Introduction

Vehicle wraps have emerged as an affordable and effective alternative to traditional advertising. Instead of paying top dollar for a 30-second television commercial or a one-month highway billboard advertisement, you can purchase a solution that lasts for years for a fraction of the cost.

Vehicle advertising allows you to turn your car, van, or box truck into a moving billboard for your business. With an eye-catching design and detailed messaging, a vehicle wrap gives brand exposure to thousands of potential customers, whether you’re driving on the highway or parking in areas with heavy foot traffic.

Use this Vehicle Wraps Buyer’s Guide to learn more about:

- Pros and cons of vehicle wraps
- Designing a wrap
- Proper installation techniques
- What to look for in a vendor
- Detailed pricing information

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Pricing guidelines

The size, level of detail, and type of vehicle wrap you choose will all impact your final price. A rough rule of thumb is to expect $5 to $16 per square foot of coverage.

Some sample prices are below – more details are on page 7.

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**Pros and cons**

It’s important to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of vehicle wraps before making a purchasing decision.

The primary benefit of using car wraps is that they provide the lowest cost per impression of any advertising method. Both the American Trucking Association and the Outdoor Advertising Association of America (a nonprofit group that tracks advertising statistics) indicate that vehicle wraps cost about $1 per thousand impressions (CPM). Compare that to $2 CPM for static billboards or $12 CPM for a one-day quarter-page newspaper ad, and it’s no wonder that the vehicle wrap industry is steadily growing.

This potential exposure for your business can be valuable, but it comes at a cost. Quality vehicle wraps start at $2,000 to $3,000 and can increase, depending on the size and model of the vehicle and the design you choose.

**Pros**

**Significant exposure** – According to studies from the Traffic Audit Bureau for Media Measurement (TAB), a vehicle wrap can generate 30,000 to 70,000 views per day.

**Long lasting** – Applied wraps typically last three to five years, allowing you to get the most for your investment.

**Protects finish** – A wrap can help preserve a vehicle’s finish without hurting the resale value. Some customers even purchase one-color wraps in lieu of repainting their vehicles.

**Easy removal/repair** – A professional installer can cleanly remove a wrap and eliminate all traces of the installation. If you need to make changes to an existing wrap, the installer only needs to replace individual panels.

**Exclusivity** – Get the full benefits of advertising your business without sharing space with other advertisers (as you would with promotional mailers or rotating billboards).

**No bidding process** – You’ll have no competition with other businesses to advertise in prime locations.

**Increased visibility for frequent drivers** – Mobile advertising becomes increasingly more valuable for companies that put vehicles on the road frequently (such as delivery services or bus companies).

**Cons**

“**Sticker shock**” – Each vehicle wrap installation requires an up-front, nonrefundable investment of a few thousand dollars. You need to be aware of the cost before considering the potential value.

**Age and wear over time** – Although vinyl manufacturers guarantee the material for 5 to 10 years, the actual life span of a vehicle wrap will be considerably less. In addition, wraps that stay on vehicles longer than three years tend to bond more strongly to the surface and will make wrap removal more time-consuming.

**Difficulties with damaged or repainted vehicles** – Wraps adhere best to vehicles with factory-finish paint jobs and no major damage. Vinyl won’t stick to repainted vehicles, and significant dents or other exterior damage on a vehicle increases the potential for unsightly wrinkling, lifting, and bubbling.
Tracking difficulties – There is no clear-cut way to measure vehicle wrap performance. You may be able to look at basic statistics, like local highway or foot traffic data, but that won’t provide specific information about how your wrap performs.

Limited short term potential – If you regularly use vehicle wraps to promote sales and special offers, you’ll incur significant ongoing expenses due to the need to constantly alter your wraps.

Types of vehicle wraps

Vehicle wraps are printed on sheets of cast or calendered vinyl. The primary difference between the two vinyl wraps is durability. Cast vinyl is best for long-term use of 1 to 5 years; calender vinyl is appropriate for short-term wraps lasting just 3 to 12 months.

Cast vinyl is a premium material that stretches easily to best conform to the vehicle’s surface. When brushed over with a clear laminate, cast vinyl provides a paint-like finish on cars, buses, and even boats.

In addition to increased flexibility, vendors prefer cast vinyl because the sheets don’t shrink much during manufacturing, and also because they maintain colors better during printing. However, cast vinyl wraps are considerably more expensive than calendered material and isn’t recommended if you need a vehicle wrap for less than a year.

Calendered vinyl has strong “memory” – it snaps back to its original form after being stretched. This means it doesn’t conform as well to vehicles. It’s also difficult to match colors. But calendered vinyl is much cheaper than cast material, and it can be produced in greater quantities. This makes it an acceptable solution for vinyl wraps lasting only a few months – especially if used on flat surfaces such as the side of a box truck – but not for long-term advertising.

Vinyl wrap methods

Vendors offer different methods for wrapping your vehicle, depending on how much surface area you wish to cover.

Complete wrap – Covers the entire surface of the vehicle. Includes perforated window film (known as “window perfs”) that covers glass surfaces without impacting the driver’s visibility.

Half wrap – Covers half the sides of the vehicle and extends around the back. Half wraps may also include a logo for the hood.

Window graphics only – Graphics printed on window perfs.

Vinyl lettering/spot graphics only – A simple and inexpensive solution that may include 1 to 2 colors, a company logo, and/or a call to action on the side of the vehicle.

If you’re unsure which wrap method works best for your vehicle, an experienced vendor can help.

Starting a vehicle wrap project

Your vehicle wrap provider needs as much information as possible about your vehicle before work can begin on the design.

Start by providing the year, make, and model of your vehicle. Wrap providers use special software that grabs the precise measurements of most vehicles and pulls them into a design template. Make sure to note specifics about the vehicle, such as whether it’s a convertible or whether you’ve made aftermarket modifications that won’t appear in most databases. If you’re wrapping a leased vehicle, you may need to provide documentation that the wrap won’t violate your leasing agreement.

Next, determine the look and feel of the design. Start with a general idea of what you want the wrap to display: sales messages, photographs, splashy designs, or calls to action. Experienced vendors will have suggestions for what works best for businesses like yours, but your input is necessary to create a finished product you’ll be happy with.
Most vendors will create a design for you from scratch. If you supply some of your own artwork, make sure it’s high-resolution – at least 300 dots per inch (DPI) – and sent in a file format that the dealer can work with. Never send logos or images taken from your web site – they offer very poor resolution and quality.

If you don’t know how to create artwork in the appropriate file formats, contact the company that prints your business cards or letterhead. It may be able to provide you with electronic files to send to a vehicle wrap vendor.

Wrapping vehicle windows

If your design covers the vehicle’s windows, the vendor will print the design on window perfs, which allow you to see through the covered windows while driving. You’ll have to decide if you want the window perfs laminated or not.

Laminate protects the material from blemishes, harsh weather, and chemical damage, but the added thickness can make visibility hazy. Non-laminated window perfs provide a clearer view most of the time, but can greatly impair visibility during inclement weather.

If you live in areas with frequent snow or ice, it’s best to avoid window perfs altogether. Using an ice scraper to remove ice from a window perf could scratch, stretch, and even possibly tear the material.

Creating vehicle wraps

There are four main steps to creating vehicle wraps: designing, proofing, printing, and installing.

Designing

The design work is the longest part of the vehicle wrap process. It can take anywhere from 5 to 40 hours, depending on the complexity of the design and style of vehicle. Certain graphics may have to be specially cut and contoured to fit parts of the vehicle, which can take longer.

Proofing

Once the design is ready, the vendor creates an electronic or printed proof of the wrap. It’s important to carefully examine the proof for any mistakes you find and immediately note any changes you want made to the final wrap before printing. Any changes you have after the wrap goes into final production can delay turnaround and add significantly to your costs.

Printing

Vendors print the finished design on 48- to 60-inch-wide vinyl sheets using a large-format, solvent-based printer.

These printers produce vehicle wraps and other signage at a very high resolution. Complete vehicle wraps are typically printed in multiple panels and carefully pieced together during installation.

After printing the wrap, the vendor sets it aside for a few hours to “gas out.” This prevents the vinyl from bubbling or wrinkling during application.
Installing

Before the vendor can begin installing your wrap, your vehicle needs to be thoroughly cleaned so that the wrap will adhere properly. Taking it through a high-pressure car wash that uses powerful detergents should clean off most grime and debris.

Once cleaned, the installer carefully aligns the vinyl panels to ensure proper fit and applies them to the vehicle. The installer uses a small tool like a heat gun to stretch and reposition the vinyl, and a squeegee to eliminate imperfections. When finished, he may apply a UV-coated laminate to the surface to protect the wrap and provide a glossier finish. This process also makes the wrap easier to remove when you no longer need it.

It’s important to note that installers rely on sharp razors to manipulate the vinyl and remove excess material around door handles and crevices. Even with expert installers, there’s some potential for minor nicks and scratches to the surface.

Caring for your wrapped vehicle

To keep the wrap clean, hand wash the vehicle regularly with soap, water, and a clean rag. Avoid high-pressure or bristle-based car washes that could lift up or tear the wrap, as well as waxes that could remove the laminate or minimize the wrap’s adhesion.

Wrap alterations and removal

One of the benefits of a vehicle wrap is that you can replace or repair part of the design without replacing the entire wrap. This is helpful if your wrap becomes damaged, or if you want to update or add messaging to the design.

Contact your vendor and describe the changes you want. The technician will access a computer-generated version of the wrap and pinpoint which panel needs to be reproduced. The vendor then prints an overlay piece that inconspicuously covers the old piece and becomes part of the overall design.

Wrap removal

Your vehicle wrap should last you 3 to 5 years, depending on how well you maintain it. When it’s time to remove it, you can do the job yourself or take the vehicle back to your wrap vendor.

Remove the wrap by heating one of the corners with a heat gun until it starts to separate from the vehicle. If you don’t want to work with a heat gun, you can buy a special solution to loosen the wrap, but removal can take longer and may leave more residue behind.

Slowly pull the wrap off the vehicle while continuing to heat the vinyl. This will help the vinyl come off in large, easily removable sheets. Repeat the process until you’ve removed all the panels. If the wrap leaves residue behind, use a citrus-based cleaner or paint thinner to wipe it away.

Selecting a vinyl wrap dealer

Vinyl wrap vendors can range from companies that focus solely on creating and installing vinyl wraps to sign shops or graphic design companies that offer wraps as an additional service. Both can offer quality products and services, but companies that work exclusively with wraps typically have the most experience. However, you may pay a little more for that level of experience.
Wrap certification

When shopping around for the right vehicle wrap vendor, it’s important to find one that is certified by one of the top vinyl manufacturers in the U.S. Manufacturers like 3M, Avery, and Oracal – and distributors like Fellers that work with multiple brands of vinyl – provide certified training for vendors to ensure that they learn the best methods for applying vinyl wraps.

To become certified, vendors go through an intensive multiday course to learn each aspect of a vinyl wrap installation – from properly aligning and affixing the material to wrapping complex angles and rivets. Once vendors complete training, the manufacturer certifies them and lets them promote their new status to potential customers. By working with a certified vendor, you can have increased confidence that the job will be done properly.

STOKED GRAPHICS is certified by Fellers
www.fellers.com

Conduct a site visit

If possible, arrange a visit to the vendor’s facilities. This lets you watch various stages of wrap production and the level of attention that goes into each step.

Observe the processes of designing, printing, and laminating wraps, and examine the finished product for quality. Try to view an actual installation, and take note of the installer’s attention to detail. Does the installer frequently reposition the graphics to get the right fit? Are there any noticeable creases or bubbles in the material after each panel is applied? How careful is the installer when cutting away excess material? This will give you a good idea of the type of service you can expect.

If you can’t visit a wrapping facility, ask the vendor to provide a finished sample of a wrap panel so you can review the material and quality and envision what your wrap may look like.

Other things to look for

In addition to certification, there are other significant signs of quality and reliability you should look for in a vehicle wrap provider.

Since the average cost of a wrap will be similar across multiple dealers, look for ways vendors distinguish themselves from others. Can you meet with the vendor to discuss different design possibilities? Can the designer make suggested changes quickly? Will the vendor walk you through the finished job to ensure that you’re happy? You want to make sure you select a company that is committed to making you comfortable with the purchase.

Be wary of dealers whose prices are far lower than their competition. A dealer who quotes a rate half as much as your other bids should raise a red flag. Companies that offer cut rates are unlikely to stay in business long, and may not be around if you have problems down the line.

Finally, ask the vendor about the warranty. Policies vary from vendor to vendor, but you’re typically covered for 1 to 3 years on exterior installations and one year on window perf installations. The manufacturer’s warranty covers the material for 5 to 10 years. Vendors’ warranties only cover installation failures due to their negligence (e.g., improper cleaning, faulty material cuts). Vendors are not responsible for wrap damage caused by acts of nature or customer abuse.
Vehicle wrap prices

Vehicle wrap vendors typically provide straightforward pricing – either a rate per square foot or a fixed dollar amount for the entire project. With either pricing model, your car wrap prices should include the entire project consultations, design work, materials, and installation.

Vendors typically charge $12 to $16 per square foot for cast vinyl material to wrap vehicles. Project complexity and total installation time dictates the total price. Simple installations on smooth, flat surfaces are less expensive, while vehicles with deep concaves or complex designs will push car wrap prices to the high end. Less expensive calendered vinyl costs about $5 to $8 per square foot.

Special requests – like rush delivery, proofs printed to the actual vinyl, or changes to the design post-proof – can add significantly to your total costs.

If your vendor provides a flat rate for the complete wrap, the costs typically vary based on the size and type of vehicle:

- Cars, compact SUVs – $2,000 to $3,000
- Large SUVs, vans, box trucks, Hummers – $3,000 to $5,000
- Buses, train cars, tractor trailers – $5,000 to $7,500
- Vinyl lettering, spot graphics, window graphics only – $200 to $500

Note that the above prices are estimates for high-quality cast vinyl, which is best for vehicle wraps lasting one year or longer. If the vendor uses calendered vinyl for shorter-term wraps, expect your costs to drop by 40% to 50%.

If you need to wrap five or more vehicles, most vendors will offer volume discounts of 10% to 15%. You'll not only save money by wrapping multiple vehicles at once, but you'll also keep the design and messaging constant for your entire fleet.

Other vehicle wrap costs

Some vehicle wrap vendors provide complete design and print services but use outside installers to apply the wrap. Expect to pay about $400 to $800 (or $50 to $85 per hour) for third-party installers.

Replacement panels to cover up damage or replace outdated information cost $12 to $16 per square foot – about the same as new projects. It's important to find a certified installer to apply replacement panels, as a sloppy or misaligned installation could void the manufacturer's warranty on the vinyl.

When it’s time to remove a vehicle wrap, you can typically do it yourself with a few tools and some patience. However, if you want to ensure the cleanest removal possible, we recommend having a vendor remove it. For $50 to $85 per hour, a vehicle wrap vendor can carefully remove the vinyl without damaging the finish or leaving residue behind.
Vehicle wrap tips

Here are some final suggestions to help with your vehicle wrap purchase:

- **(Almost) anything goes.** Most vehicle wrap companies don’t have restrictions on the design or advertising material they’ll work with, but your state government might. If your transit advertising wrap will feature risqué or potentially offensive graphics or messaging, check local ordinances to ensure that you don’t violate any public lewdness laws.

- **Wrap third party vehicles.** Promote your brand by paying independent drivers to wrap their vehicles. For $100 to $300 per month, you can find people who are willing to advertise your company during their daily commute. You’ll still have to pay for the wrap design and installation, but you’ll be able to present your brand beyond your locality.

- **Complex decor.** Most providers simply wrap the vehicle exterior and windows with vinyl. For more creative and complex solutions, such as decoration or figures attached to the tops of vehicles, you’ll need to find specialized providers.

- **Go green with caution.** Make sure to ask your vendor what types of inks they use in their printer. While eco-solvent inks are friendlier to the environment, they may not last as long outdoors as traditional inks.