

## Ford contract has Pride Signs roaring loudly

By Chuck Howitt, Record staff

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CAMBRIDGE — Brad Hillis quickly puts to rest the notion that making signs is just slapping letters on a flat surface.

He lists the manufacturing equipment in Pride Signs' 80,000-square-foot plant on Pinebush Road: computerized metal folders, shearers, benders, routers, extruders, two large paint booths, even a large wash booth.

At one end of the plant sits a gleaming blue Ford sign. Made of flexible aluminum, it's about a foot thick and shaped like a large flat oval with prominent raised lettering. [Pride Signs](#) is making 500 free-standing signs over the next five years for Ford dealerships across the country.



**rec-Pride-25.** Brad Hillis, president of Pride Signs, stands next to a sign for a Ford dealership produced by the company. Record staff Source: Record staff

Signs shaped like pop cans and cookie bags for President's Choice, or the crown on the Statue of Liberty for East Side Mario's; signs topped with a large red apple for Applebee's restaurants or a large bulldog for Mack Trucks — they've all rolled out of the company's doors at one time or another.

But to hear Hillis tell it, making the sign is only part of the story.

"We have to manage a lot of information before we even start to build the sign," he says before listing design drawings, 3-D computer modeling, engineering work, landlord specifications and acquiring a myriad number of municipal permits as some of the tasks the company needs to complete.

"We do a lot of project management to get that sign sold," he says, adding that the company also arranges delivery and installation.

Electronic storage plays a key role. On one occasion a truck backed into the letter S on a Shoppers Drug Mart sign in Calgary. Even though the sign was made years ago, Pride was able to retrieve the computer file and make another letter in the exact same size and shape.

For major clients such as Home Hardware and Royal Bank, Pride becomes like the manager of their brand and graphics. "We make sure the dealer does the brand properly," says Hillis.

The Ford contract and work for other key clients, such as Home Depot and Applebees, have Pride Signs, named after a "pride of lions," roaring loudly these days.

The company's workforce has grown to 125 employees from 85 three years ago and annual revenues have nearly doubled to \$25 million in the last year alone. Pride is among the three largest sign companies in Canada, Hillis points out.

It's a far cry from the company's early days in the basement of his home in Paris, Ont. Hillis, president and majority owner, started Pride in 1986 after working as a franchise manager for College Pro Painters.

Technological advances such as photo shop software and vinyl-cutting plotters were just starting to come into vogue, making sign production cheaper and more sophisticated. The Peterborough native and York University business grad saw an opportunity.

"I started as a one-hour sign business before they really were prevalent," says Hillis, 53.

From his Paris basement, he moved Pride to a business incubator in Brantford, then to Cambridge in 1988 to access this area's more robust economy. Key early clients included Zehrs and East Side Marios.

In all, Pride has moved seven times, each time to gain more space. The last five moves have been within the city of Cambridge.

Home for the longest period, from 1999 to 2008, was a 54,000-square-foot plant Hillis put up on Holiday Inn Drive. "I thought it was my final resting area," he says, but he lost ownership of the plant in a divorce.

Hillis was able to win the Ford contract, he says, by coming up with a creative solution to design, build and roll out the signs. The signs feature long-life LED lighting, a 10-year warranty and pylons made of flex-based aluminum rather than fibreglass.

The company has developed its own "tensioning system," he says, to stretch aluminum as tight as a drum and create elaborate shapes like the bulldog on the Mack Truck sign. "We're one of the few companies that can do the complicated stuff," Hillis says.

As an established player, Pride doesn't have to do a lot of marketing. It knows where the major accounts are and relies on referrals for the rest. Thanks to a referral, Pride was among a select group invited to bid on signs for Target after it acquired the Zellers chain, he notes.

Not everything Hillis has touched has turned to gold. Six years ago, he bought a sign company out of receivership in Rochester, NY. But the facility was too big and the market too depressed to make a go of it, so he closed it 18 months ago. "The market turned. It cost us millions to absorb that, but we got through it."

Despite the U.S. setback, 10 per cent of Pride's customers are based south of the border, including Applebees and Dollar Tree.

The switch from neon to LED lighting, and screen printing to digital are among the major technology changes he's seen in his 25 years in the business.

On the sales side, he's noticing clients are getting more aggressive about updating the look of their restaurants or stores. "Rebranding and re-imaging are important to keep the attention of the public, especially as they become younger."

With the Ford contract and others keeping the company busy, one of his main challenges now is managing production. "But those are always fun challenges," Hillis says.

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