



signs for the times

By K. Schipper

It's not quite as if Mother Nature dropped it there, but the use of local stone often helps give these signs a sense of belonging to their sites. The letters are painted with long-lasting sign paint for extra contrast. (Photo courtesy Stonehenge Signs)

There's nothing like a declining bottom line – and for stone fabricators, an end to the once boundless lineal feet of countertops – to get people considering ways they can expand their products or services to bring in a few more dollars.

For stone stops, one solution isn't so much a different product as it's an old standby in a different plane. Stand that countertop on its edge, decorate it, and *voilà*: A sign is born.

It isn't really quite that simple, but there's a certain synergy between various aspects of the industry that helps some operations tie signage in with their other work, be it countertops or landscape stone.

And, even those who work with stone daily but have never shaped an ogee edge say it's a market with plenty of potential that hasn't really been slowed much by the present economy.

MORE THAN MONUMENTS

When most people think of adding words to stone, the first concept is monuments. These testaments to stone's durability are certainly part of the mix, and a launching pad for

some now doing stone signage.

Mark Lange went to work for his father at Northland Monuments in 1985. Five years later, he launched Granite Designs Inc., in the small central Minnesota community of Longville to fill what he saw as a need for granite countertops.

Today, he's still doing countertops, but having added two other monument companies to Northland, that portion of the business is averaging about 45 cemetery monuments a week, plus doing a brisk trade in other types of stone signs.

"We do signs from granite, limestone, sandstone and boulders," he says. "We fill a certain niche because we have big saws."

About 30 miles east of Manhattan, in the Long Island community of Brookville, N.Y., Maggie and Hugh Tanchuck of North Shore Monuments also used a family business to point them toward other opportunities, including signage.

Hugh Tanchuck started working for his father when he was barely a teenager, learning to do hand-carving and tooled letters, as well as sandblast-

ing – among other things. When the couple relocated the business to Maggie's hometown, they quickly became acquainted with neighbors anxious to tap his skills moving and restoring large pieces of stone.

"We also had architects see that we could carve big signs for them," says Maggie Tanchuck. "Then, about 15 years ago, we started doing engraved bricks and donor recognition."

One of their most-recent projects: engraving 24" X 24" tiles with donor names across 3,000 ft² of rooftop terrace at New York's famed Cooper Union.

On the other hand, monuments and signage can serve as another business opportunity for someone looking to branch out from the countertop business. Just ask Alec Turner of the Fairbanks, Alaska-based Alaskan Granite.

"I got into the monument and sign work just because — like with my countertops — I saw an opportunity," says Turner. "There are some glass shops here in town doing minor sandblasting — and that's just on glass. I figured I wanted to get into the monument end, and every year I get more and more business."



Laser engraving a highly polished black granite provides sharp-contrast white images with plenty of crisp detail and good outdoor durability. The bulk of laser engraving for signs is done on black stones. (Photo courtesy Laser Imaging and Design, Inc.)

Initially, Turner had his sandblast stencils created by someone else; since taking the plunge four years ago he's added a knife plotter and the computer software to cut them in-house. Sometimes he works with countertop material, sometimes with thicker granite stock (up to 8"), and sometimes with boulders people bring to his shop.

"It's a matter of grinding a flat surface on it, polishing it and then putting the name and whatever the client wants on it," he says. "It (the marking process) also lets me do artwork on back-splashes and things like that."

BEYOND SANDBLASTING

While monuments and boulders are a big part of this market, they're certainly not the only part, nor are sandblasting or hand-cutting letters the only methods for doing the work.

Jim Smith, owner of Lebanon, Ohio-based Laser Imaging and Design, Inc., has six in-house laser engravers, and estimates he does 95 percent of his work on black stones – mainly black granite – to provide enough contrast with the lasered areas.

While he says he has more than 100 different monument companies around the U.S. for whom he does work, "We do

everything from memorial work to architectural work, signage, civic projects, veterans' projects and more," he says. "We also do a lot of recognition and dedication plaques."

Just to cover his bases, Smith also offers waterjet inlays – although that work is contracted out – a little sandblast engraving, gold-leaf inlay and items of a more-decorative nature.

The laser engraving is something that's becoming more common in both the monument and sign industries, and Smith certainly isn't alone in his use of the machines.

Northland Monument's Lange, for instance, is currently researching adding a line of smaller signs and plaques to his repertoire that would be sold through a separate Website. And, Michael Schumacher of Valders, Wis.-based Valders Stone and Marble, says that company is currently partnered in doing 30' high walls that incorporate laser engraving on one of the company's limestones.

"We were told we couldn't do it because we have a light-colored stone and with the laser you couldn't tell the difference," he says. "Originally, we were told that we couldn't laser-etch our stone due to its light color. Since

the laser essentially reads in black-and-white, the programming would have a difficult time recognizing what was etched and what was blank. However, the material looks gorgeous, and the laser-etching process is a great surface treatment."

Even the sandblasted signs can do more than just sit on the ground. Rob Conover of Quincy, Calif.-based Stonehenge Signs started his career building wood signs more than 35 years ago. When clients started requesting something with less maintenance, he got into working with stone.

Today, with a new name that emphasizes the stone connection, he and son-in-law Frankie Tapia Jr. are specialists in golf course and entrance signs, and Conover says it's not uncommon to build some sort of a structure – wood, brick or stone – to hold up the slab. However, it doesn't stop there.

"We do a lot of landscaping stone art to go along with the signage," Conover says. "We don't just have the sign sitting by itself. It might be in rocks, but it could be part of a waterfall. We've done fire pits, walkways, and patios, but our bread-and-butter is the signs."

The ability to do installations can

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It's not unusual for these signs to be part of a larger installation that incorporates landscape elements, including other stone. (Photo courtesy North Shore Monuments)

be an important part of the sign market, but it doesn't always have to be. Julie Krezman and Lucinda McLeish, the sisters most responsible for the sign and monument side of Naples, Idaho-based Idaho Graniteworks, say they do quite a lot of delivery and installation, and the family-owned operation has the equipment to do the work.

"We have a truck with a knuckleboom on it for placing the stone, plus we have the manpower for smaller jobs," says McLeish. "For the most part it just takes leveling things and setting the stone in the right place."

Valders' Schumacher says installation is typically left up to the client, but there are exceptions.

"We did a soccer field in Fond du Lac (Wis.), and it required a very large piece of stone – probably about 100 ft²," he says. "We transported it from our headquarters to the field with a few of our loaders and employees and installed it onsite as part of our community outreach."



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Many stone signs are done for public entities, and a well-timed donation – note the company's name on the lower left of the sign – can be a great marketing tool. (Photo courtesy Idaho Granite Works)

Conover, the signage veteran, says if it's outside his northern California area he doesn't push it.

"A lot of times it's more cost-effective for the client to do it in-house," he says. "We'll design the installation, and send photos of similar jobs, along with detailed instructions and basically walk the people through it. We've been pretty successful with that."

MANY PARTS

Just as with countertops and vanities, the size of stone signs ranges from the very large to the quite small, from wall-sized to desk-sized.

While many of these companies say they try to stay away from doing items that are too small to avoid doing what one refers to as "trinkets," Schumacher notes that an address block may only be as large as a piece of paper.

"We don't do a lot of things smaller than that, but we do some ornamentals and trophies," he says. "Particularly for some of our better clients or some of the associations we work with, we'll donate those items."

And, as with countertops, the clients for these items can be all over the board. For instance, when it comes to architectural signage, Laser Imaging's Smith says he most often deals with architects and developers.

For Lange, particularly with his big boulder signs, government entities – both state and federal – are good sources

of revenue, although he says that aspect of the business has been slightly down for the last two or three years.

"Right now, we're doing a big natural boulder sign for the Army Corps of Engineers for a park in Duluth (Minn.)," he says. "We'll just cut the sides off a big boulder and sandblast it."

Lange has also done several memorials for veterans groups, and although they're not high on the customer list for countertops, educational and non-profit entities do tend to buy signs and awards.

For instance, Maggie Tanchuck says North Shore Monuments was called on to build a monument wall at the Keyspan Park baseball stadium in Brooklyn, featuring the faces of all 416 first-responders killed at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

"We've done a lot of Sept. 11 monuments," she says. "Not since World War II have communities spent this amount of money on large community monuments."

And, Valders' Schumacher says that company has been involved in an extensive project at Beloit (Wis.) College that has been beneficial to both sides.

"There have been a lot of really wonderful elements we've been fortunate to work on with that," he says. "There's going to be a lot of signage on campus. Beloit College was looking for a low-maintenance product with 100-year longevity. A college is still a

business. Presentation is a large part of how they market themselves to their prospective students. This project was a great example of how our custom signage was incorporated into the scope of our landscaping package."

As for how their signage clients know about them, again, it runs the gamut, but good word-of-mouth always helps. Alaska Granite's Turner, for example, uses that and an ad in the Yellow Pages. However, he's also raised his profile by donating a memorial to the locally based 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team that suffered the loss of 25 members while deployed to Iraq.

"The politics take so long to memorialize our soldiers, I thought if I had the resources it would be nice to be able to give to the community," he says, adding, "That's worked out really nice, and it carries a bit into the local military sector and into the private sector."

It's also an area where technology can do some of the heavy lifting. Tanchuck says both North Shore Monuments and the couple's more-recent foray into the architectural stone market – North Shore Architectural Stone – have strong Websites, although she doesn't mind utilizing older methods, as well.

"We took a couple strategically placed quarter-page ads in *Architectural Digest*," she says. "I couldn't believe what a good response we got. People really noticed them."

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monuments/
memorials



When the client is looking for durability – say, with an outdoor sports venue – there's little that wind and weather can do to natural stone, and it's capable of accepting a wide array of complex graphics. (Photos courtesy Valders Stone and Marble)

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For others, a direct approach helps, as well. Laser Imaging's Smith says his company combines its Website with attendance at various stone and monument conventions, while Northland Monuments' Lange has an on-the-road salesman who focuses on the company's signage and landscape products.

The one thing they all agree on, though, is that stone signage is a good market and some more aggressive sales could probably make it even better for them.

Lange, for instance, says the time on his big saws – key to the sign and monument work – is scheduled anywhere from 30-60 days in advance right now and Idaho Graniteworks' Krezman says between that company's monument, signage and countertop work, their saw and polisher are running 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

"When countertops were slow last fall, it really helped keep us busy," she says. "I think if we pushed it harder in our advertising, we could definitely expand that part of the business quite a bit."

Alaskan Granite's Turner agrees – both with the advertising and the work. He says after more than 10 years of doing countertops, he finds the monuments and signs he does tend to be a little bit different, and each has its own personality.

And, while sign work is only about 10 percent of the total work Valders handles, Schumacher says it's a booming 10 percent.

"There's always something in our production facility to be engraved," he says. "It's certainly not something we're only doing once a month. Very often we'll have more than a half-dozen pieces that have to be engraved waiting in our finishing department. There's always something we're working on, and it's not just three numbers on a piece of stone." ■