Creativeink Design Group uses CorelDRAW® for signs, Web sites and logos

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Doug Downey
Owner Creativeink

Creativeink is a busy, full service creative agency, offering their customers everything from signs, Web and graphic design to full color print services. Owner Doug Downey and his team of creative professionals use one software package for pretty much everything they do – CorelDRAW Graphics Suite 12.

Doug Downey started in the sign-making business in 1979 – an era when computers were used almost exclusively by serious men in lab coats. Like other sign-makers at the time, the people at Sun Signs hand-painted all their signs. But Doug Downey has always been interested in technology and he remembers the first revolution in the sign industry:

"In 1988 we got a Gerber 4D plotter and all of a sudden we were cutting vinyl with a machine. It wasn't exactly easy to use, but it worked, sort of."

Since then, Creativeink has always been an early adopter of advanced technology and everybody in the industry used Doug Downey and his shop as guinea pigs:

"I sometimes wonder how many unpaid hours I've spent on the phone providing technical support to other sign-makers. I'm pretty sure I don't want to know," he says and laughs.

When CorelDRAW for PC was introduced a few years later, Doug Downey immediately realized that this was the future of sign-making. This was an application that gave the user complete freedom to create shapes, text, fills, outlines in an easy-to-use package. He learned to master the application quickly and has been an avid fan ever since.

"We use CorelDRAW every day of the week. It's so fast and so easy-to-use it just smokes the competition," he says.

"We have Adobe® Illustrator® installed as well, but we only use it to make sure some of the AI files open properly before we send them to a client or print shop. We use CorelDRAW to design everything and then export it to AI as a last step."

Creativeink has gradually phased out its big sign-making machines and today the company out-sources most of the manufacturing to several shops across Canada and the US.

The flexibility of CorelDRAW has allowed Creativeink to establish a smooth workflow, even though all the people involved are scattered across North America. Says Doug:

"We create the designs in CorelDRAW here in Stratford, export the file to a GIF or JPG and email it to the client for approval. Once the design has been signed off, we send the native DRAW file to any of our manufacturers. They simply export the .CDR file to a format their plotter can read and start cutting or printing the vinyl. They also ship the finished product directly to the client, which means we rarely see the finished product any more."

With its four employees, Creativeink is hardly a big operation, but Doug Downey and his colleagues are definitely established in the sign-making industry. You only have to take a quick glance at the impressive portfolio to appreciate their unique sense of design and style. Restaurants, pubs, sports teams, schools, farmers and bookstore owners across North America have asked Creativeink to design their corporate identity and store-front signs.

"When I sold my sign company I was hired to design at Kelly signs who produced signs for the Firkin Group of English pubs in Toronto," says Doug. "After that I worked for a company doing all the casino work in Niagara Falls. Not just the signs, but posters, show cards and other marketing materials as well."

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Doug Downey does most of the design work at Creativeink, and in the past few years the company has delved deeper into new media and Web design. And he uses CorelDRAW for everything, including Web site mock-ups.

"We've evolved into a full-service creative agency, based almost exclusively on the creative power of CorelDRAW. It makes sense for most of our customers too," he says. "If we design their logo and their store-front sign, we're in a unique position to re-purpose all the artwork to very quickly produce posters, flyers, business cards, Web sites and anything else they need. CorelDRAW is so incredibly flexible it allows us to do anything we can imagine!"

According to Doug, CorelDRAW has one distinctive advantage over all other graphic design applications: speed!

"There's really no comparison," exclaims Doug Downey. "The DRAW user interface is superior to both Illustrator and Freehand in many ways. One of the most important things is that I don't have to wade through dialog boxes every time I want to change a setting. The interactive tools in both CorelDRAW and Photo-Paint are the best in the industry!"

Examples of interactive tools include the Drop Shadow, Transparency, Blend, Contour, Envelope, Extrude and Distortion tools. When a designer applies one of these effects to an object, all settings remain editable in real-time. For a drop shadow effect this means that the direction and opacity of the drop shadow can be updated with a click and drag of the mouse – and the application provides a live preview of the final result, taking the guesswork out of the process.

"I can even change the color of the drop shadow by drag-and-dropping a color from a color swatch. You still have access to a context-sensitive toolbar where you can enter all settings as numbers, if that's what you prefer. But I love the quick and easy and interactive way these tools work.

"We do everything from business cards to billboards in DRAW and Photo-Paint, and we do it much faster than our competitors. As far as I can tell, there's nothing these programs can't do!"

In 2003 Creativeink expanded its services with something they call Splashink signs. The signs are manufactured using Tyvek, a thick paper-like material that can handle both inclement weather and the special fluorescent inks used in the process.

"Splashink has been very popular with car dealerships and supermarkets for instance. They send us the window measurements via email and we design everything to the correct size in CorelDRAW. Couldn't be smoother," says Doug Downey.

Doug Downey will be on stage at the 2005 SignWorld – an annual sign-making event hosted by The United States Sign Council in Atlantic City. Doug has created a special event called Whose Sign Is It, Anyway? – a tongue-in-cheek spoof of Drew Carey's improv comedy show Whose Line Is It, Anyway?

Doug will be on stage designing signs from scratch in CorelDRAW, taking cues from the audience on the spot.

"I do design presentations like this all the time, and it's great fun to show the audience what an amazing program CorelDRAW is. Every so often an Illustrator fan will come up to me and say 'well, I can do that in Illustrator too'. I just reply 'I know, but it will take you five steps. With CorelDRAW, I can do it in three.'"