



**Valley Ranch Town Center
New Caney**



development strategies we have used for the past 20 years. 'Experiential' is nothing new, but today it has a name and is in the spotlight, and we are excited to have Valley Ranch in the conversation," Signorelli says, pointing out the development's assets that include Little League fields, the school District's sports complex, parks, trails and maximized connectivity. "Not long ago, the pinnacle of retail development was the 'grocery-anchored power center' and other experiential concepts were considered far-fetched and certainly high risk development. Today we are enjoying the exciting results from taking that risk."

The project was recently named a finalist for the Houston Business Journal's Landmark Award. Signorelli says it stands out from other developments, thanks to the hard work of a great team, what he calls a "solid foundation."

"VRTC passes all the typical retail tests, such as location and high-visibility, super strong market and demographics," he says. "Beyond that I would have to credit our concept and ability to be patient in developing a significant scaled project. There are steps to developing a project with this many moving parts. Not skipping a step has been critical to our success. Being patient has been tough at times, but the results are worth it."

If the success of Valley River Town Center is any indication, the retail sector of commercial real estate is thriving as it grows and evolves.

"Generally, we're pretty optimistic about the market," Walker says. "It's healthy. It's active." ■

Not-so-simple signs

BY BRANDI SMITH

For most consumers, signs are their first exposure to a brand, be it a restaurant, a store or a service. But often when commercial real estate professionals discuss retail and its trends, that first point-of-contact initially gets forgotten or looked over. That's not the case at Plano-based American Signs.

"What happens over time in any type of advertising is that the more that someone sees a brand, the more they start to embrace the message that comes with it. Ideally, there's some trust built into that," says Bill Young, the company's general manager. "So when they see that brand while they're driving by, they recognize it and connect with it."

Because brands, logos and consumer messages change so often, so too should a company's signage, according to Young. He estimates the lifespan of a sign to be about 10 years before either the message is obsolete or the weather has taken its toll.

Young says American Signs focuses on regional and national accounts because of its emphasis on developing long-term business relationships. Typically, that means companies opening five to 50 new locations each year, which keeps Young and his staff busy.

"For the most part, our job is to listen to what their brand is and what they want from a sign. Clients will sometimes supply us with drawings or artwork. Then we take that apart, compare it to landlord criteria and city code, and try to maximize the signage that they want on that building," Young says.

Because every city and landlord has different regulations and rules, it's important for American Signs to be staffed with detail-oriented people, from the designers to the sales staff.

They also have to be able to adapt along with the latest technology. Young says the biggest shift in the past decade has been from neon to LED lighting. The more energy-efficient LEDs, he says, grew in popularity once their price started dropping. However, he says some companies still prefer the look and feel of neon.

"It's still in demand, just not quite as much as it was ten years ago," says Young.

American Signs also stays busy producing electronic message centers (EMCs), which you see a lot of at schools, churches and at some retail centers.

"You'll see them in a lot of other applications, especially on highway signs, pylon signs and pole signs," Young says. "From a price standpoint, our clients are able to use EMCs as a better visual tool to market products. The software programs out there are evolving as well."

That evolution allows companies to switch out messaging and track traffic.

"Let's say you have four different ads running on your EMC. That software will allow you to monitor traffic flow to evaluate how many people saw each message," says Young.

While the technology and approach to signage may have changed over the years, what hasn't is the impact it has in drawing consumers in. After all, that's what keeps Young and his crew at American Signs busy.