

FOCUS CAREERS & JOBS

Yep, he went around the bend

This neon sign maker has a real bent for success as he twists the glass tubes and lights up the life of microbreweries

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BATTLE GROUND, Wash. — Regional microbrewers have garnered lots of glowing recommendations, but none so bright as Roger Schurman's neon beer signs.

"They're really the bread-and-butter," said Schurman, 41. His orderly shop is stacked with bent tubing and transformers that will become advertisements for Bridgeport, Pyramid, Grant's, McMenam's and other small breweries.

"We have standing orders from Bridgeport and Pyramid for 10 signs a month," he said, "falling into the microbrewery market definitely kept us alive when we were starting."

"When I got out of neon school I started doing signs for Pyramid because I grew up with the guy who started it. Back a few years ago the microbrewers all talked to each other, and I started getting work from the other breweries."

As his portfolio makes plain, Schurman's work has spread beyond the walls of local taverns. He and designer David Spencer are typical of the second generation of neon artisans who are resurrecting — in some cases reinventing — the nearly lost art.

"It fell out of favor in the 1960s when cheap plastic signs came into vogue. At one point there was just a handful of the old neon tube benders



STEVE NEHL/The Oregonian

Roger Schurman heats a glass tube that will eventually become part of a neon light.

left, and most of them wouldn't tell you the secrets. David and I went to school in Portland in 1988 and it was one of two or three schools in the country — now they're all over the place."

"And school didn't teach you everything," Schurman said, "you don't learn neon in three months — I'll be learning the rest of my life."

Watching Schurman work is a fascinating glimpse of this world of fire, electricity and rare gas. He selects a 4-foot length of clear tube and places a short piece of rubber hose over the end. Schurman will blow

into the hose to keep the glass tube from collapsing as he bends it.

He holds the tube over a cannon fire — a strong jet of natural gas and oxygen — twisting slowly until it begins to glow and sag. At the right moment he holds the piece up and makes a perfect 90 degree-bend, all the while maintaining air pressure in the tube.

He demonstrates how the tube bender works to a full-size backwards pattern traced onto a piece of fiberglass and shows some of the complex bends and curves needed to achieve perfect lettering. "For instance, all the Os, Ds and Gs have to be a little taller than the rest so they look right. Some letters have to be spaced closer together to get the right appearance."

But — as fussy as the tube bending is — the real challenge comes in evacuating the tubing and filling it with neon or argon. Bombarding, the process is called, and it involves 10,000 volts of electricity, vacuum pumps and a deft touch.

A big gray transformer steps 220 volts up to 10,000. Subjecting the electrodes in the new sign to that kind of voltage serves to vaporize impurities that would later cause

the sign to light unevenly; it also burns the protective coating off the electrodes.

When the tubing is glowing red, Schurman juggles valves on a manifold so a pump can suck out the vaporized impurities. He then carefully adds neon or argon to a certain pressure depending on the diameter of the tube, reseals the tube with a small torch and cuts it away from the manifold.

"This part is far more important than the bending," he said. "There's lots of ways to ruin a sign right here."

But Schurman's biggest problem these days is getting away from the books. He now has two artisans working with him and he finds more of his time taken up by the details of running a business.

"I'm not a tube-bender anymore, I'm a businessman," he said, "and that's got me worried because I want to stay in the fires. Everybody finds neon fascinating — well, so do I."

Writer John Foyston has been a dishwasher, monkey handler, engineering technician, electronics assembler, rock'n'roll musician, small-business owner and motorcycle mechanic.

CAREER SPOTLIGHT: NEON TUBE-BENDER

The state of Oregon has nothing to say about neon tube-benders, but Roger Schurman does:

■ **APTITUDES:** Patience, manual dexterity, good hand-eye coordination, the ability to visualize and a methodical — painstaking — approach to the craft are necessary, Schurman said.

Cuts and burns and long hours standing at a fire are the downside, tremendous job satisfaction is the plus. "It still tickles me to drive past one of my signs. We make things that are out there for everyone to see."

■ **TRAINING:** Neon schools now abound, and the complexity of the process makes school a must. But don't expect to learn everything; school is a good start, Schurman said. Students can gain experience after school by working at one of the bigger sign companies.

■ **JOB OUTLOOK:** There's a glut: "People wanting to get into the business now will probably have to relocate," Schurman said. As neon's gotten hip, the big cities have filled with neon shops and the competition has become fierce. The trick is to find a good-sized city that doesn't have a shop yet.

Source: Oregon Career Information System