

Up for Grabs

Window Film Brands Continue to Emerge. Is the Fight for Market Share Really that Wide Open?

by Casey Flores



Photo: Rayno

Rayno invests heavily in major industry trade shows, ensuring their booths—and products—get noticed by tinters and other manufacturers.

It used to be that tinters had a limited number of film brands from which to choose. Not anymore. In the past two years alone, three new film brands have been introduced (or reintroduced) into the U.S. market: Rayno (June 2014), SolarFX (September 2013) and Maxpro (June 2013).

Many tinters are puzzled by the trend, citing the current market's oversaturation.

You Can Be Profitable

Don't say that to Joe Cobbe, though. The 73-year-old retiree and former founding member of Commonwealth Laminating and Coating (Suntek), is getting back into the game. He's the man behind the still-recent purchase and rebranding of Maxpro Window Films. Along with a new logo, the company built a new manufactur-

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—Rachel Minn, Rayno Window Film

ing facility in Whiteville, N.C.

Cobbe's new venture is the result of a random encounter on an airplane with two people who helped build the manufacturing facility at Suntek. He says the three of them got to talking and thought, “Why not?”

“If you can make window film, it can be profitable,” he explains. “There are only about a dozen factories in the world that make window film.”

But what gives these newer brands an opportunity to gain market share?

For such a complex question, we turned to none other than the Dr. of Tintology himself—Mike Feldman, whose column in the March/April issue of WINDOW FILM magazine urged tinters to think bigger as the economy has recovered.

Feldman says it was the struggling economy, however, that actually opened the door for new,

private-label window film brands in the first place.

There used to be unwavering brand loyalty in the industry—and some still exists. It's just not "enforced" by manufacturers anymore, Feldman says.

"With the economy going down, manufacturers weren't able to punish their dealers for cheating on them with other film brands [for fear of losing them]," he explains.

He says that while economic hardships led tinters to offer multiple film lines, territorial politics also left some dealers without access to certain brands.

"As manufacturers started trying to penetrate the commercial and high-end residential market, they realized they needed to develop elite dealer programs," he says. According to Feldman, this ended up limiting the number of dealers to whom manufacturers could sell in certain territories. "Once you have a dealer that's buying a significant amount of film, you don't want to mess with the guy," he says.

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Photo: SolarFX

SolarFX offers diversified products, such as the car speakers seen here, to be a one-stop shop for automotive aftermarket businesses.

Newer Isn't Always Better

Despite claims of better customer service or lower prices, not every dealer can be convinced to leave his current film provider—especially those who've done it before and had bad experiences.

That's the case for John Little, owner of All Pro Window Tinting in Decatur, Texas. Little has switched his main film supplier three times over the years but has always returned "home."

"Twice, it was for the price and once because my manufacturer went from a 1-millimeter film to 1.5," Little says. He didn't have any problems with his current manufacturers but other, newer manufacturers had better deals and/or film sizes he was comfortable with.

On two occasions, he says the new film turned purple all too soon.

"Everybody's got a lifetime warranty—it doesn't mean it's going to last

more than six months," he says, adding he'll never switch again since the film he uses is color-stable (though a bit more expensive). "The number one disadvantage, in my opinion, is you don't know how long [new film] is going to last" regardless of warranty.

Mike Leffler, owner/operator of Indianapolis-area Mike's Mobile Tint, says a falling out with his manufacturer caused him to make a switch to a newer company.

"I paid for overnight shipping for a large commercial installation and the film didn't show up. I couldn't do the job and they fired me," he says, so he switched his manufacturer.

For one year, everything went smoothly, until the automotive film to which he switched also turned purple, eating up hundreds of man-hours and

\$6,000 in supplies. Needless to say, he switched back to his original supplier.

Despite his distaste for color-changing film, Leffler says it's not all about the product.

"Customer service and packing and shipping from the distributor is key. That is another factor to consider when switching your film brand. It's not just the product, it's the other parts of the company you have to think about," he says, noting he's had scraps in his film and even been shorted on his orders before. "If the distributor isn't packing and shipping correctly, it can screw your business bad. I've even had them ship me the wrong product."

Leffler says he gets sales calls from other manufacturers every day but pays them no mind. He won't be switching again.

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Percentage of customers that buy film after trying:

- SolarFX – 30-40 %
- Rayno – 20-25 %
- Maxpro – 15-20 %

Feldman explains that this left whole groups of film installers without access to certain types of film, so private labels began springing up to fill that void.

With the economic situation improving, he predicts another shift in the industry.

“As the economy gets better, the major manufacturers are going to start clamping down and asking for exclusivity again. They have the right to do that; they just haven’t,” he says. “When they start doing that, people will have to decide if they’re with them or not,” he adds.

Personalizing Customer Service

One of the benefits of being a smaller, newer window film brand, Feldman says, is that they’re actually able to offer more personalized customer service.

That’s what Shawn Vogler, vice president of SolarFX Window Films, is banking on. He plans to be ready to capitalize when the

market tightens again.

“We have somebody who’s always available [on the phone]. It’s back to customer service,” he says.

Cobbe agrees, saying that size matters when it comes to customer service. “Because we’re smaller, we can provide more [personalized] customer service than [others] can,” he says. “If you call our company, a body answers the phone, and our goal is to always have a body answer.”

Rachel Min, marketing team leader at Rayno Window Film, says one way her company hopes to woo U.S. film dealers is by streamlining communication between them and the company’s research and development teams. The manufacturer introduced itself and launched its Phantom film line in June 2014. By February 2015, Min

says the company “introduced an upgraded version of the whole line—totally based on the American tinters’ feedback.”

Standing Out from the Crowd

Each of these company representatives knows it will take more than quality customer service to capture a portion of the U.S. window film market.

“It’s not really easy for us because they’re familiar with other brands of films they’ve been using for 20 or 30 years,” Min says, so Rayno has been aggressive in its industry trade-show presence. “It’s important for us as a new brand to get company

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Photo: Maxpro

Maxpro’s manufacturing plant is in Whiteville, N.C., allowing them to say their products are “Made in the U.S.A.”

credibility. We believe exhibiting at the International Window Film Conference and Tint-Off™ and SEMA is one of the ways to prove it,” she says.

For SolarFX, a product line that includes more than just window film is key to getting more customers.

“We also offer car audio, car video, alarms/remote starters and lighting products that can assist tint shops to expand their product offerings to diversify,” says Vogler.

Cobbe believes one thing that differentiates his company is being able to say its films are “Made in the U.S.A.,” though he echoes the other brands’ representatives when he says that quality and affordability are what really attract new customers.

State of the “New Guys”

“We’ve been pretty successful throughout the country,” says Cobbe. “Part of that is because we’re the new guy in town. We have such small market penetration at this point that we pick up customers all over the place.” Maxpro distributes from its manufacturing plant and also has a distributor in Phoenix.

“Our sales increase month over month,” Vogler says. “There’s never been a month where we have gone backwards—even through the winter months. We’ll be on an upward trend until we hit some level of saturation and we level off.” The company has two distribution centers, one in the Kansas City area and one in Houston, and Vogler plans to add more as they grow.

And Rayno is now hiring new salespeople, expanding its reach nationally. Min says that in addition to its distribution center in Orange, Calif., the company is looking to add one in Illinois as well as on the East Coast.

Doctor’s Orders

Mike Feldman, president of Advanced Film Solutions in New Port Richey, Fla., says there are some things you’ll want to be aware of if you plan on adding another line. Here are some questions he recommends asking:

1 What is your price?

First things first: pricing. When you hear their price, that will help you determine what questions follow, such as:

2 How does your film compare to big-name companies’ film ratings?

While many don’t have NFRC ratings yet, ask if they plan to have their films rated soon. If they give you numbers, be curious and ask about the testing that went into producing those numbers.

3 For your automotive film, how easy is it to install? (AKA Can I have a sample?)

Typically, a private label company will send you enough film to tint at least one car.

4 What kind of marketing help can you give me?

Consider carefully if a company doesn’t offer point-of-sale boards, brochures or the like.

5 How long will it take to get my film?

Sometimes you need a lot of film in a hurry. Can these companies deliver? Find out where their distribution center is and go from there.

6 What types of warranties do you offer?

This may be the most important question of all. You’re taking a risk by using a less-established brand. If that company is confident in its product, it should offer you a warranty that takes care of any concerns you may have. Then, of course, you have to have confidence the company will be around to honor the warranty if necessary.

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