



Successful & Stunning Vehicle Wraps: What You Need to Know



When I began wrapping vehicles with graphics in 1996, I purchased the proper “certified” equipment (electrostatic). I went to 3M Scotch Print school and I made sure I was in compliance with all of the stringent rules for wrapping vehicles. At the time, these rules were well-defined; all vehicle graphics film was to be manufactured in a specific way and only “certified sites” would be allowed to offer a full, five-year warranty on the wraps. This meant that all vehicle graphics film that was mounted to a vertical surface, excluding window perf, carried a full five-year warranty. The window perf only carried a one-year warranty, and coincidentally, a good number of the window graphics would fail within one and a half years. Today, we have hundreds of choices of vehicle graphics film, from water-based UV inks printed on a calendared vinyl to UV curable films with a UV liquid coating. Additionally, the current warranty from most film manufacturers is for “materials only” — meaning if the vehicle graphics vinyl is defective, the manufacturer will only pay for the materials, not the labor to remove and install the new wrap. So what’s my point? When I attend a show and see a row of vehicles lined up for a contest about how fast someone can wrap a vehicle, I

I have turned to SGIA’s Professional Decal Application Alliance (PDAA) to find installers for many of my wraps. These companies set the industry standard for wrapping vehicles and most of the major companies that manufacture vinyl for vehicle wraps certify them.

have to wonder how true this is compared to what the average company goes through to create a vehicle wrap.

I spend much of my time working with sign and graphics companies all over the US and Canada. Many of these companies are either into wraps or trying to get into wraps and are running into problems. Our industry is not much different from many industries in that sales and marketing people are always trying to make things look much easier than they really are. In this article, I want to make sure that I help you gain an understanding of all the aspects of vehicle wraps so that when you take on the next wrap project, you can be more aware of the correct ways to wrap and the pitfalls to avoid.

Selling the Vehicle Wrap

Today, less than one percent of the vehicles on the road have graphics on them and less than three percent of the commercial vehicles on the road have digital graphics on them. When someone tells me that the market is saturated, I always say: “I guess you are not looking hard enough.” Vehicle graphics have a 10 times better return on investment than the next best choice. When my clients ask me for a price on vehicle wraps, my answer is always: “A PT Cruiser is \$3,000 and a bus is \$10,000.” Often the response is something like: “Wow, I thought it would cost about \$300–500,” or a slightly more positive reaction. When I get the \$300–500



By David King, Commander of Results, MarketKING

Vehicle graphics have a 10 times better return on investment than the next best choice.



comment, I do not waste any time and I move on. When I get the slightly more positive reaction, I automatically ask them what they currently spend on marketing. Depending on the answer, I either give them the cost of a quarter page ad in *The Boston Globe*, a full-page ad in a magazine or a four inch block ad in the Yellow Pages. Then I tell them that the vehicle wrap is good for five years, and that every one of my clients has seen a direct return on wrap investments. I break down the wrap cost by year and then compare this with what they currently spend. Once a prospect has viewed my Web site and has previewed the hundreds of vehicle wraps I have done, price is no longer an issue. Money is spent so carefully today and no company wants to take a chance spending their hard-earned marketing dollars with a company that cannot show past success. I close a good 70 percent of all my wrap sales calls, which translates to over 3,000 wraps sold since 1996!

Setting Expectations

One of the largest mistakes we make in our industry is setting expectations too high. I tell my clients to set the bar lower so that overachieving is more likely to happen. When a client brings in their vehicle to be wrapped, take the time to walk the client around the vehicle, pointing out the issues that need to be addressed before they pick up their newly wrapped vehicle. For example, the area under the door handle will not be wrapped since once the vinyl is on top of the door handle, there is none left to put under it. Since no vehicle is a perfect square (excluding straight trucks), no pattern or design will line up from the side to the back or from the front quarter panel to the hood. Save yourself some time and headaches by making sure your client knows that the sides will not blend into the back when you stand at a 45 degree angle to the vehicle. The one exception is if you have a plain background. Show them that large indents in the body may end up without vinyl on them, because you cannot stretch vinyl too far or it will tent and fail. You should not wrap the inside of the wheel well since this has no chance of staying adhered to the vehicle and will fail. You can wrap the mirrors, but this will take more than an hour to make it look good. With a total of one square foot on the mirror, the costs usually outweigh the benefits.

Designing the Wrap

Always use a template as the base for the vehicle design. I prefer the Pro Vehicle

Outlines templates because they have templates for just about every vehicle from 1998 to today. Next, my team designs vehicle wraps only in Adobe Photoshop. We shoot for 100 ppi at final size, but this makes for a huge file, so many times we will create at 75 ppi. A 100 ppi Photoshop file for a PT Cruiser driver's side without any layers or artwork (just the vehicle and a colored background) is 492 MBs, but the same vehicle at 75 ppi is 276 MBs. Ask yourself these questions to help you decide what ppi you will use:

1. What resolution of files do you have to put on the vehicle? If they will never reach 100 ppi at the final size, go lower on the total wrap.
2. What is the viewing distance of the vehicle? Are you wrapping a show car or a tractor-trailer? Tractor-trailers are best at 50 ppi, where a show car might be best at 100 ppi.
3. What computer are you using to design the wrap? Do you have a Mac with dual processors, or an older PC? A very good Mac with a 700 MB file will take 20 seconds to modify. If you do not know, open any file you have and scale it up to 700 MBs in Photoshop and make a modification to it. This will give you a good indication as to how much pain you are going to deal with while designing the wrap.

Make sure you put each element on its own layer and make sure you design the wrap with an extra two inches (at final size) on the top, bottom and on both sides. This way, if you have a small issue with the position of a graphic element, the installer can shift the wrap either way to help fix the positioning. In addition, because you do not want the installers touching the adhesive part of the wrap that will touch your car, with the extra two inches all around, they will touch the bleed area and not the adhesive.

Make sure you send your clients a PDF of the final wrap and put it on a file with your company name and intellectual property statement, so they will not take the wrap design down the street and get someone else to do it for less money. Also, I always charge for designing wraps. Depending on the wrap, I ask between \$500 and \$1,500 for the design. I also ask for 50 percent of this up front so that I do not spend hours making a wrap and then have the client tell me that they found someone else to do a better wrap for less money. Keep in mind that if you charge them for the wrap and they pay you, then they own that wrap. They can take the files anywhere they want

to get the design printed — of course, you don't want this to happen.

Vehicle Prep and Removal

In the process of selling a vehicle wrap, I give my clients a "Vehicle Prep Guide" that I created. In this guide, I have a "Reasonable and Unreasonable Expectations from Your Vehicle Wrap" section and a section for them to sign-off on so I know they are clear about what I will be doing to their vehicle. The Reasonable/Unreasonable section covers everything from using a sharp blade on the vehicle to removing paint and, most importantly, the ideal distance to stand when viewing a good wrap — 10 feet. This document sums up (in writing) what I have already told them when I walked around their vehicle with them. There also is a section that tells them that I will remove all emblems, name plates, dealer stickers, rub rails (if rubber) and anything else that



Cast vinyl will conform better to compound curves and rivets much better than a calendared vinyl.

2. Are you going to stretch the vinyl? If so, make sure you are printing with ink that can stretch. Some UV-curable inks do not stretch well and will cause issues.
3. Are you printing with ink that will go the distance of the warranty? Some ink manufacturers make claims that may not be true. You must either customize your warranty offer based on the inks you use, or choose a printer that will last the five years. The industry standard is five years, and more than 90 percent of the big players in the market use hot solvent inks for their five-year vehicle wrap graphics.
4. Are you using a liquid laminate or a hard film laminate to coat the wrap vinyl? A liquid laminate will save you more than \$400 per roll of vinyl

will interfere with the look or success of the wrap. If the client opposes this, I ask them to rethink who they are promoting. Some installers remove the mirrors, but most people would not know where to start to pull off a mirror on a vehicle, and since so many vehicles are different, this would be a difficult task. If the vehicle you are wrapping is older, you could risk breaking something in the process and this would be an expensive decision for you.

Once everything is removed, check for holes in the body (from where the emblems or rub rails were). I use a piece of reflective vinyl to cover the holes, so they will not blow out the life of the wrap. The next step is to wipe down the vehicle completely with alcohol. I always install vinyl inside a clean and climate-controlled building.

Printing and Laminating the Wrap

You can print the wrap on any machine and on any vinyl you want. Before you make any decisions, consider these points first:

1. Are you printing on a cast vinyl?

(typical cost is 15 cents per square foot), while a two-mil cast vinyl laminate typically costs 80 cents per square foot. Or, are you using a UV-curable coating for your UV-curable print? No matter what you use, you should be aware that all warranty programs are matched to a specific ink, vinyl and laminate combination. Perhaps you are not coating the vinyl at all, which is often the case with window perf. For a window perf, I only use hot solvent and have never had a window perf fail, peel off a window or fall off. After three years, the window graphics on back windows (angled up more than the side windows) tend to fade about 20 percent, and by the end of five years, they are faded by 50 percent. Some people put laminate on window graphics, and most tell me they start to curl up after about a year and a half. The only problem with not laminating window perf is that when it rains, the holes in window perf fill with water, making it very difficult to see out of the windows. But given the choice between failure before

Always use a template as the base for the vehicle design. I prefer the Pro Vehicle Outlines templates because they have templates for just about every vehicle from 1998 to today.

five years or blurry vision from the laminate, I will take the water issue. I tell my clients this up front.

5. Are you going to pre-mask the vinyl wrap? If you are liquid laminating the wrap or clear coating (typically done in a screen print shop with a clam shell press), then your installer might require you to pre-mask your vinyl. We have installed thousands of vehicles with liquid lam and we do not pre-mask the vinyl, but my installers are trained on this film and I have more than ten years experience. Personally, I like Digimask products, since the pre-mask is clear, making it easier to line up the panels and remove it very easily without stretching the vinyl.

Installation

If you have never installed a wrap before, heed this warning: wrapping is much more difficult than you imagine. I went to school to learn about vinyl, and I hired a professional installer so I could watch and learn how they do it exactly. I wrapped all three of my own vehicles before I took on a client's vehicle. The first client vehicle I took on was a VW Bug and I sure made a mess of it. I took more than 14 hours to wrap it once, and it looked so bad, I had to reprint and start the entire process again. Needless to say, I did not make money on this one, but I learned a lot and the final job looked okay (just okay). I have turned to SGIA's Professional Decal Application Alliance (PDAA) to find installers for many of my wraps. These companies set the industry standard for wrapping vehicles and most of the major companies that manufacture vinyl for vehicle wraps certify them. They have gone through intense training and have been taught by the best in the business, so I am guaranteed a professional job when they install my graphics. You can learn more about PDAA at SGIA.org/PDAA.

You will need to following tools to install a wrap:

1. A squeegee with one edge coated with loop Velcro. This allows you to squeegee directly on the film without scratching it.
2. A propane torch. You have many choices, but the \$40 quick start units are the minimum you should have.
3. Fine Air Release Tool, or FART, as we refer to it in the industry. This is basically a stick with a pin on the end that you can use to release air under the vinyl.
4. Terrycloth towels used with 70

percent isopropanol alcohol.

5. MBX zapper tool to remove all adhesive from the emblems and any existing vinyl on the vehicle.
6. Small snap blade that you can purchase at a box store. I would only use the small blade on vehicles, since it is easier to use and does not cut too deeply.
7. Masking tape to attach the panels onto the vehicle.
8. A tape measure.
9. A clean, climate-controlled building.
10. Color comp of the wrap from all sides. You must follow the comp, as the client has approved the wrap based on this comp.

The most important piece of the "wrap puzzle" is time and patience. It takes a significant amount of time to do a nice wrap, so don't rush, as it will show in your work. If you hire a professional installer, make sure you and the installer have an understanding as to what is expected of them before they begin. Nothing is worse than an installer showing up and the vehicle is missing, the film is not done, the conditions are not right, etc. If your client was told they can pick up their vehicle the next day, and you paid for a one day install (typically all vehicles are done in one day, from a VW Bug to a full tractor trailer), you do not want to deal with the ramifications of the vehicle not being finished.

Delivery of the Finished Wrap

Once the wrap is completed, take the vehicle to a location where the background is not a distraction to the graphics and take pictures of your hard work! You will need this for your portfolio and your Web site. In the beginning, I only had a few vehicles on my Web site, but as I did more and more, I kept putting them up. Today, I have more than 300 vehicles on my site, and it strongly sells my clients on my ability to deliver. Next, you should have a "care and maintenance" document for your clients to take with them. They need to know what they can and cannot do with their vehicle and how to properly care for the wrap. My document covers everything from peeling to waxing and it works for us. Place the vehicle in a good location so your client gets the best view of it when they drive up. Take them out to the vehicle and, as before, walk them around the vehicle and point out all the things you said you would do to the vehicle. Give them all of their documents, and if they paid for the wrap design, give them a DVD labeled



with their car on it. Clients love this! Make sure they pay you before they leave, unless you have a very good relationship with them or they have terms with your company. I have seen many happy clients leave and call back a week later telling me they see a wrinkle and want to know if we can fix it. Again, this all goes back to setting realistic goals and making sure you communicate with your client through every step of the process.

There are great resources available for those who want to get into wrapping vehicles or to learn to become more successful at wrapping:

1. SGIA.org/PDAA for training and excellent installers.
2. LargeFormatDigitalGraphics.com for the Wrap & Roll DVD.
3. Digitalauto.on.ca — Pro Vehicle Outlines for templates.
4. Come to the Installation Demonstration Area at the 2009 SGIA Expo.

I have been successfully wrapping thousands of vehicles for a long time now. My clients get the return on their investment, and as their business grows, they come back for more wraps! Clients that use me for their wraps also use me for all their other graphics, because as they say: “If he can wrap our vehicles, the rest is easy!”

Good luck and I will see you on the show floor at the 2009 SGIA Expo (New Orleans, October 7–9).

David King is “Commander of Results” at MarketKING. “The Master of Printing and Graphics” offers the Print Shop Makeover, the program is designed to teach business owners how to be successful with large-format digital graphics.

david@themarketking.com

