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# The Race to the Bottom

Motion Picture Graphic Designers have come a long way, but are some running in the **wrong direction?**

Before the rise of the Internet and cellphones smaller than a pork roast, before email and eBay, prepping a movie was an entirely different affair because you didn't have the world at your fingertips. Well, actually you did, but those fingertips had to do some walking through an enormous alphabetized list of businesses that had been printed on yellow newsprint and left on your doorstep when you weren't at home. We called this thing "The Yellow Pages" and everybody in the world used it whenever they needed to find a plumber, or a florist, or just about anything else because Google DID NOT EXIST!!! seriously. ¶

That great big yellow book was invaluable and was one of the very first items distributed when a production office was being set up. I still remember PAs walking through offices, flinging brand new telephone books onto our desks and in just a few weeks those books would be dog-eared, covered in doodles and filled with bookmarks. Decorators and propmasters would take their telephone books with them while they were out shopping, and more than a few Yellow Pages would disappear from payphone booths. Remember kids: this is the way things worked before the iPhone™. And you know what? It worked! We found the stuff we were looking for, and movies got made. ¶

Sometimes a person would misplace their own telephone book so they would "borrow" one from someone else's desk in the production office. My friend and propmaster Joe Connolly took to writing "STOLEN FROM PROPS" with a big giant marker all over his newest set of Yellow Pages (yes, they sometimes came in sets). And Joe meant "stolen", because those books were valuable tools. If you worked on a show in another part of the country you'd take that city's Yellow Pages home at the end of the show because it increased your "database" of contacts. ¶

Joe had a saying that, "If you can't find it within 6 phone calls it doesn't exist," and in those days that was pretty much the case. ¶

One of the few things you knew you wouldn't find locally were places that specialized in making fake newspapers and fake money, because there's not a lot of demand for the former, and the latter will get you 10 to 20 in Federal prison. No, for those things you had to turn back to the mothership: Los Angeles. ¶

When I first began working in the motion picture industry, back in 1991, a large majority of propmasters and set decorators in the United States used a company called Earl Hays Press.

Known simply as 'Earl Hays', this company was a good source for most any printed item you might need on set. From fake magazines and newspapers, to adhesive-backed labels (called "wraps") for making fake liquor and beer bottles, to paper wraps for fake cigarette packs, Earl Hays had you covered. The only downside of ordering from Earl Hays was that some of their material looked as if it had been designed in the 1940s, which was quite possible because the company had been in business since 1915! ¶

We appreciated the convenience of Earl Hays products but we dreamed of being able to create our own labels. The problem was that the techniques for creating labels were still laughably rudimentary in the 1990s, partly because we still thought in terms of using photocopiers and dry-transfer rub-on lettering – a technique left over from the 1960s. More importantly, we were supposed to be prepping a movie, not designing labels. ¶

Things have changed significantly over the last 20 years. Earl Hays is no longer the only supplier for product labels in Los Angeles, and may even now be considered a 2nd tier source for prop graphics. More significant has been the rise of the embedded graphic designer on productions, and that's what I really wanted to talk about for this issue of the Creative Index: **What does it take to make a living as a graphic designer in the motion picture industry?** ¶

To be a "normal" graphic designer you have to have artistic talent, you have to understand composition, you have to be able to work to a deadline, you have to be able to work with people with extreme personalities, you have to know how to measure things, you must possess an understanding of the history of graphic design, you should probably check to make sure you're not colorblind and that you're a fairly decent speller, and most importantly you have to own (and preferably know how to use) the goshdarn software! ¶

To be a good **Motion Picture** graphic designer you also have to understand how to design pieces "for camera". If you're working independently, not embedded with a show, you have to operate with the mentality of a doctor, in that you're always on call, because there are always last-minute emergencies. And you'd better be a wizard at shipping, too, because it's a bad day if your magazine cover doesn't arrive on set in time for a scene. ¶

Be sure to find a reliable output house and develop a collaborative relationship with their output team because those are the people who will help you solve all the seemingly impossible problems that will get thrown your way by a crazy director or a wildly impossible location. Chet Long, a senior account manager with Meteor LLC Atlanta, recently explained how he'd once "fired" a graphic designer because they consistently provided poorly crafted files with incorrect measurements and then had the audacity to berate him on his prices. His company was so busy producing material for other film projects that he was able to encourage that designer to seek another vendor.

**Don't let this happen to you!** ¶

By 2001 there was a convergence of affordable illustration software with a rapidly growing "library" of seemingly free photographic material on the Internet. The same studio system that had so jealously guarded its own products through the years suddenly found itself facing copyright-infringement lawsuits due to a widespread ignorance of copyright law among the design community hired to make graphics for films and television programs. ¶

