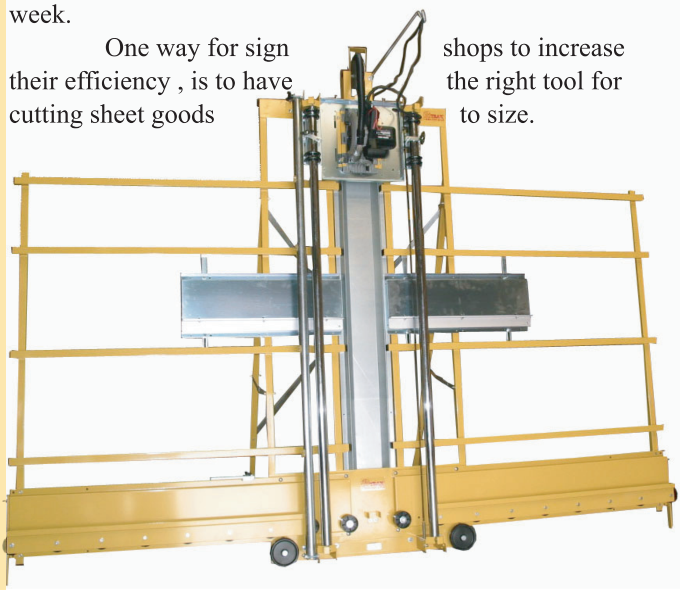
Panel Saw, Table Saw, Matt Cutter or Combo Machine?

Which one is Best Suited to the needs of Sign Makers?

Cutting blanks to size is an everyday operation for sign shops. Time spent cutting blanks of overlaid plywood, PVC, acrylics, aluminum composite or corrugated plastic adds up over a week.

One way for sign shops to increase their efficiency , is to have the right tool for cutting sheet goods to size.



There are a few basic considerations that every sign shop must address when purchasing a cutting machine: space restraints, ease of use, capablity, safety, cost and dust. These may vary with priority, but all will be factors when making your buying decision.

First we'll discuss space restraints. This will eliminate the table saw option right off the bat. Table saws work on the horizontal plane with large in feed and out feed tables on either end of the saw. Cross cutting is difficult, usually requiring two people. With a table saw, kick back and blade exposure are safety issues that can send a user to the hospital. Practically speaking, there is no room for them in a sign shop.

Panel saws, mat cutters and combo machines work in the vertical plane easing floor space requirements and sheet handling issues.

Before we go much further, I want to explain what a "Combo" machine is. It is a combination panel saw and mat cutter. The saw plate is removed from a sliding carriage and a knife plate is inserted in its place to cut foam boards and corrgated plastics. Thus, one machine can cut materials with a saw or with the knife. Since no cutting capabilities are lost with a combo machine vs. a straight panel saw, the only consideration is increased cost vs. added capabilities. It is our experience that the combo machines with their bundled accessories cost little more than the straight panel saw with the same accessories. The minimal added expense vs. the capabilities of the saw / knife "Combo" machine eliminates the plain panel saw from further consideration.

So we are down to Combo machine vs. Mat Cutter. Mat cutters cut with a straight blade or pinch with rolling blades. They are limited by the thickness of materials, density of the materials and cutting direction (up and down only).

When cutting with a knife, several scoring passes may need to be made to get through a piece of expanded PVC. It is possible to cut some aluminum composites but it's more a matter of pinching the material through two rolling cutters. It requires user strength and is very limited in the thickness and hardness of the aluminum and the wear of the blades. Sincce they slit or pinch, they don't make saw dust.

Mat cutters use a knife to cut materials. Combo machines use a knife to cut materials but can also use a saw to cut thicker or denser materials that can't be cut with a knife or pinched with rolling blades. The saw makes cutting much faster since one pass is made instead of several with a knife.

Combo machines are made out of steel and are much sturdier than their mat cutting rivals that are made out of aluminum. Combo machines have a base that is up to 10' wide for support of large sheets vs. the 5' wide support of Mat cutters.

Combo machines can cut up and down AND SIDEWAYS on sheets and can be purchased in models that cut 4', 5' and 6' feet wide. This rip cut capability means that you can cut 6' x 3' sign blanks from a 4' x 8', which you can't do with a Mat cutter.

Cost is not an issue because the list price of a Fletcher type cutter is about as much as a Saw Trax "Sign Package" Combo machine with a 10 foot wide, powder coated steel frame.

The Saw Trax combo machines have addressed the dust issue with a dust brush under the saw, dust collection on the saw and a dust port at the base of the saw to catch the dust before it hits the floor. Their newest innovation is the "Freedom" saw. It is a floating saw that lowers onto the material as it cuts. This action traps the saw dust, greatly increasing the effectiveness of the dust vacuum, collecting almost all of the dust.