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## Sign company shifts HQ to Houston after buyout

BY MOLLY RYAN / REPORTER

After a brief hiatus from the technology world, Houston entrepreneur Robert Marsh is back in action with a \$10 million-plus investment and plans to add 100 local manufacturing, marketing and administrative jobs by the first quarter of next year.



Robert Marsh

The former founder and CEO of Everyone's Internet, or EV1, just purchased eSigns.com, a Michigan-based custom sign and banner company, which he hopes to transform and expand when he moves the company's headquarters to Houston. Marsh acquired eSigns in late April, and in addition to keeping the company's 24-person Michigan plant in operation, as the new CEO and a significant investor, he intends to pursue a rapid expansion plan in the Houston market with a new management team.

This includes a new 62,000-square-foot manufacturing plant and headquarters near Interstate 45 and North Beltway 8, which Atlanta-based Industrial Developments International Inc. is constructing. Marsh expects to staff the facility with around 35 employees when it opens in August. He also plans a new Las Vegas facility for 2013.

Marsh has high hopes for the company's future sales revenue. With millions of dollars of investment, he expects revenue to jump from \$5 million to up to \$24 million in 2013.

eSigns has a different business model than most traditional signage companies, Marsh said, which face an extremely competitive market in Houston, along with what some say are highly regulated exterior signage laws.

"Our presence is national in scope," he said. "... Any restriction by regulation in one locality will have very little effect on our performance. In addition, many of our products, such as A-frame signs, banner stands, window banners and indoor banners, are not affected by such regulation. ... The addition of products such as T-shirts, custom-printed tents and table covers, rubber stamps and flags will boost our growth trajectory."

Furthermore, Marsh said he is confident in eSigns' established technology, which allows customers to design signs and banners online and provides a cheaper, faster turnaround time than other manufacturers. eSigns can complete and ship a sign or a banner in two days, while a traditional sign shop may take about three days, Marsh said. It is also less than half the price, he said.

Because of the low cost and the quick delivery, Marsh said eSigns will target small and mid-size businesses.

"We will fulfill their needs to grow and foster business with a value-priced process," he said. "It's not just about signs, it's the least expensive form of advertising they can engage in."

Marsh chose Houston as the new headquarters of eSigns because the company already has clients in the area, and he said it is a good location from which to ship products around the country.

But established Houston companies don't see a big future for eSigns' types of products in local or surrounding markets.

National Signs, a 95-person Houston-based sign company that specializes in making signs for the health care, worship and auto industries, took its focus off smaller retail companies about seven years ago, said Al Ross, founder and CEO.

"It's a crowded field and a shrinking market," he said. "... A lot of banners and temporary signage are prohibited in the city of Houston. We are not seeing that market increase at all."

### ESIGNS.COM

**HQ:** Houston  
**2011 REVENUE:** \$5 million  
**TOP EXEC:** Robert Marsh, CEO  
**EMPLOYEES:** 24  
**FOUNDED:** 2008  
**BUSINESS:** Signs  
**OWNERSHIP:** Privately held  
**WEB:** esigns.com

His company, which he sold his ownership stake in to a private equity firm last month, sees a future in LED signs, since they are low maintenance and are energy-efficient.

Sandy Gaitz, president and CEO of 4DSignworx LLC, a more than 40-year-old Houston business, said he has grown his business by creating high-end specialty signs. The other types of signage markets are too saturated in Houston, especially the paper signs and banners market, which has a lot of small companies that get by on cheap single-order items, he said.

Marsh said he is confident in eSign's business model, especially since it has some similarities to his former successful Houston business venture, EV1. He left EV1, his fast-growing Houston-based dial-up Internet provider and Web hosting company, when it merged with The Planet, a Dallas-based hosting firm, in 2006. During his break from the technology world, he formed RM Brothers Development LLC and Cottage Classics, both home development companies.

Now that he is back in the technology market, Marsh said he is excited to once again work with small businesses.

"At EV1, we had thousands of businesses selling Web hosting through our software," he said. "... eSigns has a lot of parallels to what we built before. We are empowering small and medium businesses."