

# "Luminous Writing" in NSW

by Marc Levy



Marc Levy has spent the last 7 years in the signage industry, specialising in various aspects, including neon and LED. He has built and managed his own signage business in South Africa for 5 years and has now

been operating in Sydney for 1 and a half years where he runs Mclubed, a company that specialises in mobile marketing media (Garage Media – a new aged outdoor vehicle graphics and advertising agency).

Marc has also contributed extensively to the sign trade media in South Africa. Marc can be contacted on 0404 267 120.

more viable streams of regular income in order to stay afloat. What was once a thriving industry of approximately 300 neon shops is now hovering at 100. The obvious question which comes to my mind is "Why is this happening and what's causing the situation?"

Before attempting to gain an understanding, an explanation of the local market has to be outlined. The neon market consists of neon manufacturers and non-neon manufacturers. There is a distinct difference here where non-manufacturers wear the "neon hat" well and convince people to buy the product from them. Half the time the order is coming from a designer or from a shop fitting company or via a back channel contact. This is the reality of the situation and that's how the industry works. It allows some who do not rightfully deserve the esteem to often acknowledge and take the pride away from the men who create the perfect tube.

In the early 80's, there was a major boom in the neon lighting and signage market with a corresponding increase in the supply side. Sign companies started offering neon as a mainstream product even though they had never dabbled in this medium before. The reason I am emphasising this is because a large number of people and companies started to see the demand and offered the product even though, in many cases they did not have the experience and expertise, which brought about problematical installations.

Contracts were awarded on price almost exclusively and neon's reputation was gradually eroded. Like any bad experience in life, once bitten twice shy, buyers started to look at alternatives. The manufacturers were overflowing with work, with their machines working overtime often with less maintenance and servicing. They were not following protocol, neon manufacturing equipment requires certain maintenance in order to produce quality products. Due to the scientific nature of dealing with mercury, the machines become contaminated and oil changes are required. People were not doing the simple required maintenance and thus the quality of the finished product was being jeopardised. There was no governing body monitoring these procedures and occupational health and safety standards were far from desirable.

The installation of neon is another whole side to the industry. The wiring aspect is the messiest part of the sign, which tends to

make it a complicated medium. Installation short cuts were often taken and inefficient and inexperienced people were pretending to understand the medium without reading the basic Australian Standards (AS) rules, which governs the fitment of the product.

## Computronics scores with hotel group

Computronics have developed custom turnkey display solutions for a large range of industry sectors including leisure, transport, advertising, visual graphics, gaming and retail.

Their most recent project was to design and build a range of freestanding directory information displays for the Stamford Hotel chain sites in Melbourne and Adelaide. The challenge was to build a product

that was both functional and visually stunning as the units needed to blend seamlessly with the fine décor of their foyers. A special finish was used on the cabinet to give the display depth and contrast.

The displays were designed to fix the serious problem of traffic flow throughout the building. The problem was that people were entering the building and wandering aimlessly around trying to find the function room they needed to attend. Computronics designed special windows-based "Events Directory Software" to control the sign. The software allows the user to pre-program information about each function room including what function was taking place and at what time and the location of the room. Multiple pages could be displayed and the software automatically updated information daily in real time. Other data could also be displayed such as advertising or promotional information and seasonal greetings making the display extremely multifunctional.

The results were both visually spectacular, exceptionally functional and provided the client with the perfect solution to their traffic flow problems.

Computronics Pty Ltd  
Tel: 1300 888 506  
www.computronics.biz  
dsales@computronics.biz



As an industry, neon is small and niche, the secrets are tightly held, and the industry players generally all know each other or of each other. It's a product, which has its highs and lows, peaks and troughs in a cyclical nature.

There is a sizeable downswing in the neon market at present, an exact percentage would be impossible to determine, but a good estimation would be to say

an overall drop of between 40-50%. No new start-up neon businesses are happening. Over the last two years, four businesses have closed and another two have stopped producing in-house, with another planning to shut down it's manufacturing plant in Sydney.

Companies are not offering apprenticeships, nor are they willing to invest the minimum two years into training glass benders, as they are not seeing their return on investment. In Australia at present, there is no neon college or school where the art of glass bending is taught.

A number of manufacturers have now retired and some of the smaller neon manufacturers have turned their attention to



ing rules and the correct electrical loadings have to be complied with to avoid fires. An electrical connection has to be done using a certified engineer which adds to the cost of the sign

and overall product.

Today, improvements in the technology of transformers and earth leakage have reduced the chances of a fire to almost zero.

The shopping centres determine a large amount of the neon business and



as such they tend to set the standards (i.e. the benchmark). In the late 80's, they started using other mediums to replace neon to differentiate themselves from each other and to avoid the continuous problems associated with the inferior manufacturing and installation procedures. Furthermore, the architects, shop-fitters and interior designers were not sufficiently educated on the capabilities and limitations of neon.

The outdoor sky sign neon market was also hit quite badly by the downswing but many of those companies that did go ahead believed that once they had purchased an expensive neon sign, it should work forever not knowing that maintenance is an integral part of neon sign ownership.

Neon glass itself has to be periodically regassed because the illumination of the gas ages resulting in the glass becoming patchy. The mercury in the tubes can also become dim and weathered and therefore a maintenance contract is recommended in the outdoor neon market.

LED lighting in more recent years has become a competing product with neon in the internal illumination of letters, producing about 30% light exposure in comparison to a neon glow. In the USA, LED lighting has attracted close on 7% of the neon market. In Australia, this might be affecting 2% of the market.

Due to the digital revolution, neon is often perceived as an antiquated process because everything is done by hand starting with

**R**eaders who are involved in electrical work are urged to take note of the SAA article on page 4 and in particular the reference given to the plight of one Brisbane Company who came unstuck due to not having the correct license.

the bending of gls is still done by hand. Because of the complexities of atmospheric temperatures affecting the glass tubing while heating it, human intuition plays a crucially important part in the manufacture of neon tubing and computers will never replace this. Neon bending is a skilled art and will always remain a skilled art.

A small cyclical boom in the 90's lasted with four good years running up until the Olympics and significantly impacted on the amount of signs produced.

Neon also has some parallels with regards to a countries growth and development; i.e. a third world country in a major development stage attracts neon tubing as it moves into the rankings of a second world country.

The reality of the market led to the establishment of NISA (Neon and Illuminated Signage Association), a non-profit organisation. NISA stimulated co-operation between industry players as well as going some way to lift the standard of the industry. The organisation sadly ceased operating in 1999 after a 15 year period.

If a proposed neon project is going to cause a reaction or really stand out, a town planner would have to be notified and a procedure would have to be followed before getting the go ahead for development consent on a commercially acceptable sign. The applicable council approval can take anywhere between one and six months before permission is granted. Local authorities and state government administer the market with the 'sepp 64', development control for signage an advertising. Some councils have an appetite for neon, while others might want to stand clear. Generally speaking councils have been supportive of the medium as clearly evident when you look at the city skyline.

A booklet known as the N-license (offered at TAFE as a short course) that outlines in detail the correct production and installation techniques is compulsory in Victoria. NSW have not stipulated this requirement at present. However, a short five hour course is a requirement by the Health and Safety Work Cover Liability required by insurance companies as of a few months back.

What are the underlying factors that differentiate one neon sign from another? The materials, manufacture time, preparations, design, over all look, quality involved? Neon is a product where you get what you pay for. If you want quality you pay for it. If you are willing to take the risk then you can pay a cheaper price. Lots of corners can be cut so to speak when manufacturing neon. A well-installed neon project can last a long time with very small amounts of maintenance if manufactured properly.

There is no more beautiful site than a well made, bright, outdoor neon masterpiece in the distance, illuminating the entire street. A reflection that is seen and felt from afar. A romantic glow that filters the air. A shiny quivering light that bounces its glare off a wet road during a dark overcast gloomy day.

the lack of foresight when a project. Not from a timeline ensuring that the sign fits in surroundings. The biggest mistake a neon sign is an addition, not to a business. The natural progression is from a cheap business name in lights.

Neon is custom made to fit a create a certain atmosphere, and surroundings are the major factors when designing a neon

## 7 Tips to Improve Your Outdoor Advertising

Paul McCarthy of Adaptive Components of the AlphaEclipse PureColour programmable outdoor message displays AlphaEclipse and PureColour programmable LED outdoor displays offers almost limitless possibilities to meet outdoor communication or advertising requirements. The AlphaEclipse displays allow you to communicate advertising outdoors.

→ **Provide a bold headline**  
Providing an opportunity for a statement that captures attention

→ **Select the right ad size**  
With more than 300 ad sizes available there is a message for every business application.

→ **Have flexible advertising**  
No longer are outdoor advertising options limited by the permanence of static signage. An operator can change a message as often as the M

→ **Use bold colour**  
From 1 - 16.7million brilliant colours to attract attention and drive-by customers.

→ **Maintain control over advertising**  
Offers complete control of advertising from the operators P.C. or laptop with custom software.

→ **Stand out from the crowd**  
Advertisers can create their own advertising to output gif & bmp images to Messages can include pre-programmed animations and other animations downloadable from the manufacturer.

→ **Must be cost efficient**  
Can be custom built to the client's requirement. These dynamic, attractive & stimulating displays are efficient and cost effective.

Paul continued by stating that advertising should capture attention, stimulate interest, create desire and get people to take action". The AlphaEclipse displays provide all that and more.

Adaptive Components Pty Ltd  
Tel: 02 9553 0922  
www.adaptivecomponents.com.au

## Jefferson Bay Neon & Associated Products

Jefferson Bay Neon, a leading supplier to the Australian neon industry has been operating since 1989 and has built a solid reputation as one of the most reputable suppliers to this market. The company represents global leaders in neon and LED's and makes those products available locally via its national agency network.

### Transformers

Jefferson Bay Neon is the Australian distributor for F.A.R.T. transformers and despite the name (Factory Radioelectric Apparatus Treviso) they are Europe's leading manufacturer of transformers. F.A.R.T. Resinblock and Miniblock transformers are vacuum sealed in specially developed and strengthened epoxy resin to ensure maximum safety, improved insulation and operating reliability where the transformer is exposed to the weather.

The Resinblock transformer has gained a reputation in Australia for its overall reliability, ease of installation, minimal maintenance and high level of operating efficiency in our harsh environment.

Since 1945 F.A.R.T. have been innovative in the field of electrical engineering and transformer research and are committed to ongoing product development.

### Converters

Hansen are a German electronics company highly respected for their technical expertise in the design and manufacture of solid state transformers or what is otherwise referred to as high frequency electronic converters.

Hansen have developed what is arguably one of the best electronic converters on the market to operate small to medium sized neon signs and more specifically point of sale displays. The

the room itself is not taken into account and thus when the sign is delivered there can be a disappointment. Neon is a product, which falls in and out of fashion.

Neon is always competing with the environment itself. The light opacity has to be noted and the size of the room with the amount of windows has to be taken into the equation. Once all the internal factors have been considered (the size of the store, amount of lights, number of mirrors) the outside of the shop has to be noted. What are the other shops to the left and right doing? What other signs appear in the street? What height are they sitting at?

In order to move 'our industry' forward we have to stand together and have more discussion, if this can happen progress will be achieved. Also we must educate our customers on the merits of neon.

Neon lovers remain hopeful and optimistic about the products future. Let us hope the next cycle comes around with a brighter than ever glow.

This article has been compiled with thanks to Jeff Stumpman (Advanced Neon), Randel Bezuindhout (R & B Neon), David Cooper (Cooper Neon), Mark Bode (Spectra Sign Supplies), Peter White (First Neon), Michael Gleeson (Gleeson Neon), Nick Harris (Sign Lite) and Norm Barton (Barton Neon).

After focusing my attention on writing this article, a bigger challenge is now on my agenda.

converters have been widely accepted due to their low profile design, low energy consumption, and built in earth leakage and open circuit protection.

The main advantage of using Hansen converters is the minimal weight of the unit, compact size, constant output current, ease of installation, noise free and a stylish design that will not distract from the sign.

### Glass Tubing and Electrodes

EGL are the world's largest manufacturer of neon tubing, electrodes and rare gases and their comprehensive selection of glass tubing has over 70 colours. EGL phosphor coatings combine special adhesives, the world's finest phosphors and a range of proprietary ingredients that are uniformly coated, baked and annealed in computer controlled ovens.

Accuwall machine drawn coloured glass tubing is available uncoated or coated with EGL's rare earth phosphors to achieve the most intense saturated neon colours available.

EGL's have an extensive range of Premium Plus tubulated and non tubulated electrodes that are fully annealed, patented ceramic collar centre shell inside the tube, thicker shell walls to disburse heat more evenly and heavy gauge solid nickel lead wires.

### LEDs

Hansen have developed a superior range of LED's that are now available in Australia and have distinct advantages for use in fabricated letters, point of sale displays, edge lighting and architectural signage and effect lighting.

LEDs (light emitting diodes) are a relative newcomer to the sign industry, but have increased in popularity in the last few years due to broad acceptance in

the United States and in Europe.

The Hansen LED Tube is available in 1 metre or 3 metre lengths and is totally encapsulated in a clear shrink down plastic tube which is insulated against moisture and at the same time offers ultimate protection for the diodes.

The Hansen LED Tube is an integrated and innovative system which is simple to use, the converters are hermetically sealed and watertight, plug in connecting terminals and self adhesive nylon tube holders are designed to make the system as uncomplicated as possible.

The LED's are available in 6 standard colours being red, yellow, orange, green, blue and white, the light emitting diodes are spaced at a standard gap of 42mm but are also available with different diode spacings subject to use and application.

### Equipment and Accessories

Jefferson Bay Neon have an extensive range of neon accessories including, polycarbonate tube supports, end caps, silicone electrode sleeves, high voltage silicone cable, rare gases and much more.

Our range of neon bending equipment, gas transfer systems, ribbon burners, mercury injectors and EGL Maxivac neon pumping equipment is extensive and of the highest quality from EGL in the United States of America.



Writing a detailed book outlining the last half a century of Neon in Australia! The deadline is 1 Jan 2006. Documenting Neon before it's too late! With a focus on attention to detail, passion and love!

## New wind blowing through the Australasian Electronic Displays market.

PolyComp (Pty) Ltd (South Africa) is a designer and manufacturer of electronic displays, specialising mainly in the LED field. Established in 1985, this dynamic company now has agents worldwide and has been rated, by Deloitte, as one of the TOP 50 growth companies in Southern Africa.

Nir Eshed, local representative of PolyComp said that the primary reasons for PolyComp's success in the world market are not simply its innovative and dynamic products, but also its ability to offer these products at very affordable prices, worldwide.

Although PolyComp has had representation in Australia and

New Zealand for the past few years, due to the increased demand in this region for high quality affordable electronic signs, the decision was made to open an Australian based head office and assembly plant in Sydney.

PolyComp's Directors, in conjunction with Nir Eshed, who's relationship with PolyComp extends back 12 years, first as the production manager and then as the provincial agent (KwaZulu Natal), have formed PolyComp Electronic Displays Pty Ltd in Australia.

Nir Eshed said that the purpose of the local company is to increase awareness of the brand; to offer 'on the ground' support coupled with the highest quality products and service.

**PolyComp Electronic Displays Pty Ltd**  
Tel: 02 9686 2015  
polycompsigns@optusnet.com.au