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# Sticky Situation

Applying large graphics can be daunting — but even the novice can achieve excellent results

**BY BARRY KLUCZYK ■ THERE'S NO TWO WAYS ABOUT IT: INSTALLING LARGE AUTOMOTIVE DECAL GRAPHICS IS A SCARY PROPOSITION TO ANYONE WHO ISN'T EXPERIENCED WITH THE PROCEDURE. YOUR MIND IMMEDIATELY JUMPS TO THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO OF A MISPLACED OR CROOKED FINAL PRODUCT — SOMETHING YOU'RE STUCK WITH, BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY.**

Such was the dilemma we were facing with our '79 Ford Ranchero GT fresh out of the paint booth. It wore original-

color metallic maroon, but still looked naked without its humongous and oh-so-Seventies decal graphics. We simply

had never attempted the application of such large graphics, which span the upper half of the rear quarter panels, the entire lower rocker section and a big, fat chunk of the tailgate.

The paint shop wasn't particularly interested in spending a day applying the graphics and would have charged another couple hundred dollars in labor time. So, with our thriftiness — read that as cheapness — trumping our trepidation, we decided to give installing the big stickers a shot.

Our first step was a call to Phoenix Graphics, where we talked with owner Brian Kotarski. He assured us the application of larger body-side graphics was the same as smaller graphics, only requiring more time, patience and, usually, an extra pair of hands.



**1** Here's our project vehicle, a 1979 Ford Ranchero GT (with a 302 V-8 and factory air conditioning), as found in suburban Seattle. It was straight and virtually rust-free, but the 25-year-old paint was worn and the original graphics were faded.

**2** Close-up of the lower rear quarter panel shows some amateur touch-up, too, which contributed to the vehicle's unsightly appearance.

**3** As this was a budget resto — and, frankly, because a '79 Ranchero just doesn't warrant the same investment as a 1969 GPO Camaro — we sent the truck to the Maaco shop in Troy, Michigan. Because there were no major dents or body damage, the prep work and paint job were quite reasonable at approximately \$2,600.

**4** Out of the paint shop, our Ranchero looked great, but naked without its funky graphics. The Maaco shop provided very good value for the money. While not necessarily a concours-quality paint job, it's smooth, shiny and was completed relatively quickly. For budget projects like ours, it was the right way to go.



"Keeping the graphic and the body surface lubricated is the key," Kotanski said. "It temporarily deadens the sticking action of the graphic, allowing it to be moved and adjusted."

Soap and water is generally the method for this lubrication, but Phoenix Graphic also offers a gel called Slide-On that is thick and remains "wet" longer. Most automotive graphics are made from the same couple of automotive-grade materials, which are mostly supplied by 3M. This means whether you're installing a billboard graphic on

a '71 'Cuda, the hood bird on a '77 Trans Am or the GT stripes of a '77-'79 Ranchero, the application process is the same.

We ordered the correct gold-color graphics and a bottle of Slide-On from Kotanski, and then set about the task of adding large, gaudy, '70s-style graphics to our big ol' Ford. As we learned, patience is the key to achieving professional-looking results.

Admittedly, we made a few mistakes on our first-time attempt, but in the end, the installation looked great. We

do have a few words of wisdom for the novice, however:

- Lubrication is essential, but go easy on gel-type products, such as Slide-On — a little goes a long way and on a big vehicle like the Ranchero, we were down to the last few drops by the end.

- If the graphic and paint surface are well lubricated, the graphic is fairly easy to adjust and remove; it should be as straight as possible before attempting to squeeze-out the excess air or lubrication.



**5** The graphics are grouped together on several individual sheets. Before cutting them out, we spread the sheets on the floor to let them acclimatize.

**6** Before sticking anything to our Ramblers' freshly painted tanks, we earlier printed "before" photos of the truck to reference the original placement of the graphics. Because we were nervous about installing larger graphics, we started with the smaller, more manageable graphic for the tailgate. We prepped the area by thoroughly cleaning it of dirt and oil.

**7** We used masking tape to provide a lower-edge reference point for the graphic.

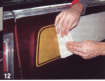
**8** We then cut the graphic from its mounting sheet. We tried to cut close to the edge of the graphic, but not too close. We wanted a little "wiggle" room to play with when installing it.

**9** We applied Slide-On gel directly to the vehicle body where the graphic was to be installed. As we found out, a little goes a long way. In fact, we applied too much at first.

**10** At the moment of installation, the graphic on its backing paper is pulled away from the waxy mounting sheet.

**11** While the lubricant was still wet, we positioned the graphic on the body and began to lightly press on it with the plastic squeegee included with the graphics kit. It's basically a body filler-type squeegee. The idea is to apply pressure, working outward from the graphic's center, to smooth the graphic and force trapped lubricant to the edges.

**12** It was hard to wait the recommended few hours before removing the backing paper, but we followed the kit's directions to the letter. The backing paper was removed by pulling it slowly back on itself and set at a 45-degree angle. A couple air bubbles were apparent as soon as the backing paper was removed. With the tailgate graphic as — and straight, as less — we were encouraged to continue with the larger body-side graphics. So, we cut out these next.



• Tape-marks and other measurements made prior to installation of the graphic are a huge help in lining things up correctly on the first try.

• A body filler squeegee makes an excellent squeegee. Our graphics kit came with a similar item, but with two people working on the project, we needed an extra tool and the squeegee was the right one.

• Work the squeegee slowly, but firmly. If you go too fast, wrinkles can occur — believe us on this one!

• Stubborn air bubbles can be fixed with a tiny pin prick, but resist the urge to do this immediately. Let the graphics sit untouched for a few days and many of the bubbles will shrink or disappear altogether.

It's this last point we really want to emphasize. On a vehicle with such large graphics, air bubbles are all but inevitable. And, when you have all the graphics applied, you'll see plenty of them. It initially looks terrible — we immediately set out with a couple of sharp pins to correct them



**13** Masking tape wasn't much of a help when applying the body-side graphics, because they contained a tapered and curved section that made judging the correct position difficult. We relied on the "before" photos and lined the graphic up the best we could manage. Then, of course, came the squeegee action with the spreader. The lower-body graphics were slightly easier to install than the larger upper-body decals. Interestingly, the '77-'79 Ranchero GT's decals didn't extend all the way to the bottom of the rocker panels; they

— but restraint is the watchword here.

We forced ourselves to walk away for a couple days and came back to find the great majority of bubbles had receded or disappeared. We pin-pricked the few remaining bubbles and called the project done.

The final results look professional and give the Ranchero an all-new appearance. It also was a satisfying project that took the better part of a day, but cost relatively little. In other words, it was a DIY project that paid big dividends for comparatively low investment.

Those are the types of projects we really like. ■

ended just below the door line. The remaining section of the rocker panel was painted gold. So, after the decals were applied, we took the truck back to the paint shop to shoot the gold paint.

**14** Again, when it was time to remove the backing paper, it was pulled slowly and carefully back over itself. We had gotten much better with the Slide-On gel at this point and there were fewer air bubbles to deal with. While some air bubbles can be

forced to the edges of the graphic, take our advice: let them sit for a few days, particularly in the sun. Most will shrink down to nothing. Stubborn ones can be removed with a careful pin prick.

**15** Our budget Ranchero resto looks like a million bucks with the finishing touch of original-style graphics over new paint. You can spend more restoring cars, but this project has been just as fun and rewarding. And everyone owns a daily driver.

## SOURCE:

Phoenix Graphic  
488 S. 79th St.  
Chandler, AZ 85226  
(800) 941-4558  
[www.phoenixgraphics.com](http://www.phoenixgraphics.com)