

Keyed into Houston:

Key Maps creates custom maps as art & business tools

BY BRANDI SMITH

When Steve Hubbs began working at Houston-based Key Maps two decades ago, you could say the map-making industry was a little different than it is today. The company's books of grid maps were the go-to navigational tool for everyone from emergency responders to pizza delivery drivers.

"There was definitely a heyday when we were the only source in town for any kind of maps," Hubbs laughs. "Then GPS came along."

These days, the grid maps can serve as an excellent backup when you're in a pinch.

"Throw a Key Maps book in your trunk or wedge it between your seats," suggests Hubbs. "If your phone's dead and you're lost, you'll at least be able to navigate your way through the streets."

When he acquired the company nearly three years ago, Hubbs understood the changing times meant he needed to adapt. The era of map books had faded, but the public's fascination with cartography had not.

"Maps are artistic and they're such useful tools," he says, adding that most of Key Maps' business now comes from developing custom wall maps for local businesses.

Every project starts with the company's base map, which includes every street in the greater Houston area.

"We can customize it. If someone comes in and says, 'Oh, we want school districts on there,' I can geocode the addresses and make the map accordingly," says Hubbs.

Those map can be turned into anything from wall art, to project boards, to calendars.

"It's a really great way to be more organized," says Hubbs. "People are drawn to it. You put a map on the wall, you're going to have meetings in front of this map."

He adds that they're especially popular for conference rooms. Key Maps has added aerial photographs of Houston, Dallas and San Antonio to its repertoire, expanding into new territory since Hubbs took over. The maps can have a variety of finishes, including lamination, which can be written on with permanent marker.

"That's great for any company where employees are running routes. You can color code each one and then put them on the calendar," Hubbs explains.

Another popular product right now is Key Maps' custom ranch and hunting maps. Aerial photography helps chart out different areas of a property. The printed map includes a key, as well as a calendar to help organize hunting and harvest periods.

Hubbs' maps, as you might imagine, are also popular within the commercial real estate industry. Hubbs says he recently completed a map of the City of Houston with tax increment reinvestment zones (TIRZ) highlighted for a client.

"I requested the data from the City. Once I got the GIS files, I was able to import them and make a beautiful wall map of those TIRZ," says Hubbs.

With the addition of a new plotter, Key Maps has been able to increase the size of its projects, now offering maps that can fill an entire wall.

"We can print on a permanent adhesive material. We recently printed a 40-foot by 20-foot wall map for a new company in town. They placed it on a curved wall, like super wallpaper," says Hubbs.

Every map can be customized with specific colors, locations and logos. What might be most impressive, however, is Hubbs' turnaround time.

"The whole process takes about an hour or so to make a really nice custom map," he says. "Before I owned Key Maps, it was a five- to 10-day wait. Now, we tell people, 'Go grab some lunch, come back and we'll have your map ready for you.'"

It's clear early in the conversation with Hubbs that cartography is a passion.

"It's a lot of fun every day. Every new project turns into an idea that turns into a standard or stock item that gets somebody else thinking," he says.

Hubbs' creativity is evident when you pay a visit to Key Maps' showroom along Durham Dr. The centerpiece is what used to be an old, 500-lb., steel light table.

"We put together a mural of the City of Houston using aerial photography, then put a line down the middle and stretched a ping-pong net across it. Now clients and guests come in and say, 'Oh, wow! That's awesome! And they want to buy the ping-pong table,'" laughs Hubbs.

Another set of products also catches the eye of visitors to the showroom: antique maps of Texas and the U.S. discovered when Hubbs took over the company.

"I found this sleeve of all these old maps. They were in a drawer, just forgotten," he says.

The originals are framed and hanging at Key Maps, though the prints are available online.

"They are these 200-year-old, hand-watercolored prints of Texas and the Battle of Galveston," says Hubbs. "I imagine some 15-year-old boy walking around in the sticker burrs of West Texas with this map in his pocket. Two centuries later, it ended up in my shop. That's really cool."

To check out the products offered by Key Maps, you can visit KeyMaps.com or its showroom at 1212 Durham Drive in Houston. ■

