

made of a porcelain-like coating he calls "MagnaLux" over steel. While his company, W.A. Krapf Inc. doing business as Magnatag, still sells a range of items including fabric boards and photo-posting panels, whiteboard systems are now his best seller.

To date, Magnatag has spent little on marketing other than mailing catalogs; most advertising comes through word-of-mouth. For instance, Magnatag said its role on "ER" came in the mid-1990s after a doctor advising the show recommended adding a Magnatag board to make the set feel real; he'd used one in his own ER. The medical boards are designed to track everything including patient room numbers and illnesses, and doctors on call. "Doctors refer to this thing as their real-time device," says Magnatag's marketing chief Doug Weeks. "If it's not on the board, it's not happening." The Magnatag kept its starring role several seasons until it was replaced by a clear board as part of a set redesign.

Magnatag's ability to offer such a wide variety of boards and still deliver quick turnaround is a byproduct of careful inventory control. Blank steel sheets coated with MagnaLux are shipped from a production facility (Mr. Krapf won't say where for competitive reasons) to Magnatag's 60,000 square foot factory in Macedon. There, the company preprints its most popular designs to have on hand. To determine how many to make, Mr. Krapf has carefully honed a formula taking into account the square footage of the steel, the time it takes for a print run and the projected sales for each design.

Notably, some boards are gentle variations on existing models. But by giving them new task-specific names he likes to dream up—like the "LongRanger 24-Month Strategy Planner" or the "Hot or Not Performance Tracker"—and tweaking the accessory offerings, Mr. Krapf has managed to make each board feel customized for a particular task. The goal, Mr. Krapf says, is to "raise the perceived value of a product so people think of it as a unique item that they can't compare anything else to."

A popular seller is the "Loan Tracker," which customers like Thomas MacNamara, a branch manager for First Horizon Home Loans, use to monitor the status of mortgage applications. "I've had 80 people on the board at one time, and I can look at it and then walk into my assistant's office and go bam, bam, bam, here's what's missing on this application," says Mr. MacNamara who paid about \$500 for his board.

Other Magnatags are more personalized, such as one purchased by the not-for-profit Montrose County Sheriff's Posse Inc. in Colorado to help track lost hikers, mountain bikers, and plane crashes. The organization, aided by grant money, ordered a \$4,000 Magnatag board 12' long by 8' printed with a detailed map of the area and its roads. Magnets represent vehicles such as helicopters, all-terrain vehicles and snow machines as well as rescuers on foot. Before getting their Magnatag, the posse depended on pocket maps.

"Now you can see the whole county and visualize the roads," says Mr. Huff who volunteers with the group. "Sometimes we have two incidents going on at the same time, and the board really helps to keep track of where everybody is."

To date, Mr. Krapf's business hasn't been threatened by technology, though that day may be coming. There are digital whiteboards that interact with software, and whiteboards whose musings can be stored on a computer hard drive. Thus far, he's sold boards only in North America due to shipping costs, but with the economy going global he's preparing for the day this will change and has hired a retiring army general, Robert W. Mixon Jr., to become president in October. He's also grooming his 22-year-old son Christian to take the reins eventually.

Still, for his part, Mr. Krapf believes whiteboards will weather the technological revolution. "Stuff on the wall is believable and carries authority. If you get something in email, you wonder if it has changed or when it was sent. The wall can't be a lie."