

## Sign Manufacturing Day Helps Build Interest, Solve Challenge of Finding Workers

Two years ago, John Lewis of Lewis Sign agreed to participate in the first Sign Manufacturing Day. But then, things got busy. So he didn't, missing the opportunity to bring high school, community and technical college students to learn more about careers in the sign and visual communications industry.

It's a mistake he won't make again, especially after the convincing turnout he had with students in 2014.

"We had a really great response," he said. "We got a lot of positive feedback from the school."

It also led to an ongoing relationship with schools in the area—and Lewis believes it won't be long before he hires his first student.

That would go a long way toward solving one of the industry's most daunting issues:

finding and keeping the next generation of sign and visual communications industry workers. For Lewis, it's a recurring problem, so much so that he keeps a sign permanently affixed to his Buda, Texas, facility that touts job opportunities.

He is far from alone. In ISA's 2014 State of the Industry Survey, finding workers ranked as the greatest workforce issue, with 63.7 percent of those surveyed citing it as a concern. And yet, about that same percent—65—said they intended to hire.

Lewis may just have found part of his pipeline for new workers. Participating in Sign Manufacturing Day has led to tours at least once a semester for the schools in his area. He also was asked to join a committee to make recommendations to the school board about a new technical training facility.

It's fitting for Lewis, who said his family is actively involved in youth programs through sports and church. "I wanted to show them that they could potentially come work for me in the future."

Lewis believes others in the sign industry should learn from his mistake that first Sign Manufacturing Day. "It was a blessing to have those kids in here and to be able to see their eyes light up when they see how we make signs."

If asked for advice by those considering participating in 2015, he'd suggest getting started early and taking advantage of the toolkit that ISA provides for participants. It details ways to reach students in the local area.

He also recommends involving the whole staff. His team suggested little touches, like



Sign Manufacturing Day 2015 will be held Oct. 2. Sign companies wishing to participate should contact Alison Kent, [alison.kent@signs.org](mailto:alison.kent@signs.org). ISA and the National Association of Manufacturers have put together a toolkit to help companies recruit students and help them put together an exciting day.

### Additional Resources for Reaching Students

ISA offers tools that can help companies reach future workers throughout the year:

1. A 90-second video aimed at students interested in pursuing a career in the sign and visual communications industry.
2. A flyer that details job opportunities in the sign industry.

Find both at [www.signs.org/signmanufacturingday](http://www.signs.org/signmanufacturingday)

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60 percent of the jobs of the future require skills possessed by 20 percent of the current workforce, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. •

buying items and creating materials for the students to take home. "Those finishing touches provided neat things they could hang on to," Lewis said. "But they were not my idea. They came from the staff. It's not a hard sell to get them excited about it."

Michael Quigley, vice president of Sign-Age of Tampa Bay, agrees. His company participated for the first time in 2014. "For many reasons, we will continue to open our shop to students on Sign Manufacturing Day," he said. "One big reason is because the event is a tremendous employee morale builder. I was blown away

by their excitement, at being given the opportunity to tell their stories about how sign manufacturing came to be their career choice, and to share the training/education they attained that is making them big contributors to the company's success."

Lori Henderson, a bookkeeper at Sign-Age, agreed. "Although I was very excited to open our doors to students on Sign Manufacturing Day, I was also a little concerned that my area of bookkeeping would be the least interesting. It was a delight to see our visitors engaged in the information I was telling them. I really

enjoy what I do here at Sign-Age and wanted to express that to our visitors. When I informed them of what I enjoy most about my job, the students could see why I enjoy it so much! It is a real pleasure to be at both ends of the process. I get to see the progress that the project makes, and also the finished product and the customer satisfaction. There is no greater joy than to see the happy customers, and I think the students' eyes were opened to my area of bookkeeping for that reason."

The same story could be told throughout production facilities, graphic design desks and elsewhere: The sign and visual communications industry offers diverse careers. And by and large, most of those working in the industry are happy to share their stories with students. | 

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The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a shortfall of 875,000 skilled manufacturing professionals by 2020. •