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## Booming Building Wraps

***A strong market for outdoor advertising has helped lift the building wraps business, but successful execution is the key to profitably offering this grand format service.***

By Thomas Franklin

To hear print providers tell it, producing building wraps is a lot like climbing a mountain. You don't start out on Everest. That would almost certainly be fatal. Instead, you begin by struggling up the small hills before working your way up to the pinnacle.

"Building wraps are not something you start out doing when you invest in grand format printing, you'll fail miserably," says Tom Wilhelm, president, GP Color & Imaging Group. "But it's something you end up doing. It takes a lot of education and experience. We evolved into it."

Tackling building wraps entails a considerable investment, though one that will open the door to a range of offerings, not simply building wraps. This investment entails both tangible one-time and recurring costs such as a printer, RIP, laminator, welder, sewer, requisite staffing, ink, and media. Those costs can easily exceed \$500,000. But it also entails some intangible investments, providers say, such as your willingness to learn on the fly; to be flexible in the face of unexpected problems; and a solid grasp of what you can deliver.

### Printer

Any wide format solvent printer can technically get you started up the building wrap mountain. It's a matter of how much productivity you'll sacrifice as you stitch or weld the panels together. The smaller the printer, the longer it will be dedicated to producing a wrap and nothing else. Some print providers won't touch building wraps unless they're using 16-foot machines, others have proven success with smaller models.

Wide to grand format solvent and UV printer costs can start in the \$60,000 range and climb to as much as \$350,000-plus depending on productivity specs, resolution, and included software. While the low cost is tempting, building wraps entail serious, often around the clock, production. They're frequently ordered under tight deadlines. Printers need to be capable of running on a full time basis to ensure client satisfaction with a responsive technical support system in place to address problems immediately.

"Sometimes we're given ten days in production, sometimes five. Sometimes ten days can turn into five while we work to get the file correct," relates Gary Lucke, owner, Fast Signs in St. Petersburg, FL.

Printers in this class include, but certainly aren't limited to, the Nur Expedio 5000, EFI's VUTEK UltraVu II 5330, Gandinnovations' Jeti 5024, and the HP Scitex line.

Wraps are produced on mesh vinyl or with a new class of film such as 3M's Scotchcal Graphic Film for Textured Surfaces IJ8624. Prices can range widely, depending on roll size. The price range for solvent inks can exceed \$10,000 depending on the kit configuration.

Finishing supplies will also require added investment. Depending on the duration of outdoor time, a wrap may need laminating. Large format laminators can cost upwards of \$40,000. Regardless of whether a wrap will need laminating, it will need to be assembled. Industrial sewers can cost as little as \$3,000 but RF welders can reach into the six figures. Then there are smaller expenses, like grommets and rope, to keep in mind.

One expense that's usually an afterthought is shipping, says Eric Rosencrantz, CEO, EMR Graphics, Randolph, NJ. A wrap in its entirety can weigh several hundred pounds and can cost several hundred dollars to ship overnight, he explains.

### Installation

A small number of building wrap providers do their own installation using internal staff. Often, union rules at facilities such as sports stadiums or convention centers, mandate that union employees are the ones scaling the wall or riding the bucket truck. In other instances, the property owner or media company has their own preferred installation team.

Considering the relatively few firms that can produce building wraps, many companies offer the service on a national basis, working with a team of qualified installers around the country. "We only use 3M-certified installers," Rosencrantz says.

"Sometimes we just mail it out and wait for a phone call to come in," jokes Wilhelm.

Qualified installation—either in-house or subcontracted—is often a key value-add that a print provider can use to differentiate their offerings. It's one thing to print a wrap graphic, it's another to shepherd a project from start to successful finish.

Building wraps don't just provide advertisers with a big bang for their outdoor buck, they can enrich print providers as well. Producing building wraps can be a lucrative addition to a grand format printers' portfolio of services, print providers say, but it's not without its challenges.

"It's a nice, niche market," is how Wilhelm describes it. While coy about specifics, print providers acknowledge that properly executed building wraps projects can offer significant margins versus other graphics products. "They're very profitable," seconds Lucke.

Building wraps have benefited from the overall strong growth in outdoor advertising expenditures. According to the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, Inc.—an industry trade group—advertisers dropped \$6.8 billion on outdoor ads in 2006. That's an eight percent increase from 2005's \$6.3 billion. Through the second quarter of 2007, total revenue for the outdoor advertising industry jumped 7.9 percent versus the same period last year.

The outdoor market has seen consistent growth and shows no sign of abating, says Tim Greene, director of wide format, InfoTrends.

Demand for wraps is not uniform, however. Given that they are regulated by local government, they will thrive in locales with a looser or more permissive regulatory framework, Greene says.

The local nature of the business extends to specifics of the local economy, especially commercial construction. "In places like Orlando, FL where there's a lot of construction and rehabbing of older buildings, you see a lot of building graphics," he says. This speaks to wraps increasing use not just to promote products but to disguise construction sites, re-minding the neighborhood of what the ultimate aim of all that chaos is.

There is a greater appreciation among advertisers and property owners about the impact of building advertising, providers say. It thrives in promotional cities like Vegas or Hollywood, Greene observes. "These are the Super Bowl cities that see the launch of big media campaigns," he adds.

Wraps have also benefited from an overall growth in digital printing, Wilhelm asserts. "I think the whole market is just expanding and the media companies—Viacom, CBS, etc.—have finally latched onto wraps."

Pricing wraps is a subtle game, says Lynn Krinsky, owner of Seattle, WA-based Stella Color. "You need to be a high volume business, because no one will want to pay for a wrap by the square foot." Her recent purchase of a Leggett & Platt Virtu wide format UV flatbed has made this dye sublimation powerhouse take a close look at the wrap market, even though it's typically the domain of the 16-foot solvent machines, she adds. "We haven't done one yet, but we're studying it very closely," she says.

Pricing by the square foot is a non-starter, Greene seconds, but leveraging the service aspect of the wrap—its installation, permitting, and overall job coordination—can help boost returns.

Given the volumes of ink and media involved, the production time, and the installation logistics, profiting from wraps requires very careful budgeting, Lucke says. Building wraps are frequently elements in a larger media campaign, and that means a lot of money is on the table. "And you have to consider what your customers are re-selling the graphics for," Lucke says.

Still, customers are demanding. "Everyone wants high quality and the lowest possible cost with the fastest turnaround, everyone wants to have their cake and eat it too," Rosencrantz adds.

"Building wraps can be a very good business, provided you walk away from the bad jobs," Wilhelm offers. Bad jobs are typically the result of inexperienced clients or problematic proposals and job sites. "Sometimes people just don't understand what will work."

To make a decent profit, you need to execute the job flawlessly. "It's a profitable service, but if you make more than one mistake it's over," states Rosencrantz.

To pull off a successful—and profitable—building wrap project, marketing, design, deadlines, permitting, printing, finishing, and installation all need to harmonize.

### **Marketing**

The best possible advertisement for your building wrap business is your building wrap business. Sounds redundant, but according to Lucke, a successful job proves to clients that your business can be counted on for future projects.

"We live on word-of-mouth; one good job leads to another," seconds Rosencrantz.

Developing a relationship with media companies and their creative partners is a key to repeat business, Wilhelm adds.

### **Deadlines & Design**

While tight deadlines are universal in the business, deadlines are particularly acute for producers of building wraps given the size and complexity of the printing, assembly, and installation. One of the greatest impediments is the graphic file.

"If there's one thing that usually holds us up it's the file," Wilhelm says. Usually, a third party creative team has difficulty matching the contours of the building or particular fonts aren't supported. "Every building is different and every design is a challenge," he says.

While established structures sold by media companies tend to have templates to keep designers within the designated dimensions of the building, other surfaces may not.

"We typically see files that are not properly matched to the dimensions of the building, or that don't take into account some unique aspect of the building's design," Wilhelm says.

"We take pictures of the structure to first ensure that it's a surface we can handle," Rosencrantz adds. "We have to determine the exact nature of the surface. Then we do a site inspection. After that, we create a custom template for our designers [or third party designers] to work with," he says. The design stage is usually where a project can live or die. "Everyone wants to get in as much text as possible, but if it's not properly aligned within the dimensions of the building, you're going to have big problems," he says.

"You have to get the installers and the designers talking to one another, so everyone knows what will or won't work," Wilhelm explains.

### **Permit**

In many cases, securing the required permits is handled by the media company that owns the space to be wrapped, but it never hurts to ensure someone has their eye on the local officialdom. "They can be the graphics Gestapo," jokes Wilhelm. In Hollywood where Wilhelm's firm operates, the regulations are quite detailed—specifying the precise height of the lettering, the proportion of words to images, and other intricate details of a project. Running afoul of these regulations, Wilhelm explains, means wasted time and materials.

Many building wraps are placed on structures such as stadiums and commercial properties that are already zoned for displaying advertisements. Others, especially construction sites, may not be and

will require some research as to what's permitted.

### **Printing & Finishing**

While wraps may not have the dpi requirements of POP or other graphics, they'll still consume many printing hours. Not only that, but they require significant space to be laid out and proofed by the printer. "Most computers can't handle the full sized wrap file to view for proofing," Rosencrantz says. "We give them a swatch proof to show them what it looks like at the dpi we'll be printing at."

Printing on mesh vinyl is also challenging, Wilhelm says. "You have to think about what it's going to be placed over. If you're putting it over a white surface, all the color density is going to be sucked out of the graphic."

"Anyone who wraps vehicles knows that the cutting and the finishing takes all the time," Lucke says. Given the relatively short duration of most wraps—30 to 60 days—they typically don't require laminating. But assembling the graphics for shipping is quite important, because the install team at the site needs to be able to get up and running quickly, Rosencrantz says. "We ship a kit, with everything laid out plainly."

Getting it to the installers in a fashion they can handle, with everything carefully labeled, is crucial Wilhelm adds, "You're going to have people hanging off the side of a building, so everything needs to be packaged the way the installer likes it."

### **Tackling the Titans**

Lucke, who has owned his Fast Signs franchise for the past ten years, has seen building wrap success feed on itself. He completed a major project at Tropicana Field—home of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays—for a firm that redesigns stadium stores and interiors. Having successfully produced and installed over 5,000 square feet of vinyl graphics once, the firm doubled down on Lucke's Fast Sign for a new project—to outfit LP Field, home of the Tennessee Titans—with an array of interior and exterior graphics.

The centerpiece of the effort was a 40x41-foot graphic on an exterior wall of the stadium. Instead of using mesh vinyl, however, Lucke decided instead to employ 3M's Textured Surface Film IJ 8624 on the stadium's form poured concrete walls. He had used it for the first time at Tropicana Stadium and was pleased with results.

"I remember when my sales rep came into the store to show it to me and I thought it would be a good fit for that job," Lucke explains. Unfortunately, at the precise moment the Titans job came in, no dealer in Tampa had any of the film in stock. "We drove to Orlando to get it and had a special delivery of several rolls over-nighted," he relates.

The frenetic pace would only continue. Lucke then received a CorelDraw file from the creative team designing the graphic but the centerpiece image of Titan's Quarterback Vince Young, was too low resolution to suit the dimensions of the wrap. The team's photographer was quickly summoned to snap a new image during a pre-season game. "We're now in the 11th hour with this photographer running around trying to get the perfect shot," Lucke says. The final file—weighing in at 3.6GB—was received on September 8th.

"From that point," Lucke recounts, "we were printing day and night." There were a number of additional graphics produced for the job as well.

Using a 64-inch Seiko ColorPainter solvent printer, Lucke produced the graphic as a series of nine, 51-inch panels and one, 30-inch panel on 3M's film. The bottom of the graphic was to be placed 150 inches from the ground and given the length it had to travel from top to bottom, Lucke afforded himself 1.8 inches worth of overlap "in case we started wandering" during the installation. "And we did, but just a little."

After letting the ink out gas, the printed film was laminated using 3M's 8524 overlamine on a 72-inch Ding Laminator. "The two, working in combination, really produced an awesome graphic," Lucke says. The laminate itself is the trickiest part of working with the new substrate, as it can be less forgiving, but it's not difficult to master with experience, he relays.

Because they were operating under a tight deadline, Lucke personally flew the graphics to TN, checking in seven, 54-inch boxes at the airport. "Security definitely gave us some weird looks," he

says, "especially when they saw the applicator."

Lucke arrived in TN on the morning of the 12th. Working in tandem with two installers affiliated with the stadium, Lucke got to work. 3M's Textured Surface Film is Adhesive backed and is applied using the firm's heat resistant texture surface applicator—TSA-1. The panels were hinged at the top and were unraveled slowly as the adhesive back was pressed into the concrete. Using a digital heat gun to control the temperature, Lucke affixed the graphic.

"The film fits into every little crack, and the result is very smooth," Lucke explains.

On the 45-foot knuckle lift swaying under the persistent breeze, Lucke "squeegeed every square inch." Working at a breakneck pace of 47 hours in three days—including one 20-hour day—the job was completed on the 14th. "We were definitely bleary-eyed," Lucke says.

While Lucke still sees a role for mesh vinyl in many future projects, he envisions using the textured surface vinyl for a number of large graphics. "There is so much it can be put on. The market needs to be educated. I think a lot of customers don't realize that these surfaces are now approachable."

### **Deep in the Weeds**

Tom Wilhelm is no stranger to promotional blitzes. GP Color & Imaging is in the belly of the promotional beast—Hollywood, CA. His 40-year-old company employs three, 16-foot HP/Scitex solvent printers, with a fourth en-route. They have been producing building wraps since 2001.

His firm recently finished a project promoting a pair of Showtime network series—Weeds and Californication. It included a 210x38-foot wrap, with a 50x80-foot tower wrap for a total of 12,000 square feet worth of graphics. They also created 500 square feet of perforated adhesive window for the street side windows.

The building wrap itself would encompass three sides of the structure and a tower. "We received the file with ten days to print, which is nice, usually there are changes right up to the last minute," Wilhelm says. The project took five days to output using a combination of perforated adhesive window vinyl and mesh vinyl from Clear Focus and UltraFlex, respectively.

It was welded with 72- and 36-foot FIAB RF welders, placed at right angles to each other. The firm produced fourteen, 16x38-80-foot panels, which were welded together to create four finished images. They were then soft folded, placed on pallets, and sent to the installation site at the corner of Hollywood and Highland Blvd. in Hollywood, CA.

The total installation took three days, a breakneck pace, "which killed the installers," Wilhelm recounts.

### **That's a Wrap**

At the end of the day, a wrap does more than catch the eyes of passers by. "It's such a big project that it generates a lot of buzz in the community, it gets your business noticed," Greene says.

The potential for the market is perhaps its most attractive feature, Lucke adds "Really, we see unlimited growth if it's marketed right and if we educate our customers."

*Dec2007, Digital Output*

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