

Signs and your Business

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Have you considered the impact that your sign has on your business?

This publication discusses signs, what they can do for your business, and how they can be used to your advantage. A checklist for ordering a business sign is also provided.

Introduction

Signs are one of the most efficient and effective means of communication. Signs help people find you, they reach people who are passing by, and they present an image of your business. In short, signs tell people who you are and what you are selling.

Signs are such a powerful communication medium that it is hard to estimate how much they influence people. Other media need to grab the attention of the person receiving the message. Signs, however, can convey a message while creating a mood. It isn't necessary for people to give full attention to your sign in order to get the message.

What is a sign?

A sign is the most direct form of visual communication available. In fact, so many people use signs without a second thought that it is easy to overlook their importance. When we can't talk to people directly in a given location, we tack up signs: wet paint, beware of dog, entrance, garage sale, etc. Signs are the only form of mass communication directly available to everyone.

What can signs do for your business?

Signs perform three major communication functions for your business: they give information and direction, provide a format for street advertising, and build your image.

Signs give information about your business and direct people to your business location

Signs index the environment so people can find you. This is especially true for travellers, new members of your community, and impulse shoppers who may be on a journey to purchase a particular good or service which you sell. A primary source of customers for your business is the number of people who are new to your community or who may be just passing through. Your sign is the most effective way of reaching these potential customers.

Signs can compensate for poor location. If your business is located on a site which is not visible or in a building which does not correspond with the goods or services offered, your sign can overcome this disability. For example, most buildings are not built to conform to the design needs of any particular type of tenant. Without an effective sign, it is often impossible to determine what type of business is being conducted in a given building. In addition, when your site is located off a busy traffic artery or in an area which is not easily accessible, your sign can communicate to people who are passing on a busy street several blocks away. If you are located off a busy freeway but far from an exit, your sign becomes your main device for directing people to your business. High-rise signs are used when a business is located away from the routes potential customers normally use.

Signs are street advertising

Your sign provides an easily recognizable display format for the goods or services you are selling. Most businesses will find potential customers passing by on the street. The message conveyed by their sign reaches people who are close enough to make a purchase.

Street advertising also helps people to remember your business name and the products and services you sell. People tend to buy from businesses they know.

Signs can build an image for your business and help you identify with the market segment you are trying to reach.

Through materials and design, a sign can appeal to a given group of potential customers. For example, some firms attempt to capture the youth market; others are geared to senior citizens or unmarried single people and so forth. If you have a particular market segment that you wish to attract to your business, your sign can be an important means of bringing these people in.

The advantages of signs

On-premise signs are your most effective and efficient means of commercial communication because they are inexpensive, available, practical, easy to use, always on the job, and directly oriented to the trade area of your business.

Signs are effective

- Your sign is an integral part of your advertising program along with the other forms of commercial communication such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines and billboards. There are four basic criteria used to judge the effectiveness of these advertising media:
- coverage of the trade area;
- repetition of a message;
- readership of a message;
- cost per thousand exposures of a message.

Two other criteria important for the small business owner are:

- availability; and
- ease of use.

Let's see how signs measure up to the above criteria:

- Signs are oriented to your trade area. Signs do not waste your resources by requiring you to pay for wasted advertising coverage. The people who see your sign are the people who live in your trade area.
- Signs are always on the job repeating your message to potential customers. Your on-premise sign communicates to potential customers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, week after week, month after month, year after year. Every time people pass your business they see your sign. Seeing the message repeated over and over again will help them to remember your business.
- Nearly everyone reads signs. Signs are practical to use because nearly everyone is used to looking at them and using them, even small children. Studies have shown that people do read and remember what is on signs. When special items are displayed, sales increase for these particular items within the store.
- Signs are inexpensive. When compared to the cost of advertising in some other media, the on-premise sign is very inexpensive. Unless your trade area encompasses an entire city or region, where you must rely upon broad based media coverage, there is no better advertising dollar value than your on-premises sign.
- Signs are available to each and every shop owner. There is no need to schedule the use of your sign. Your sign is available to you whenever you need it and to be used however you please.
- Signs are easy to use. No special skills or resources are needed to operate a sign once it has been installed. If it is an illuminated sign, all you need to do is flip the switches and that may not be necessary with timing equipment. Once the initial expenditures are made, no special resources or professional services are needed. You only need to operate and maintain your sign.

Checklist for Ordering a Business Sign

Before you select a sign for your business, there are several things you need to consider. A competent sign company in your area can help you with the answers to some of these questions.

Who are your customers?

Potential customers for your business are people who live in your trade area. Most of your customers come from the immediate area, within a half mile to a mile of your business location. Trade areas come in many shapes and sizes, depending upon the business. Trade areas may also vary according to the season.

How do you get information on potential customers?

Create a dot map of your customers as soon as you open your business. You can easily do this by using a street map of your city and showing the addresses of people who stop in your store (and especially of those who buy) by putting a dot on the map of your city. Within a few months time, you will have a pretty good idea of the area from which you are getting your customers. Then, you will be able to decide what type of sign would work best for the people in that area. For example, if your customers can only reach you by car or you are located on a very busy street, the type of sign that you use will be very different than if you are located in a shopping centre and people must walk to your store from parking lots.

Get your street profile from a city traffic engineer. Since your sign is geared to people who pass your business, you can direct your message to potential customers if you know what type of traffic passes your door.

Your city traffic engineer can provide information which will tell you:

- where people begin and end their trips;
- how people travel;
- when people travel by time of day;
- why people travel; and
- where they park when they reach a destination.

Even small cities and towns have traffic volume maps available to tell you how many people pass by your business every day.

Know how many new people move to your area each year. This is a potential market for your business. This type of information can be obtained from any board of realtors, chamber of commerce or police department.

How are you going to communicate with the customers?

In order to communicate effectively, a sign must be noticeable and readable.

A sign must be noticeable. After a while, a sign becomes part of the landscape. It loses some of its ability to attract attention. If you periodically change some small design element or use changeable copy, your sign can continue to attract interest. You can use time and temperature devices or rotating and moving parts to maintain interest in your commercial message. Time and temperature units also provide a needed public service.

A sign must be readable. A sign needs to be large enough to read. You need to know how far a person is from your store when he first sees your sign and the real speed of traffic on your street. With this information, a competent sign company can use a formula to calculate the necessary size for your design and build you an effective sign.

What are you trying to say?

Decide on a message that is clear and simple.

Focus on key words. Choose one or two words which describe your business. Clever or strange names may only attract certain customers.

Be brief. The cleaner and clearer the message, the more impact it has. Lists or unclear names or symbols confuse rather than communicate.

What image are you trying to create?

The design of your sign is very important. Your sign tells people a lot about your business. Stark simple design and materials may suggest discount prices and no frills. Elegant and expensive sign materials may suggest luxury goods and services. Two basic design considerations are important when ordering a sign:

- **Physical elements** of sign design. These include size, placement, materials and structure. The size of the sign is important to your business. The biggest sign that you can afford may not necessarily be the best one for your needs. A sign should go with its surroundings. A sign which is either too big or too small will not communicate your message effectively. The number of signs in the surrounding area is also important. Too many signs compete with one another and reduce the effectiveness of your message by presenting an image of confusion to potential customers. The materials used for your sign determine its appearance and

performance. For example, differences in cost, appearance, colour, durability, flexibility and reaction to extreme weather conditions can be found in the many types of plastics available. The structure of a sign also contributes to its effectiveness. Pole covers and cantilevered construction help to deliver an attractive message.

- **Graphic elements** of sign design. Graphic elements of design include layout of the message, colours, lettering, shape, symbolism, harmony, and daytime versus night-time lighting conditions.

Legibility is a test of good design. If your sign is well designed, it will be easy to read. Legibility means that the letters or characters on the sign are distinct from one another. Some colour combinations of background and letters make it easier to read your sign while others make it harder to read. To test your sign's legibility, drive past your business and see if you can read it from a distance. Look at it both day and night. Some signs are difficult to read because of illumination problems such as glare from street lights, signs on nearby businesses, or shadows from nearby buildings. A well-designed sign blends with the environment, has a message impact and is easy to see.

How much should your sign cost?

You should consider several factors when deciding on the cost of your on-premise sign.

A sign is an investment. Your sign is one of the most permanent parts of your business and is exposed to weather and constant use. The average life of signs varies from five to eleven years, depending on type of materials used, construction and other factors. Find out how many years of service to expect from your sign. It pays to purchase good materials if you intend to use the sign over a period of years.

Maintenance costs - No business can afford to have a sign that is falling apart. A dilapidated sign tells the public that you don't care about your business image or their visual environment. Some types of signs are practically maintenance free while others need more attention. Find out how to replace burnt out bulbs or tubes in your sign. Find out who is responsible if the wind blows your sign down and someone gets hurt.

Energy consumption - New technology now makes it possible for some types of signs to save you energy without sacrificing effects. Ask about new energy saving bulbs and internal materials.

Owning or leasing - Many sign companies have programs which allow you to lease a sign for a given period of time and they will maintain it for you. This may save you money if you have a new business, especially if there is any chance that you might change your logo or business name in the first few years of operation. Statistics show that if a small business fails, it will happen somewhere between the first and second year of operation. Leasing a sign during this period of time might help you to save some of the initial capital you will need for operating expenses.

Custom or standardized - Some large companies offer standardized types of signs which are cheaper than signs which are custom designed and constructed. Many of these standardized units use ingenious design techniques to show creativity and individuality. The standardized units can often be arranged in different positions, depending on your needs. Some standard sign units use the highest quality materials and are designed to be relatively maintenance free. Mass production makes it possible for these units to be sold much cheaper than if they were designed and produced from scratch.

Signs communicate in a shared environment

Since a sign can send its message beyond the place where it is located, you must be sensitive to the effects of your message on others. Since you share your space with others, consider their rights and feelings. They are potential customers.

Consider city or town planning goals and regulations when you order a sign. Some types of signs are not allowed in some communities. Find out what the regulations are in your community before you discuss design with a sign designer. Most sign companies are well aware of the regulations in any given community and can guide you in selecting a sign that conforms to the law.

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For further information regarding starting a business, contact the

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