

Thinking about installing vehicle graphics or refreshing an old design? Here's some advice from the pros: Keep it simple, work with marketing, and plan ahead.

By Lauren Fletcher

VEHICLE THINK BEFORE



Liberty America wraps both its vans and buses with eye-catching graphic illustrations.



Amherst Alarm utilizes an image of its alarm sign, and includes its website and phone number.



Pure uses a large image of a sleeping child and includes its slogan in large lettering.

Also considered “driving billboards,” vehicle graphics help identify a fleet’s vehicles, build on a company’s brand, and can even increase the resale value of a company’s fleet.

However, there are several factors to consider before determining whether vehicle graphics are right for your fleet. Once the decision is made, the process has only just begun.

BRANDING THE FLEET

Before graphics are installed, a fleet must first determine it wants them in the first place. Reviewing the value of potential

AT A GLANCE

When installing vehicle graphics, be sure to consider the following:

- Vehicle surface type and size.
- Longevity of marketing program and goal.
- Audience.
- Qualifications of graphics installers.

graphics and fleet vehicle types can help identify the best options for the fleet before proceeding.

“Fleet managers considering vehicles must see a value in what those graphics will do as a benefit to the company that they represent,” said Trace George, CEO and president of VSP Graphics.

Also, remember one key to vehicle graphics is that the vehicles become “moving” billboards.

“Keep it simple,” recommended Jim Soppelsa, president of Sun Art Decals, Inc. “When a vehicle is on the move, your message needs to be understood quickly. Also, keep in mind how long you plan to keep the vehicle in a fleet. You may need a removable material versus a five- or a 12-year material. There are many adhesives for different applications.”

Be sure to maintain the company’s brand and use wording that management and/or marketing approves of, to ensure a standard within the whole fleet.

“Many fleet managers responsible for

the graphic layout hire a sign person to design and install them. Some mindsets are to just put logos and copy wherever there may be space available on the vehicle surface,” George noted. “Fleet managers should only be responsible for making sure whatever is installed on a vehicle benefits their fleet in surface protection and that proper steps are taken to ensure warranties of installation and eventual removals.”

Fleet branding can be very beneficial for many reasons to the company that values it; however, before a plan is begun to implement fleet graphics, a fleet manager should contact a material manufacturer to specify the materials that would best fit his or her project plan.

“3M, MACTac, Arlon, Avery, and Oracal are the best-known fleet graphic manufacturers available to contact through their websites,” George noted. “A local sign shop may not be the right direction for information, as many sign shops only carry one or two types of

GRAPHICS: YOU WRAP

Quality laser services utilized an image of a technician working on a printer to show its area expertise.



Large trailers provide a lot of room for graphics, such as the image above of DirectTV.



The wrap on Roy's Plumbing, Heating & Cooling truck was worked around the sliding van door.



Warm & Fuzzy home Heating & Cooling uses bright colors and friendly images.

material to keep inventory costs down. Many sign shops are not gauged to offer up proper fleet graphics because they may only use short-term materials or may not follow proper printing/overlaminating standards for specified fleet needs."

Fleet vehicles are never one size, one shape, or one brand.

"Keep in mind the variety of vehicle types and body styles. While it may seem like you'll only be in one or two types of vehicles right now, who is to say what you'll be in five years from now?" asked Jamie Knakmuhs, senior graphics designer for National Fleet Graphics, LLC. "Try not to cater your graphics too specifically to the details of the vehicle body, but rather let them work across a wider variety."

When considering full or partial wraps, Knakmuhs also recommended keeping in mind items such as door handles, which will weather faster, or bumpers, which will increase the cost.

"Full vehicle wraps will help increase

the resale value of your fleet vehicles," according to Knakmuhs. "By being covered in a quality vinyl, the paint will be protected and you can avoid any paint fading, minor scratches, or ghosting that may occur with contour cut spot graphics."

INSTALLING GRAPHICS 101

When fleet managers are looking to install graphics on vehicles for the first time, there are several factors to consider, including the vehicle's surface, vehicle type, and the audience.

One of the first steps a fleet manager should do is consider what surfaces they have for each project.

"Many fleets that have box or trailer units have either corrugated or flat side/riveted surfaces to display brands/copy on. If chassis-only units are utilized, such as Mercedes/Freightliner Sprinters, vans, pickup trucks, etc., the surface may be smooth, but, the consideration of full body wraps may be a concern if

not spec'd out correctly," said George of VSP Graphics.

According to George, the main common denominator for choosing any form of fleet branding is the material that is intended to be used, for the project(s).

"If surface conditions, longevity concerns, and/or surface adhesion are not considered for the application, a bidding vendor may just use an inexpensive product, leading to short-term expectations and possible damages to the surfaces," George noted.

Also, fleet managers should be sure to keep ideas simple.

"As with most design, the best rule of thumb is simplify," recommended Knakmuhs of National Fleet Graphics. "How much information do you need to have present? How many colors do your graphics need to be? What type of audience are you trying to attract with your graphics?"

The location of the graphics installation is also critical.

Vehicle Graphics

"You need to be in a clean controlled atmosphere," said Soppelsa, of Sun Art Decals.

COMING BACK TO LIFE

For fleets that already have graphics on their vehicles, and are looking to redo, update, or refresh, a few other points must be considered.

Soppelsa of Sun Art Decals recommended finding a well-established decal producer and installer. He also noted that fleet managers may need to look into a good auto body shop to remove any previous graphics.

Quality is also key, and, while today's fleet managers are cost-conscious, the adage "you get what you pay for" rings true.

"Try not to shy away from a quality product due to price. When you pay for a quality vinyl installed by a professional, you're going to wind up with a lasting graphic," said Knakmuhs from National Fleet Graphics. "It'll be hard for your customers to take you seriously if they see a faded and cracked decal on your door."

A new, updated, or refreshed look can bring an old fleet back to life again, especially with old paint jobs that may be covered with new high-gloss graphic wraps, according to George of VSP Graphics. "Fleet managers who want a

From trash trucks, to trailers, to fleet vehicles, graphics can be utilized on a broad array of fleet units as moving billboards.



new look should consider working with someone in a graphics company to maintain the company's brand," he said.

If graphics are to be removed from an old finish, there may be ghosting of the outlines from the old look. These ghosts may be buffed out of the paint, and a new lettering application can be installed.

"If a total wrap is considered, the ghosting surface will not be an issue as the material would cover the area completely [the method of wrapping is such as wallpapering a vehicle surface with vinyl material]," continued George. "If a complete wrap project is considered to refresh a fleet look, a fleet manager must make sure that all surfaces are adequate for implementation. Vehicle graph-

ic wraps cannot cover rust, corrosion, or siliconed areas. Surface prepping would have to be considered upon graphic installation, and may incur additional costs from the installation company."

OVERLOOKING SIMPLICITY

Adding graphic elements to a vehicle, or installing a complete vehicle wrap, is a relatively simple process. However, some factors should never be overlooked.

As noted previously, simplicity is key. "Fleet managers should not overlook the simplicity of the message (verbiage, graphics, and photos) and contrast in color," said Knakmuhs of National Fleet Graphics.

Another piece of advice revolves

GRAPHICS MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS

The experts at Sun Art Decals, National Fleet Graphics, and VSP Graphics shared some common myths and misconceptions within the graphics industry.

Graphics last forever. "With welds and rivets, no matter how good and perfect the installation is, the vinyl will eventually want to lift. Paradoxically, the vinyl will stay better when cut along a weld or around a rivet and then sealed," said Jamie Knakmuhs, senior graphics designer for National Fleet Graphics, LLC.

More is better. "I think with wraps some folks think more info is better. Wraps are very effective if done right, but they often just get cluttered and cannot be read quickly," said Jim Soppelsa, president of Sun Art Decals, Inc.

Anyone can remove graphics. "One concern fleet managers need to address is that the installations and/or removals must be done by a 3M/PDAA-certified installation company," said Trace George, CEO and president of VSP Graphics. "Manufacturers of graphic material have organizations of certified professionals they rely on to install

and/or remove their products. These trained professionals must know the materials they intend on working with and must adhere to strict hands-on procedures to maintain surface prepping, and proper techniques in trimming, heating, and applying difficult projects. Information on these organizations can be found on www.UASG.org or PDAA.com."

Graphics cause more harm than good. "Many fleet managers believe that vehicle graphics are a possible harm to fleet painted or unpainted surfaces. The thought that a graphic may be damaging to a fleet surface is a very big myth. For a majority of all manufacturers, vinyl graphic products are protectants of surface paints or exposed metals," said George. "If a fleet unit is wrapped the day it is purchased, the finish is sealed and protected as if it was brand new the day it is traded in. Also, the graphics, if laminated with a proper clear overlamine will protect many surfaces from most scratches, dings, or similar instances that may be evident over time, due to improper care of the exterior."

around planning.

"It's all about controlling the materials and your surroundings. Plan ahead and be prepared. Have the right tools and materials," said Soppelsa of Sun Art Decals.

Company branding should be taken into consideration, as well. While a new campaign might lend itself to some great graphics, the longevity of the campaign should be reviewed. Price varies depending on how long graphics must last.

"Many fleet managers must consider whether the branding or lettering vehicle graphic program is short- or long-term," noted George of VSP Graphics. "I have seen many projects specified for fleet graphics, which may have only been needed for short-term campaigns/needs. The material that was specified was for a more expensive, long-term product. 3M and many other manufacturers have one-, three-, five-, and seven-year materials, and fleet managers



(Left) Smylie One and (above) Tony K's Catering show how fleets can keep graphics simple, and still get the necessary information across.

must know the technical data in creating specifications for each project," George said.

The final laminate of the graphics should also be reviewed. "In the 17 years I have been in business, I have lost many bids due to the winning bidder not using a mandatory UV clear overlamine material, to protect the print material [from sun damage]," George said. "Many fleet managers are not aware that if they specify a project, there must be UV overlamine on any prints."

According to George, even when specified in bids, many people cannot detect whether the prints have a laminate or not, for the glossy finish is the same on a bare print as it would be if laminated.

"It is very hard to detect and manufacturers get away with it all the time to save almost 50 percent of the gross costs to produce the project. As a 3M-certified company, I must laminate everything to maintain integrity of the product and to fulfill warranty standards."

'THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS'

Depending on the type of graphics (full or partial wraps, logos only, etc.) and the vehicle type (sedan versus pickup trucks versus semi trailers), different challenges may come to light. Simply applying the graphics to a vehicle can be challenging in itself.

"There are many challenges to applying fleet graphics. All certified installers must use proper trimming, heating, and installation techniques every day," noted George of VSP Graphics. "Corrugated trailer units have many peaks and valleys, and there is a difficulty maintaining that no distortions happen to prints

due to the surface conditions."

In addition to corrugated materials, highly riveted surfaces need strict attention to material adhesion as well. "If a graphic is not installed correctly within each nook of every corrugation or rivet, air or moisture may eventually create graphic material failure," George continued.

Quality can also be impacted by technician training and poor technique.

"On the quality end, many graphic companies that have no proper installation training processes may patch many problem areas that only a trained professional would not overlook," noted George. "Fleet units have mirrors, door handles, windows, vents, grills, etc., and many companies, while trimming around these parts, may cut into the paint or may not know how to trim correctly to make the product look as if it were painted."

According to George, cutting into paint is a big issue. "If the installer does not know what he/she is doing during a trimming, they may cut too deep into the material past the clear coat and into the metal surface of the fleet unit," he said. "When this happens, body rust develops quickly within those cut areas, leading to failure."

Knakmuhs of National Fleet Graphics agreed that the devil is in the details.

"When we're looking at semi cabs, there are a number of details that come into play when deciding how the graphics will reside," Knakmuhs said. "Obstacles, such as rivets, peep windows (the little window on the lower portion of one or both doors), mirrors, and emblems are the most common we see." **WT**

About the Sources

■ **Sun Art Decals** was established in 1975 with the primary purpose of designing and manufacturing decal markings for commercial vehicles. Over the years, it has produced decals for buses, trucks, trains, boats, cars, aircraft, parking decals, organization decals, decals used as architectural markings, etc.

■ **National Fleet Graphics** was founded in 2001 with the goal of supplying customers with quality products at a competitive price with a quick turnaround time. It chiefly serves Central Minnesota, Northern Iowa, and Western Wisconsin, but also serves many other locations.

■ **VSP** is a fleet branding company, specializing in fleet lettering and complete vehicle/truck wraps. Since 1995, VSP not only creates the fleet designs for the client, but also manufactures the materials. With its 3M-certified installation network, it has the ability to install the projects anywhere in the continental U.S.