



Board room graphics and sign installation. Courtesy of VisuCom Graphics.

When to Access Installation Services

Sometimes a job entails more than producing a great print.



By Dan Marx,
Industry Author

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For this article, the term “applied graphics” describes products printed on flexible films, then “put in place” using pressure-sensitive adhesive. For many, the concept of pressure-sensitive products speaks to decals, which are generally printed as flexible vinyl or plastic that is “stuck” to a solid surface.

Ranging in scope and size, applied graphics comprise a broad category of applications, including murals, vehicle graphics, fleet graphics, and other graphics purpose-made for application to floors, windows, textured surfaces, and more. And the installation of these applied graphics — literally the process of sticking them where they need to be stuck, and doing so successfully — is not a step to be taken lightly. Printers understand how mistakes in the finishing process can ruin a whole job, and installation should be seen as a final, essential step in the finishing of certain projects.

Graphics Installation Explained

In the most basic sense, installing pressure-sensitive materials is rarely easy. Sure, anybody can slap a bumper sticker on a car, but is it straight? Has the shape been deformed by stretching? Are there creases or bubbles? Does it really adhere to the complex, contoured shape of, say, a car bumper? Was the surface clean? While these questions, based on the lowly bumper sticker, may seem trivial, they absolutely are not. Applied graphics projects are usually larger and more complex, making seemingly small considerations very large concerns.

Graphics installers are a large group of professionals serving the needs of the graphics community. They are hired by many companies to use their formidable skills and knowledge to ensure the success of applied graphics projects that may be beyond the abilities of the ►

graphics producers themselves. Case in point: While a company may be fully comfortable applying a 12x18" decal to the door of a plumber's truck, it may not be remotely comfortable wrapping that same truck with a full, graphically complex wrap. And there is no shame in calling a professional in to complete a complex job; it's done all the time. Think of it like using a plumber (knowing the small stuff, but also knowing one's limits). The goal is to get it right the first time, and one should use a professional when it's the best bet.

Asked how he would explain the advantages of utilizing professional installers, John Carthey, president and owner of Corporate Installations in Tomball, Texas, says, "I have spent thousands of hours learning and refining my installation skills. It only takes time, money, and a lot of practice to become a professional graphic installer. After they mess up a big print job and have to answer all the questions of why it looks so bad, and then have to remove it, reprint it, and reinstall it, they will have a whole new appreciation for professional installation skills. We are professionals and it's a big responsibility to represent the printer and make the end user happy with installed graphics."

He adds, "Most of the time, the client does not see the printer. They only see the person [who] installs their graphics."

Many Considerations

A quick visit to the website of any pressure-sensitive vinyl manufacturer, or to their booth at a trade show, will quickly illustrate how many choices there are among materials. Given this reality, it is important to understand that among those many choices are specific purposes — the materials are not "one size fits all." On a basic level, there are a handful of key considerations/strategies to help you make the right choices.

For example, understanding the difference between cast and calendared films is essential, and is highly relevant based on the application. Cast films are quite stretchable, which allows them to be used on contoured



Locker graphics.

Courtesy of Axis Graphic Installations.

surfaces like the complex shapes of a vehicle. Calendared films are generally not to be stretched, and are mostly intended for flat surface installations.

The adhesives applied to pressure-sensitive films range from repositionable (think the adhesives used for Post-it notes) to permanent, used to affix graphics to commercial aircraft. For many graphics jobs, the adhesive level needed will fall somewhere in the middle. One wants it to stick and stay put, but also wants to be able to remove it without damaging the surface to which it was affixed.

Not all adhesives work equally well on all surfaces. For instance, while some films will, over a short amount of time, be "rejected" by interior paints that contain silicone, other films will adhere far too well (i.e. permanently) to stainless steel. This is the type of knowledge that can help a company grow in applied graphics, and these are decisions that must take place before the print is made.

For most applied graphics jobs, a laminate film must be applied to the printed surface. In addition to protecting the print from scratches and abrasion, it can provide UV protection to keep it from fading. It can also provide dimensional stability to

thin films, aiding in the installation process. So, a laminator is essential for the production of applied graphics.

How long will the applied graphic be in place? Is it a short-term window graphic advertising a week-long sale, or is it a full wrap on a delivery van that will be in place — in both full summer sun and the elements of winter — for an expected five years (without failing)? The materials will be different, and knowing which to use when will reduce the chance of failure.

While there is much to know and consider, the good news is that the major adhesive film manufacturers all maintain robust technical assistance teams that can help determine the right film for an application. Further, an experienced professional installer has deep knowledge of materials, surfaces, and what it takes to do the job right. Ask an installer before starting to source a difficult or unfamiliar job. It will be much appreciated.

Vehicle Wraps

The best and most visible example of applied graphics onto complex shapes is the full vehicle wrap, where the goal is essentially to cover a 3D object with a 2D print, and to do so in a way that doesn't distort the

image, result in creases or bubbles, and lines up as planned with the unmovable elements of the vehicle (e.g. door handles, seams between doors, and windows). In the day-to-day sense, vehicle wrapping is the pinnacle of the graphics installation trade. Perfectly installed wraps are truly a thing of beauty. That said, due to the difficulty of the installation, badly designed and executed wraps can be seen on roads everywhere, which speaks to the need for experienced, certified installers.

“When you’re not sure if you should hire a professional graphics installer, then you should hire a professional graphics installer,” says Krystal Miszewski, manager of Candy Wraps Orlando in Orlando, Fla. “Not only do mobile installers bring a wealth of knowledge to your shop, they provide a sense of security and value to your end product. As

an installer, I’ve worked with many variables including environment, weather, materials, wind, dirt, complex curves ... the list goes on. Installers come with certifications, insurance, tools, and experience you’ll want and need on your job sites. You can call your installer and ask them for a material that will perform well on a specific application such as textured walls or boats. Utilize your installer’s knowledge when providing warranties for your wraps so you’re not overpromising and under-delivering, including failure points on the difficult areas. While the installer is working at your shop, you will also benefit from learning techniques to help you when it’s time for you to install your own wraps.”

Skill Level

To continue with the plumbing analogy used earlier, it is important

to use the services of graphics installers certified to be proficient in the type of installation needed. Just as having a pipe wrench and a truck does not make one a plumber, having a ladder, a squeegee, and some razor blades does not make one an installer. The Professional Decal Application Alliance (PDAA), which operates under the umbrella of PRINTING United Alliance, holds regular certification tests and maintains a nationwide roster of installers who have proven their proficiency in the areas of commercial graphics, architectural ▶

Insuring Installation Work

Whether a graphics business provides in-house or outsources installation services, it’s imperative installers carry the proper insurance for the job. Learn more in a recent post on the PRINTING United Alliance Printing Press Blog at sgia.org.

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graphics, and/or vehicle wrapping/color change.

Simply put, hiring a certified graphics installer (when needed) is all about managing risk. Screw-ups, do-overs, and installation fails not only hurt a business's bottom line, they also damage its reputation with the customer. Get it done right!

"Utilizing the services of a professional installation team is invaluable," says Ken Burns, president and CEO of Axis Graphic Installations, which has multiple divisions in the U.S. "The amount of time, energy, and money put into the sale, design, and production of a project are nullified if the installation is anything less than perfect. With so many steps from concept to production, there is a lot of room for human error. A professional installer will have the knowledge and skill set to troubleshoot most problems in the field.

"For example, our team was contracted for a project that consisted of approximately 20,000 sq. ft. of wall murals throughout an office building. Unfortunately, the producer made the mistake of not setting up overlaps in the print files. Many installers would not have had the skills to perfectly butt-seam each panel, which would have led to a reprint of the entire project, ultimately

causing the project to be a loss for the producer. Fortunately, these are the types of situations professional installers are capable of managing. Our team was able to install what they were given, successfully, with an end product that the client was completely satisfied with."

Signage and Beyond

Increasingly, graphics installers are being accessed to do installation work that goes beyond pressure-sensitive materials. For instance, many of the installers who focus on indoor applications for retail, corporate, and hospitality settings are asked to install digitally printed wallpaper, or to install silicone-edged textile graphics (SEG) into existing frame structures. By viewing qualified graphics installers as reliable service providers, businesses can also expand the product mix they offer their customers.

Pete Kouchis, owner of Visu-Com Signs & Graphics in Mokena, Ill. — which installs high-visibility corporate and retail graphics in the Chicago area — explains how his company has gone beyond pressure-sensitive graphics into other areas. "Aside from the typical installations that we do, we are often asked to handle a variety of other types of installations. They would

include pasted wallcoverings; SEG frames and fabrics (requiring frame assembly and installation); dimensional signage (corporate branding, pin, or flush mounted); fixture assembly and decoration for retail; framed art (especially in multiples); and architectural resurfacing films (i.e. DI-NOC and others).

"In a large part," he continues, "the end user is trying to consolidate vendors to do a wider variety of installations. Accommodating these requests makes us more valuable and sets us apart from other, more one-dimensional installers."

Doing It Oneself

Graphics installation can also be likened to playing the drums (or any instrument): most anyone can do it, but doing it well takes a great deal of practice. If there is a person on staff who currently does small, applied graphics applications, and is expected to stay with the company for a while, investing in his or her training and practice is paramount. As this person becomes more adept with larger and more difficult installations, then more of that work (and job cost) stays in-house.

While much of the focus in the printing industry is (logically) on the print, it is important to remember that the completion of any applied graphics project requires finishing steps, and this can include lamination, trimming, and installation. Sure, customers want great prints, but what they really want are successful, fully completed projects. ■

Dan Marx's extensive knowledge of the graphic communications industry results from nearly three decades working closely with business owners, equipment and materials developers, and thought leaders. With a focus on new technologies and their related opportunities, he has been published in industry publications worldwide, presented at industry events across segments, and served as an enthusiastic ambassador for new processes and business opportunities. He is available to write, speak, interview, host, moderate, or represent at dwxmarx@gmail.com.

Train car exterior wrap.
Courtesy of Axis Graphic Installations.

