TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

CADlink's SignLab 8
Sophisticated, yet simple to use

For years, CADlink has offered a sign package that provides useful, simple-to-use tools for the digital-printing, vinyl-cutting, engraving and routing environments. SignLab 8 continues that tradition.

With this all-inclusive vector- and raster-graphics design package, CADlink has leaped into the high-end design studio. The new version includes bitmap-editing tools and special effects such as masking and easy background elimination; text enhancements, including Eye Candy, create the "wow" factor. SignLab 8 also facilitates creating/using these tools within the program, rather than jumping into other, high-end, image-editing programs. Other features implemented in previous versions have been enhanced.

After we discuss the design features, we will finish with the print-and-cut functions. Also, the new Visual Production Manager (VPM) replaces the Print and Cut Manager with increased flexibility and functionality.

Design features
When the program launches, the default tools appear on the left side. As you click on a tool, at the top of the screen, the Smart Bar displays that tool's attributes. For instance, when you're adding text in the window, simply choose the "A" in the left toolbar to access the necessary text-attribute functionality (**Fig. 1**). The Smart Bar facilitates changes on the fly. The toolbars are also customizable on the desktop.

The Font Detective helps organize font families. You can create folders to add typefaces (**Fig. 2**) to use for certain signs. To create customer folders, just load fonts the customer would use. With corporate-text attributes, for example, load text styles associated with that client, and you'll minimize retrieval time and wrong choices. CADlink's 1,100 type families and the group you've already installed make a formidable list. You can group them in formal/non-formal, serif, san-serif, etc.

Layering plays a crucial role in designing a sign, banner or poster.

Fig. 1: One of SignLab 8's robust desktop attributes, the Smart Bar, displays attributes across the top of the screen for easy viewing and changeability.
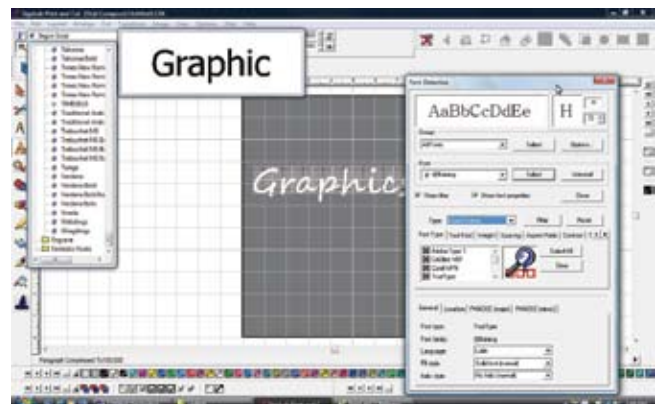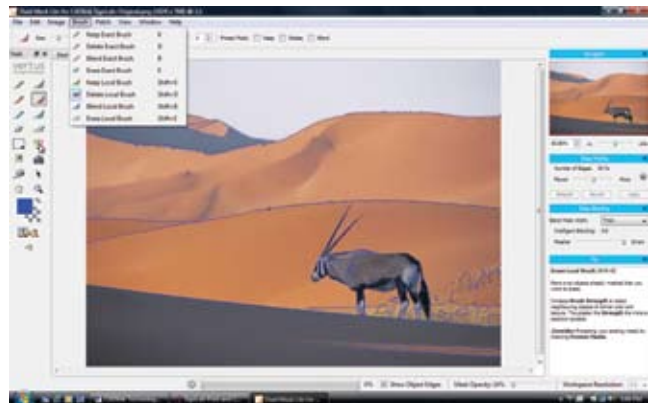

Fig. 2: Font Detective helps organize font families. Folders can be created to add typefaces for certain signs or identify categories.

Fig. 3: SignLab 8 provides numerous filter options. Here, the Solarize filter easily simulated a winter scene.

Fig. 4: The Fluid Mask tool is an efficient cut-out filter. Such tools as Edge Finding and the Blending choices vastly improve the task.

CADLink has taken this tool to a new level. When you're creating the sign, the Instant Replay function automatically logs all the steps.

Remember how many times you've enhanced your text with a drop shadow, a special feature such as Eye Candy's chisel effect and a gradation, and you don't remember the size, gradation parameters or the exact colors? We kept log books to jog our memories, but SignLab's Instant Replay has ended this craziness. The functions (or actions) you create can be saved for future signs for a specific client.

For example, we created a sign blank with four different colors and sizes. We used Eye Candy's chrome effects to enhance the text. Instant Replay recorded all these functions, plus the type attributes, for future reference. What a timesaver and a great archiving tool!

New filters, which enhance text and vector- and raster graphics, transform this package into a stand-alone, graphics-editing workhorse streamlined for signmakers so it won't overwhelm them with superfluous tools.

Creating a winter-wonderland poster for a local ice rink was simple (**Fig. 3**). In two seconds, we imported a photo into SignLab 8 in color (the original was black and white) and, with a click of a button, transformed the image into an iceberg. Under the Image menu tab, click on Filter, Stylize/Artistic, Solarize, then choose a low threshold number. Here's the result.

Previously, we had to access another graphics program, create this photo with special effects, then import it into the sign package for the text additions. Five more minutes of work would materialize the final product.

Filters for bitmap imaging abound. Special effects like Craquelure 3D, Lattice Composer and Water Ripples change the texture of a background, image or frames. Eye Candy adds such special effects as chrome to objects and text. Filters for lighting effects, blur, sharpening, embossing, mosaic pattern and more demonstrate this program's bells and whistles to fix, add and create from scratch any text, graphics and photo manipulation.

There's more. Many design programs probably make you question if masking items in an image is worth the struggle. SignLab 8 Print Cut includes CADlink's special version of Fluid Mask, a super-fast cut-out filter that eliminates the pain. Tools such as Edge Finding and Blending locate a single object's outer edges or cut out a sky or background. Further, you can localize the fine-edge detection in more difficult areas.

In **Fig. 4**, to cut out more complicated areas, such as areas around the animal, we selected the area and used more detailed tools for edge detection. Brushes and pen, paint-over and masking tools can hone in to complicated areas to make the cutout process fast and satisfying.

Print-and-cut capabilities

SignLab 8 includes a software RIP. The completely re-designed queue system, the Visual Production Manager (VPM), replaces the Print Cut Manager. The easy-to-read module provides information at your fingertips. It queues up multiple jobs with various types of job information, such as cropping, tiling and copy number. Nest other jobs for optimum paper usage, or half-cut data for decals. Viewing the actual images makes them easier to manage. If you stack multiple jobs in the queue, you can change their print order instantaneously. VPM provides complete job-management and scheduling tools that save labor and cut costs.

Conclusion

SignLab Print Cut's many features – high-end features such as the 75+ filters and the RIP itself – make version 8 a phenomenal graphics package. We barely touched on the vinyl-cutting features. This easy-to-use, smart and sophisticated package is first class. ∎