

Poblocki Sign has rich history in U.S., and it's still going strong

By [Rick Barrett](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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West Allis - In the middle of the Great Depression, Ben Poblocki could hardly have chosen a worse time to start a business.

The founder of Poblocki Sign Co. wasn't getting paid by his employer, however, so he figured that he didn't have much to lose.

He also wanted to capitalize on the popularity of "talking pictures" by making signs and marquees for movie theaters.

So despite the Depression, Poblocki started Electrolite Signs Co.

Seventy-seven years later, the firm - now called Poblocki Sign Co. - has clients from all 50 states. Its signs are in hospitals, sports stadiums and office buildings.

The company has installed signs on the first 50 floors of the Trump International Hotel & Tower in downtown Chicago. Signage for the remaining 42 floors, which are under construction, will be installed by early summer.

Once Trump Tower is completed, Poblocki will have fabricated and installed more than 3,000 signs in the building.

It's a big project, but it isn't unusual for the company that's provided signage at landmarks such as Lambeau Field, the Milwaukee Art Museum and Marquette University.

It also has done signs for the Harley-Davidson Museum, numerous hotels and the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta.

The Trump deal

For the Trump project, developer Donald Trump personally negotiated the signs contract.

It was a deal valued at more than \$500,000, but the negotiations lasted less than 12 minutes.

Trump was a very amenable guy, said Chuck Amundsen, Poblocki's national sales manager, who represented the company.

But he also set rules for the contract talks, including no speaker phone, no cell phone and you couldn't use any of his nicknames such as "The Donald."

Trump disarmed Amundsen with his friendliness and personal interest in the signs.

"He didn't stay on the point of the money," Amundsen said.

The final contract amount wasn't made public, but Trump and Poblocki Sign split the difference between their best offers.

"He made me feel like I was going golfing with him the next day," Amundsen said.

Poblocki Sign's business, like its products, is colorful and rich in U.S. history.

After World War II, the company made signs for automobile dealerships and banks that sprang up across Wisconsin.

It found work in dozens of small towns, said David Drury, Poblocki Sign president and a board member of Journal Communications Inc., the parent of the Journal Sentinel.

"There were a zillion banks, and they all had their own signs," Drury said.

In the 1960s, Poblocki made signs for a little-known hamburger chain called McDonald's.

The company put up signage for more than 1,000 Target stores and benefited from corporate takeovers and business name changes - all of which resulted in the need for new signage.

"We have a pretty good stable of national companies to work with," Drury said.

Poblocki's business has evolved into architectural signage - where messages are more than rectangle boxes hanging on a wall.

Autumn slowdown

In 2008, the company had about \$25 million in sales - a large figure in an industry with mostly smaller players.

"We came off a record year in 2007 and weren't feeling too bad about the way things were headed," Drury said. "Our order books stayed reasonably full in May, and then by November it felt like the order books had closed."

Early this year, Poblocki laid off about 10% of its work force. It has since called some of those people back to work and now has 144 employees.

The company has never felt a recession like this one, according to Drury.

"A lot of our business is related to health care buildings, and that business has slowed," he said.

New opportunities have come along in environmentally friendly signs for buildings seeking Leadership and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

"Two industry trends that are picking up speed are digital signs, including electronic way-finding signs that can be changed" frequently, said Paul Poblocki, general manager of interior signs.

The company has exited some market segments where signs are made in mass quantities and profit margins are thin.

But the downturn in the economy could result in Poblocki acquiring other companies in its field.

Some sign-makers are undercapitalized and might not make it through the recession, Drury said.



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