

Making Magic at California Sticker Factory

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By KAREN LELAND / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

PETALUMA, Calif. – Taking the family to San Francisco? Once you’ve shopped on Union Square, hopped a trolley to North Beach and chowed down on clam chowder at Fisherman’s Wharf, take a break from the city and explore where stickers come from.

Mrs. Grossman’s Sticker Factory, 40 miles north of San Francisco in this Victorian river town, is an active outing that satisfies the creative kid in adults and children alike.

The nation’s largest and oldest sticker factory, Mrs. Grossman’s prints 15,000 miles of stickers a year (enough to circle half the globe). It’s housed in an 110,000-square-foot building overlooking the Petaluma River.

The factory tour (geared toward visitors 5 and older) offers an opportunity to step onto the production floor and see stickers being printed and packaged.

The tour begins at the end of the production line in the Finishing Department. Here, brightly colored 5,000-foot rolls of stickers are cranked through a machine that slices and dices them into smaller packages for sale. Watch as stickers (such as red sleighs, yellow cars and black-and-white penguins) roll past and are converted into sheets of 12 each, the ideal size for a scrapbook, art or stationery store to sell.



Moving on, the tour arrives at the heart of the factory: the printing presses. Running day and night, they can print up to eight colors per image.

The magic of making stickers happens as plain white rolls of paper are transformed into sheets of bright red firetrucks with yellow stripes and dancing gray hippos sporting yellow dresses and pink hats.

The next-to-last stop on the tour is the high-tech LaserWeb machine – a factory highlight. It’s the only system in the world designed to laser-cut stickers.

While the tour guide explains how the 4,000-watt laser (powerful enough to cut through steel) works, video cameras project a live feed of flashing blue bolts of light traveling down to the copper template of a sticker and disintegrating (with 10,000 degrees of heat) whatever paper is showing through.

As visitors move from one area of the factory to another, they see piles of paper scraps and abandoned stickers.

“We are crazy for quality,” says Jason Grossman, company president and son of founder Andrea. “We take stickers that are not perfect and donate them to hospitals or recycle them.”



Waste stock, he says, goes to a Michigan firm that converts it into fuel pellets for electrical generating plants. The company also uses water-based inks and energy-efficient bulbs, he says.

The factory part of the tour ends at the 30-foot-tall Wall of Stickers, where 3,000 miles of stickers are stacked in large rolls on blue metal shelves. Hundreds of stickers, from Thanksgiving turkeys to tennis balls, can be seen waiting to be sent to the finishing area.

At this point, visitors are ready to roll up their sleeves and get into some sticker action. Mrs. Grossman's accommodates the urge by concluding the tour in the Arts and Crafts Classroom. Here, everyone gets a generous package of stickers, cards and instructions on how to make the most of the product.

For those inspired to take the fun back home, next door to the classroom is the company store where more than 700 varieties of stickers, scrapbook supplies and stationery products are sold.

Mrs. Grossman's is unique in that it both designs and prints its stickers. Although a stop in the design department isn't included in the tour, it does adjoin the classroom. Visitors peek through the glass windows to glimpse artists at work drawing, cutting and pasting their way to the stickers of the future.

One last stop is the Sticker Museum in the lobby of the visitor center. It houses a sample of every sticker ever created by the company, including the first one developed by Andrea Grossman at her dining table in 1979: a red heart.

Although the company has moved during the past 30 years from dining room to factory, the family feeling remains.

"You can't be too tense when you are selling teddy bears, balloons and hearts," Mrs. Grossman says with a smile. "We celebrate a lot."

- Karen Leland is a freelance writer in California.

TIPS ON MAKING STICKERS

Stick-to-itiveness: Making the most of crafts projects.

Need help on making the most of your stickers?

Here are tips from "Mrs. Grossman Tells All: The Ultimate How-to Book for Great Sticker Art!"

- *Scattered stickers can be confusing. Compose your stickers into little scenes that tell stories.*
- *Give stickers perspective by where you place them on a paper. If you want the image to seem farther away, place it higher on the page. If you want an image in the foreground, place it lower on the page.*
- *Overlap and layer stickers to give them a sense of depth and interaction.*
- *Allow your artwork to breathe. Leave space around and between stickers.*
- *Don't be afraid to cut up stickers. If a sticker doesn't create the desired effect, snip or trim it to get the piece of the image you need.*
- *Give stickers a lift. Use double-stick foam mounting tape to raise one off the paper.*
- *Changed your mind? To remove a sticker, use Un-Du, available at crafts stores.*

WHEN YOU GO

Mrs. Grossman's Sticker Factory is at 3810 Cypress Drive in Petaluma, CA, 94954. Visit www.mrsgrossmans.com

Factory tours:

Public tours at Mrs. Grossman's are available Monday through Friday by reservation. Departures January through May are at 9:30 and 11 a.m. and 1 and 2:30 p.m. From June through August, they're on the hour between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Cost is \$3 per person; free for younger than 3. Contact: 1-800-429-4549.