



The specialised art of signage production

A company profile: AE Plastics, masters of signage in the retail, corporate and petro-chemical space

Seldom does one have the privilege of working with a group of people, or company, with such a deeply entrenched set of ethical standards, skills development programme for its own staff, close attention to customers' needs and expectations, and a core staff of which many have over 20 years of service.

In February, *Shopping & Retail SA* did indeed have the privilege of visiting such a company. And this company, as to be expected, is a family business, where the term "family" naturally extends to and encompasses not only all staff, but is loosely seen in the culture of the organisation to ultimately include suppliers and customers alike

AE Plastics was founded some 40 years ago by Des Geraghty in 1976 with a staff of four. At the time the need for signage was for "point-of-purchase" products, where vacuum

formed products and creative display shelving was the main priority - thus the name "AE Plastics". Des' son Brendan joined the business 19 years ago and is now the Managing Director of the business.



Des and Brendan Geraghty

In the '70s and early '80s, as demand began shifting steadily towards signage, the plastics aspect soon fell away. In a short space of time

AE Plastics became synonymous with high quality signage. "Edgars was our first big client - since 1980 - and still is today," said Des. "And securing this account put the business firmly into the retail space."

Des' statement really says it all: "...and still is today." Only companies with true dedication, strong depth of capability, and a deep understanding of their clients' needs is capable of retaining clients of this calibre over a period of decades, and is ongoing.

In terms of capability, AE Plastics is proud of its unparalleled set of in-house skills, coupled with a modern well equipped 10 000 m2 factory complete with overhead cranes, warehousing for bulk storage, and offices - conveniently located in Wadeville, Gauteng, between the N3 and N17 highways.

On staff and skills: "Our primary mission is to always supply the client with a quality product



from cover story

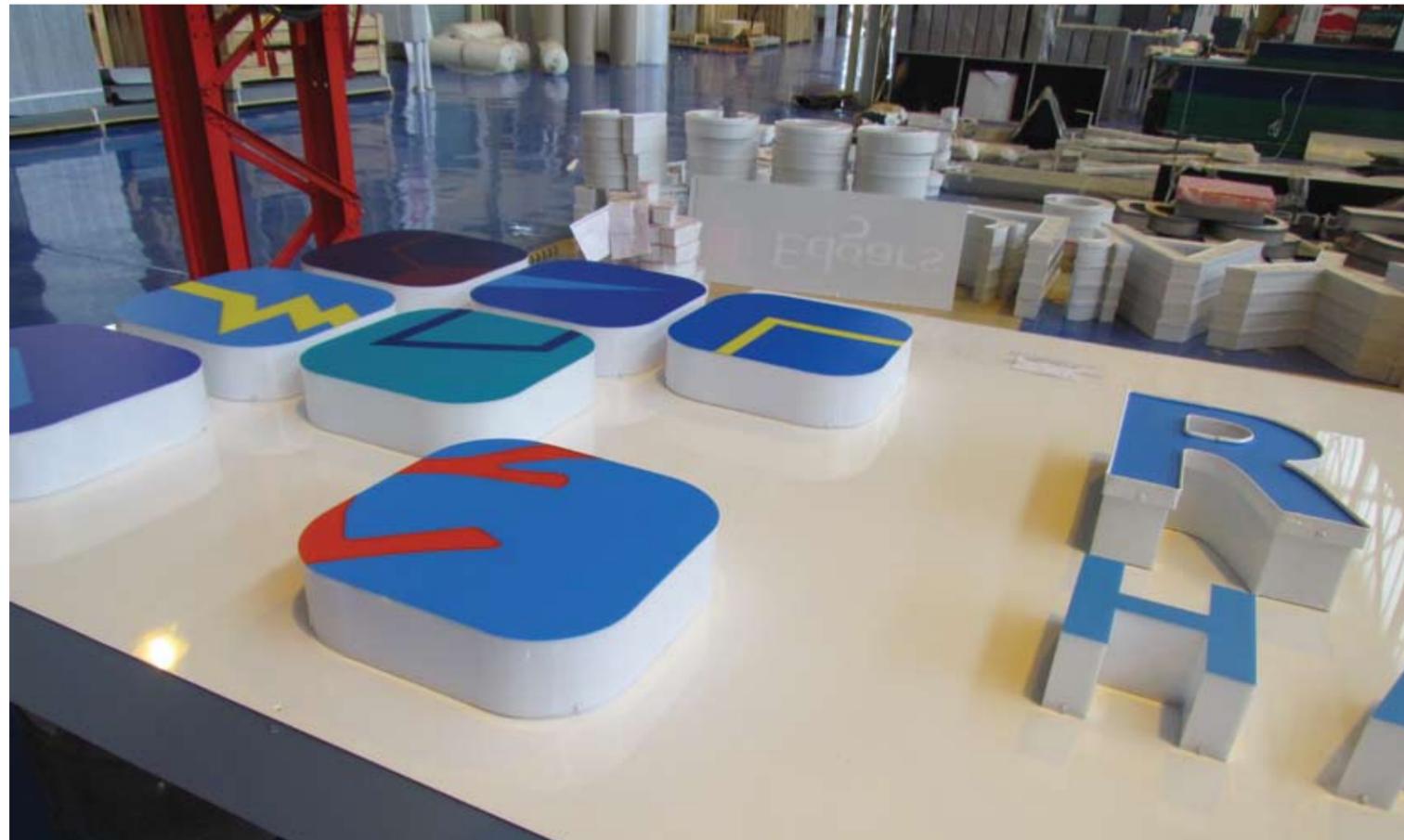
and on time," said Brendan. "Our skill-set is growing all the time and many of our 110 staff have been trained up in-house over the years.

"Whilst welders and spray painters are recognised trades - and these skills are readily available - this is not so with other signage skills which are unique and learned "on the job". There is no "signage NQF" qualification, so we go to great lengths to train our staff in the skills specific to the signage industry, including fabrication and installation. Furthermore, we take care to look after our staff, some of whom have been with the company for over 30 years and include their own new generations joining and becoming part of the business."

On this note, it is pleasing to learn that AE Plastics offers bursaries to its staff and their families. "An integral part of our vision is to help with the education of our people, to be a part of creating exciting opportunities for them to grow within the company. Ours is a "non-traditional" family business in which all participate with great pride."

On customer service: "Few have the capability, the premises, the plant, the staff, and the knowledge and expertise that we have," explains Des. "In order to be successful in this industry it is essential too, to develop a long term understanding of the needs and requirements of the client, and to ensure continuity in quality and service delivery over time. In our value system we spend a great deal of time communicating with our employees, customers and suppliers alike."

The work pressures that come with signage manufacture can be significant, and as deadlines loom the close-knit culture within the company comes to the fore to the extent that everybody pitches in and stays until the job is done. "We keep in step with our



clients," continues Brendan. "And we have learned to move at the same pace as they do, anticipating their speed of requirement and growth."

On plant and equipment: "Signage is very much a "hand-made" process," explains Brendan. "At our new premises here in Wadeville our artisans are able to apply their skills to the full, as each job has its nuances. Processes always vary slightly - depending on design and customers' specifications - there is very little repetition. Each sign is a little different - even for the same client."

The AE Plastics production line has a quiet air of purpose about it. A sense of organised

calm prevails. "Much time and effort is spent on pre-production planning and preparation," said Des. "Our strength is in how to make the best product as quickly as possible in the most efficient and cost-effective way."

Quality checks are in place at every stage of production, be it the CNC letter bending machine, framework and fabrication, electrical work, spray-painting, final assembly or lighting and testing. The end results speak for themselves - and have done for decades.

On technology: "At one stage we had several of our own neon glass-blowers, and although there is still a small and specialised

requirement for neon, that and fluorescents are now only maintenance contracts," said Brendan. "Today LED is the main lighting technology, and quality is paramount."

On geographic footprint: "AE Plastics operates throughout Southern Africa and in many African countries. All operations are fully managed directly and hands-on right here from our head office," continued Des. "And all installations controlled and managed by our own teams on all sites."

Regarding future direction: Brendan tells us that the market is changing slightly, and always is. "ACM (Aluminium Composite Material) cladding of buildings is becoming a



from page 2



practical way of revamping the exterior of older buildings – and is a natural extension of our business, which of course enables us to develop even more skill-sets,” explains Brendan. “So we are doing a fair percentage of that too. ”

“Another direction of interest is the incorporation of renewable energy sources into the illumination of our signage. This will not only be of particular interest to our clients in keeping running costs down, but of course maintains our competitive edge with regard to leading the field with sensible application of modern technologies.”

In forthcoming editions of editions of *Shopping & Retail SA* we'll be bringing our readers insight to some of AE Plastics' installations and on site capabilities through a series of case studies, and we'll be spending more time with them on the production floor getting to know the artisans and their skills developed through this exemplary company.

Sites where projects are currently in progress for various clients include:

- Springs
- Ballito
- Alexander
- Kyalami
- Musina
- Tamboi

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**WE CAN MAKE
 YOURS**



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