

Gary Johnson

Basking Ridge, New Jersey

Shop name:The Great American Sign Company **Shop size:** 1500 sq.ft. **Age:**____ **Staff:**____ **Graphics equipment:**A Gerber 200 router, a Gerber 375 Envision plotter and a Gerber FX printer **Web site:**



I've been in business since 1989. After graduating from college I went to work for an advertising agency but I didn't really like it very much, so my boss helped me get a job at a friend's sign shop. It was a nice bump up in salary, and I liked the work much better. I tried to learn as much as I could about all aspects of sign making.

I stayed there until '89 when the shop closed. I borrowed some money, bought some computerized sign-making equipment from my old boss and started my own shop.

Until I went out on my own, most of what

I had done was related to vinyl sign making, and I started to get bored with that. I saw Dan Sawatzky [www.imaginationcorporation.com] doing 3D signs at the USSC Sign Expo and it lit up something in my head. I've been to a couple of his Sign Magic Workshops since then, and it's really changed my business.

I spent the past year learning lots of new things—welding, sculpting, using Abracadabra Sculpt epoxy [www.abracadabrasigns.com]. It's great. It's a real change from the work I've been doing, and it makes everything more interesting.

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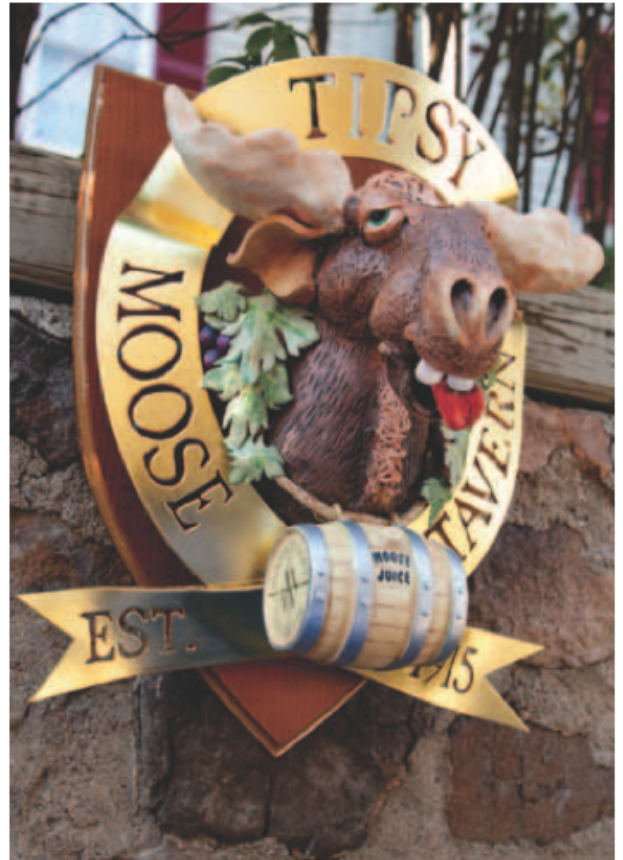
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The Children's Museum was my first welding project. It was great. I had a lot of fun doing it and I'm happy with how it turned out.

Basking Ridge, which is about 20 minutes from Morristown. There's a lot of history around this area—George Washington passed through here, and he had friends here.

My shop is in what used to be a house, which is pretty common for businesses in my area. It's a nice little 1,500-sq.-ft. building, but it's getting a little small. I'd like to get a bigger router and some other tools, and I wonder if it's going to fit. The building needed work when I got it, so I have remodeled it as I need more space. But I'm starting to fill it up.

_____, my wife, helps me out in between taking care of our new daughter. She takes care of the bookwork and that frees me up to do the fun stuff. She's learning to do some of the vinyl sign work, too, because that's a big part of our business. I wish I could do more of the 3D work, but the vinyl work really helps pay for all the welding equipment, the router and everything else.

In a market like mine, I think you have to be versatile and do a variety of work. If I were in a tourist area or something like that, I might be able to specialize more in 3D signs. I built my business for 20 years on serving institutional and government clients—people who valued good, dependable service and a quality product. A lot of that work isn't terribly creative, but it's essential signage.

Then you get this yearning to do the creative work, and you see the power it has to deliver



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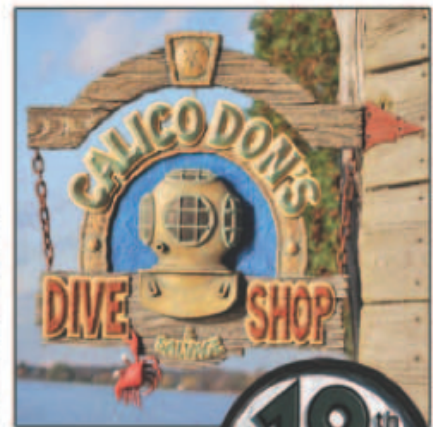
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great advertising to businesses. That's pretty exciting, but it can be tough trying to straddle two markets like this.

Creating a market for unique 3D sign work here is tough. It's a pretty conservative area, and many customers just don't think outside of the box. As I get more work out, though, it's getting easier. People really can't visualize this type of signage when all they've ever seen is flat, basic identification. It's really new to them.

I've done some community projects and that has been really satisfying. People notice this work and remember it, so hopefully that will start to bring in more of that type of work.

Marketing this work is an ongoing process as near as I can tell. There doesn't seem to be any secret to it. You need a strong Web site, and you need to get the work out there so people start to understand what it can do for them. You have to develop the market and wake people up to the power of unique signage. Just learning to sell 3D sign work to people is an art of its own. Dan Sawatzky has mastered that just like he has mastered creating unique sign work. That's something I want to get better at.

—From an interview with John McIlrot

