

NOTHING IS

Standard

Company: Gregory Signs and Engraving Ltd., Downsview, Ontario

Owner: Gregory Kaminsky

Specialties: Architectural signage

Years in Business: 19

AS A SHIP ENGINEER in his home country of Russia, Gregory Kaminsky had no aspirations of becoming a sign maker. But through happenstance, Kaminsky found himself in Canada in 1966 working on a Russian ship. He traveled to Canada again in 1970 and finally, in 1975, he brought his wife and daughter from their home in Odessa and decided to stay.

"I couldn't speak English," Kaminsky recalls, "but I worked in scrap yards as a welder and pipe fitter."

It wasn't until he found work as a maintenance mechanic at a prominent bank in Toronto that he unknowingly began his career in signs. The mechanical department had a manual engraver and Kaminsky engraved small nameplates and tags for pipes and other equipment.

Kaminsky's son Boris says, "He'd spend his spare time doing engraving for retailers, businesses... anything."

Every day after work, Kaminsky engraved signs until midnight. Eventually, after working out of his home basement for four years, he moved to a modest 1,500 square foot building in 1985.

TO THE TOP

Today, Kaminsky owns and operates a 10,000 square foot sign manufacturing plant and an additional 3,500 square foot front office in Downsview, Ontario. Son Boris is the marketing and sales manager, his mother helps out in the office, and a staff of 16 employees rounds out the team.

Gregory Signs and Engraving Limited specializes in channel letters, pylon signs and custom displays but Boris says they also have a digital printer, router, plotter, spray booth and a full metal shop with engraving machines.

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From left to right, Gregory, his wife and son Boris Kaminsky.



Some of the crew at Gregory Signs.



Each of these letters is 3' high. They are aluminum, manually bent with an anodized finish.



This sign was installed about 14 years ago. The metal is actually hand-bent sheet metal, making each letter extremely heavy. Boris says the sign looks as good today as it did when it was put up. The tree was cut from a router.



This is an original Gregory Signs design. It's a backlit acrylic sign with vinyl letters. The olive is also part of the sign.



This plaza sign is made up of steel pylon posts, with all aluminum sign frames. All the faces are acrylic with vinyl lettering.



This sign for the Hotel Intercontinental is in the restaurant. They are aluminum letters with a mirror finish sheet that is applied with adhesive. Blue LEDs provide the halo illumination.



This is a concrete sign, the letters are hand bent, painted aluminum channel letters. It's lit from landscaping lighting.

An example of a pylon sign, designed and fabricated by Gregory.



(Below) The lettering was eradicated into the flexible-face awning material for the upper part of this canopy. The white frame around the bottom is aluminum with the "BANQUET" copy furnished in vinyl. All the canopy frames are done in-house at Gregory.



"A lot of sign companies don't offer engraving as an option," Boris says, "so when the client hears we have engraving, they really like that."

Most of the engraving at Gregory Signs these days is done in the form of plaques and not labels. Boris explains that Tennis Canada just completed a brand new facility for the tennis championships and asked Gregory Signs to furnish the building with a number of 1' x 2' engraved plaques infilled with paint.

"We also do things like the door numbers in apartment buildings. If we furnish a 30-story building with numbers, there are thousands and thousands of them," he says.

All of Gregory's channel letters are hand-formed, and Boris says, "We find that doing it manually is better." The machines, he believes, don't achieve the same quality. All the letter backs are also cut by hand; no router is used.

"It takes a lot of time but our clients haven't complained because we're quite efficient on how we create the letters and remain cost effective."

He says clients demand high quality and Gregory Signs has taught each customer that quality costs more. "We'd rather keep our quality high and maintain our price at that level as well," Boris says.

STEP BY STEP

Gregory Signs provides every step of the sign creation, including the idea, which is put together neatly in brochure form and presented to the client for an approval signature; the design work and digital file management; the fabrication of the sign and finally the installation.

Except for neon, Boris says they can produce any type of sign the client requests, from mammoth pylon signs, to small interior wayfinding signs.

"In this business, nothing is standard," says Boris. "There is always something new the client wants, so we try to figure out how to do the job instead of passing it up. But he admits that there are times when they have to tell the customer that either they can't do it, or they can't provide it on time so, "We tell them they have to go somewhere else."

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Gregory Signs also provides vehicles, including fleets, with graphics. Everything on here is cut vinyl, except for the triangle shaped recycle logo on the bottom panel of the truck, which is a digital print.



This Merrill Lynch awning is part of Gregory Signs' new product offering.



This is one of 10 stores that Gregory Signs supplies signage to. They are back lit, hand-bent letters. The diamond shape in the "O" was made by cutting out the center and replacing it with acrylic. The diamond cuts are vinyl.

He's reminded of the jobs they get from designers and architects – a group of colleagues the staff at Gregory Signs admires and with whom they work very closely. But sometimes, Boris says, "what they've designed, we can't produce. How it looks on paper is different than how it is fabricated."

Boris says that each employee in the plant knows how to do every step of the production, and may even find themselves digging postholes on some days.

"All of our staff are multi-taskers. They can do vinyl application, then go out and install a pylon sign with a concrete foundation."

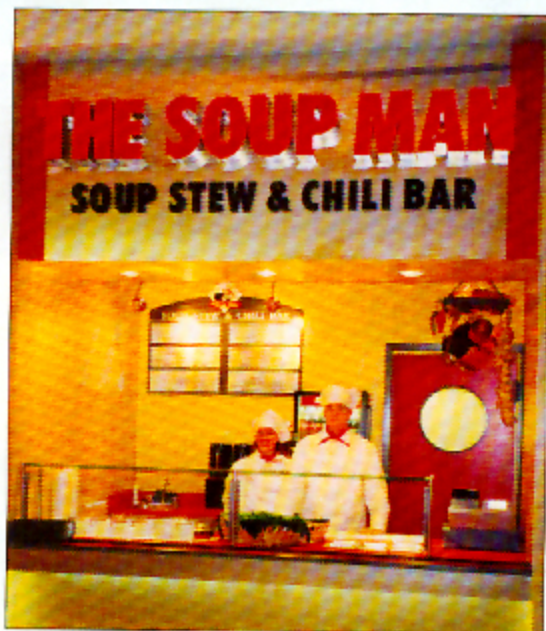
The pylon signs have to be installed using a crane, but Boris reports that although they have boom trucks and two pick-up trucks, for now at least, they do not own their own crane. However, they've been looking into purchasing one and Boris believes they may have one by the end of the year.

For signs or banners that hang from high-rise buildings, Boris says they'll rent a swing stage to get the installers to the top of the structure with the sign.

Gregory Signs also provides installation services for other sign companies, and Boris says that American businesses

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Halo-lit channel letters and dimensional letters for a food court restaurant.





The "Room-Deco" and "Fine Furniture" copy are all aluminum, hand-bent channel letters. They are mounted on a steel frame that Gregory installed. The vinyl SALE sign in the window was also produced by Gregory Signs.



Shop staff fabricating various projects at Gregory Signs.



This pylon sign is more than 18' tall. It's all aluminum. The lettering on the faces are all cut out and filled with acrylic and lit from within. Gregory Signs also poured the concrete foundation.

are sending a large number of signs to Canada to be installed.

Gregory Signs also works in partnership with many installers in America who provide the same service for them.

FULL CIRCLE

Having the opportunity to run the job from beginning to end makes it fun to come to work, Boris says, from sitting down with the client talking about a design idea, to being on site when the sign is installed. Seeing the finished sign is everything you pictured in your head, he says, or even better than imagined.

"I'm fascinated with fabrication too," he says, "but haven't done it." He enjoys watching the guys create signs out of metal and screws, and says he understands the process.

"You have to if you're selling the job, because you have to explain to the client how it's going to be done. And you have to understand whether or not it's something that *can* be done."

Occasionally, there's that *one* client who insists the sign they received isn't what they signed off on.

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Sign People

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Boris says Gregory Signs has a method to make life easier for both them and their customer. It's about compromising.

"We'll do an additional sign or give them a discount," he says. "It's not worth fighting with the client for a couple of months and then going to court and wasting money and legal fees." He explains that fixing it right away shows that Gregory Sign isn't running away and that they care about the client's concerns.

Being in the sign industry is difficult, Boris says, dealing with not only a difficult customer, but with unusual sign materials as well. Everything is so custom, he explains, that the fabricator might find himself using parts from window companies or automakers.

When it comes to dealing with the more unsavory customers, Boris says it's not beneficial to try to work with clients who won't pay and Gregory Signs is getting selective about the type of client it wants.

Boris and his father firmly believe that Gregory Signs has built an impeccable reputation and can now pick and choose the type of clientele they want.

The fabricator might find himself using parts from window companies or automakers.

SOUP TO NUTS

From vinyl to sandblasted, Gregory Signs has provided signage for such well-known names as Bloomingdale's and Trump Tower; even producing the graphics on The Donald's own private jet and hanger. Three years ago, Gregory Signs dove headlong into the awning business and Boris happily says it's booming too, thanks to the nostalgia craze everyone is enjoying. **EB**