



US Signcrafters More Than a Sign Company

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Company: US Signcrafters
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Web site: www.ussigncrafters.com
Management: Scott Franko, president
Employees: 12

What they do:

Headquartered in Osceola (in St. Joseph County), US Signcrafters began as a small sign-making company in 1991. Today, it operates three divisions: Building Impressions (launched in 2011); The Sign Store (offers online merchandise such as flags, flag poles and accessories; Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant room signs; and safety signs and markers); and US Signcrafters (produces custom signs and graphics).

The company celebrated its 20th anniversary in late 2011.

Franko: "We've had a tough couple years like a lot of people, so it was kind of a dual celebration. We worked so hard this year and we're finally clipping along into profitable territory. A lot of our ideas we've worked on the last couple years – with Building Impressions and new things that are making an impact in the company – we're just starting to see it. That's why we're excited."

History:

Franko began working with US Signcrafters shortly after his father-in-law purchased the business in 1991. "He saw an opportunity for this little company that was struggling," Franko recalls. "That fall, he had a heart attack. It was the first in a series. That was the catalyst that brought us together."

"I looked at the situation and thought, 'I'm a designer (he had recently earned his fine arts and graphics design degree). I've been around fabrication and construction (via work experience during high school and college). I really thought I could make an impact."

"That's how I got my start. I came aboard to help him with design and sales."

US SIGNCRAFTERS

Learning to lead:

Franko didn't receive a warm welcome from all.

"The rude awakening I got to business (was), 'You're 24 years old. You don't know what you're doing,' he notes. "I thought the place was going to welcome me in to help, (but) I was looked at like, 'You don't know the sign business, and you're the son-in-law to boot.' I was an enemy when I came in. It was all stacked against me.

"I would say those early years after that, it just took a long time for a lot of lessons to be learned."

US Signcrafters' move from Goshen to Osceola in 1997 when Franko became president signaled a new beginning.

"I guess that's where our story starts to change a little bit. ... I took that as a new starting point. We weeded out a lot of the (original) people. By then, I could start to develop my own leadership style, learn about business and learn what it is (that would) make this company uniquely different from our competitors," he reflects.

"I was going around and making sure we were coming to work to be a part of something that was more than (just) a sign company and making sure that we were attractive to the community and that there was somewhere to go in our future. Along the way, we started to call that (philosophy) something: Building Impressions."

What's in a name?

What Franko calls "a re-invention" of the organization led to a new US Signcrafters' motto.

"Our tagline used to be, 'World-class Signs at Hometown Prices,' – very much matching our name – but in the end, it just said, 'You're a sign company and you're making signs,' " he stresses.

"We changed our logo and our look, and we eventually changed our tagline to say, 'More Than Signs, We're Building Impressions.'

"Building Impressions has kind of become the two-word mission statement, purpose statement (for our company)."

Clients:

US Signcrafters serves a variety of businesses ranging from supermarkets and banks to restaurants and retailers.

"Most of our work is probably within a 45-mile radius of us. Within that realm, we do just about anything and everything," Franko observes. "We've also done jobs all over the country. Some of those companies have taken us as far as Nebraska, Tennessee, Virginia."

A current project involves Fort Wayne-based designer Vera Bradley.

"It's decorative, architecturally-built window treatments," Franko comments. "There are no signs in this project."

Franko calls a recent project involving the Legends of Notre Dame Restaurant "probably our proudest project to date.

"We developed the platting, the façade, the crown molding, the lights, the awnings, the signs, the logos – the whole experience of seeing it differently today. It was a big project for us, and 70% of the job wasn't even a typical sign job."

Obstacles:

The nature of US Signcrafters' niche services makes the hiring process – trying for any employer – even more challenging.

"It's kind of difficult, even though we're in an area where employment is down. We're not large enough for a lot of training, and you have to have some specialized people to do this (type of work)."

Future hires, he shares, will focus on areas such as engineering, architectural rendering and skilled fabrication.

"For 19 of my (20) years (with US Signcrafters), it was sometimes very difficult to find the right kind of people that we wanted to hire," he confides. "I found it to be easier this past year because we're attracting them with this little re-invention of ours (Building Impressions)."

Words of wisdom:

Franko describes Pay Notes, which he implemented in 1997 as



US Signcrafters works for clients in a variety of industries.



Work is underway on a custom fabrication project for a resale outlet managed by Habitat for Humanity.

motivational messages enclosed with employee paychecks, as “culture drivers.”

“The first Pay Note I ever wrote is the first chapter of what turned out to be a book (a collection of Franko’s favorite samples). It’s called, ‘Living Happily With Worn-out Shoes,’ and it came to life for me when I saw an example of people (in a mall) who knew how to be happy with literally worn-out shoes on their feet.

“We’re talking little kids, big kids, toes popping out of shoes ... and that was the theme I came back with: Take pride in what we’ve got and you’ll be surprised at how we catch up.”

Pay Notes has received attention beyond the walls of US Signcrafters as well.

“There have been some opportunities to use Pay Notes as another feeder of our information and to gain interest in the company,” he states.

What’s next?

US Signcrafters may be a small company, but Franko has big plans for the growing organization.

“I’m hoping to go from a \$2.5 million company to a \$7 million company in three years, but definitely in five years or less,” he declares. He also plans to triple its personnel.

Building relationships, he emphasizes, plays a crucial role in the company’s success.

“We have strategic relationships with people. We’re in Elkhart. Elkhart is manufacturing (driven), (but) manufacturing is down. All of these companies have awesome capabilities, so what we do is we tap into these companies while they’re down. We’re outsourcing a lot,” Franko remarks.

He concludes, “We have a unique responsibility at this company because we affect what the community looks like.”