



Courtesy of Signs.com.

## Achieving Innovation in Large Format A Conversation with Signs.com CEO Kirk Green

**Editor's Note:** Earlier this spring, Ferrari Color was acquired by Signs.com, a fast-growing online seller of large-format graphics. The news attracted attention, in part because Ferrari Color was such a well-known pioneer in the large-format graphics business.

Signs.com is committed to giving online buyers of large-format graphics the best possible customer experience. The types and sizes of products that businesses and consumers can order through Signs.com is impressive. For example, businesses can order custom pole-pocket mesh banners ranging in size from 1 by 1 foot to 1 by 145 feet. Consumers can order photo prints in sizes ranging from 4 by 6 inches to 4 by 8 feet.

Free design services are available to buyers who already have an idea of the type of look they want on their banner or sign. Perhaps most amazing is the fact that most orders placed by 5:00 PM ET will be produced and shipped the next day.

To learn the full story behind the Signs.com acquisition of Ferrari Color, the SGIA Journal asked Eileen Fritsch to interview

both the CEO of Ferrari Color and the CEO of Signs.com. Eileen was surprised to learn they are both the same person — Kirk Green.

The Journal asked Eileen to write this story because it isn't a typical merger/acquisition story. In 1997, Eileen wrote a digital imaging case study about a unique large-format graphics project produced by Creative Color, the professional photo lab that Kirk Green led before acquiring Ferrari Color and becoming the production facility for Signs.com. (See sidebar on page 22.)

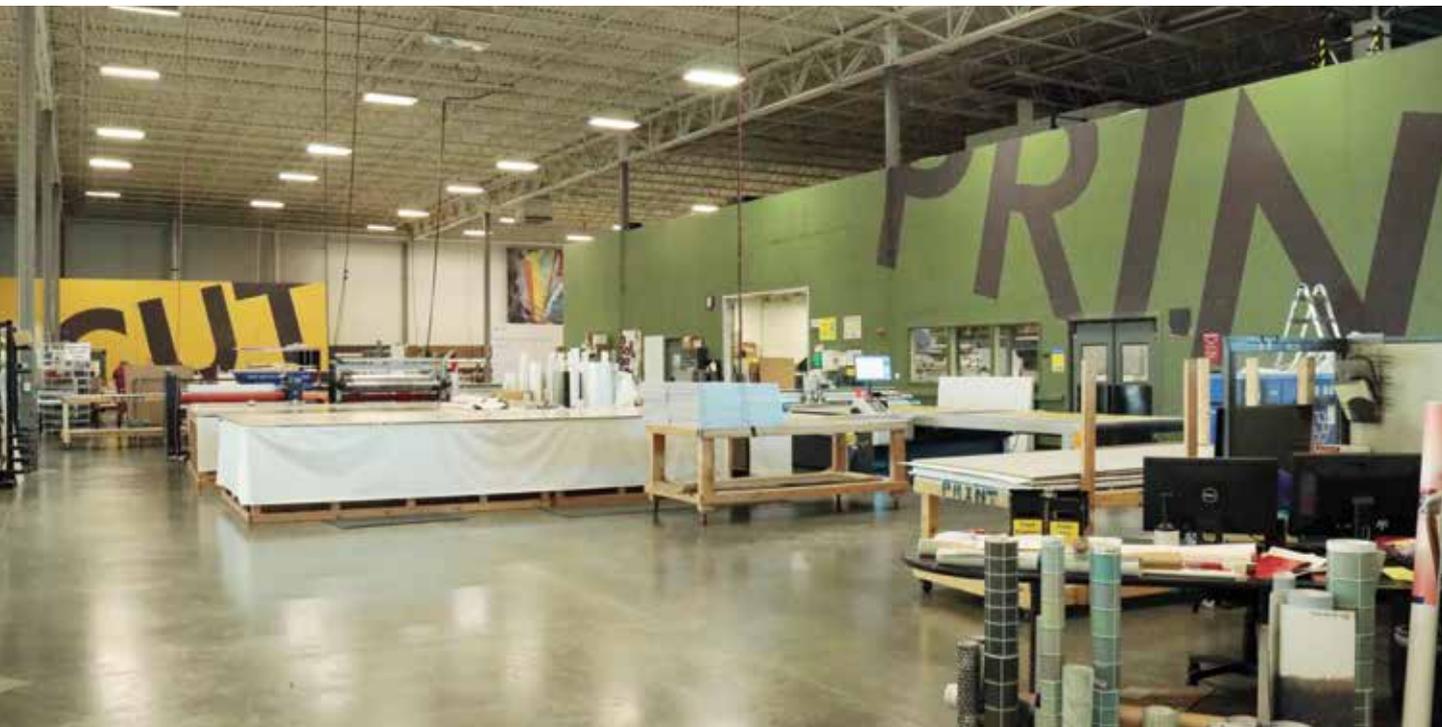
Reading that 1997 Creative Color case study reveals how rapidly digital imaging, printing, computing, prepress and data transfer technologies have advanced. It is also a reminder of how thoroughly digital technologies disrupted the professional photography business and how quickly advances in large-format inkjet printing technologies displaced electrostatic (toner-based) large-format printing methods.

In 1997, electrostatic printing devices were regarded as the most promising method of producing "large runs" of outdoor-durable

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By Eileen Fritsch, Industry Author



Courtesy of Signs.com.

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*graphics. Until the introduction of solvent inks (and then latex, eco-solvent and UV-curable inks), wide-format inkjet printers were incredibly slow and unlaminated prints faded quickly. As wide-format inkjet printing became more versatile, the use of electrostatic printing quickly declined.*

*Like Kirk, Eileen witnessed the birth and evolution of desktop publishing, digital photography, and the internet in the 1990s, followed by the development of e-commerce, smartphones, workflow automation and social media. All these advances have had profound effects on the way products are designed, manufactured, packaged, advertised and sold.*

*When Creative Color was experimenting with creative applications of large-format prints, commercial printing companies dismissed large-format inkjet printers as too slow and unstable for their operations. Plus, skeptics doubted that it would ever be possible to sell large-format graphics online.*

*For one thing, buyers often design large-format graphics to fit the specific dimensions of various walls, windows, doors and floors. Plus, creators of large-format graphics used a mishmash of design and imaging programs and often submitted photos too small to produce good results.*

*But the Signs.com business model is definitely working — Inc. Magazine has ranked it as a fastest-growing company. Also, more than 92,000 customers have rated it*

*an average 4.8 out of 5 stars, according to shopperapproved.com, a website that collects online merchant reviews.*

#### **Kirk Green Explains Why It Works**

**Fritsch:** *Tell me more about the evolution from Creative Color to Signs.com*

**Green:** The Creative Color photo lab started in 1978 by Carlos Henrie. My father, Mel, purchased that little photo lab from him in 1987 and turned it into a welcoming space for photographers. We had off-street parking and a lobby space with lightboxes where photographers could gather and view their prints and slides.

When digital imaging started to appear, we were early adopters. When we did high-resolution scanning for photographers, we delivered their image files on Bernoulli disks, Iomega Zip drives and CDs.

The internet came along with predictions of streamlining the future of commerce. We purchased the Signs.com domain in 1997 when the internet was just getting going. At the time, we were only doing a few retail graphics and signs. Our core business was still processing photographic prints. We tried to buy domains in the photographic space, but could not find anything of value.

Originally, our objective was to set up a secondary business for sign supplies, selling



Green and the Signs.com team are at the forefront of B2E e-commerce with their highly automated graphics production facility and online portal, making it easy for customers to order everything from business cards to supersized outdoor mesh banners. Courtesy of Signs.com.

sign equipment and materials. We had a good business plan and some strong sign suppliers who were willing to sell through our online system. But the dot-com bubble burst in 2000 and everyone thought, “This internet thing may be a bust.”

So, we admitted we didn’t know what we were doing with the internet and decided to focus on growing business we did know — Creative Color. In the spring of 2001, we began discussions with Maggie Ferrari about acquiring her digital imaging business. We purchased Maggie’s business that fall, shortly after 9/11.

We then focused our attention on merging the two companies. We consolidated our company names under the Ferrari Color brand because it was so strong. We had two Ferrari Color production facilities — one in Salt Lake City and one in Sacramento, Calif. — as well as a small sales and support office in the East Bay area of San Francisco. That’s when we started to attack the market for large-format digital graphics.

We made another attempt to do something with Signs.com under the Ferrari Color brand. Then the Great Recession of 2008 - 2009 hit. So once again, we focused our attention on the traditional work that we had been doing.

It wasn’t until the country started coming out of the recession in 2011 and 2012 that our core executive team of Marty

McGhie, Dan Spangenberg, Mel Green and I took another look at Signs.com.

Signs.com was established as a separate, independent entity with its own branding. We hired a “go-whenever-the-market-takes-you” type team (led by Nelson James) with the technical skills to design the software and market the services online. We hired some brilliant people. Some were graphic employees from Ferrari Color, but most were tech experts. We chose to build the software ourselves.

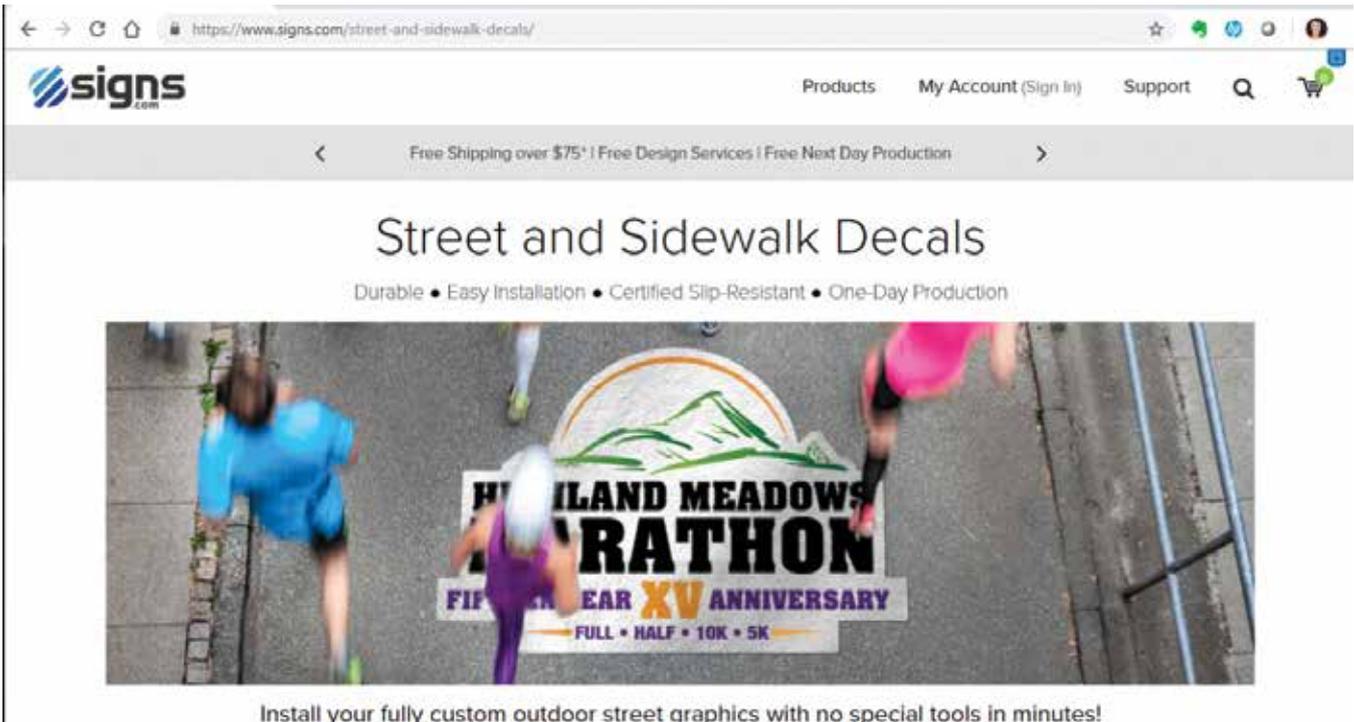
We launched in 2012. Revenue that year was slightly over \$20,000. We worked hard to design the website with the look and function our clients needed.

Initially, Ferrari Color was producing the orders for Signs.com during the “midnight shift” from 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM.

***Why do you feel the timing was right for Signs.com to acquire Ferrari Color?***

Signs.com has been growing rapidly. In the early days, we could look at each separate order. Individual orders were easily reviewed to determine the products customers were buying. Now, there are just too many. We’re getting hundreds and hundreds of orders coming to Signs.com each day.

A couple of years ago, Inc. magazine named Signs.com one of the 100 fastest-growing companies in America. Last



Buying custom large-format graphics from the Signs.com website is easy. Free design assistance and down-to-earth advice on graphics installation and storage is readily available.

year, we still ranked in the top 500, but it's harder to maintain the same growth rates. In addition to experiencing growth, we have identified a set of competitive advantages we can leverage to continue to grow Signs.com.

***Does that include owning the facilities in which the graphics are manufactured instead of distributing print jobs to well-equipped plants throughout the U.S.?***

That is one advantage. We have figured out how to create quick turnaround. Instead of operating multiple facilities throughout the U.S., we work closely with the shipping companies to get extremely quick deliveries throughout the country.

Another thing that speeds up the process is that we offer simple, free design online.

It has been a game-changer for us. If a client has an idea for a sign or banner, but is not really sure how to create it, they can choose one of our simple, basic templates, or our designer will help them work through the process to develop the right look. Then, it's paid for and produced.

***Does enabling buyers to get help from experienced large-format designers speed up the prepress process?***

Yes. Our objective is to reduce prepress to "Press Go." We have designed some very fast software to take whatever the client has given us and batch them with similar orders so that every job gets produced in a very efficient manner.

There is a high level of automation, because we are trying to take out the human

touches. Every point that is touched creates an opportunity for error. For example, if a buyer requests 12 copies of a banner, and an employee is required to enter the information, an inadvertent "2" changes the order from 12 to 22.

***The videos and other educational content on Signs.com seem to remove the intimidation factor associated with ordering large-format graphics online.***

Yes, our goal was to create the best graphic-buying experience online anywhere. We are not there yet, but we're getting closer. We worked really hard to create that experience and it seems to be paying off.

Even in the high-end retail space, buyers are looking for speed, ease and simplicity.

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Many clients' budgets have been cut and they are always trying to do more with less.

The old days of picking up the phone, calling the rep and sending multiple emails is too inefficient. People want to have all-hours access through an online approach.

With reference to the book "The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail" by Clayton Christensen, it was clear that Ferrari Color was not offering anything unique in the marketplace. We were good, and we had great clients, but we were not distinct. There are many other companies like Ferrari Color that produce good work and have great clients.

Signs.com is absolutely unique and offers distinct capabilities.

To continue to make Signs.com a top graphics player, we realized that running Ferrari Color and Signs.com as separate entities was like having a split personality. We could not be everything to everybody. We had to pick a single strategy and go with it. Signs.com was that strategy. It made financial and structural sense to have Signs.com purchase all the manufacturing assets from Ferrari Color and bring them under the Signs.com banner.

***The business models for selling event graphics are also changing. Many companies that started out printing trade show graphics now offer booth design services as well as specialized support services such as on-site booth set up, and booth storage and logistics. They must compete with event-production companies that now have extensive wide-format printing capabilities in-house.***

Surprisingly, Signs.com receives a share of the trade show graphics business. For instance: a trade show planner who has forgotten a few signs can place an order before 5:00 PM ET, have the images



Courtesy of Signs.com.

printed and shipped the next day, and arrive on-site the following day.

***Did Ferrari Color clients know that you also ran Signs.com?***

Yes, we have been open about it. At one point, Signs.com was "powered by Ferrari Color." Some clients had already been moving some of the simple business away from Ferrari Color to Signs.com.

Signs.com offers branded signage portals for retailers and franchise organizations. Customers can set up their own branded portals. Employees at different store or franchise locations can place orders for the signs and promotional graphics they need.

Store employees can adjust some content on the brand templates. But they aren't allowed to change the colors, logos and other branding elements. Our system



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Courtesy of Signs.com.

provides a great solution for distributing a certain level of control to stores with multiple branches while enabling the retailer to maintain ultimate control over brand identity.

***What advice would you give to SGIA members who are concerned about some of the changes occurring in the printing industry?***

Disruption is a much larger issue than what's happening in our own industry. It is happening in all industries. So, as Christiansen points out in his book, you are either going to be a disruptor, or be disrupted. You're probably going to be both during your career.

You can no longer just sit and do exactly what you have done in previous years. Even making incremental improvements to your organization, something like the adoption of B2B e-commerce or the rise of B2E (business-to-everyone) commerce, might disrupt the way people buy things.

Look at what's happening in the retail business. How are you going to adjust to all the disruption in retailing? Are you always going to react to change? Or are you going to get out ahead of it and create disruption?

Successful companies can't afford to be complacent; they must become change agents.

*Eileen Fritsch has covered the evolution of large-format digital printing since 1996, when she was a founding editor of Big Picture magazine. As a freelance contributor to the SGIA Journal, she has written about ongoing changes in the workflow technologies and markets for large-format graphics, including textiles and packaging.*

## 1997 Case Study Shows How Fast Inkjet Printing Has Evolved



Kirk Green's vision and leadership helped Creative Color evolve from a professional photo lab into Signs.com, a fast-growing online seller of

large-format graphics to businesses and consumers.

Like hundreds of other photo labs in the '70s and '80s, Creative Color helped photography professionals and advanced amateurs process their film. In the days before digital photography, Custom Color then converted the photographer's selected images into slides, transparencies and prints for presentations, printed advertisements, press kits and exhibitions.

Creative Color was an early adopter of professional scanners and other digital prepress devices as well as large-format electrostatic and inkjet equipment for making short runs of custom photographic murals, trade-show graphics, point-of-purchase displays and retail banners.

A 1997 case study about Creative Color featured two giant, multi-panel murals Creative Color produced for the Delta Center in Salt Lake City to celebrate the Utah Jazz making the NBA playoffs.

The 116-by-22-foot mural on the building's northwest façade consisted

of 96 separate 3.5-by-7.5-foot panels sized to fit within the building's windowpanes. A second 118-by-22-foot mural featured 84 panels.

A 35-millimeter slide of Karl Malone was scanned at 4,000 dpi on a Howtek 4000 scanner and placed into a design created by Macromedia Freehand. PosterWorks software enlarged the artwork to mural size and tiled it into sections. Initially, each panel was saved as a separate 100 MB file on a zip disk. After the tiled graphics were enlarged for printing with Visual Edge Technologies RIP software, the panels consumed about 7 GB of space on Creative Color's 16 GB server.

The graphics were printed in reverse onto wet transfer media on a Raster Graphics DCS 5442 electrostatic printer and transferred to self-adhesive vinyl when the printed transfer media was fed through a GBC Orca III laminator.

To peel off the paper transfer media from the vinyl, the rolls of graphics were fed through an Axiom Graphic T-54 wet transfer station, then cut into the 180 panels. Creative Color technicians stacked the panels in alphabetical/numerical order before turning them over for proper installation by the Delta Center's window-washing crew.

The project helped Creative Color show ad agencies and event planners some of the creative possibilities of using large-format graphics in building windows.