as customers even today."

Letter Design & Sign Display is not open to the public; the building doesn't even have a sign. Martin works with architects, interior designers, and sign companies. He creates very intricate pieces – for example, brass with gold plating, combinations of metals with acrylics...one-of-a-kind projects.

His upscale chain store clients spend a great deal of money on aisle markers and point-of-purchase displays, employing architects and interior designers to design each store. Martin's group works with these professionals. In his opinion, "Every store is a new challenge where we have to create new logos and graphics."

Although his shop has the capability to mass-produce, he focuses on custom work, including

very detailed logos and graphics for trade shows – like a \$1 million booth for an oil company.

Martin's graphics experience allowed him to visualize and create things in a three-dimensional way, using very limited equipment. However, some jobs that once took three days to complete now take just 15 minutes using the proper equipment.

According to him, “My goal is to provide the best quality work in the market. In the early days, I was able to accomplish that with my hands, but I was only one person. Buying the computers and routers was like multiplying myself with the guarantee that the finished job would always be the same – beautiful. Anyone can put the information into the computer, and the router will run automatically. My nine employees can reproduce an item to perfection due to the quality of the equipment.”

Martin commented that if his profits hadn't kept increasing, he wouldn't have bought more and more Gerber products. He said he would have stopped after purchasing the first router. “The equipment has been a good investment. Now I have requests for 3-D effects that I don't have, so I'm going to purchase Auto-Carve™ 3D software,” he stated.

“Gerber makes the most reliable equipment on the market,” Martin emphasized.

“The very few times I had a problem, technical support was fantastic. I have formed several positive professional relationships with members of the router department at Gerber Scientific Products. They've visited my shop, and I've seen them at the shows. When I talk to them, I can be sure that they know the product and that I can follow their instructions.” Even his oldest router has given downtime on only three occasions in over a decade.

It is the dream of every business owner to have a lasting business with enough customers that there is no need to advertise. For Martin, this describes his reality.

He stated, “We do good work. That's why we're still in business. We have never had a sales department because we've always used word of mouth. I just canceled my phone book ad.”

For more information, Hannibal Martin can be reached at:

Letter Design & Sign Display

13407C Murphy Rd.

Stafford, TX 77477

Phone: (281) 261-4775

©2007 Gerber Scientific, Inc. All Right Reserved