

## A Simple Giant of Our Industry



The city of Chicago was politically charged in the mid 1920s after several rounds of headline-making organized crime and police corruption. From the town hall to the infamous Chicago White Sox scandal of the 1919 World Series, unethical conduct and gross misdeeds complicated life in the Windy City. They were tough times and about to get harder with the shadow of the Great Depression lurking around the corner.

Amid this turmoil, a small Italian boy named Carlo LaManna started to sprout. Like a tree, with roots firmly planted in the ground, he absorbed his surroundings and used them to mold himself into a street-smart young man raised in a blue collar neighborhood, surrounded by poverty and daily strife. He walked to school every day to get the education his father earnestly pushed him toward. “You don’t need much,” his father said. “Just a simple education and a simple job to put food on the table for you and your family.” Those were words LaManna would never forget. But inside, he had his eye on something bigger than he or his family could imagine. “Keep it simple, son,” just didn’t sit well with him.

LaManna charged ahead and did the best he could with the tools he had

Thermal kiss cutting was first developed and implemented in 1962 by Vomela Industries. The process employs the use of a “heated” die and pressure to cut vinyl sheeting without piercing through the paper backing of the pressure sensitive material. This led to a revolution in the sign industry that pushed out the old stencil and print process and paved the way for the birth of our current vinyl printing and signage industry.

available to him. He worked diligently and completed his academic studies at the Chicago Technical School that prepared him for his first job as a folder in a local bindery in the printing industry. A year of laboring long hours in a hot press room did not dissuade him. His willingness to learn everything he could about this new trade pushed him to seek new opportunities.

In 1946, 20 year-old LaManna packed his bags and settled in the wintry, quiet town of St. Paul, Minnesota. Coincidentally, a new company was establishing itself in St. Paul: The Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing Company. However, this was not yet on LaManna’s radar. Instead, he knocked on doors around the city, trying to find one of the few post-war jobs. Most of these jobs

were filled quickly by hometown veterans who were embraced by the locals upon their return. Although things weren’t quite going as planned, LaManna never gave up.

LaManna spent the better part of three years doing odd jobs. But one day, he happened to knock on Jack Vomela’s door. In 1947, Vomela started a small print and die cutting company in St. Paul. He had room for an enthusiastic young man willing to learn the ropes. He gave LaManna a job as a letterpressman for the Vomela Company, which he wholeheartedly embraced. Vomela Company was new and focused on printing and die cutting Christmas seals and tags. While not glamorous, the position was a good way



By Rock LaManna, President, LaManna Alliance

for a young pressman to get his feet wet. Mr. Vomela did not know that young LaManna had a passion for the job that would eventually propel him forward as a defining force and wizard of innovation in the graphics and signage industries.

The letterpress, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, became an art form, and operators, including LaManna, were “artistes.” The relief printing of the “type-high” bed and the crisp images left in the paper by his press intrigued him. To satisfy his curiosity, LaManna took the press apart and put it back together so that he could understand all of its parts and pieces and see for himself what it took to make this wonderful machine come to life. The images he produced were true works of art, and he loved producing them. LaManna’s thirst for knowledge, work ethic and willingness to learn anything and everything earned him a reputation as a “can do” guy. Whenever someone in the plant needed something, they always said, “Carlo can do it.” This led to his promotion to Plant Manager for Vomela and the beginning of his days spent supervising and thinking his way to the top. Beyond Vomela, LaManna rose to the top of the national signage and graphics industry. This same “can do” attitude helped LaManna find solutions to problems posed by new clients and challenges. The first challenge was his engineering and commission of the first heat plate for Thompson National Press.

While Vomela had progressed as a company and was specializing in vinyl converting, the old process of cutting vinyl was a hindrance to real growth. LaManna’s background as a pressman came in handy when, one evening, he looked at an old tool in a new way. He began exploring the idea at work, tinkering on his own, before he pulled together a team to put his idea into action. His idea was to adapt a letterpress to hold a heated, steel rule die instead of type. At first, it didn’t seem like much, but it led to a true revolution in the specialty printing industry. Ultimately, this adaptation and idea led LaManna to be credited with his most notable invention — the thermal kiss cutting process — that included rule height and the introduction of an aluminum back plate for hot die.

Kiss cutting, by definition, is a type of die cutting used primarily for labels, decals and vinyl lettering. It is designed to make it easy for a substrate to be cut into any form and to peel off the base stock. It uses a heated steel rule die, like die-cutting, but the pressure is adjusted to cut through the first layer and not the base; the hot die

just “kisses” the substrate. This enables the vinyl letters to be removed easily from the base. It was a simple idea that arose from a complicated challenge, yet today, it is one of the most commonly used techniques in the entire signage industry and something many of us take for granted.

By 1962, the kiss cutting process was ready to be unveiled. This new process opened up a world of ideas for the Vomela Company and LaManna by allowing mass production of vinyl decals, logos and pin-stripping, which simplified and sped up the process and led to immediate growth and expansion. Christmas seals were a thing of the past; the entire world of OEM graphics was knocking at their door. One of the first companies to approach them was 3M, which was looking for a solutions provider for a pending contract with the Ford Motor Company.

Lee Iacocca, Vice President and General Manager of the Ford Division, was pioneering a prototype vehicle that would seat four people. It had front bucket seats, a lightweight frame and a price tag under \$2,500. It was sleek, powerful and fun. The original concept cars built in 1962 and 1963 paved the way for production. In 1964, the first editions of the Ford Mustang rolled off the assembly line. Its popularity was immediate and the launch was extremely successful, as was the arrangement between Vomela and 3M. Vomela helped 3M with the OEM pin-stripping that went on the popular new cars.

With Lee Iacocca’s vision behind the creation of these cars, it was not a surprise that Ford Mustangs became very popular. And with the visions of Vomela and LaManna, the Vomela Company was about to do the same. As Vomela grew, so did its reputation. With the credibility of a big Ford contract in their portfolio, Vomela got more OEM graphics production and the contract pipeline started flowing. Unlike the “mom and pop” shop that acquired jobs one at a time, Vomela became a vinyl converting pioneer, specializing in contract manufacturing. Vomela teamed up with 3M, Minnesota’s mammoth vinyl producer, and spent almost three decades as a captive shop for 3M. Three shifts at Vomela cranked out as much vinyl as 3M could provide, and the cash flow and business success afforded LaManna the ability to devote more resources to process innovations, research and development.

### **The Next Wave: Expanding on a Good Idea**

When Vomela decided to retire in 1980, LaManna purchased the company.



Jack Vomela (L) and Carlo LaManna.



Carlo LaManna the the Vomela Team, 1990.



Carlo and Virginia LaManna, 1990.

Optimism was high, but the success that the Vomela Specialty Company enjoyed was short-lived. Six months after the buyout, 3M decided to condense all of its vinyl film fabricating into a single, 3M-owned company, and planned a three-year phase-out. After shifting focus to meet 3M's demand, the loss of this business was devastating. Vomela spent three difficult years in a right-sizing mode, with personnel shrinking to 32 people and production reduced to a single daytime shift.

Like any company, growth is about "what can you do for me now?" LaManna was busy growing in other ways as he and his wife, Virginia, raised a family of 11 children with the core values LaManna learned from his parents. As the new owner of Vomela, LaManna kept all 11 children working in the business at one time or another. It was a big company and a family company at the same time. But Carlo hankered for new thought and new growth, and with that many mouths to feed, LaManna needed to make drastic changes at Vomela. With the help of his new Vice President, R.J. LaManna, they knew that the next wave of growth was going to come as it had in 1962: By simplifying and speeding up the process to meet huge demand in a faster time frame. The task was going to take a lot of courage and vast resources. One thing LaManna learned was that being the leader meant taking risks — calculated risks.

In 1984, when Apple Computer launched its personal computer, LaManna took it as a signal. Computerization was the next key to success. After a year of careful thought and planning, and with the assistance of son R.J., they expanded their ideas to encompass globalization by way of technology. In an unprecedented move, Vomela entered into a co-op with companies from the USA, Norway and

Germany in 1985. Vomela Specialty Company invested more than \$2.5 million on a collaborative, state-of-the-art CAD/CAM system and high-tech die making and cutting equipment. This brought technology from around the globe back to St. Paul, with Carlo guiding its adaptation in much the same way he adapted the letterpress for kiss cutting.

It was time to re-invent the kiss cutting process. The CAD system meant precision and speed, while precision meant quality and quality meant reputation, something important to LaManna. He knew that the way to capture large contracts was with a skillful combination of precision, quality, speed and engineering forethought. They purchased an oversized, German-made die board cutter to carve die slots in wood and other materials into which a double-beveled steel rule was inserted to make a die. A laser cutter could cut anything from wood to acrylic up to a material thickness of one inch. Equipment like this, combined with the CAD system, was the catalyst for the next wave of growth at Vomela.

The company was now able to manufacture highly accurate dies to create a variety of membrane switches and flex circuitry for electronics manufacture, in addition to the new capabilities they introduced to the vinyl cutting process. Those capabilities led to what are now considered industry-standard developments for the signage industry: Replacing pre-spaced, legends and multi-color overlay graphics produced for many different industries and contracts. This eliminated the need for dies and used the full power of enhanced computer technology to facilitate the vinyl cutting process. It enhanced speed and reduced costs dramatically.

LaManna continued to tinker

with equipment during this entire transformation process. His next brainchild was to re-engineer a 48"x120" customized die-cutting press for screen-cutting applications, increasing tolerance levels to allow for precision cutting. Large-format graphics automation was now a reality with the advent of LaManna's invention of the first wide-format "cold" kiss cut process.

Vomela then began converting vinyl with lasers and a tangential knife-cutting process. Short-run, quick turn jobs were now a reality. In fact, early adopters included Japanese automobile manufacturers Nissan, Honda, Mitsubishi and Toyota, companies that are sticklers for fine, precision graphics. Vomela was soon producing OEM graphics for everything from snowmobiles to autos to large recreational vehicles. From what started as a simple pinstripe on the side of a classic Ford Mustang, Vomela's new technological innovations enabled them to secure contracts with other major entities, producing vinyl to cover entire sides of Greyhound buses or Winnebago RVs. Graphic applications for fleet transportation was established.

Employment at the plant quickly grew from 32 people to nearly 150. Vomela was now on course and doing upwards of \$10 million annually in contract business. The expansion continued into global market development and government signage contracts. The company was now handling orders from prestigious companies like Honeywell and NASA. Globalization was on the horizon, and Vomela entered joint ventures with Saudi Arabia, France, 3M International and 3M Europe and their customers.

Plato said: "Necessity is the mother of invention." When it comes to the vinyl signage and screen printing industry, LaManna could be called our "father of invention." The methods we employ every day have been advanced over the last few decades. The giant CAD system now fits on your desktop, and the price tag for the software and hardware combined will no longer put a dent in your wallet. But like the changes that have taken place in the modern space program, from a single orbit around the globe to walking on the moon, it all started somewhere. We have LaManna to thank for a portion of what our multi-billion dollar industry has become today.

LaManna retired in 1990 and sold the company. He is now 83 years old and lives with his wife of 63 years in South Florida where he still consults periodically, but devotes most of his time to enjoying his children and their spouses, 34 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. Many of his children are still in the industry. Some are still working at Vomela today.

A single comment from a father to his son so aptly describes this true pioneer of the graphics industry: "Keep it simple, son (KISS)." This is precisely what Carlo LaManna did. We should all know what this extraordinary man accomplished in his time spent in our industry.

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# LaManna Alliance

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