

Those Blasted Foam Signs

By Bill Mogensen

Here's a simple and effective way to use vinyl, styrofoam and spray paint to create the sandblasted look.

WHAT COSTS PENNIES TO MAKE, will last for a hundred years, can look like expensive sandblasted granite, wood, or marble, and weighs almost nothing? Give up?

It's plain old styrofoam that has been etched (blasted, melted, eroded...) by the solvents contained in common spray paint, then sealed and painted to look like something else.

I'm sure that I'm not the first one to discover this technique, but it's worth passing on as a way to create quick and easy sandblasted-style signs and graphics that can make a big impression on your customers.

They're fast, easy and inexpensive to create, and when the material is sealed properly, and mounted correctly, the signs are durable and long-lasting.

Just about everyone in the sign business is familiar with sandblasted signs made from wood and three-dimensional letters and graphics made from foam, but

how can you *blast* signs from expanded polystyrene foam? The usual sandblasting method for wood signs would be too way too powerful for styrofoam. The steps are similar, but the materials and tools are different.

I discovered this technique by accident while cleaning the tip of a can of spray paint by holding the can upside down and spraying the remaining paint in the pick-up tube against the inside of a trash can.

The trash can also contained some scrap foam that was partially covered with some weeded vinyl. When the paint hit the foam that was covered with the vinyl, nothing happened. But when the paint hit the foam that was not protected, it was blasted, eroded, eaten, melted away... (Ah-ha... a little light came on.)

The solvents in the paint *melted* the foam, and seemed to work best with a very light layer of paint; almost an over-spray coat. Many very light coats work much better than a few heavy ones. Heavy coats of paint tend to not only undercut the edge of the stencil and blur the edge of the design, but also tend to seal the foam from further erosion.

MATERIALS REQUIRED

Foam: You can use plain old white insulation-type styrofoam or closer-celled extruded polystyrene foam, such as 3M Foamular, for a smoother finish.

Mask: Paint Mask Vinyl works best, but you can use just about any intermedi-

continued



Here's a finished piece, "blasted", painted and airbrushed. The lettering is cut out of vinyl using the original file I created on the computer for the mask with a .05" inline, and stuck on top of the foam for a very clean edge.

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continued



Photo 1: I used paint-mask vinyl in reverse and regular application on two cut-out blanks of Foamular extruded polystyrene insulation. Almost any kind of styrofoam works.



Photo 2: Using flat black Krylon, I lightly coated each blank with numerous coats to get an even "blast", then I removed the paint mask.



Photo 3: I used Krylon Fleckstone spray paint to create the granite effect on this piece after I coated it at least twice with latex paint.

ate vinyl, or even Contact Paper. Be aware that the paint solvents may attack vinyls that are not designed to resist paint.

Blasting Agent: Solvent-based canned spray paint or lacquer thinner in a spray gun or airbrush.

Sealer: Latex-based paint for sealing the blasted foam prior to finish painting.

Miscellaneous: Finish materials, lettering enamels, vinyl, and decorative finishes, like marbling, fleckstone, etc.

TECHNIQUE

1. Design the sign, and cut it out of the paint mask material, weed the areas to be blasted, and apply application tape.

2. Apply the vinyl to the foam blank, and remove the application tape. See **Photo 1**.

3. If the job warrants it, you can use an X-ACTO™-type knife to cut into the foam along the edge of the mask in order to prevent excess undercutting of the foam by the paint/solvent. This is especially important for long, thin borders, panels, and design elements that are in close proximity to each other.

4. Using either a spray can of paint, or solvent in an airbrush, with a respirator in a well-ventilated area, paint over the exposed parts of the foam with many light coats, pausing each time to evaluate the amount of erosion that is taking place. Its better to use a number of light coats so you have better control over the amount of blasting (see **Photo 2**).

5. After the foam has been blasted/eroded/melted to the desired depth, remove the mask and seal everything with at least two coats of a good latex paint.

6. After the latex has dried sufficiently, you can give the project the final finish. This can be whatever you desire. I have had good luck with faux granite and marble finishes, as-well-as painted and textured finishes.

One of the samples created for this article was finished with Krylon Fleckstone to imitate granite, and it ended up looking like a stone monument or headstone. The voids in the surface of the blasted foam helped create the illusion of rough sandblasted or chiseled stone (see **Photo 3**).

The sample on page 60 was finished to resemble a sandblasted wood sign. The blasted or negative areas were painted with dark brown lettering enamel.

The lettering is actually airbrushed vinyl that was cut from the same computer file as the mask. This provides a smooth, sharp-edged finish to the lettering. The only difference from the original file is that the lettering was cut with a .05" inline.

You can also utilize a hot-wire cutter to form panels, borders and other design elements to use in conjunction with the above blasting technique.

Signs and graphics made from this material can be very durable and long lasting. I have made lettering out of this stuff that has been up (and still looks good) for over 15 years! Just make sure it is mounted away from curious fingers and

hungry or bored birds... Cut, mask and spray, and you're on your way.

TIP OF THE MONTH

The following vinyl tip is provided by Dan Walker of Network Art Service, Burbank, Calif., and involves a weeding technique that I call *suicide weeding*.

When you're saddled with weeding out a bunch of small copy, like three or four lines of half-inch lettering, try this:

Use an X-ACTO to cut a rectangle around the block of lettering. Then use the tip of the knife to loosen an edge of the rectangle along the entire block of lettering.

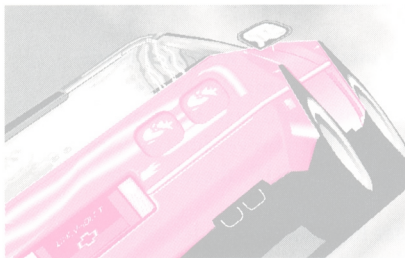
Now the fun part... With one hand holding the loose edge of the cut vinyl rectangle (your right hand if you're right handed, and vice-versa), and the other hand *firmly* holding down the rest of the

vinyl, shout the magic word, "Eeow!", and snap the hand holding the cut vinyl up and away very quickly.

If you're lucky — and this takes practice — you'll find that those three or four lines of lettering have been suicide weeded in a most pleasing way. Of course you'll still have to pick out all the centers, and if things don't work out right you may have to re-cut and re-weed the whole darn mess.

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