



Success Story: The Sign Brothers

Two Owners Sign Up for a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Justin and Michael Seibert knew that Athens, Georgia was a place they wanted to lay down roots. After talking with a family friend who owned a sign manufacturing business, they determined their skill set and business outlook was a good match for the industry. So seven years ago, they opened The Sign Brothers, a custom sign manufacturing business within the community.

The Sign Brothers employs 13 people and offers a large variety of signs. From vehicle wraps to building signs to freestanding structures, each sign type requires a different timeframe for production and a unique technique to produce. A few months ago they realized the large number of SKUs required for their product line was beginning to cause problems. The brothers knew it was important to get ahead of these issues in order to continue to thrive.

Situation



Since meeting with the GaMEP, The Sign Brothers have:

- *Strategically solved problems and encouraged team members to make changes.*
- *Eliminated issues with misplaced tools.*
- *Been able to accurately tell customers when their jobs would be complete, including reducing repeat, yearly projects from a six-week turnaround to three weeks.*
- *Reduced projects getting lost or off-track in the queue from eight percent of all projects to almost zero.*
- *Streamlined the process to move scrap from inside the building to the dumpster and recycling bin, eliminating pile up.*
- *Begun to break their production lines into two tracks, allowing for smaller and easier signs to move through production more quickly than before and establishing different lead times for each type of job.*

At the time, Justin and Michael were working with the University of Georgia's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) on business initiatives. They began talking with their contact about their processes and it was during one of these conversations that they were put in touch with Bill Nusbaum, Northeast region manager, and Paul Todd, project manager, for the Georgia Manufacturing Extension Partnership (GaMEP) at Georgia Tech. After an initial conversation, Todd visited the plant, observed their processes over several days, and talked with many of the employees. He also took the team through a series of training exercises to demonstrate the basics of lean flow, including how to make changes that affect processes, why these changes are important, and the outcome they can have on a business.

Justin and Michael wanted to make a company-wide effort that empowered employees to initiate and participate in changes that would make a difference. They decided the most effective way to do so would be start with the items that were the easiest to fix or those that could have long-term impacts on their day-to-day operations.

»» Solution

The Sign Brothers were experiencing an issue with misplaced tools. The production and installation departments were sharing the same tools, causing instruments to be unavailable when needed. The team purchased a second set, designating one for the production room and one for the installers' truck. This small change completely eliminated the problem.

The production manager was spending 30 minutes every morning developing a white board detailing which projects had been completed the day before and those that needed to be worked on that day. This process was time-consuming and allowed too great an opportunity for human error. The team wanted to eliminate the transposition errors that were causing jobs to get lost or behind schedule. They began researching the concept of Kanban boards, a visual aid to represent work items in the production process. They studied examples and interpreted them to meet their needs. By creating a temporary visual board with Post-It Notes, they were able to map out their process and conduct live tests, making changes as needed. Once the new system was established, they created a permanent color-coded magnetic board, where each magnet color represented a sales person and was moved across the board based on where their project was within the process.

They then used this board to expand upon their visual management system. By creating a two-month calendar and entering and assigning deadlines to all jobs, they were able to more accurately tell customers when their job would be finished. This reduced the divergence of projects in queue from eight percent of all projects to almost zero. Additionally this planning allowed The Sign Brothers to more accurately work yearly repeat projects into the production schedule which cut completion time in half, from six weeks to three weeks.

Finally, the team tackled the issue of waste management within the organization. Due to building layout, the dumpster and recycling bin were located far from the work area. This caused scrap to be piled high in trash cans and only taken out when it was getting out of hand. As a solution, the team purchased a trailer that they keep by the back door as a holding area for trash. Twice a week they attach the trailer to a truck and drive it over to the receptacles.

Currently, the brothers are reading The Toyota Way and are exploring ways to rearrange their floor plan and implement just-in-time production to reduce in process inventory. Additionally, the team is breaking their production process into two tracks, so that different size orders can run on separate production lines, permitting different lead times and a more organized system.



"Georgia Tech gave us some great ideas and some great advice. By listening to them and implementing some small changes, we were able to make immediate impact on our business"

- Justin Seibert, Owner

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