



Bringing the **MAKER MARKET** to Main Street

You'll find them at arts and craft shows around the country: young entrepreneurs with ideas, the passion to bring them to life, and the tenacity to turn their creative endeavors into budding businesses. Members of

a generation that increasingly values authenticity, these makers strive to produce goods that go beyond the expected and ordinary. In the process, they are helping to prove that the demand for custom manufactured items is growing, an enormous opportunity not only for those who

dream up these ideas, but also for those who can help execute them.

The trend holds great potential for producers of signs and specialty graphics – and not just as a source for work that your competitors might be missing. True, makers often seek out local printers to

help them realize their vision; those who succeed will place larger orders and eventually require permanent signage for their businesses. But an increasing number of printers and sign manufacturers are realizing they can get in on the action themselves. “The barriers to entry into the manufacturing segment

are at historic lows,” says Josh Hope, senior manager of business development for Mimaki USA. “Through collaboration and using complementary technologies, print service providers can take advantage of this low cost of entry to customize, personalize, or regionalize products to sell to both the B2B and consumer markets.”

At the ISA Sign Expo in April, Mimaki USA helped signage and graphics professionals visualize the unlimited potential of the maker space, unveiling a dramatic new booth dubbed the Mimaki Microfactory. The booth’s simple but powerful theme – Print/Assemble/Finish – demonstrated how easily signage and

CUSTOM BICYCLE HELMETS

Featuring the dramatic artwork of renowned artist Ryuji Kazamatsuri (whose designs figured into many of the products made at the Microfactory during the show), the graphics for these protective helmets were printed onto pressure-sensitive vinyl using the Mimaki JV300-160 printer and then cut on the Mimaki CG-FXII vinyl cutter. The graphics were applied during the show by Matt Braswell, an independent wide format graphic installation specialist.



The Mimaki booth featured a pop-up retail store for ELEV8TE Sports, showcasing custom-printed apparel, skateboards, helmets, equipment and other goods that users can manufacture with the latest printing and cutting technologies.

graphics companies can employ readily available technology to completely transform their businesses.

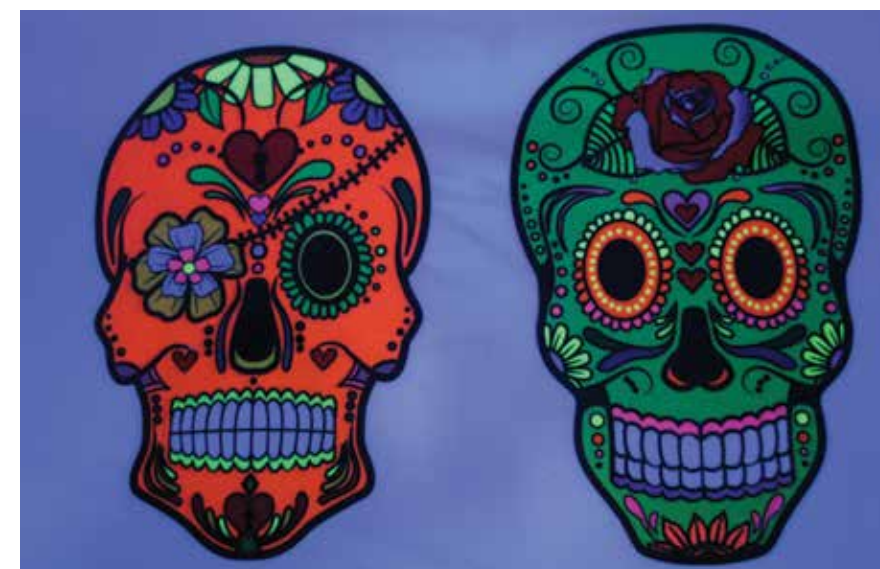
Visitors to Mimaki's booth were presented with a fictitious company called ELEV8TE Sporting Goods to illustrate how different printing and finishing technologies can be used to create a vast range of products. Hope explains why sporting goods provided such an appropriate theme for the Microfactory concept: "A sporting-goods store offers so many hard goods that are decorated, such as fishing poles, water skis, biking helmets, baseball bats, and so much more. And then there are the soft goods: workout gear, sleeping bags, team apparel, and so on. Existing print technologies can be used to create or decorate nearly everything that could be found in such a store."

Mimaki's innovative booth design began with a pop-up retail store for ELEV8TE that showcased a full range of sporting-goods items that today's digital printing technology enables – in addition to the signage, graphics, and store displays that would make such a store stand out. Mimaki then showed exactly how several of those products would be made, detailing the workflow and demonstrating the production steps using equipment and consumables from Mimaki and a number



CUSTOM SLEEVE BAGS

Throughout the show, Mimaki was manufacturing protective tablet sleeves designed to showcase the versatility of direct-print and dye sublimation textile printing. The outer shell was direct printed onto cotton canvas using the TX300P-1800 printer, while the inner fabric was printed on the TS30-1300 dye sublimation printer and transferred to fleece using a Monti Antonio heat press. The two fabrics were cut on a CWT cutter and sewn together on a Juki sewing machine, with a Velcro closure completing the product. (Photos by Darek Johnson.)



of industry partners. The central idea was to help users think beyond putting ink onto substrate and imagine themselves taking on an even bigger role in the world of making and manufacturing.

The message resonated with attendees. Hope believes that signage and graphics manufacturers don't find the "Print/Finish/Assemble" message behind the Microfactory to be far removed from

Flower power, or Día de los Muertos? Mimaki was printing these vivid textile transfers and demonstrating them in a black light viewing booth throughout the show to highlight the design versatility of its fluorescent dye-sub inks.



CUSTOM SKATEBOARDS

Showcasing the range of applications that can be produced on Mimaki equipment, these skateboards were decorated on virtually every available surface, including the deck, trucks, and wheels. The decks were directly printed on the JFX200-2531 wide-format UV LED printer, while the wheels were done on the UJF-7151 plus flatbed machine. The grip tape was cut on a Trotec laser cutter.



ABOUT THE ARTIST



The striking graphics featured throughout the Microfactory were created by Ryuji Kazamatsuri, an artist who draws his inspiration from the lively street festivals (matsuri) in the old business district of Tokyo. To express the excitement of these lively scenes, Kazamatsuri has chosen the unusual art form known as kirie (or cut picture), and over the years has developed techniques that allow him to produce the most intricate paper cuttings with extraordinary attention to detail. In his work, Kazamatsuri captures the traditions of Japan, with matsuri, sumo, kabuki, and street scenes among his favorite themes. His cutting of the Hasedera Temple is part of the permanent collection of the Guimet Museum of Asian Art in Paris.



Even Gore-Tex -- a popular water-repellent material that is notoriously difficult to decorate -- can be tackled with the right dye-sub technology.

were printed onto transfer paper with the TS30-1300 dye sublimation printer. These dye sub prints were transferred to a fleece material using a Monti Antonio heat press. Then, both the cotton and fleece fabrics were cut using a CWT cutter mounted to a flatbed table and sewn together. Finally, a Velcro closure was added and the finished fabrics were ironed to complete the sleeve.

their existing businesses. "It can be argued that PSPs are manufacturers already, whether they are producing signage or decorating other surfaces to help their customers create unique objects. As visitors toured the booth, they were able to gain a new appreciation, not only for each technology that was represented, but also where it fit in the workflow."

Nowhere was that understanding more eye-opening than in the textile area of the booth, an application that Hope notes "is still a bit of a mystery to many sign shops." Right there on the show floor, Mimaki manufactured custom sleeve bags for tablet computers. The outer shell of each sleeve was printed directly onto cotton canvas material on the Mimaki TX300P-1800 printer. To create the inner fabric for each sleeve, the images



What might a company like ELEV8TE Sports manufacture? Bicycle seats, skateboard trucks and wheels, tooling, helmets, promotional products, and 3D-printed prototypes barely scratch the surface of the possibilities.



The Mimaki team celebrating the opening of the ISA Sign Expo from its Microfactory booth.

Hope notes that while this isn't the first time that Mimaki has demonstrated fabric printing at the ISA Sign Expo, the interest in textiles among these users is stronger now than ever before. It's just one example of how the more progressive companies in the sign industry are thinking outside the box -- or outside the display, the wall graphic, or the other applications to which they are accustomed. They're exploring new opportunities as custom manufacturers of short-run premium products.

If you missed the ISA Sign Expo this year, don't worry. Mimaki will be bringing the Microfactory to other events this year, including the SGIA Expo in New Orleans this October. Come and explore how the marker movement might help you reimagine your business. ■■