



The Importance of Quality Installation Training and Techniques

■ How do we define a “quality installer”? A quality installer knows and understands, firsthand, a wide range of material properties, and their limits. They also have the skill set and experience to install a variety of graphics on all types of surfaces. Quality installers have the ability to install calendared vinyl on a complex curved surfaces, but will also be able to anticipate certain failure. In other words, just because you can do something doesn’t mean it’s wise. I also believe quality installers should take the time to inspect their work when the opportunity arises, in order to analyze which techniques worked and which didn’t. Quality installers practice their craft daily, and know that the learning process is never-ending. Through their interaction with others in the industry, quality installers are quick to learn about cutting-edge materials, tools and techniques. The best installers are the ones with the most comprehensive knowledge and experience.

Does experience alone make a qualified installer? It certainly helps, but unfortunately not all experience is good experience. Over the years I’ve

come across quite a few installers who’ve only worked for a few local companies, some fortunate enough to be taught by skilled and knowledgeable business owners. With the right skill set for the industry, these installers have a chance to become great. However, there’s also a possibility that they’ve learned from someone with limited knowledge, which, in turn, could lead to bad habits and sub-standard results.

When I see other installers using poor techniques, there is a common explanation when they are questioned: “I was taught to do it like that” or “That’s the way we do it at our shop.” I’ve watched installers use improper knife techniques and cut paint, bridge and stretch vinyl into deep recesses when it was easily avoidable. I have also seen poor trimming, loose edges and installers unfamiliar with post-heating procedures. Each time I see an installer making these mistakes, I wonder who taught them that and how far have these techniques spread.

I have a couple of personal experiences to share that illustrate some of these points. In one instance, I recall rejected graphics on several Chevrolet HHRs,

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Shane Courtney, Owner, Core Graphics & Signs LLC



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and installers given a second chance to fix the problems. When the graphics were rejected a second time, I was brought in and asked to redo them for the third time. When the vehicle was presented to me, the graphics were bridging in areas, there were loose edges, alignment issues, and cuts in the paint. The customer was unhappy with the process, and needed a lot of reassurance. I replaced the graphics using a small amount of adhesive promoter in the problem areas and post-heated them. The customer left happy and hired me for all of their future graphics installations. Unfortunately there wasn't anything I could do about the cuts in the paint, except to make sure the new graphics covered them.

I was later asked to replace printed graphics on a Ford van, because the newly installed graphics were bridging and cracked in the bodylines, and edges were coming loose. When I saw the van, I understood the customer's concerns. The previous installer had even removed sections that were failing around the taillights. The customer asked me if this was normal. When I said no, he replied, "I didn't think so. I took it back to the company who installed it, and they kept it for the day. When I picked it up, they told me the material was the problem and that there wasn't anything they could do to prevent it." All it took to fix was a new graphic and the proper technique.

In both instances, quality cast vinyl was used, but the proper techniques were not. Let's examine what can cause bridging and loose edges: Failure to properly prepare the surface, over-stretching the vinyl, insufficient squeegee pressure and not post-heating. In these examples, the installer's technique failed, not the vinyl.

I've used extreme examples to illustrate my point, but they happen every day all over the country. Not only were thousands of dollars of someone's profit wasted, but the installers left a bad impression on the industry and lost future work for themselves. The company that provided the graphics is left with a tarnished reputation because of the installer's poor performance. Maybe, as an installer or graphics producer, you've had similar experiences and understand why I think there's a portion of the industry that is lacking in skills and knowledge.

There are several ways for installers to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to become a true professional. Start with the manufacturer's product, technical and instructional bulletins. These bulletins are free and cover things like choosing the right material and its properties, cleaning and preparing the surface, proper post heating temperatures, and even how your customer should clean and care for their graphics. Once the material facts are acquired, you can then judge what is seen and heard from other sources. I regularly frequent sign message boards, and have found good information, but the facts are necessary to filter out bad advice.

Trade shows are another good learning tool offering a wide range of opportunities. They offer educational classes, free installation demonstrations that allow for time to talk with the installers, and opportunities to speak directly with manufacturers. Don't be afraid to ask the "what if" and "how to" questions. Installers need to take an active role in education; doing so will improve quality of work and increase value.

After a full materials understanding is acquired, I would encourage installers to sign up for some type of formal training that includes interaction with an instructor and other installers. Several options are available depending on budget and ability to travel.

The least expensive options are manufacturer-sponsored one-day training events offered all across the country. These condensed classes won't teach everything, but installers can ask questions about the manufacturer's products, and will learn a few new skills with limited practice. While at these events, take the time to build relationships with the instructors, product representatives, and other installers; they can be a future resource.

If more comprehensive training is needed, the Professional Decal Application Alliance (PDAA) and other certification organizations offer multi-day training sessions as well. Not only do they teach the skills necessary to be a good installer, but also what it takes to become a Master Certified Installer (through PDAA). These multi-day classes are far superior because there is time to learn more than one technique, and the training builds on the skills learned on previous days. The instructors for these programs have more time for individual instruction, and the extra practice is a crucial part of any training.

If you think you're a great installer, you may benefit from becoming certified. The top certifications test an installer's knowledge on surface preparation, material properties and proper installation techniques with a written test. Application skills must also be proven using different materials and varying levels of difficulty, from flat surfaces to compound curves. The top certifications also have some business requirements — e.g., proof of general liability insurance, workers' compensation and a minimum number of years in business. Because of the thorough independent evaluations performed in the top certifications, many graphics producers rely on them to build a network of installation companies for their



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projects. If you would like to increase your installation presence, or find quality installation companies there are several good certifications to choose from. The PDAA offers two levels of certification. The Basic Certified Companies are certified for flat surfaces and rivets, and the Master Certified Companies have shown knowledge and proficiency across all levels of difficulty from flat surfaces to vehicle wraps. The general members hold no certifications, and have either recently joined or are on a training path toward certification.

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Shane Courtney is the owner of Core Graphics and Signs, LLC located in Tallahassee, Florida. He has been working in the graphics industry since 1996. He began his career with no installation experience, and was initially trained by a business owner with the some knowledge but limited experience. Fortunately, through the years, he's had the opportunity to collaborate with several quality installers, and gained, through them, the valuable skills and experience necessary to be successful. Those experiences taught him early on how valuable working with quality installers is, and that there's always more to learn.

For more information about PDAA membership and certification, visit SGIA.org, Keyword: PDAA, or contact Dan Marx at 703.385.1335.



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