



BANNER UP: ALL SIGNS POINT TO SUCCESS

Jon Kuhn, who is now the “face” of Banner Up Signs, clearly inherited the entrepreneurial impulse from his father. “I think I have my dad’s work ethic,” smiles Jon. “He said it over and over again, and now I hear myself saying it, ‘if it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.’” Familiar words, but when the life of your products is sometimes measured in decades, they are words to live by.

Jon’s dad, Ed Kuhn, has been in the sign business for nearly thirty years. In that time, he’s witnessed the advent of computerized graphics, precision vinyl cutters, and large format printers. He’s seen his business grow from a small retail operation in Geneva, specializing in banners and other temporary signage, into a full-service design, fabrication, and installation facility now located on Route 64 in Sycamore.

The shop Ed and Jon own in Sycamore is now capable of turning out just about any kind of sign you can imagine, but Ed’s dream started small. When he left his job with the Duplex Products, Inc. in 1986 to start his own business, the cradle-to-grave security of the corporate world had already begun to erode. Also, the print and paper world Duplex served had started to give way to

the digital revolution. “I actually saw self-employment as the more secure plan for the future,” says Ed. “And, yes,” he confesses, “I liked the freedom and the excitement of owning my own business.”

Ed credits growing up on a farm for the confidence he felt to embark on a new path. “We had to be able to solve problems on the farm,” he remembers. “You had to figure out how to repair equipment. You had to be handy. There was a new challenge every day, and the sign business is not that different.”

Jon agrees. “Our customers often come to us with an idea that may or may not be practical,” explains Jon. “It’s our job to execute their idea, but it’s also our responsibility to educate our clients. For instance, if price is a customer’s main concern, there’s often a sacrifice in longevity. We want people to understand that. Sometimes we have to guide people toward the best solution, and that takes experience, as well as imagination.”

Between them, father and son have experience aplenty. When he first started Banner Up, Ed was a one-man operation, covering all the bases, from design, to fabrication, to installation. His wife, Karen, helped out

in the office and the front desk, but it would be a few years before Jon and his older siblings, Phil and Sarah, would be old enough to help out around the shop.

“The technology was pretty basic,” remembers Ed. “We had a vinyl cutting machine that gave you a choice of four fonts. Now, of course, everything is connected to a computer, and the choices are just about endless.”

Jon remembers his dad bringing work home in the evening, where the children helped “weed” the excess vinyl from around the edges of the cutout letters that Ed would be applying the next day to store windows, vehicles, and backlit signs. Over time, all the children would play a part in the business, but it was Jon who

decided to follow in his dad’s footsteps and continue working in the sign industry after he finished school.

“It was a little different for me, growing up. When the other kids in my class were on summer break, I’d be working. My brother would drive us back and forth to our first location, in Geneva, and I’d always make him stop on the way home to get me a candy bar. It was a little reward for all that hard work,” Jon laughs.

“I didn’t get to take those long summer vacations, but now, when I want to plan for some time off, it’s up to me. I have friends in the corporate world who don’t have that kind of freedom. If I want to work late one day so I can have the next day off, I can do that.”



**BEFORE,
DURING,
AND AFTER
EXPANDING
THEIR
BUILDING
THIS FALL**



That's the theory, anyway. With the growth that Banner Up has enjoyed over the past decade, late nights may be as much a necessity as a choice. This year, the company celebrated the grand opening of its new building, which now has a large vehicle bay for one of Banner Up's growing revenue streams, vehicle wraps. Jon, who is a specialist in wraps, works with Ed and fellow staff member Tom Davila to install these colorful vehicle graphics, which have become an essential marketing tool for all kinds of businesses.

Ed chuckles at Jon's claim of being able to trade a late night of work for a day off. "It doesn't always work that way. Everybody wants everything done right away now. And a lot of our jobs are time sensitive. You may have to have a sign up for a grand opening or a special event. You don't always get to choose your hours."

Jon smiles. "That's true. I remember when NIU went to the Orange Bowl. They wanted to wrap their equipment trailer and have it ready for the trip down to Florida. I was using a heat gun to make finishing touches in the vinyl, and I think they pulled the trailer out the door the second I turned off the gun."

Ed says that with Jon on board, he's the one who has a little more time for golf and cross-country skiing, both of which he pursues on the Sycamore Golf Course, depending on the season. "I really have the best of both worlds right now," Ed says with a grin. "I have an office in the new building, and I get to hang around and visit with the friends I've made over the past 20 to 30 years of business, but I leave it to others to weed the vinyl. That never did much for me."

"Yeah, but he still likes to be involved in the installations," adds Jon. "That's where he gets to figure things out and make things work. And there's a lot of satisfaction when a job finally goes up. In the sign business, you get to see your work all over town."

Ed nods. "In this business, you get to be an engineer, an architect, and a designer. It's really something different every day, and I like that."

Jon points out that they also have to have a strong knowledge of local sign ordinances, and that it helps to be familiar with various locations where Banner Up might be called upon to put up a sign. "I think we have an advantage, locally, over out-of-town sign companies," Jon notes. "We've been doing work in this area for so long that we don't even have to do a site survey in some instances. When a new business comes to town and needs a sign, we've often done a sign in or on the same building."

In addition to signs, Banner Up can provide a wide range of other products, from interior décor to parade floats. Two of the company's more interesting non-sign assignments came from Resource Bank. One year they were asked by Resource to design and build a float that had a 50's rock and roll theme. They provided patterns, had a computer driven plotter cut out the shapes, then covered them with printed and cut vinyl.



More recently, Banner Up supplied reprints of vintage photos, as well as other unique decorative touches to the bank's Shabbona branch, which features a remodeled one-room schoolhouse as a community room.

"Resource wanted to feature some excerpts from the journal of one of the teachers who taught in the schoolhouse," recalls Jon. "We created a border that took her handwriting, which was about a quarter of an inch tall, and blew it up to about four inches, so visitors could read her story, in her hand, around the walls in the schoolhouse."

Jon and Ed both credit their staff for the growth the company is enjoying in DeKalb County. Designer Sara

Inboden and customer service specialist Stacie Haugk make sure that Banner Up clients see their visions realized, on-time and within budget. Tom Davila brings years of experience to both the fabrication and installation of Banner Up products, and Jon's brother, Phil, occasionally takes time off from his job as a fireman in St. Charles to pitch in when a job calls for an extra pair of experienced hands. Although the company keeps about 90% of its work in-house, Ed and Jon have a trusted network of partners to help them meet the demands of complex jobs that may require specialized fabrication or installation.

With a succession plan in place that will one day see Jon at the head of the company, a new facility with the

capacity to handle the growing demand for the Kuhn's services, and an increasingly vibrant market in DeKalb County, the odds for Banner Up's continued success look very good, indeed. If he finds himself spending a little more time on the golf course in years to come, Ed says he won't be too upset. "You hope, when you are self-employed, that you will actually get to be the boss someday. That means you have people working with you who can do the job just as well as you can. Jon and our crew have the ability to come up with solutions for any project, and I'm confident they'll take the company in the right direction."

That's a good sign for any small business.



(Left to right) Banner Up team members Jon Kuhn, Stacie Haugk, Ed Kuhn, and Sara Inboden in the lobby of their new facility. (Far right) Tom Davila installs lettering on a vehicle.



"We have a great, two-way relationship with Resource. Not only are they a client, but they take the time to make sure they are meeting our needs."

-Ed Kuhn

"I love Resource Bank's extended business cut-off hours. They have a branch right down the street, and that's incredibly convenient for us. It's always a pleasure to stop in and be greeted by the friendly staff. And they send us some really fun, outside-the-box projects."

-Jon Kuhn

"After seeing the brochure on the Classics Club, We can't wait to sign up."

-Karen Kuhn

