TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

SAi's Flexi 8.5™

Hot off the press

As a signmaker, you're either using Flexi and thinking about upgrading, or have heard about Flexi's unique features. From vector-artwork creation to color matching digital prints, Flexi has been around awhile. For this version, the Flexi designers acknowledged what users requested and implemented these changes.

The first notable change – the operating-system compatibility list has expanded to Windows Vista™. The minimum requirements are 1GB RAM or higher, a 4+ GB working disk space, a 1,024 x 768-resolution graphics card, a DVD drive and an Internet connection (broadband preferred).

SA International (SAi) produces a family of products from vector-based graphics design to router CNC software. We'll stick to the digitally printed, vector-based graphics and color-management side. As new printers, cutters and engravers become available, SAi includes the driver and corresponding ICC color profiles for numerous popular printers. The long list comes with numerous tasks these devices will encounter, such as contour cutting, color compatibility and output.

The software's installation procedure has significantly simplified since SAi eliminated dongle use. A softkey, which implies that an USB open port isn't needed, replaces it. The system's only requirement is Internet access for the initial installation, with online validation required every 30 days. However, the system must be connected to the Internet when first launching the software.

Once launched, you'll notice interface improvements (**Fig. 1**). The much more user friendly desktop contains numerous, single-click features. Convenient access to sub-menu functions, or shortcut commands, enables power users to shave their design time. These key commands, listed in the Quick Reference Card (QRC), come with the Flexi software.
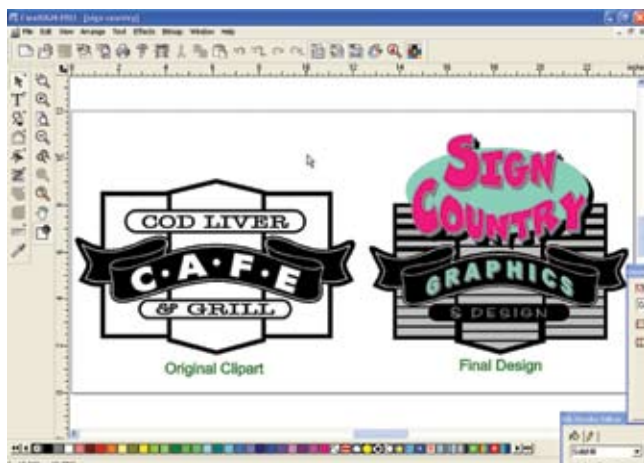
Re-designing a logo

Starting with a pre-canned graphic from Designer's Café clipart, we'll change a few things to finalize a new design. First, bring in your clipart design. Now, let's get busy. The original clipart file must be separated so each component can be changed. Simply ungroup the

Fig. 1: The new user interface has numerous, easy-to-navigate, single-click features.

Fig. 2: To straighten the line in the clipart file, the Select Point or Path Edit tool deleted some curved areas.
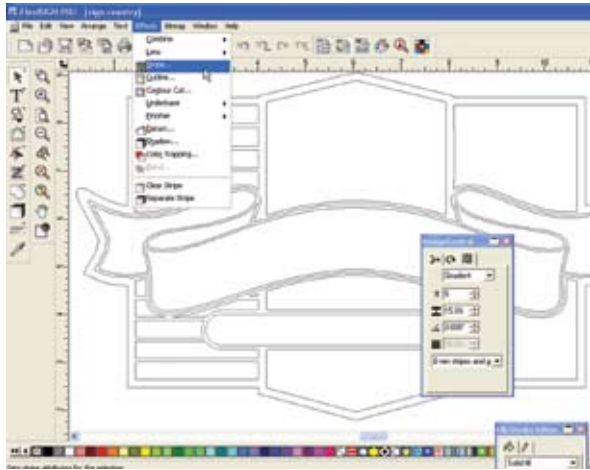
Fig. 3: The Stripe technique from the Effects menu was a simple solution to spice up the graphic. Just key in a couple of values, and you're there.
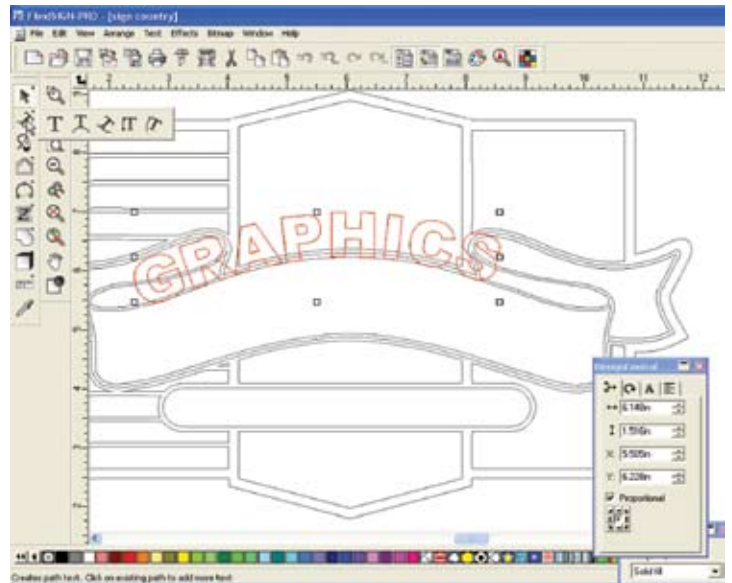

Fig. 4: Text on a Path works great from the Toolbox – a great timesaver.

vector file to address each object separately. Delete unnecessary components. The Select Point tool removes curved lines (**Fig. 2**). Later, we welded together some objects to produce the "louvered" look. A single-click Weld icon on the tool palette performs the same function (the Stripe tool works much better than the previous versions).

To get the louvered look, we used the Stripe technique from the Effects menu. DesignCentral controls choice activation, such as how many stripes and what distance apart (**Fig. 3**). For the word "GRAPHICS," we used a simple click on the Text on a Path, residing in the tool palette (**Fig. 4**). The text will follow the object's contour very simply and quickly. With a few nips and tucks, the graphic was created in approximately 20 minutes. Flexi 8.5 is

Fig. 5: Simply choose the standard Print function, and click on your printer with the Dynamic PPDs installed.

extremely feature rich and a "must have" for a sign designer.

Also, Flexi has become a more robust raster (bitmap) image-editing and creation program, too. We noticed, as Flexi launches, it picks up many Adobe Photoshop™ filters we installed on our system. Our large range of filters, collected over the years, can be accessed from Flexi.

Because wide-format digital printing is a large portion of our business, the RIP is paramount. Flexi 8.5 has implemented some new features and improved others. Through Dynamic PPDs (PostScript Printer Descriptions), you can now do application-direct printing – directly from an application, you can simply choose the standard Print function and click on your printer (**Fig. 5**). This alleviates having to activate Flexi's

Production Manager.

Another new feature, the Repeat Job function, allows you to send a digital-print job that entails numerous copies, and it won't re-RIP every time; this saves significant time. The Dual Roll function, for nesting or tiling jobs, allows you to print multiple jobs on different media rolls at the same time. You can set different Job Properties for each job in a nested set and then arrange each job on the appropriate media roll.

The final task is to print through the RIP and see the results of the enhanced color management. We put the RIP to the test with several different images. Using the nesting function, we RIP'd and printed, at a respectable speed, standard, 16 x 20, full-color prints. After having set up all the printing parameters and a bit of tweaking, we got what we expected – no surprises – and that's great.

In conclusion, Flexi 8.5's many, terrific features, functions and improvements really make this package tops in its class. It's nice to see it's Vista compatible, and the user interface has been re-vamped to our liking. We really enjoyed designing a sign in less than a half hour, which any signshop will love. For people looking to upgrade, you'll love the new functions, and, for people looking to purchase a sign-specific package, you can't go wrong. ∎