

YESCO keeps Las Vegas bright one light bulb at a time

By Aleza Freeman
Vegas.com

At the Young Electric Sign Company, it takes two service technicians to change a light bulb—one to operate a boom truck that reaches upwards of 160 feet, and the other to brave the heights and screw it in.

On the other hand, it only takes one light bulb to change a man.

Just ask Robert Atkinson, a YESCO service technician. Atkinson has been hooked on servicing signs since the first time he rode in the basket on the end of the truck's crane. Service technicians ride in cranes as well as scale down the sides of buildings using a type of rope ladder and harness designed for rock climbing.

"There's nothing like it," said Atkinson, a brawny but friendly man whose hands were blackened by grease. "It's scary the first time, but once you get your legs it's a ball. It's kind of like being Spiderman."

YESCO, a bright fixture in Las Vegas

YESCO has designed, produced and maintained a majority of the brightly-lit, iconic signs that line the Las Vegas Strip, downtown and beyond for a good portion of the company's 80-plus years, from historical relics like Vegas Vic, Silver Slipper, Stardust and Golden Nugget to modern marvels like Mandalay Bay, Rio, Palms and Wynn Las Vegas.

Innovative neon, fluorescent, LED and iridescent signs hang from the rooftops of 50-story-high mega-resorts and run up and down the sides of those same buildings. Enormous marquees distinguish the properties from the street. Signs also fill the insides, marking everything from slot machines to restrooms.

With the almost constant installation and removal of signs throughout Las Vegas (the city is constantly growing and sometimes imploding), no one at YESCO seems to be able to come up with an exact signage figure ... though they estimate that it's in the thousands.

"The number of signs?" asked Mike Richards, interior service manager for YESCO. "A lot!"

The company, started by Thomas Young in Utah in March 1920, is the only manufacturer in the United States that designs, assembles, sells/leases, installs, creates content for and services electronic displays -- all under one roof. This is abundantly clear when touring the buildings that comprise YESCO's Las Vegas site. They are just as much a testament to customer service, craftsmanship, and innovation as they are to neon tubing, metal siding and light bulbs ... lots and lots of light bulbs.

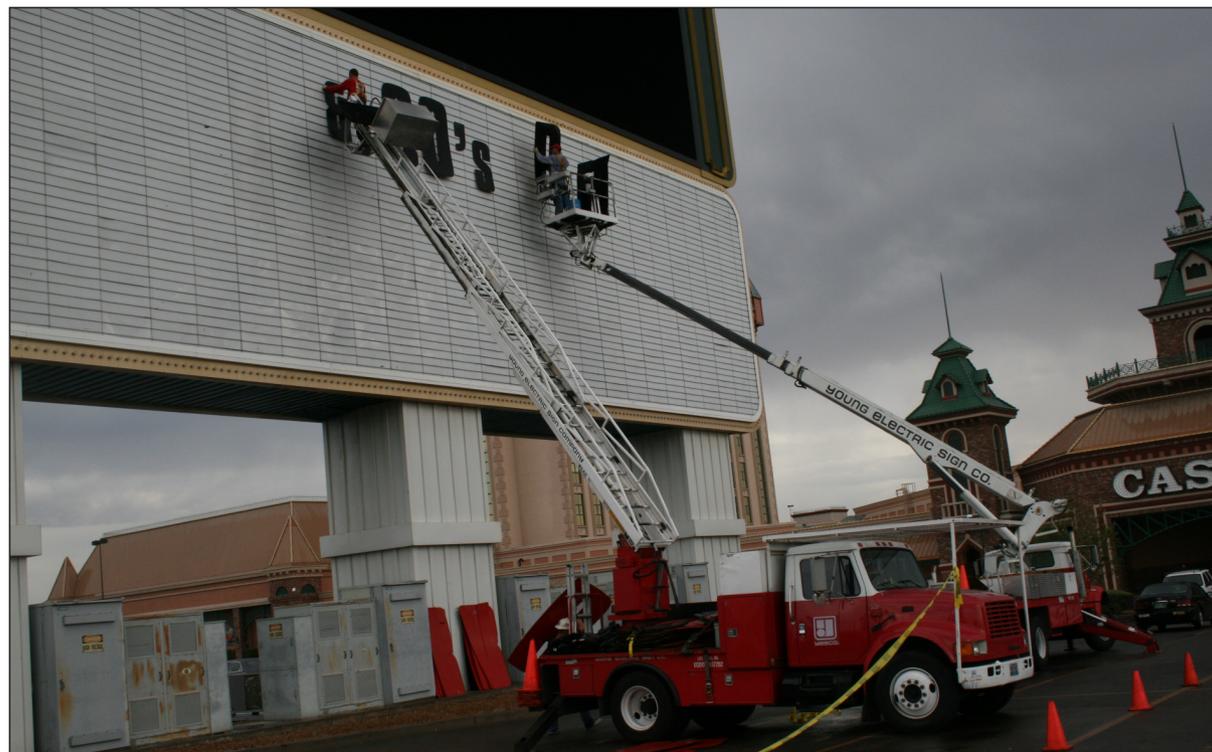


Photo by Aleza Freeman

Brian Smith, left, and Jason Nichols, right, repair a sign at Boulder Station.

"They were just rappelling like crazy monkeys."

— Mike Richards,
YESCO interior service manager

And these aren't your ordinary, everyday light bulbs.

"One bulb that you buy at Wal-Mart or Home Depot will last about 750 to 1,000 hours," explained Richards. "The ones we use last 50,000 hours. They are also designed to be subject to outdoor weather. If we used one from Wal-Mart, it might last a week."

With the current trend leaning toward energy saving bulbs, YESCO recently sent technicians to replace all the regular bulbs on the Rio Hotel's sign with more energy efficient ones.

"It looks different and it acts different," admitted Richards, "but it saves a whole lot of power."

Of course, every sign no matter how

big or small, old or new, energy efficient or not, eventually needs fixing, repainting or cleaning.

Have no fear, the sign patrol is here

Members of the YESCO Sign Patrol spend their evenings scouring the city for burned-out bulbs and other sign-related damages. The team then reports back to the service department with their findings, typically something like an outage or a broken panel.

"Every once in awhile someone shoots at the signs or throws beer bottles at them," said Charlie Rundquist, service department foreman. "It's a party town, so you know."

Then, like your friendly, neighborhood mailman, the service technicians show up rain or shine to make the repairs.

On a particularly stormy day, Brian Smith and Jason Nichols have the task of updating the letter paneling several stories up on the Boulder Station Hotel and Casino main marquee. But they're not too worried about the weather.

"It's a judgment call," said Nichols, and Smith agreed. "If the lightning got really close or we felt unsafe we'd shut it down," said Smith.

Since they work placing the letters on the marquee from the center out, they admit that the occasional humorous spelling error may accidentally slip through, but only long

enough for them to get a good laugh.

When they're not battling the weather, other on-the-job challenges can include burns and electric shocks. A lot of the guys, admitted Rundquist, have big calluses on their hands from touching hot lamps.

Then there are the pigeons.

"They get in the signs, make nests, have babies and die," said Rundquist. "They pile up inside the signs, and we have to work in that stuff."

The hardest signs to maintain are the more technically sophisticated ones like the Wynn sign, which has a "mechanical eraser" that moves up and down the sign, or the older ones like the Circus Circus sign.

"Really old signs have a lot of loose wiring and a lot of shorts," explained Smith. "You never know what you're going to get."

Over the years, things have gotten safer for the technicians. Historically, most of the signs have been built with pegs or other access points to allow technicians to climb on them.

But until more recent years, they didn't even use ropes or harnesses to climb on those pegs, no matter how high the building. "They were just rappelling," said Richards, "like crazy monkeys."

So next time you're enjoying the bright lights of Las Vegas, thank YESCO. Without this Las Vegas fixture, the city would likely be dark and dull.

YESCO's bright spots

Young Electric Sign Company has been at the forefront of the sign-making industry since 1920, expanding throughout the Western United States. Here are some of those bright spots, courtesy yesco.com:

1920

Thomas Young Sign Company founded.

1925

YESCO sold neon signs in Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Nevada. They began manufacturing neon tubing in 1927.

1932

Business extended to Las Vegas. YESCO acquired Nevada Outdoor Sign Company and set up a branch office in Vegas in 1945.

1948

YESCO installed neon spectaculars for the Pioneer Club, Golden Nugget and Eldorado Club creating the famous "Glitter Gulch" in Las Vegas.

1951

Vegas Vic, a 75-foot-tall, 12,000-pound sign, built and installed.

1969

Circus Circus Clown spectacular installed.

1975

YESCO opened a new plant in Las Vegas.

1980

YESCO installed the world's tallest freestanding sign (222.5 feet) at the Sahara Hotel & Casino.

1990

Award-winning Rio Hotel & Casino sign installed in Las Vegas.

1991

Las Vegas Hard Rock Café guitar sign designed and built.

1995

YESCO adopted "wedge base" lamp technology used to create Fremont Street Experience's 1,400-foot graphic display system in downtown Las Vegas.

2001

Bally's Las Vegas Casino sign installed at one of nation's busiest intersections.

2004

220-foot-high New York-New York Hotel & Casino main marquee installed.

2005

YESCO installed its Wynn Las Vegas sign, complete with an innovative "moving eraser."



Wynn Las Vegas