

# LARGE OUTPUT ROUNDTABLE

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## Large Output and Computer Aided Signmaking in CorelDRAW

by William Mogensen

Someone once said that being an artist, is knowing when you are finished. CorelDRAW can help make just about anyone an artist so, knowing when you're done is more important than ever. More about that later.

Large output, or larger than desktop output is referred to in the sign industry as Computer Aided Signmaking, or CAS. CAS, in a form that is accessible to the average signmaker has been around for about ten or eleven years.

In late 1982, Gerber Scientific Co., introduced the SIGNMAKER III.® It was quite a remarkable machine. After entering the necessary information, the machine would plot absolutely perfect letters and graphics on paper, or cut them out of self adhesive vinyl. You could modify the lettering in a number of different ways

(stretch, force, italicize, mirror, etc.) but, everything was done in the blind. There was no monitor, just a keyboard, CPU, and plotter. The number of typefaces was limited, and quite expensive (approx. \$225 per font), and the machine itself was in the \$10,000 range.

In the late 1980's, IBM PC based CAS systems became available. The first systems used modified CAD programs to produce lettering and graphics and were pretty basic. The big advantage was the ability to see on the screen what you were laying out. These systems had no real design or page layout capabilities, but you had the ability to scale sizes, italicize, force in both axes, then output files to a plotter, for pen plotting, or knife/hot-tip vinyl cutting. Layouts and designs of the final products (commercial signs, etc.) were still, for the most part, designed in the traditional way on the drawing board.

CorelDRAW changed all that. The sign maker could now create the complete design right on the desk top in a matter of minutes. From thumbnail sketches to final production drawings, and plotter files you could do it all. You had instant access to hundreds of typefaces, graphics devices,

geometric shapes, colors, outlines, distortions, etc. It was like a dream come true. For me, it was better than a dream come true, because I could do more with CorelDRAW than I'd ever dreamed possible. And, after using the program for literally thousands of hours over that past four years, I still feel the same. There's no competition. I've sampled the others, and it's like swimming with your clothes on. But, you probably already know that, or you wouldn't be reading this.

So, how is CorelDRAW used for large output, or CAS? For large scale plotter output (either for pen plots, or vinyl cutting), an intermediate program is usually required to convert the exported CorelDRAW files (usually, EPS or PRN) to a format that can be utilized by HPGL (Hewlett Packard Graphics Language) or DMPL. In the past, the most popular software for doing this was CadLink. Cadlink would read the CorelDRAW files, and allow scaling up to 20,000%, then output to supported plotters for vinyl cutting, and pen plotting. Cadlink has add-on modules available that will allow inlines/outlines, distortions, weed borders, mirroring, etc.



Over the past six to twelve months, about three of four other Windows based plotter control programs (ProCut, WinPlot, ShortCut, etc.) have become available from other manufacturers. They can all do the job. Some offer more enhancements than others, so investigate and decide for yourself what will work best for you.

Large format color PostScript printing systems are available for output applications ranging from trade show signage to point-of-purchase (POP) displays, courtroom displays, and business presentations. Output sizes can range up to 52-inches by 30-feet with some systems. Most service bureaus that offer this type of output can use Encapsulated PostScript (.EPS) files exported from CorelDRAW. The output is quite good, and can be mounted on foam boards and/or laminated for more permanent displays. Costs start at around \$10 or \$11 per sq. ft. For further information about specifics, I'd advise contacting some of the service bureaus listed at the end of this article.

An economical alternative for poster size output that will work in a pinch, is to tile your output to a PaintJet printer, then assemble the tiles on a light table to full size. This procedure won't stand up under very close scrutiny, but it might save the day in an emergency.

## Large (CAS) Output Design Considerations

The most important thing to remember when using CorelDRAW for large output is that you'll have to produce whatever it is you design. It's very easy to create something with a few clicks of the mouse that will be difficult, expensive, and perhaps impossible to create at full size. This doesn't mean that your designs have to be sterile and boring, just be aware of your final output limitations and try to avoid creating production nightmares.

Signs exist to be seen. Their success depends on the readability and visi-

bility of their graphic elements. This usually means good and proper proportions. The simpler, the better. At best, you'll only have a second or two to convey your message. Anything that distracts from that limits effectiveness. Elements that detract from the primary message should be eliminated. Learn to *see* the signs that you find appealing. You'll soon notice that better designs are clean, simple and enduring. Bad signs and poor designs are usually overly complicated, spotty, and out of character with the subject. Be aware of, and make proper use of the negative space in your designs. Negative space is that which surrounds the graphic elements of your design and extends to the edge of the format. Its primary use is to illuminate the positive space. I suggest studying good design, and analyzing the elements that make it good.

Type style is important because of the large size of most commercial sign applications. When appropriate use heavy outlines to isolate, and project lettering off the background. To avoid busyness, try to use no more than two type styles in any one sign design. Body text typefaces at large sizes tend to lose a lot of impact. It is best to stick with display typefaces, or the bold/black versions of traditional faces. CorelDRAW's symbol library is a great source of graphic devices. Their simplicity can be easily utilized to enhance your designs for large output.

An important tip to remember when preparing files for export to *sign cutting software* is that if you use thick outlines in CorelDRAW, only the wire-frame images will be available for output to the plotter. In order to actually cut thick (or thin) outlines, inlines, etc., the 'sign cutting' software will have to provide that capability. Also, if you're going to have a service bureau cut vinyl from your files be sure to convert all text to curves to ensure the proper typeface is cut.

But, most important of all, DON'T OVERDO IT. To be good artists, we must know when we're finished. ♦

## Suggested Reading List

Mastering Layout  
by Michael R. Stevens  
ST Publications  
407 Gilbert Ave.  
Cincinnati, OH 45202

Speedball Textbook  
22nd edition  
Hunt Manufacturing Co.  
Statesville, NC 28677

Signcraft Magazine  
PO Box 06031  
Ft. Myers, FL 33906-9962

Signs of the Times Magazine  
ST Publications  
407 Gilbert Ave.  
Cincinnati, OH 45202

Sign Business Magazine  
PO Box 1416  
Broomfield, CO 80038-9922

## Large Output Service Bureaus

Blair Graphics  
1740 Stanford St.  
Santa Monica, CA. 90404  
(310) 829-4621

Andresen Graphic Services  
2639 29th St.  
Santa Monica, CA. 90405  
(310) 452-5521

Paris Imaging  
1961 S. La Cienega  
Los Angeles, CA. 90034  
(310) 204-0500

## CorelDRAW Computer Cut Vinyl

The following Companies can provide computer cut vinyl and full size patterns from CorelDRAW files.

Ordway Sign Supply  
(818) 908-9666

Noller Sign Co.  
(805) 248-8374

Mogensen Sign Co.  
(818) 352-4102