



There are a multitude of industries that metal marking can serve, from corporate plaques to personal awards.

# The Money In Metal

## *Advancements in metal marking*

By Cassie Green

**M**etal marking. It seems pretty simple, fairly self-explanatory. It's just that: marking an image or words on metal. Except these days, there's a little more to this embellishment process than just adding an image to a piece of aluminum. Between the multitude of metal substrates available to mark on, the reasons for marking, and the different machines that are capable of doing so, metal marking is a way of creating different looks for a variety of demands.

Perhaps this is why it has seriously grown in popularity. Or maybe it's that metal marking technology has improved over the years, with manufacturers, decorators and customers alike all contributing to its advancement. Whatever the case, retailers everywhere should take note. With so many selling options and improvements, this embellishment technology is sure to bring home some bucks.

### THE LATEST

Metal marking is currently one of the most popular decorating techniques in the awards and engraving industry. Between the demand for image placement on outdoor signs and plaques to barcodes needed in the industrial market, the technology has been forced to become versatile and efficient to execute in the past few years.

Metal marking can be achieved in a multitude of ways. Elisha Kaufman, U-Marq, states that it can be done using a diamond drag, carbide cutter, laser or chemical process, such as sublimation. Whatever the method, the technique as a whole has evolved over the past few years. "We can now follow uneven surfaces, and mark different and harder metals," she says.

This has a lot to do with the different equipment used to mark on metal. Take the laser process, for example, which has





The introduction of fiber lasers, coupled with improvement to other laser engravers, has helped spur the advancement of metal marking.

been around for quite some time. "Historically, metal-marking applications were done using galvo-based YAG metal-marking systems, which can present engraving size limitations and a much higher cost," states Bob Henry, Epilog Laser. However, that's no longer the case. Now retailers are able to work with a variety of substrates in different sizes, and the cost has come way down because of machine improvements.

Karly Baldi, Horizons Imaging Systems Group, elaborates on this point. "Lasers have become easier to use, more consistent and adaptable to specialized materials like AlumaMark," she points out. And improvements aren't just limited to lasers, either. Across the board, metal marking has grown in all available equipment options. "There have been improvements in the image quality of inkjet printers, benefiting AlumaJet and sublimation," she states.

The introduction of fiber lasers has also spurred the advancement of metal marking. "A fiber laser costs much less than the traditional YAG method and lasts for a long time," states Warren Knipple, Trotec Laser. Coupled with the improvements to YAG lasers and other pieces of equipment, this creates more opportunities for companies in the metal-marking market, he adds.

These changes have all come about largely because of the customer. "Customers expect higher-quality markings," Kaufman explains. Such demands do create a cycle of influence on the changes to metal marking, as well. Because customers are on the hunt for creative ideas, personalization and great customer service, awards retailers now search for the best machines to get

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Metal marking is used in industrial applications such as serializing parts or marking barcodes to help identify and track products.



There are a variety of ways that metal marking can be achieved, including laser engraving. (Image courtesy of Trotec Laser)

the job done. "Consequently, we as the manufacturers have to deliver that high standard," she finishes.

## MAKING A MARK

With so many parts playing a role in the change, it's no wonder metal marking has grown into a huge segment of the awards and engraving industry. There are a multitude of ways, and products, in which it is now applied. In order to maximize on such a large opportunity, awards retailers need to keep up with the advancements in metal marking as well as know how to utilize it in different situations.

For those shops who aren't sure where specifically the opportunities to apply metal marking are, have no fear, there are quite a few out there. Baldi lists donor plaques, architectural signage, name badges, trophy plates, property tags and customized corporate awards as just few of the products on which metal marking can be applied.

But it doesn't stop there. Retailers will also see a lot of industrial customers looking for images that will hold up to some serious beating, such as sun or transportation. "Metal marking does apply to industrial applications such as serializing parts and marking barcodes to help identify and track pieces and parts," states Henry. He adds that the personalization arena is also well-suited for this technology, such as customers looking to mark their iPads or desk nameplates.

With so many product options, retailers would be wise to offer metal marking in some way, shape or form. "By offering metal-marking services, retailers open the door to a multitude of sales opportunities," Knipple points out. He adds that shop

owners who have the equipment and knowledge to process multiple materials are able to say "yes" to any customer and any job that walks through the door.

Saying "yes" also means being able to take on some unexpected requests. Kaufman states that customers will ask for customization on items as small and personal as jewelry. These types of opportunities help build a strong and loyal customer base across all industries, big and small. "It creates a special service that not every retailer can offer to their customers," she elaborates.

All of this adds up to one thing: profit. Since this service is in such high demand, retailers should have no problem seeing the value in it. Baldi states that customers generally want three specific things when it comes to metal marking their products: durability, value and resolution. If a customer's product needs to last, it creates a higher perceived value, she says. Higher perceived value equals higher profit.

## A DYNAMIC FUTURE

With so many advancements, and so many profit-making opportunities, it's safe to say that the future looks bright for this technology. Customers continue to demand this embellishment, so retailers must continue to offer high-quality end products. Thus, metal marking will continue to play a role in the awards and engraving industry.

"As demand for this service increases, many retailers are recognizing the value it can bring to their shop," emphasizes Henry. He explains that doing so makes a retailer the one-stop shop that customers are looking for to fulfill every need.

More importantly, it will continue to contribute to the overall success of awards shops in all different offerings, from general engraving to sublimation. That success in turn will cycle back to the continuous improvement of the technology. "As time progresses, advancements with this process will once again pose a dynamic change to the awards and engraving, gifts, and promotional industries, as it will yet again open new doors of profit and end-product capabilities," Knipple believes.

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