

Sign MFG Day Successes Continue Year-Round



Alfonso Guida

Before the next generation of workers can take its place building signs, sign and graphics companies have to get them in the door. Often, it is that first step inside a sign and graphics manufacturer that introduces young people to a world they never knew existed.

Sign Manufacturing Day offers one way to make the introduction to a great career. But it also can be the beginning of a year-round relationship with schools, teachers, colleges—and students themselves.

Signtech Tour Opens Door to Possibilities

Alfonso Guida was about to graduate and wasn't sure where he wanted to apply his welding skills. So when a counselor at the Center for Employment Training (CET) invited him to attend a tour of Signtech as part of Sign Manufacturing Day, he signed up.

"I knew they built signs, but I had no idea," Guida said. "I grew up in San Diego my whole life and didn't know Signtech was right around the corner. It blew my mind all that they do here."

"I saw the equipment, the bending machine, the welders, the cutting saw. I was like, 'Wow. This is a great place to start working.'"

The tour took him through all the departments of the company, showing the phases of sign production. "I saw the equipment, the bending machine, the welders, the cutting saw. I was like, 'Wow. This is a great place to start working.'"

So as soon as he got back from the tour, he filled out an application and returned it to Signtech. Within a few weeks, he was employed full time there as an apprentice fabricator/welder.

"It's a whole new career field from what I thought I would be doing," Guida said. "I love it. I'm very happy here."

And, he's learning more skills than just welding. "I'm doing much more than what I had learned in school. I'm learning every day. It's a really great career."

Before participating in Sign Manufacturing Day, Signtech had established a relationship with CET and other trade schools in the San Diego area. But Sign Manufacturing Day offered another opportunity to expand that relationship.

"We thought Sign Manufacturing Day was a great idea," said David Schauer, Signtech's president. "We're always looking for new ways to bring people into this industry."

Regular tours of the facility offer a great way to do so, Schauer said. The company typically hosts a couple of tours each month. "It's really helped introduce Signtech to the community."

Getting potential employees through the doors is the key to success, Guida said. "It shows schools that there is a career path here," he said. "I'm sure more people don't realize that the sign and graphics industry even exists and that this can be a great profession."

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Over the next decade, nearly 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will likely be needed, and 2 million are expected to go unfilled due to the skills gap,

Ruggles Building Bridges Along with Signs

With Woodford County High School down the road and the main offices of the Kentucky Community and Technical College Systems (KCTCS) right across the street, Ruggles Sign has a natural connection to its future workforce. But it wasn't something that just happened. It took work to build those bridges, with Sign Manufacturing Day a key component

Ruggles Sign allowed students at the nearby high school to take Advanced Placement testing in its conference room. That's where Shelby Wright first entered the building. She could be a natural fit for the industry, with a love of design. She even asked for a Cricut vinyl cutter for her high school graduation so she could make decals to sell. Still, she didn't know what really happened inside Ruggles until she visited with her high school's Woodford Leadership Tomorrow club.

"I don't think any of us knew what they did or who they worked with and the scale at which they worked with those companies," she said. "After we left our tour, we were blown away by what we had seen."

There was the immediate identification with the mall retailers whose signs Ruggles produces—the kind of stores where she and her friends shop. "When we walked into the sample room and saw signs from stores I recognized, I got intrigued by the whole process." So much so, that she spent the summer working as an intern for the company, before she headed off to the University of Kentucky to pursue a degree in integrated strategic communications.

Getting students like Shelby through the door is paying off. Ruggles participated in its first Sign Manufacturing Day in 2015.

In the year since, Ruggles has expanded its relationship with the KCTCS leadership, said Brad Turpin, Jr., Ruggles' organizational development manager. "Our owner, Tim Cambron, has always wanted to partner more with our technical colleges," Turpin said. "The fact that he drives by their sign every day just keeps it top of mind. There are resources there that we

could take advantage of, a talent pool to pull from and even training for existing employees."

Since Sign Manufacturing Day, KCTCS teachers and leaders have toured Ruggles and Ruggles has toured a campus at the Toyota plant in nearby Georgetown. Ruggles also has deepened its relationship with KCTCS, with formal plans to help each other out should one experience a disaster.

"The partnerships that you create outside of Sign Manufacturing Day are worth it," Turpin said. "Now, they're in our minds and we're in theirs."

And staying top of mind—whether that is for students or school leadership—is important towards filling the workforce of the future,

Turpin said. He should know. In addition to his Ruggles job, he coaches club and high school soccer, putting him in contact with the next generation of workers on a daily basis.

"I feel that they don't get enough information early on in high school about helping them determine a career," Turpin said. "It really takes exposing them to different situations. I tell them, 'Hey, if you like doing it, you should do it as a career.' They're not really hearing that anywhere else."

And while they may see signs every day, they don't really see the careers in the sign and graphics industry—until someone shows them. | 



Representatives from Ruggles Sign meet with leaders from KCTCS.

Join Sign MFG Day

The 4th Annual Sign Manufacturing Day, part of the National Association of Manufacturers' Manufacturing Day, will be held October 7, 2016. ISA has developed a number of resources to help sign and graphics companies plan for and conduct the day.

A webinar will provide an overview for interested participants. It will be at 2 p.m. EST July 21. Hear helpful tips and strategies for success from some of last year's participants. Register at www.signs.org/webinars.

Contact workforce@signs.org to learn more about Sign Manufacturing Day or the related webinar.