

design:retail

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Winning WINDOWS

ed, "Vendor-vendor on the street, what's the safest thing to eat?"

The Great Cover-Up

HOLDING MY BREATH, while carefully peeling the glossy backing off an oversized vinyl wall graphic during a recent store promo installation, I got to thinking about how it was that we were adding another large visual message to an already crowded and competitive graphic universe.

It's impossible not to notice the growing number of vinyl graphics being applied on every imaginable surface—within retail interiors, on store exteriors, around buses and beneath our feet in the aisle at the local grocers. Along with more standard attention-getting devices, such as backlights, oversized posters and banners, no surface seems to be off limits, with many retailers using entire building façades as a canvas with which to express the current brand message.

Not surprisingly for retail designers and visual merchandisers, the impulse to use vinyl graphics is driven by the same factors that always push retail design into new creative directions—a combination of new technology, improved manufacturing techniques and market demands.

It was not that long ago that the use of vinyl in retail environments was quite limited; perhaps simple, cut-vinyl on the front door posting the store hours. For many retailers, anything beyond this was not readily available, awkward to install or too expensive. And while humans have been adorning their markets and streets for centuries, from Egyptian papyrus wall posters to Victorian billboards, it only is recently that we have the capacity to cover and color our world with the range inherent in today's vinyl graphics.



Vinyl itself was a surprise development in the early 1920s by a rubber scientist named Waldo Semon while he was researching synthetic

and signage company based near New York's Times Square. He notes that while the material costs have not dropped, the cost savings related to faster



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adhesives. A mixture of chlorine and ethylene, with a few other ingredients, the material was called polyvinyl chloride (PVC), or simply "vinyl." It quickly became a popular material for an array of industrial and home products.

Improved vinyl coating techniques and new colors provided more options for a growing demand for graphics throughout the 1940s. In the early 1950s, mass-produced die-cut letters made vinyl a more acceptable alternative to traditional hand-painted signage, while pressure-sensitive vinyl films arrived later in that decade, followed by silicone-release liner paper that has changed little since. The '60s and '70s brought about fluorescent film, short-term vinyl adhesives, embossed effects, faux wood and metallics.

Translucent films appeared in the '80s, and their wider widths ignited a huge demand for backlit graphics. In the 1990s, innovations in film came via "self-healing" micro-replicated air channels and air-egress technology, which reduced issues with air bubbles during installation. The electrostatic printer appeared on the scene, noted as a first in successful, large-scale digital printers, soon to be replaced by a more advanced direct-printing process. The new century ushered in advanced inkjet printers that allowed for even more durable graphics and excellent color.

Today, improvements in print speed, size and resolution are driving vinyl graphic usage, according to Omar Mejias of King Displays, an innovative display



print time and easier installation have had the greatest impact on making large-scale graphics more affordable, as have advances in durable, outdoor grade inks and adhesives—including new vinyl films capable of being installed in 20°F temps and on compound curves.

It's been a fast-paced history since Semon cooked up the first batch of vinyl 90 years ago. Yet, as we continue to wrap our world in more commanding and ever-present visual graphics, are we in a better place because of it—living within a thin plastic coating of urban graffiti exploding with colorful words and patterns? Are we just having fun with the newest technology and architecture as retail always has done, or is it really uncontrolled visual pollution?

There is a healthy industry debate regarding the idea of “ad creep” and the hyper-commercialism of our everyday lives in continuously new ways. From an environmental, social and sustainability point of view, the vinyl industry cites recent benefits that have come via advances in lead-free inks, and notes that many vinyl products are recyclable and can be reused to make a range of new products. Vinyl



film is not recyclable due in part to the heavy metal inks and adhesives used, but take heart, that glossy, silicon-coated release paper is.

As with any good design decision, striking the right balance between using vinyl thoughtfully and using it out of habit is the key; being conscious of why you use it and how you dispose of it. There are alternatives to vinyl film—from painting a mural to using new eco-sensitive direct print textiles and recyclable rigid board, or

using a vendor that offers newer, environmentally sensitive products and processes. Or, how about supporting one of those rare hand sign painters?

There is a fantastic range of beautiful and powerful retail visual graphics, and vinyl film readily provides an efficient way to share information and promote a product or brand; a good tool in the toolbox. Vinyl appears to be here to stay—keep an eye on it. dar

BASED IN NEW YORK, PETER-TOLIN BAKER IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RETAIL DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING VIA P-T B DESIGN SERVICES (OWNER), THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ADJUNCT PROFESSOR), RETAIL DESIGN INSTITUTE NY CHAPTER (BOARD PRESIDENT) AND AS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO DESIGN+RETAIL.

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