



Northampton Signs, Ltd. Adds Router Capability to Vinyl Work

Product Spotlight:
Gerber Dimension 200® Router
Gerber Sabre™ 408 Router

**Northampton Signs, LTD.
Northampton, England**

It is not unusual for a successful sign shop that does vinyl work to consider adding routing to its list of services. Here is an example of what happened when one such company decided to make that move.

When Rex Lowin first took over as director of Northampton Signs, Ltd. in 1990, the shop was operating vinyl cutters but was cutting substrates such as acrylic, wood, and aluminum by hand. Three years later, a Gerber Dimension 200® router was acquired to perform this task.

In existence since 1965, Northampton Signs has recently moved into a more spacious factory in Northampton, England, a large industrial town 70 miles from London. The company of 28 employees now occupies 13,000 square feet and boasts annual sales of over US \$2 million (£1.3 million). When Lowin joined Northampton Signs, the shop produced an average of four jobs a day. That number has more than doubled to roughly ten per day.



Average growth of 25% a year was achieved with no sales force at all. This phenomenal growth has necessitated the addition of about three people a year for the last several years. According to Lowin, "Many of the people we recruit don't want to spend all day on repeat work; they want to use their brains. Putting in machines gives us far more opportunity to be creative because it means we can automate which also saves costs."

He added, "What you find is the machine does the simple part of the craftsmanship; and it does it fast and very repeatably. Then we can use our craftsmen on things where their skill is put to use in a more worthwhile way. Automated routing produces both good value for money for the customer and satisfaction on the part of the people who work here."

Northampton Signs takes advantage of the router's special capabilities at every opportunity. When a chain of travel agencies needed standard signs made to fit hundreds of different-sized shops, the router automated the cutting of all the basic components. It also performed small inlay work which could never have been done satisfactorily by hand because the two halves wouldn't match accurately enough. Smaller jobs can be completed using better quality materials and still cost less than before because each job takes less time to complete on the router.

A restaurant chain approached Northampton Signs to produce what was described as a cartouche. Lowin and his group were given a drawing of a menu with a fancy dimensional scroll around it. The final product was designed to measure about two feet high and a foot wide for mounting on the wall outside the restaurant. It would be very elaborate with three-

dimensional borders and the restaurant's name cut into it. The menu itself would be sign written in the middle.

He recalled, "We were told the idea—that it had to be three-dimensional—and to just find a way to do it. It would have been handy at that time to have had the Gerber Auto-Carve™ 3D program. We had to work out our own way of cutting layers of material." He cut various layers of M.D.F. (medium density fiberboard) which were mounted on top of each other. Patterns were cut into the face of the top layer, as well; so the piece was a totally carved item by the time it was finally painted.

Highly satisfied with the results, the client has given the shop more work since then. Said Lowin, "We produced almost exactly what they had in mind even though they couldn't draw it precisely. It was completed only three days after they told us what they wanted. We must have spent man-hours on it! In terms of proving what we could do and satisfying a large customer, it was quite effective."

He mentioned that he recently purchased Auto-Carve 3D. "Its capabilities will likely be of particular interest to some of our customers...and certainly of interest to us because all the tool paths are computed automatically for you. Instead of cutting letters as a rectangular hole, we'll be able to put some relief on them by cutting them at an angle and shaping them in three dimensions with the new software."

The shop still does plenty of vinyl work in addition to routing. The cutting is handled by an older SuperSprint™ and a newer HS 750™ sprocket plotter. Northampton Signs purchased GRAPHIX ADVANTAGE® software and the router together. A second design workstation was added only one year later and an eventual upgrade to OMEGA software. The shop dedicated one workstation to vinyl work and the other to routing. As the business grew, a third workstation was needed; this was accompanied by the purchase of a GERBER EDGE® digital color imaging system.

About three years ago, Lowin agreed to produce a mural to be displayed in Leeds Airport. An outside designer wanted to clad the back wall of a spacious café area with rigid 10-foot by 2 ½-foot "banners". He produced sketches of a daytime scene and a nighttime scene complete with planes, flowers, passengers, and more. Each scene had a dozen colors. A very rough sketch was faxed to Lowin. His challenge was to turn this into long-lasting hardware suitable for indefinite display.

The mural was designed using Gerber software and all the colors of vinyl were mounted one over the other. The finished mural was impressive in more ways than one.

"The end result of it really was quite spectacular. It has been up for several years, and it still looks vibrant," Lowin observed. "From the time we got the artist's sketches to the time it had to be installed, took about three days. That customer has given us a lot more work since then."

The Dimension 200 proved to be a very accurate router when Lowin compared the cut to that of outside contractors he had employed in the past. The repeatability of the cut erases doubts about whether inlaid work will fit together or if duplicate signs will look the same. He stated, "I like that precision a lot, and it's because I'm a fan that I'm proposing to buy more machines. We have a fair bit of Gerber equipment, and I'm hopefully at the point of ordering a lot more within the next few days."

One of Lowin's favorite things about owning Gerber products is the fact that he can utilize the same set of images from the software for three-dimensional cutting on the router, vinyl work, or

EDGE® digital printing. He is pleased with networking common components because it prevents interface problems.

In discussing his plans for future purchases, he said, "I've now ordered a Sabre®; 408 router to add to the Dimension 200 because the darned thing is working eight hours a day! I've been persuaded of the merits of the Sabre by seeing it at various shows, and it looks like a lovely machine. When I have two routers, that will enable me to do more experimental work on fancier-looking jobs. Another advantage of getting a second router will be the coverage it could provide if the Dimension 200 needed service. Although I have to say, it's been pretty reliable since we've had it."

In the final analysis, Lowin concluded that, "Gerber equipment allows the best results in the shortest time; and once you've impressed a customer with jobs like these, they come back to you with standard items that you can churn out week after week."

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