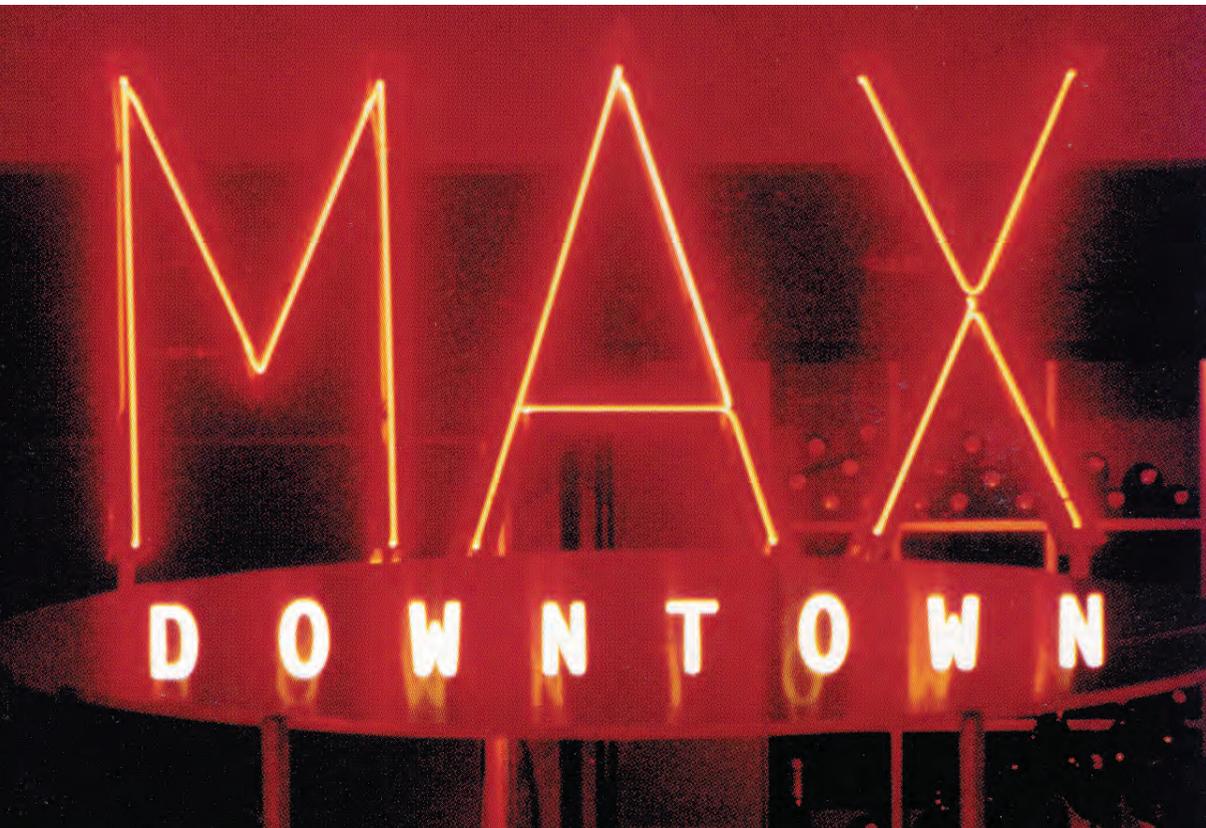
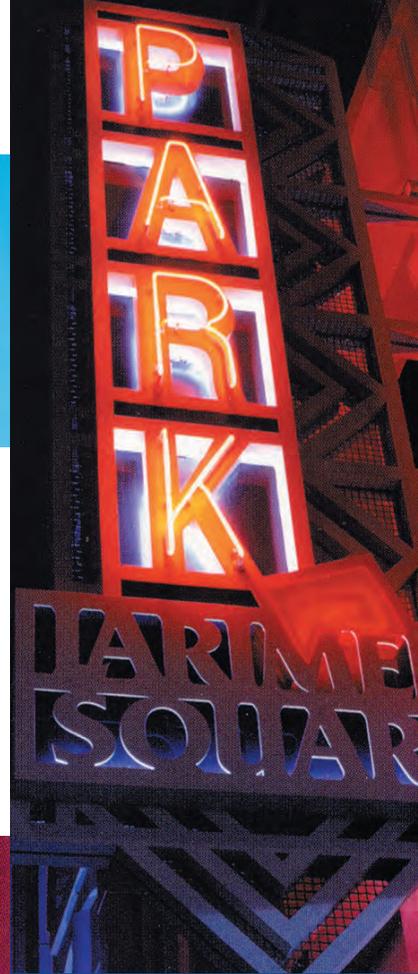




# What's Your Signage?

*How On-Premise Signs  
Help Small Businesses Tap Into  
a Hidden Profit Center*



*A handbook developed by*  
The New York State Small Business Development Center  
The Signage Foundation for Communication Excellence



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New York State Small Business  
Development Center



THE STATE UNIVERSITY  
*of* NEW YORK



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**Albany, New York**

**[www.nyssbdc.org](http://www.nyssbdc.org)**



**In conjunction with**

**The Signage Foundation  
for Communication  
Excellence**

**Sherwood, Oregon**

**[www.signagefoundation.org](http://www.signagefoundation.org)**



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*In memory of Norb Kremer  
& Kevin Boehrer.*

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## Introduction

In the mid-1990s, a husband-and-wife opened a small, storefront restaurant in southern California, and named it Frenchy's Bistro. By 1997, they found themselves at a crossroads.

Frenchy's is located in a suburban metropolitan area on a four-lane street with plenty of automobile traffic. A sidewalk runs in front of their entrance, which helped in attracting some of the pedestrians who shopped in any of the other small businesses in their neighborhood.

Business was moderate, but not great. The husband doubles as the chef, and his wife waits tables. In addition, they spent their remaining time on the numerous tasks faced by all small business owners: dealing with suppliers, handling the books, keeping the restaurant in compliance with the county health code, and on and on. They worked these long hours, like many small business owners do, with the dream of making their enterprise take off.

But it wasn't. Yearly gross sales had stabilized at around \$250,000. In addition, their minimal profit margin had seemingly peaked as well.

But what was the problem? The bistro had its share of regular customers from the immediate neighborhood, so it wasn't as though the quality of the food drove away business. Other advertising media were used, which resulted in some sales coming through the door.

There was a high auto traffic volume on the street, and adequate curbside parking available – but where were those drivers who noticed the restaurant, realized they were hungry, and stopped for a meal? Where were motorists who stopped at the paint store, and other businesses in the area? Where were those impulse sales that are so vital to retail and service businesses?



Unfortunately, we at the Small Business Development Center encounter many small businesses that find themselves asking those same questions. In many of these cases, the solution can be one that many businesses easily miss.

The answer for Frenchy's Bistro was changing the sign in front of the store. (More on them later.) Why change the sign? For one thing, a number of

studies have been conducted over the years, and their results consistently show that a well-designed, well-positioned, and well-maintained on-premise sign can have significant impact on a business' bottom line.

To illustrate this, consider this scenario: During a job interview, a man promises that, if hired, he could increase your annual sales by 3%. You'd want some proof, right? What if this same prospective employee offered research that he could boost sales by 34%, or, in the right circumstances, as much as 100%?

Before politely thanking him for his time, take a closer look at his resume:

- Will work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year;
- Will work out front, continuously reminding no less than 80% of those cars and people passing by of who you are and what you offer; and
- Will work for less than \$20 a day

This handbook was written with the small business owner in mind – **particularly those who are operating businesses in the retail or service sectors of the economy**, as they are particularly dependent on business-to-consumer trade. In addition, this text will focus primarily on **on-premise external business signage**. On-premise signs are distinct in look and intent from the two other major sign categories: billboards (also known as outdoor advertising), and temporary signs (those intended for use for a limited period of time),

which won't be discussed here.

Here's an overview of this handbook:

**Chapter 1, "The Importance of Signage in Your Community,"** addresses some of the common misconceptions about signage. In addition, this section will present compelling reasons why commercial signs help – and not hinder – the business community in which they appear.

After reading **Chapter 2, "The Role of Signage,"** you'll recognize the subtle ways in which a sign can communicate your overall marketing strategy, as well as brand your company's identity into the mind of the consumer.

Earlier, reference was made to a restaurant that showed increased sales as a result of installing a more effective sign. **Chapter 3, "The Effectiveness of Signage,"** will present analysis of a recent landmark study on that very trend. This section will also present information showing the cost effectiveness of signage when compared to other forms of advertising.

**Chapter 4, "Designing the Signage That's Right for Your Business,"** will discuss the numerous factors that should be considered in creating an effective sign: size, angle, color contrast, legibility, visibility . . . there are more than you think. In addition, the location of your business makes a huge impact on the kind of signage you should use. An overview of location factors will be

presented, as will a gallery describing the numerous kinds of available signs.

Sign companies are the professionals who help small businesses in designing, building, installing and/or maintaining a signage package. In addition, certain sign companies can be useful in obtaining the right permit for your sign, as well as acquiring variances to the local sign ordinance. **Chapter 5, “Obtaining Signage,”** provides additional information on the kinds of services offered by sign companies, and provides tips on how to choose the right one for your needs.

In developing and obtaining an on-premise sign, you will have to obtain a sign permit from your local planning board. These boards develop and enforce sign codes unique to where you do business. On occasion, the sign you want and the sign that the local code allows are entirely different things. **Chapter 6, “Legal Considerations,”** will address such areas as working with local planning boards; the need to be aware of your local sign ordinance; the Constitutional rights inherent in place-based signage; variances, and how to pursue them; and legal recourse in the face of disputes.

Signage is much more than a structure marking the location of a business. It’s a complex, interactive medium of communication. It deals with such disparate subjects as consumer psychology, advances in the science of illumination, traffic studies, the interaction of color

and physical materials – far more than can be covered here. Instead of trying to capture everything, this handbook is designed to provide the basics, in order to make you a more informed business owner when working with professional sign design companies, local planning boards, and your own marketing staff.

Also, the general scope of this book means that not every conceivable signage scenario can be addressed. You might live in a part of the U.S. with a very unique sign ordinance, or have state or city laws that are distinct from another region. Where possible, reference will be made to avenues of recourse you have at your disposal should you face a situation that this book does not address in depth. In addition, the chapter titled “**Contacts**” lists all of the lead offices of the Small Business Development Center program, as well as providing contact information for the International Sign Association, the leading trade organization for the sign industry in the country.

Effective signage has been proven to produce more customers for your business. After reading this book, you will become increasingly aware of the ineffective signage in your own area, and wonder how those businesses are surviving.

Don’t wonder about your own survival. Tap into signage, and the hidden profits they offer.

# CHAPTER 1

## The Importance of Signage

"My customers know where I am."

"I already have a sign – why do I need a new one?"

"Does a sign really make a big difference in sales?"

These responses are typical of business owners when the idea of a new on-premise sign is proposed. Signs are so common in our society that their importance can be taken for granted. As a business owner, you naturally spend a great deal of time where your business is located. You've walked in and out of your location so many times, with so many other business details on your mind, that things like your signage tend to blend into the background. As a result, you might forget that it's there.

As an entrepreneur, you must recognize that your business does not exist in a vacuum. Yes, it is there as a distinct entity, providing products and/or services to a buying public. However, it also resides within a community, alongside other businesses, other architecture, pedestrians, homes, and the land itself. The best signage is designed well enough to attract business, while at the same time respectful of the environment where it is meant to work.

This chapter will focus on the ways that signage is important within a community. The next chapter, "The Role of Signage," will dwell on how signage can be effective for your specific business.

### Catering To A Mobile Society

People in the United States pride themselves on their freedom to be mobile. Drivers in the U.S. drove over 1.6 billion miles in 2001 (see chart). In addition, our economy is a sophisticated, consumer-driven mechanism where billions of dollars are exchanged annually. A significant percentage of these transactions occur in the retail and service sectors, where businesses rely heavily on their on-premise signage.

#### Automobile Travel Statistics (2001) passenger car & motorcycle vehicle- miles traveled

Type of Road	Total Miles
Rural	607,077,000
Urban Interstate	235,944,000
Other Urban	785,930,000
TOTAL	1,628,951,000

*U.S. Department of Transportation, 2002.<sup>1</sup>*

Because of continued reliance on the automobile, it is estimated that 35 to 50% of the consumer population shops outside its local area (defined as a 5- or 10-mile radius from a given residential zone). Large segments of the American retail and service economy now serve as "points of distribution," where many customers – on any given day – visit a business for the first, and sometimes the only, time. In order to attract this large pool of potential customers, a clear and legible sign for your business is a must. If your sign lacks visibility, then it is likely that a consumer may forget your business exists, if it was noticed at all. Do all of your potential customers *really* know where you are?

Each March, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts what it calls the Current Population Survey. Among the questions in this survey is one that determines how many citizens have moved their residence in the past 12 months. Historically, this survey finds that anywhere between 13% to 20% of the population moves during a given year. The Census also reports that between 1995 and 2000, *close to half* of people over age 5 moved to a new address. Your community is constantly changing. Where would your business be if your regulars were among the people leaving the area? And do those who take their place know where to find you?

A mobile customer is generally someone in a hurry. Several years ago, Burger King conducted a survey over a period of a few months. It was done as a means of generating proof to present as evidence

in a legal action in California to prevent their freeway signs from being removed. The surveys were held at quick-service, family, and atmosphere restaurants. Participants were asked how they first became aware of the restaurant. Here are their results:<sup>2</sup>

mask the visibility of highway signs. For decades, sign codes have been designed with this belief in mind, supposedly for the public's own good.

A difficulty with this philosophy, however, is that there is no proof that it's true. Studies exist, how-

Participants' Responses	Quick Service (% of responses)	Family (% of responses)	Atmosphere (% of responses)
Saw it while passing	35%	26%	13%
Always knew	29%	27%	19%
Word of mouth	14%	30%	54%
Advertising	10%	6%	4%
All other	6%	7%	7%
Don't know	6%	7%	7%

What does all of this mean? The row titled "Saw it while passing" represents those mobile customers who stopped on an impulse. It demonstrates the importance of knowing that potential consumers – those whom you think know where you are – are constantly coming and going. You are constantly in need of replenishing your customer base. An effective sign does just that. It announces your presence, **especially** to those who are new to an area, and who are looking for a reliable provider of your product or service.

### Fostering Traffic Safety

All small businesses are subject to the sign codes written and implemented where they are located. There is no one, uniform set of ordinances that are followed throughout the U.S., but there are philosophies common to many town and city planners that help determine the sign code in their area. One of these is the belief that commercial signs are capable of compromising traffic safety, primarily in two ways: 1) they distract drivers, and 2) they

ever, that support the idea that on-premise signs by their very existence do not cause traffic accidents. Rather, danger comes from a sign that is restricted in communicating its message. Commercial signs in a community may be in accordance with their local sign code, but in reality be too small, or badly placed, or poorly lit for passing drivers to adequately respond. Instead, attempts to read the signs may result in risky driving practices.

In other words, sometimes it is the sign code that is dangerous, and not the sign itself.

For example, a 1985 report, titled "Pennsylvania Tort Claims Study," concluded that "signing deficiency" was a factor in 22 percent of the serious injury cases.<sup>3</sup> Further, such deficiency has been determined by the Federal Highway Administration to be the second leading cause of serious accidents on primary and interstate highways. And what is "signing deficiency"? It is the failure to provide information, in a safe and efficient manner, when and where it is needed by a driver.

In addition, a 1998 study by Richard N. Schwab, a former program manager within the U.S. Federal Highway Administration, stated that "[t]raffic safety is not jeopardized by the sign itself or some sort of stimulus overload; instead the culprit is inadequate sign size or lighting, or inappropriate placement, or a combination of these factors."

(A lengthier discussion of these and other factors that influence good sign design appears in Chapter 4, "Designing the Signage That's Right for Your Business".)

Another Federal Highway Administration (from 1969) report not only found that commercial signs do not adversely affect safety, but also that high-rise signs located at high traffic intersections **could actually enhance traffic safety**, provided that they are:

- noticeable or conspicuous from the background environment;
- legible (where the viewer can easily read the text or graphics); and
- recognizable (that is, the viewer can readily understand the sign's message)

In other words, traffic safety can be better promoted by notifying motorists where they are in relation to where they want to go, and assisting their entry to a business' premises, should they decide to stop. A sign cannot successfully do this unless it can be detected and read by a motorist in enough time to appropriately react while driving in traffic.



*The tired traveler from out of town would be hard-pressed to spot this hotel's unlit sign at night. On the other hand, the gas station's electronic message center and the auto dealership sign are very easy to read.*

One last point: if signs are perceived in certain sign codes to be risks to traffic safety, then why are there so many towns and cities that sell advertising space on public property (such as bus shelters, streetcars, or the buses themselves)? Were signs the anti-safety evil they are so often portrayed to be, transit agencies across the country would have long ago been sued out of existence.

## Enhancing Community Aesthetics

In the 1970s, the city of San Diego had a restrictive sign code that, among other things, banned all billboards within the city limits. The city also retroactively took ownership of them. As a way of measuring the impact of these measures, the city soon thereafter arranged for a survey to be included in all utility bills. The results surprised them: the public did not feel there was a sign problem in the city, nor did they support the ban on billboards. Most tellingly, the majority felt that the signs were useful, and good for business.

Other areas have recognized in their sign codes that a business district can be designed to be functional without necessarily being visually ugly. Barberstown, Ohio offered bonuses for custom sign designs. As a result, the town was able to gain the trust and cooperation of its local business community. In addition, it successfully revitalized its business district by, among other things, improving the look of its streets.

A sign code written to address these aesthetic issues must be written with a sense of purpose. Restrictions of signs in residential areas are welcomed, as people generally want their homes to be quiet and peaceful. However, those same restrictions should not be applied to areas meant for retail commerce.

The most obvious examples of this are locations that rely on tourism (for instance, Las Vegas or Times Square). There, planners recognize that commercial signage can improve the experience of a visitor to their city. Sign codes in these destinations are often written by these planners around a theme. Because of the commitment to commerce shown in these codes, the business community is more



*Painted murals and well-crafted signs are seen by most people as adding flavor to the cityscape.*

willing to subject their signs to a rigorous approval process. Visually appealing signage is generally the result.

The San Diego case is an example of a restrictive sign code that actually works against itself. The city believed that the banning of billboards made the city more livable. In an attempt to legislate how a community should look, the city wound up alienating its business community, not to mention the very public it meant to protect.

Signs are meant to attract attention! A business district handcuffed by a restrictive sign code is often bland, uninviting, and economically under-achieving. Fewer sales, over time, can result in a decreased property tax base. A decrease in tax revenues would surely impact a municipal budget. Smaller budgets frequently result in diminished services to the public. Given this, it's ironic that towns that wish to enhance the look of their community by strictly and unfairly regulating commercial signs might ultimately help in making the town less livable.

(More information on what makes a sign code "unfair" can be found in Chapter 6, "Legal Considerations".)

*As written earlier, the best signage is that which is designed well enough to attract business, while at the same time is respectful of the environment in which it is meant to work.*

*After reading this chapter, you should recognize that signs serve a significant purpose within our mobile American society. The next chapter discusses the role that signage plays in starting and/or growing your business.*

#### **ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 1**

1 U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. "Annual Vehicle Distance Traveled in Miles and Related Data," from [Highway Statistics](#), 2002. <[www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hs01/vm1.htm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hs01/vm1.htm)>.

2 U.S. Small Business Administration and The Signage Foundation for Communication Excellence, Inc. "Understanding the Value of Signage." [Signage for Your Business](#), 2001. [www.sba.gov/starting/signage/understand.html](http://www.sba.gov/starting/signage/understand.html)

3 Gittings, Gary L. "Tort Liability in the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation." New York, NY: Conference Proceedings: Effectiveness of Highway Safety Improvements, American Society of Civil Engineers, 1985.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Role of Signage

Recently, we asked Perry Powell, a Texas-based signage consultant to the car wash industry, what mistakes he commonly sees committed by his clients. "There's a mentality among small business owners – though not chains – when money is committed to building in a new location," he says. "They allot  $x$  amount of dollars in their budget to a line item called 'signs'. If a cost overrun occurs during construction – and those are not uncommon – then the sign budget is the first thing that gets cut."

The reverse of this thinking exists within certain large consumer-oriented corporations, who have studied the science of signage like few others. McDonald's is one such company. They recognize that the unique signage presentation at each of their locations helps emphasize in the minds of consumers one of the most valuable brands in all of business. To reinforce this branding, it helps that the very first thing they install at a new location – *even before they break ground* – is a sign.

McDonald's spends about \$40,000 on signage per location. Assuredly, there are few small businesses that can afford that. But trimming the signage budget in the here-and-now, while providing short-term savings, will have long-term consequences.



*Possibly the most effective forms of business signage ever developed have been the signature building and the integrated (or signcentric) site design. Each store helps build and reinforce the product or service in the mind of the consumer.*

Think of it. There are thousands of people who've never been to your door. The sign on your premises is your handshake with the public, and that handshake is the first impression being made on potential customers. Often, people judge the quality of your business on that first impression. What is your sign saying to them? Is it a blur of crowded text and graphics, illegible to drivers as they motor past your store? Does it readily and effectively tell passersby what you offer, or does it make sense only to you and your employees? Is your sign illuminated effectively? Is it being regularly maintained?

What role is it playing in your business? Ideally, it should perform at least these three functions:

- **A**ttract new customers
- **B**rand your site in the minds of consumers
- **C**reate "impulse" sales

### Attracting New Customers

Commercial advertising can briefly be described as an organized and measurable communication system designed to promote a product or a service. On-premise signage is but one method among many available to a business. Different types of small businesses require different marketing and advertising strategies. Given the expense, most small businesses cannot afford the major media advertising campaigns typically waged by large corporations.

However, your on-premise sign is an economical way to display and reinforce your message. You pay for your sign once, and it works for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On-premise signage has been proven to attract customers, and has also been shown to have significant economic impact.

### Signs Effectively Reach New Customers

Since 1997, the sign company Signtronix has sponsored a survey initiated by several independent small businesses in its community. Each business had a sign that had been installed in the previous 30 to 45 days. They then asked a random sampling of first-time customers a series of questions,

including "How did you learn about us?" Among other things, the survey revealed that nearly half of these customers learned about the business because of its sign. (More about this survey in Chapter 3, "The Effectiveness of Signage".)

### Economic Impact

Another study of on-premise signs was conducted in 1995 by the University of San Diego on behalf of the California Electric Sign Association and the International Sign Association. Part of the study analyzed the effect of certain variables, including signage, on southern California locations of a major fast-food chain. They found that, on average, the addition of even **one** on-premise sign resulted in an increase in annual sales of 4.75%. (Again, the next chapter will feature more on the cost-effectiveness and economic impact of on-premise signage.)

Today's small businesses have many ways to reach potential consumers with their message: network television, cable television, satellite television, the Internet, direct mail, radio, sports and event sponsorships, outdoor advertising, newspaper and magazine advertising, licensed merchandise, telemarketing – the list goes on and on. However, it is signage that can most effectively and affordably help a business tie its other forms of advertising together, and communicate to its target audience (those actually moving through its trade area).

In fact, without a sign to identify a business location, the money spent on other media is largely wasted.

### Branding Your Business

On-premise signs are a form of commercial advertising. Sometimes, it is the only indication of a business' location. Among retail businesses, it is the most ubiquitous of all advertising options. When designed effectively, a sign can combine with other media to help "brand" your business in the mind of a consumer. If your company has a trademark or a logo, it should appear alongside your business' name. Text and images on the sign should be repeated throughout your marketing mix, either when advertising through another medium (television, radio, the Yellow Pages, and so on) or within your organization (stationery,

catalogs, business cards, annual reports, uniforms, vehicles, etc.). The more consistently your message is displayed, the greater the likelihood that potential consumers will remember who you are, and what you're selling.

(Before we continue . . . what does it mean for a sign to be "designed effectively"? Signage professionals have identified three main guidelines:

1. It must be of sufficient size and height, and not be hidden or obscured by intervening traffic or other visual objects in the consumer's line of vision (power lines, streetlights, etc.).
2. It must display content (text and/or images) that is legible.
3. It must stand out from its background.

In other words, a sign should possess optimum **visibility**, **readability**, and **conspicuity**. More on these terms can be found in Chapter 4.)

If your business is part of a national franchise or chain, then you have the distinct advantage of benefiting from major media advertising. It's one of the reasons why many business owners buy into franchises with proven track records. Franchisors such as Burger King or Meineke Car Care Centers are extremely conscious of the role played by signage at their individual locations. These companies emphasize the repetition of an identical image at various places in the store, and also combine such imagery with national television media campaigns. This powerful psychological tool is applied to help increase a consumer's **recall** (how well a message is remembered within a short period of time) and **recognition** (how quickly a message is correctly identified) of their brands.

However, even if your business isn't part of a national franchise or chain, the right sign can still brand your company within your local economy. If your company image is accurately conveyed via text and/or graphics in your signage, and is reinforced throughout your organization, your business can develop "**top-of-the-mind**" **awareness** of your product or service in all who routinely pass by your location. If a consumer in your area was asked which business comes to mind in your industry, how likely would that person think of your company?

Details on how a sign company can help you design an effective image for your company appear in Chapter 5, "Obtaining Signage".

### Creating Impulse Sales

Today's consumer tends to purchase goods and services both by habit and by impulse. However, studies have shown that the majority of sales come from impulse buying. For instance, recent research from the University of California at Berkeley (which analyzed 30,000 purchases of 4,200 customers in 14 cities) found that 68% of purchases were unplanned during major shopping trips and 54% on smaller shopping trips.<sup>1</sup>

To take advantage of such a consumer, your business will need an effective sign to attract their attention. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the merits of using signs in combination with other marketing efforts to help "brand" your business in the minds of consumers. This is a long-term strategy, meant ultimately to create habitual visitors to your business. Signs, though, can also be helpful in attracting impulse buyers – those consumers who may not have originally intended to visit your store.

The Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) does a great deal of analysis on traffic habits. One of their studies attempts to estimate how selected business types (or what the ITE calls "business land uses") are affected by motorists' impulse stops (or, to use ITE terminology again, "pass-by trips").

#### Impulse Stop Percentages

Business Land Use	Impulse-Stop %
Shopping Center	
- Larger than 400,000 sq. ft.	20%
- 100,000 – 400,000 sq. ft.	25%
- Smaller than 100,000 sq. ft.	35%
Convenience Market	40%
Discount Club/Warehouse Store	20%
Fast Food Restaurant	40%
Sit Down Restaurant	15%
Service Station	45%
Supermarket	20%

From: Claus, J. and Claus, S., 2001.<sup>2</sup>

As the accompanying table demonstrates, the percentage of impulse stops varies by business type. While the table doesn't show every possible business type, it is clear that impulse trade is very important to many businesses. And because the stops are not planned, it is unlikely that drivers would stop without an effective sign to guide them.

The goal of any business is to attract the attention of potential customers, and its sign plays a role in convincing that potential customer to stop. Signage is often the only visible clue that a business exists. Sign industry professionals encourage businesses to adopt signage design so that it is the prominent visual feature of the building. They even have a word for it: **signcentric**.



*Signcentric design enables the entire site to function as a sign, giving a clear advantage to the business that uses it. For example, because of unique site design, quick service restaurants with multiple locations are recognizable to more consumers than single-site locations.*

Signcentric design has proven to be among the most effective forms of business signage. For example, Best Buy – the giant retailer of consumer appliances and electronics – understands this concept very well. The company deliberately uses on-premise signage as the prominent visual feature on the face of each of their building locations. The company recently ran a survey, and they discovered that about 17% of its customers were people who did not intend to stop there, but did. Certainly the signcentric design played a role in luring these unexpected customers into the store.

If yours is a business that is dependent on impulse sales (including, but not limited to, liquor stores, gas stations, discount motels, convenience stores, etc.), then that factor should certainly influence how you design your signage. The factors that you would need to consider (number of characters, size of text, use of illumination, etc.) are covered in depth in Chapter 4, "Designing the Signage That's Right for Your Business".

*This chapter introduces how the "ABCs" play a role in the signage used for your business. Along the way, it introduced the results to a variety of surveys, each showing how signage can be used in **Attracting new customers**; **Branding your business onto the minds of consumers**; and **Creating impulse sales**.*

*The next chapter focuses on still more surveys. This time, you will read data that gets to the bottom line – how, exactly, will effective signage impact your sales? Also, this next chapter reinforces a point made earlier: the on-premise sign for your business is the most cost-effective advertising option that you have.*

#### ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 2

1 Millner, Ian. "Burying the Myth of Impulse Buying." *Brand Strategy*, Sept. 2002, p. 38.

2 Claus, R. James and Susan L. Claus. *Marketing Aid MT-12, Signs: Showcasing Your Business on the Street*. Washington, DC: U.S. Small Business Administration, July 2001, p. 9.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Effectiveness of Signage

The focus of the previous two chapters has been to show how effective an on-premise sign can be for your economic community, as well as for your own business. A number of surveys have been conducted over the years indicating how a sign can help you **attract** new business, and to **brand** your company's image into the mind of the consumer, and how, if designed effectively, it can **create** in a buyer the impulse to stop and buy.

But how do these *ABCs* translate, exactly, into sales – the lifeblood of a business? And if there is a sales increase, is it worth the costs behind designing and installing the sign in the first place?

This chapter will examine the cost effectiveness in building, installing, and maintaining a sign, as well as provide analysis of how it can impact your profitability.

### Cost Effectiveness Of Signage

A section of Chapter 2 mentions that on-premise signage should be considered part of your overall advertising theme – TV and radio spots, a Web site, Internet advertising, newspaper or magazine ads, and so on. Like any advertising medium, the value of a sign to your business depends on its ability to effectively communicate its message to prospective customers.

To make money, you'll have to spend money – especially on advertising. The advertising industry traditionally relies on four measures to assess the effectiveness of the money spent on an advertisement. These methods are:

- Reach
- Readership
- Frequency
- Cost per thousand exposures

**1. Reach:** This measurement addresses the types of consumers exposed to the advertiser's message. For instance, cards are frequently enclosed in magazines, or consumer electronics devices, or packages

obtained through e-commerce retailers. It is hoped that the consumer will fill out the survey typically found on the card – level of income, age bracket, and so forth – so that the retailer can determine the characteristics of a typical customer.

**2. Readership:** Determining readership is a way of learning whether or not your sign is successfully branding its intended message in the mind of consumers. Can someone who sees your sign **recall** its message hours or days after having seen it? When viewed, is there **recognition** of your product or service in the mind of that person?

As a means of testing recall and recognition, larger businesses can afford the help offered by ratings service companies to measure the results of an advertising campaign. For example, Nielsen Media Research is relied upon for such assistance by those who advertise heavily on television or radio. Small business owners who operate a store in a large franchise or chain operation have access to such readership tabulations. Small businesses that operate independently, however, do not. The services of a local market researcher or a trade association for your industry can help independents measure readership.

Since 1997, Signtronix (located in Torrance, California) has helped 488 independent small businesses measure readership.<sup>1</sup> Each of the businesses surveyed 15 to 30 first-time customers to determine what prompted their visit. In all, the businesses surveyed 7,203 first-time customers, each within 30 to 45 days after the installation of a new sign. One of the survey questions was, "**How did you learn about us?**" Here's how they responded:

<b>Your sign:</b>	46% (3311)
<b>Word of mouth:</b>	38% (2708)
<b>Newspaper advertisement:</b>	7% (511)
<b>Yellow Pages:</b>	6% (450)
<b>Radio commercial:</b>	2% (133)
<b>Television commercial:</b>	1% (90)

*Signtronix Survey, 2003.*

These results clearly demonstrate two things: (1) the signs were effectively speaking to (or being read by) potential customers; and (2) signs are *the most* effective form of advertising for the small independent merchant.

Measuring readership is important. Without knowing the effectiveness of your signage, you won't know if it's doing its job. Having this tool at your disposal allows you to identify whether your sign is working, and will allow you to make changes to improve your effectiveness in attracting customers.

**3. Frequency:** This measurement calculates the number of times a viewer, reader, or listener is exposed to the advertiser's message. For example, a newspaper can estimate the number of people exposed to an ad based on the number of newspapers delivered or sold.

Frequency measures are harder to determine for sign owners – particularly those who own on-premise signs. Many drivers pass by your site. Some see your sign only once, while others – who might live or work nearby – see your sign regularly. Traffic counts (which are discussed in detail in Chapter 5) identify the number of vehicles that travel a particular stretch of road. However, it is certain those drivers (and their passengers) don't all see your sign. Because of this, traffic count figures obtained from government sources should be factored into your calculations rather than used as printed.

**4. Cost per thousand exposures:** This measurement refers to the cost for an advertiser to send a message (or "exposures") to 1,000 receivers. The measure is calculated by dividing the amount of money spent for a given advertisement by the number of people exposed to it over a given period of time. This method is commonly used by all commercial communication media, be it radio, television, print, direct mail, outdoor advertising . . . or **on-premise signage**.

Calculating comparable costs per 1,000 exposures for advertising media relies on frequency measure. Once a frequency figure is obtained, then the total out-of-pocket cost for the medium – in our case, the sign – is divided by the number of exposures occurring during a defined time period.

*Based on this measure, signs are usually considered to be the least expensive form of advertising.*

For example, imagine that you have a set amount – say, \$16,500 – to spend on advertising. You've narrowed down your options to four: TV, newspaper, outdoor advertising (a/k/a billboards), or an on-premise sign. You've done your research, and learned that for \$16,500, each option is capable of reaching a different number of people (or "trade area," to use the clinical term).

How efficient, though, would the exposures be over a 30-day period? And how would they compare to one another? Below is a table that answers that question:



*These signs are a very cost-effective form of advertising because of the large number of consumer exposures they generate.*

TYPICAL COST PER 1000 CONSUMER EXPOSURES COMPARISON				
Assumptions	Television	Newspaper	Outdoor Advertising	On-Premise Sign
Trade Area	40,000 households	Circulation of 40,000 households	333,350 cars per day	30,000 cars per day
Consumer Exposures (over a 30-day period)	1.2 million	4.75 million	10 million	900,000
Consumer Exposures in Thousands	1,250	4,750	10,000	900
Cost per Month	\$16,500	\$16,500	\$16,500	\$115
Formula	Media Cost ÷ Consumer Exposures	Media Cost ÷ Consumer Exposures	Media Cost ÷ Consumer Exposures	Media Cost ÷ Consumer Exposures
Calculations	\$16,500 ÷ 1,250	\$16,500 ÷ 4,750	\$16,500 ÷ 10,000	\$115 ÷ 900
Cost per 1000 Exposures	\$6.60	\$1.56	\$0.82	\$0.13

Some explanation is necessary:

- The "Trade Area", at least for Outdoor Advertising and On-Premise Sign, is measured by viewers present in motor traffic. Traffic counts can be obtained from your state's Department of Transportation (visit [www.statelocalgov.net](http://www.statelocalgov.net) to find the Web site for that agency in your state). Their figures are typically presented as estimates of annual average daily traffic (AADT), or the average number of cars for a given stretch of road measured over the course of a year. Figures obtained from your government agency should be adjusted for two things: a) the probability that a vehicle will have more than one person riding in it, and b) the likelihood that not everyone will actually notice your sign. The number used above for On-Premise Sign (30,000) is typical of a four-lane road that passes through a commercial business district in a mid-sized American city.
- Why are the Consumer Exposures for Newspapers different from Television, despite the fact that both have a Trade Area of 40,000? The Newspaper figure also includes readers gained via newsstand sales, as well as from subscriptions with institutions that have multiple readers (for instance, a hotel that supplies a copy of *USA Today* for every guest).
- A recent survey conducted for *Chain Store Age* magazine shows the average life span of on-premise signs in certain industries in the retail sector to be 12 years, or 144 months.<sup>2</sup> This table assumes a straight-line depreciation over the life of the sign. Its cost per month, then, is the cost (\$16,500) divided by the life of the sign (144 months).
- The actual cost of your on-premise sign will vary greatly, depending on several factors: size, the materials used in construction, the sophistication of the text or graphics, the region of the country, etc. The \$16,500 figure used above

is for demonstration purposes, and isn't meant to imply that this is what you'll actually spend.

From the above media cost evaluations, one can quickly note that the on-premise sign provides exposure of its message to a large pool of potential customers at a **fraction of the cost of other media**.

Here's how you can calculate a cost per thousand exposures for your own sign:

1. How much do you plan to spend for your on-premise signage?
2. Presume the life of your sign is 12 years, or 144 months. (If you plan to work with a professional sign company, they will be expert at gauging the estimated life of your sign. If they are involved, use the estimate they provide instead.) Use that time frame for the depreciation period in step #3.
3. Take your answer in #1 and divide it by 144 (or the duration per your sign company). The answer shows your sign's cost per month.
4. How many cars pass your trade area daily? (If the transportation department does not track this information, a local billboard or sign company may be able to help.)
5. Multiply the number of cars per day times 30 to obtain a monthly estimate.
6. Divide the answer in #5 by 1,000. This provides your monthly gross impressions in thousands.
7. Divide #3 by #6 to determine your cost per thousand exposures.

Look at your cost per thousand exposures. Determine how much advertising you would need to purchase in other media to obtain the same number of effective consumer exposures. Is there a more affordable advertising option than on-premise signage for *your* business?

### Impact of Signage on Profitability

We've just analyzed the cost-effectiveness of on-premise signage. What about its impact on your profit line?



*On-premise signage provides both an invitation to the potential customer to stop, as well as enabling consumer memory and recall for future use. Effective signage can result in a competitive advantage.*

In 1997, the California Electric Sign Association and the International Sign Association published the results of a survey commissioned from the University of California – San Diego. The survey was a two-part study of on-premise signage performance.

Part I of the study measured the impact of several variables (including signage, location, hours of operation, population density, and geographic characteristics) on sales at each of 162 southern California locations of a fast-food chain. The results of Part I showed that the number of signs at a particular site had a significant and positive impact on both annual sales and the number of annual customer transactions. Noteworthy findings include:

1. On average, one additional on-premise sign resulted in **an increase in annual sales revenues of 4.75%**. In other words, if a business had been grossing \$500,000 annually in sales, the addition of just one on-premise sign resulted in a \$23,750 increase.
2. On average, one additional on-premise sign **increased the annual number of transactions by 3.94%**.

3. On average, one additional 36-square-foot wall sign **added \$0.06 per transaction**, while one additional 144-square-foot pole sign **added \$0.78 per transaction**.

(More on wall signs, pole signs, and other sign types appears in the following chapter.)

Part II of the study analyzed seven years of weekly sales data for Pier One Imports, a national chain retailer of furniture and gift items. The study intended to find out to what extent signage – if modified, added or removed – impacted sales. The results showed that:

4. When new signage was added on previously unsigned sides of buildings sales **increased from 2.5% to 7.1%**.

5. A new pole sign with the firm's name **impacted revenues from 4.9% to 12.3%**. Such signs effectively reached passing traffic. Researchers attributed this increase to enhanced visibility of the store's new sign to passing traffic.

6. Small, reflective directional signs increased revenues as well. These signs aid shoppers in finding entrance and exit routes. The impact of these signs **increased weekly sales from 4.0% to 12.4%**.<sup>3</sup>

It is not uncommon for annual sales at a typical Pier 1 store to be around \$1 million. Businesses of this size in the retail furniture industry show a typical profit margin to be 1.2%, while those in the retail gift industry average 3.8%.<sup>4</sup> Consider, then, the **additional** impact on profitability that signs added to the performance of Pier 1 stores.

To grow and run a successful business, you need to have effective signage, as the following case studies demonstrate.

## Case Studies

- Belmont Auto Spa, a car wash business, had a sign that was illegible and too low to the ground to be visible to passing vehicles. Additionally, the owner wanted to attract more customers to the new detailing services that the company was offering. A new pole sign, costing **\$15,000**,

was erected with a reader board promoting specials. As a result, the detailing segment of the business increased **125%**. The new sign increased overall business by **15%** creating additional gross revenue of **\$135,000** in the first year. The sign paid for itself in just six weeks.

- In the story of Frenchy's Bistro (mentioned in the Introduction), customers at one time referred to the restaurant as the one "near the paint store," since that store had a more noticeable sign. Frenchy's sign – a small, one-dimensional sign that was flat against the façade of the building – was hardly visible to the street. Only residents familiar with the area frequented the restaurant. When revenues had stagnated, a friend of the owners suggested a new sign. The installation of a new V-shaped, internally illuminated sign **increased gross annual revenues by 16%** during the first year. In the second year, **revenues increased another 32%**. Frenchy's later expanded into the shop next door and added an even larger sign. In four years, as a result of the restaurant expansion and signage improvement, **gross income increased 322%** to over \$823,000.



The first photo shows Frenchy's Bistro in its early years. The sign for the paint store is more visible and legible to passersby. The second photo exhibits Frenchy's larger, V-shaped, internally-illuminated sign. Sales soon increased.

What can a new sign do for *your* business?

*This chapter has demonstrated that the on-premise sign is the **most efficient, most cost effective form of advertising** available to a small business. In its most basic form, it has been shown to be responsible for bringing in as many as half of all new customers. When it is designed as part of an overall site motif, and tied in with other forms of advertising, its benefits to the bottom line can be even more substantial. The sign tells everyone who see it that they are welcome to come inside and conduct a business transaction.*

*Remember your signage works for your business 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. In the next chapter, you'll learn about what kind of sign works best for you.*



### ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 3

- 1 Signtronix. Internal survey, 2003.
- 2 Wilson, Marianne. "Building Bigger." *Chain Store Age*, Jul. 2003, p. 60.
- 3 Points 1 through 6 hail from Tables 1-6 in The Economic Value of On-Premise Signage. Ellis, Seth R.; Johnson, Robert; Murphy, Robin. California Electric Sign Association and the International Sign Association, Washington DC, 1997.
- 4 Risk Management Association (RMA), Annual Statement Studies, 2002-2003. Philadelphia, PA, 2002.



*Signs allow anyone who wants to open a business, no matter who they are, to effectively compete with a wealthy or well-connected business owner. Furthermore, the sign tells everyone who sees it that they are welcome to come inside and conduct business.*

## CHAPTER 4

# Designing the Right Signage for Your Business

Signage of all kinds is integral to a mobile, consumer-oriented society such as ours. It helps people find where they need to go, it identifies your business for those who seek it, and it communicates to customers who you are and what you do.

Unfortunately, signage is too often treated as if it is a mere structural phenomenon of modest consequence. As this chapter will demonstrate, the design of effective signs is rooted in science, and is the stuff of numerous studies. The best signs take this research into consideration, and convey much more than what you see at a casual first glance.

There are numerous kinds of signs, which will also be discussed in this chapter. Knowledge of design factors, and how to apply them to the kind of sign that is just right for your business, is the primary function of many sign companies. A fuller analysis of what sign companies offer can be found in Chapter 5. However, before you select and work with such professionals, it is useful to be aware of the options that you have.

### Making Signage Decisions

You would be wise to begin thinking of the appropriate signage for your business in the early stages of planning a marketing strategy. Your sign is an integral part of the overall image for your business and should tie in with other marketing and advertising applications – part of the concept of **branding**, which was discussed in Chapter 2.

In addition, your sign should be designed for compatibility with the building architecture. However, care must be taken to avoid losing **conspicuity**. This architectural consistency might be mandated

in your local sign code. While traditional sign styles fit well in historic buildings, it is possible, through the variance process, to obtain a sign permit for a sign that utilizes more current styles. (More on obtaining variances can be found in Chapter 6.)

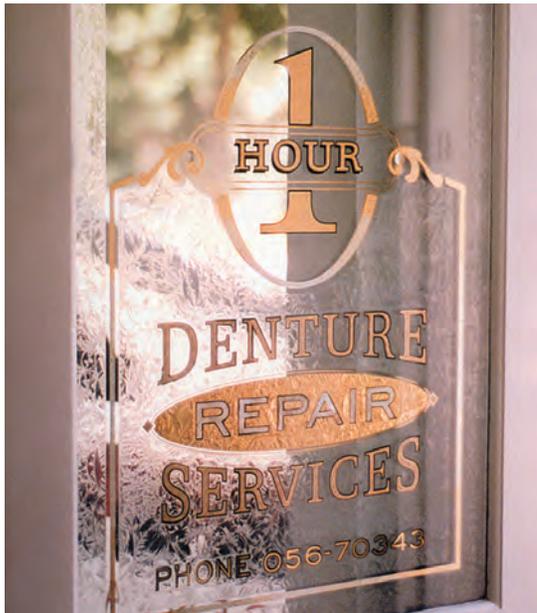
At the very outset the entrepreneur should read the local code governing signage. The code has a definite impact on the design of a sign, and you may be surprised to learn what you can and cannot do. For instance, the city of Long Beach, California prohibits signs mounted on rooftops (a very common clause in sign codes), and signs having mechanical parts. In addition, sign codes often contain a section that bans obscene or immoral text, as well as forbidding text that contains deliberately false advertising. The need for these might seem obvious, but it needs to be spelled out. Otherwise, your sign – indeed, your very business – will lack credibility.



The earlier you know the sign code limitations, the earlier you can plan around them. Businesses who go ahead with their signage plans *without* knowing their local code are taking a great risk. Avoid a situation where your opening is delayed unnecessarily or where your options are severely limited – you jeopardize your business' potential for success.

It's difficult enough for a new business to compete. Without well-considered signage, your business may be virtually invisible. Large corporations understand the importance of on-premise signage. They will typically spend a great deal of thought and expense ensuring their corporate identity is clear and consistent. By contrast the small business owner often overlooks this vital medium.

Too often business owners plan all other aspects of their business start-up and only think of the business sign at the last moment. Be wise and start early.



### Critical Design Factors

Below are brief overviews of several factors that are critical in creating the best sign for your business location. Keep in mind that these summaries are but the tip of the iceberg. For instance, a study by Richard N. Schwab (a former program manager within the U.S. Federal Highway Administration),

wrote *Safety and Human Factors: Design Considerations for On-Premise Commercial Signs*, which is loaded with detailed (and we mean *detailed*) analyses of lighting, visual acuity, legibility and many other factors. There is no need to go into that kind of depth here. However, you should have a familiarity with these subjects when you begin working with a sign company.

Remember, sign professionals will have greater expertise with topics such as these, and know how to apply them to your situation:

- Visibility/Conspicuity
- Legibility/Readability
- Size, Scale and Location
- Cone of Vision and Angle
- Graphic Considerations (Color, Contrast & White Space)
- Contrast/Brightness
- Letter Style and Capitalization
- Letter Heights
- Length of Message
- Illumination/Lighting

As you read on, you'll notice that these factors overlap with each other – our apologies for tending to repeat things. However, a sign is a sum of many parts. In order to be effective, attention must be paid to all of them.



### Visibility/Conspicuity

It may seem simple to say that you want your sign to be **visible**. However, even large signs, if not designed and placed with care, can be overlooked. Traffic, foliage, power lines, municipal signs, and street furniture can block your sign, depending on

the vantage point of the person looking at it. Before deciding on the location (and possibly the type of sign used), the perspective of all your potential customers should be investigated:

- Can it be seen by drivers in cars from various directions?
- Can it be seen at a distance great enough for the driver to react?
- Would a pedestrian on the street see the sign?
- Are there any potential obstacles blocking the sightline to the sign?

Whether or not the sign is illuminated (more on this later) will naturally affect its visibility. While you can't control every condition – such as the weather, or the amount of glare off the road – you can control design elements such as contrast, size of type, and illumination to increase the visibility of your sign.

**Conspicuity** is defined as those characteristics that help an observer distinguish a sign from its surrounding environment. Creating a conspicuous presence means isolating the sign from its background. You have mere seconds to grab the attention of drivers and passersby. For best effect, the sign should be clear, concise, legible and distinguishable from the surrounding environment and, of course, aesthetically pleasing. A sign may work well as an isolated design, but if it is placed amidst many visible objects along the road (e.g., other signs, utility poles, traffic lights, bus shelters, landscaping, etc.), the sign may blend into the background to the point that it becomes essentially invisible.



### Legibility/Readability

Legibility relates to a viewer's ability to comprehend symbols and letters, or how clearly a sign can be seen and read by drivers with normal vision. For a driver to react to a sign, he or she first has to see and understand what has been seen.

What is readable on paper is not necessarily so when transferred to a sign. Having a legible sign depends on many characteristics, including letter size, font, spacing of letters and words, the amount of negative space, color combinations, and others.

Letters must be individually recognizable, while the text as a whole should be readable. Certain typefaces, such as the sans serif Helvetica seen on many signs, lend themselves to readability. While it may be tempting to include as much information as possible when designing a sign, **it is often more effective to keep the message very simple.** Allow space to exist between and around the text.

Much research has been done on visibility and legibility. Of particular interest to researchers like Richard N. Schwab is determining the distance at which a sign first becomes legible, based on how fast a car is moving. Below is a table that Mr. Schwab created. It assumes many things (such as how the sign is placed in relation to the road, its conspicuity and readability, the complexity of its message, and others), but is still useful in a general sense.

Speed of Traffic	Minimum Required Legibility Distance
55 mph (88 kph)	440' (134 m)
50 mph (90 kph)	400' (122 m)
45 mph (72 kph)	360' (110 m)
40 mph (64 kph)	320' (98 m)
35 mph (56 kph)	280' (85 m)
30 mph (48 kph)	240' (73 m)
25 mph (40 kph)	200' (61 m)

*Source: Schwab, Richard N.<sup>1</sup>; also, Garvey, P.M., et al., 1996.<sup>2</sup>*

### Size, Scale and Location

The location of your sign plays an important role in creating a successful business. A well-designed sign can add dramatically to the visual impact of a business and cultivates awareness. An attractive, well placed sign communicates to your ideal clientele the true flavor of your business.

The characteristics of your business location will often determine the location, the type and the size of sign you can have. For instance, in an historic district you may be limited by the style and period of surrounding architecture. Or you may find that your local sign code has very strict limitations on business signage. In either case, you may need to pursue a variance if one is needed (see Chapter 6 for more on this). You should choose a location for your business with signage possibilities and visibility in mind – otherwise, you might be in for a surprise. The key is not to underestimate the importance of your "face" to the public and to make the most of the specific characteristics of your location and architecture.



For the purposes of on-premise signage, keep in mind that the viewer needs a focal point. Larger buildings particularly should locate their signs over entrances. It may be tempting to add a sign for everything you wish to communicate – your hours of operation, your current sale prices, etc. However, the greater the number of signs, the greater the visual clutter in the consumer's eyes. A single, well-planned sign maintains the clarity of your primary message.

Some businesses, however, require more than one sign to communicate effectively. If yours is the type of business that relies on conveying frequent changes in information, know that an otherwise attractive storefront can be spoiled by leaflets and temporary signs taped to windows. If your business fits this profile, factor the need for secondary signage into your master plan. For instance, installing an electronic messaging center to communicate changing information might be a good choice.



Prioritize the information you need to communicate. The organization of information on the sign face will depend on your type of business. If your company offers a unique service in the area, the address may be the most

important element. For the business competing with other similar businesses, highlighting distinctive features may be a priority. Usually the primary sign will be simpler, with either the name only, or with services and products offered. Secondary signs may include address and phone, credit cards accepted, parking directions, and so on. Clutter, or "sign blight," is sure to confuse the customer. Maintain a clear and straightforward message.



For the business reliant on foot traffic, a pedestrian-oriented sign should be included. The sign should be clearly visible to a person standing or walking by the building. A sign jutting from the building or in a shop front window will be seen easily by pedestrian traffic. Signs that alert drivers are essential, but signs that lead the walking crowd to your door are sometimes necessary.



Monument signs, pole signs and signs integrated into the overall design of the building are options for businesses on major roadways. If your business exists in a competitive environment (and what business doesn't?), your sign must stand out from its surroundings. Color, typeface, and lighting are ways a sign can distinguish itself from busy surroundings. Shrubbery, competing signs, street furniture and traffic movement should also be considered when designing a sign.

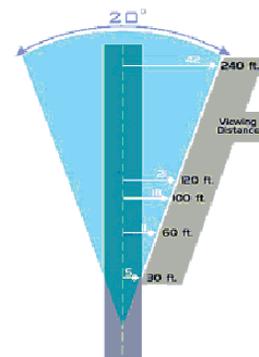


Being located in a multi-tenant office building or a mall presents a challenge for many businesses. Related but independent businesses may choose to have a main sign with a collective name on a monument sign with identification of individual businesses listed underneath. For instance, a medical office may have a main sign as well as a listing of individual doctors' names. In a mall, tenants may have the option of having a smaller version of the sign over their entrance woven into a larger monument sign near the entrance to the mall. The alternative is to have the name of your business on display in the same size and typeface as those of other tenants. In this case, it would be difficult to distinguish your business from those elsewhere in the mall. Multi-tenant signs are more effective when individual businesses can display their identifiable colors and fonts.



### Cone of Vision and Angle

Many signs will be seen through the windshield of a moving car. Note the accompanying graphic. While driving, a motorist has a 20° range, or "cone," of vision. If your business has a sign whose setback (i.e., its distance) from the road is outside a driver's cone, then your sign is in danger of being missed.



Also, as a driver moves along a road, signs will constantly be entering and leaving his/her cone. In order to attract business to your store, as well as to help keep motorists from making dangerous maneuvers in traffic, it is important that your sign be designed well enough to be seen.

A number of factors affect how much a driver can see and recognize, including the speed at which the car is moving, the number of lanes on the road, whether or not the viewer is looking for the information, atmospheric conditions, the difficulty of the driving conditions, time of day, and so on. Signs meant primarily to appeal to car traffic also need to be legible from a much greater distance than those designed for pedestrian traffic.

The angle at which a sign is placed influences how much lead-time the viewer needs to react to the sign. Earlier in this chapter, you saw a chart on legibility and distance which presumed signs to be at a 90° angle to the road. While this is the ideal angle, it is not always possible. On the other hand, it doesn't make sense to create a sign whose face is parallel to the road, as passing motorists will not be able to read it until they are right on top of it. For instance, many businesses have flat, two-dimensional signs on the face of their building. Because such a sign is parallel to the road, it is nearly invisible to motorists. Consider your audience. Will drivers have time to react to the sign once they can see it?

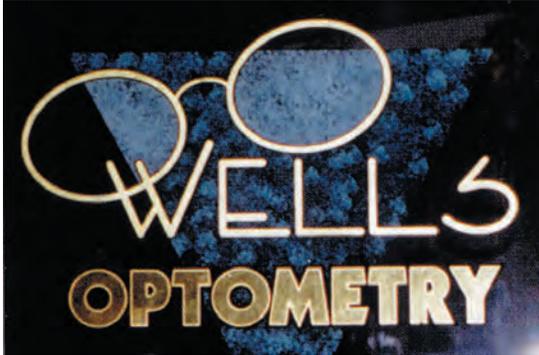
### Sign Size Guidelines for On-Premise Signs

SIGN SIZE TYPE		I	I	II	II
SPEED LIMIT (miles/hour)	LANES OF TRAFFIC	SIGN SIZE (SQ. FT.)	SIGN HEIGHT (FEET)	SIGN SIZE (SQ. FT.)	SIGN HEIGHT (FEET)
25	2	25	12	50	12
25	4	32	12	70	12
35	2	36	20	75	20
35	4	42	20	90	20
45	2	75	35	100	40
45	4	90	35	120	40
55	2	150	50	250	90
Urban Freeway		300	74	450	90

Source: Schwab, Richard N.<sup>3</sup>

In this table, the I columns refer to signs that are **perpendicular** to the road, while column II signs are those that are **parallel** to the road. Note how column II signs would need to be much larger than column I signs in order to be seen and understood.

### Graphic Considerations (Color, Contrast & White Space)



Before contacting a sign professional, you should develop a clear idea of the image and text to appear on your sign. Perhaps you have an existing logo that you want to adapt for use on the sign. You may choose to exploit the talents of your own in-house design professionals or may simply choose a sign company that offers the service. Keep in mind that while unifying the overall business identity is desirable, very complex designs may not be legible or readable enough. Design elements must be carefully considered for the best visual impact.



Choose a sign company that best meets your needs and resources (more on this in Chapter 5). Signage professionals can help translate an existing logo or design, or create new artwork. Ultimately the signage service will need camera-ready artwork for any logo or design. The business owner will be expected to have some idea of what they would like the sign to look like.

Different sign companies offer a wide range of services to their clients. Some full service outfits can assist with everything from design to fabrication. Other companies focus more on fabrication, and not so much on installation.



Even within the boundaries of your budget, or the legal limitations imposed by your local sign code, it is possible with the help of an experienced design professional to create an attractive and effective sign. Design tips to keep in mind – many of which you've already read – are:

- Choose a typeface that is easily legible and readable and one that fits the type of business. Certain typefaces are easier to read. San serif fonts and open styles such as Verdana tend to be more legible.
- Make your message clear. If you use a logo or



image, make sure it is understandable. Not every image can be translated onto a sign. Maintain a simple, clear design.

- Keep the amount of type to a minimum. The sign industry suggests that text should be 3 to 5 words in length. Motorists and passersby have but seconds to read your sign. You want to deliver your message quickly. They can learn more about your business once you've got them inside your place of business.
- Maintain white space. An industry standard



guideline is **30%-40% of the sign area should be blank space**. If the sign has too much visual clutter, then the eye will skip over all of it. Grab your viewer – keep it simple.

- Consider color carefully. There are certain color combinations that are more legible than others. You see these combinations in road signs: black on yellow, white on green, etc. However, the shade of the color is important, too. Black on a very bright yellow is much less legible than black on a muted yellow. It is much easier and faster for the eye to read highly contrasted colors than those that are similar. The most easily read combinations are black, dark blue or red text on a yellow or white background. However, keep in mind that it is not unusual for a community sign code to stipulate that at least one color match that of your building.
- It's also important to know that 8% of the

John's  
Deli

John's  
Deli

male population in the U.S. are color-blind. Therefore, it is important to use those combinations of colors that retain color and brightness contrast when viewed by color-blind people. Blue and yellow, for example, are a good combination, but blue-green or aqua on white or gray are very difficult combinations for a color-blind person to read. Another combination that is difficult to read is magenta or fuchsia on white or gray.

- Color and design should remain consistent with other design elements. Your sign is an important part of your overall business image and should match the style and color of other elements of your business identity, such as your business cards, stationery, uniforms, Web site, etc.

A simple effect like adding a border around the viewing area is an economical way to dramatically improve your sign's effectiveness. Studies have shown that viewers can read and comprehend a sign that has a border around its message **26% faster** than one that lacks this feature.<sup>4</sup>

You only have one chance to make a first impression – and your sign is key. A sign does more than just identify your business. It pulls people in.

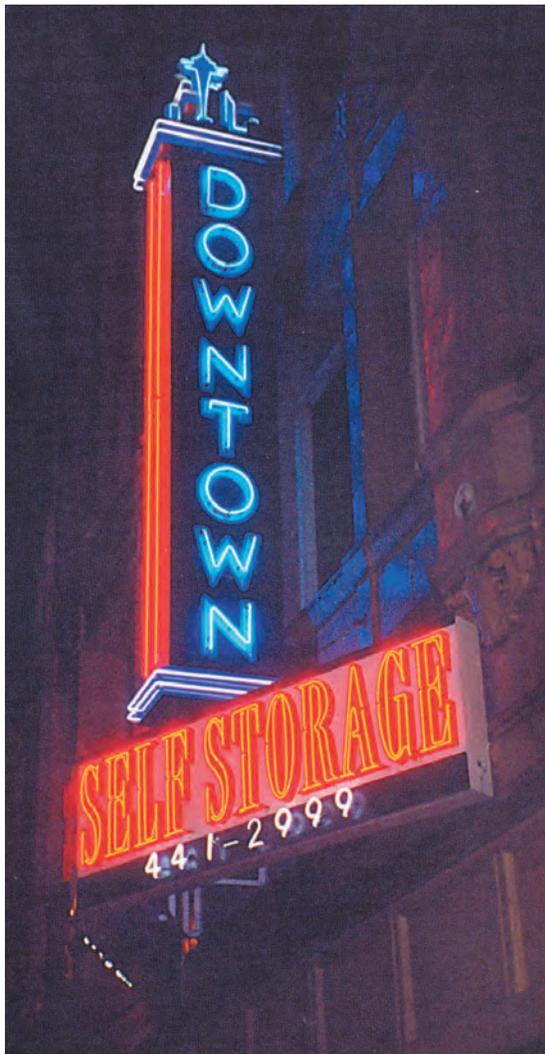
### Contrast/Brightness

Unlike **conspicuity**, which is concerned with a sign being distinct from its background, **contrast** is the difference between the lighter and darker areas on the sign itself. It is important for there to be a strong enough contrast between the legible elements of the sign and the background. Subtle differences in color will blur the lines and decrease legibility.

Positive contrast (light border or text on dark background) is easier to read and provides a greater legibility distance than negative contrast (dark border or text on a light background). Daytime contrast is determined by color. Nighttime contrast is determined by reflectivity or sign illumination.

**Luminance** is the intensity of light emitted from a surface – roughly, it is a measure of brightness. Optimum contrast levels range from 4:1 to 10:1. In other words, for text to be considered optimally contrasted with its background, its measured brightness should be from 4 to 10 times the brightness of its background material. This optimum contrast level results in greater conspicuity.

Keep in mind, however, that while luminance and contrast are critical to meeting the visibility needs of drivers, excessive contrast created by a "too bright" background will reduce legibility. A minimum contrast ratio of 4:1 is recommended, while 50:1 may be considered too great.<sup>5</sup>



Be aware that certain sign codes limit the light output allowable in on-premise signage. This philosophy (known increasingly as the "Dark Sky" movement) is often used by communities concerned with energy conservation. Regardless of the merits of this argument (for instance, new LED technology has reduced the energy consumption of electronic message centers by almost 90%), dimming the illumination of your sign will effectively remove you from the nighttime market. You and your sign professional should be aware of whether your code has such restrictions.

### Letter Style and Capitalization

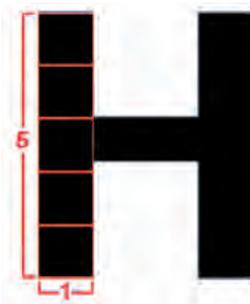
As a general rule, capital letters are most easily recognized, but tend to be read individually. Lower case letters, on the other hand, are generally read as whole words or phrases.

Sign design research designates six type styles as the most basic – Roman, Gothic, Gothic-Block, Text (or Ornamental), Italic and Script:

Y (Roman); Y (Gothic); **Y** (Gothic Block);  
**Y** (Text); Y (Italic); *Y* (Script)

For the most part, reliance on the last four of these can be a problem. People are not used to reading these fonts for extended periods. If you feel a strong reason to use one of these fonts, then use them sparingly.

Capital and lower case letters, with the exception of script styles, are generally equally legible. As a general rule, the width of a letter's vertical stroke should be approximately 1/5 of its height.



In choosing numerals, it is generally accepted that Roman numerals reduce speed and accuracy of reading because they are more complex and less familiar to the viewer than Arabic numerals.

### Letter Heights

If a sign is to be effective, then it must be legible at a distance sufficient enough to permit a driver to respond safely. Generally speaking, letters with a taller and wider "stroke" can be read from further away. This does not mean that all letters are equally legible from a distance. The letter height required to ensure legibility depends on type style, as well as conspicuity, traffic speed, and the eyesight of the driver.

Again, this is a subject that has been intensely researched. There are established recommendations dealing with the ideal letter height, based on legibility at various speeds of highway traffic. Earlier in this chapter, you saw a table that shows the distance at which a sign first becomes legible, based on how fast a car is moving. Below is a table that expands on this, showing the letter height that enables legibility:

Traffic Speed	Minimum Required Legibility Distance	Recommended Letter Height
55 mph (88 kph)	440' (134 m)	16.5 in.
50 mph (90 kph)	400' (122 m)	15
45 mph (72 kph)	360' (110 m)	13.5
40 mph (64 kph)	320' (98 m)	12
35 mph (56 kph)	280' (85 m)	10.5
30 mph (48 kph)	240' (73 m)	9
25 mph (40 kph)	200' (61 m)	7

*Signs for Success Seminar Handbook, Nevada SBDC, 2001. <sup>6</sup>*

Letters of this height should be legible to a driver for six seconds. Calculating the proper reaction distance required by your typical customer can be difficult when applied to commercial signage. If a substantial number of people who view your sign are new to your area, or are vacationers or business travelers, then the amount of time needed to react will be greater than that required by people familiar with the area. The longer the reaction time required, the greater the recommended letter height.

### Length of Message

As stated earlier, a standard in the sign industry suggests that sign text be 3 to 5 words in length. All of the above research repeatedly emphasizes the wisdom of keeping your sign's message brief, and easy to understand at a single glance. In general, information most important to a potential customer or client should be emphasized, with ambiguity kept to a minimum. This is particularly important in complex driving situations (at major intersections or on major arterials), where the message needs to be simple and direct. Abbreviations should not be used unless they have essentially universal recognition or understanding. Whenever possible, text should be arranged horizontally rather than vertically. In addition, color contrasts and familiar symbols or logos are likely to enhance conspicuity.

### Illumination/Lighting

The purpose of your sign is to communicate a legible, readable, and conspicuous message to your customers. Don't forget, then, that these factors matter around the clock – your sign is working for you 24 hours a day. To communicate at night, remember that illumination is an important aspect.

You will want to be sure that your potential customers can see your sign during the nighttime hours, as well during inclement weather. On-premise signs can be lit either internally or externally.



A wide variety of lighting techniques are available. The use of a technique depends on your sign's location, the architecture of your building, the materials used to make the sign, and any limitations imposed by your local sign code. Here are some common techniques:

- light fixtures mounted above a flat sign to provide uniform lighting
- a cabinet style plastic case lit from within with fluorescent or neon bulbs
- channel letters lit from within by neon tubing or lighting
- luminous tubing or fiber optics, patterns of incandescent light bulbs, or light emitting diodes shaped or formed in patterns of lettering or symbols
- light sources in a concealed canopy that light a flat sign indirectly
- a light behind the sign face, illuminating the main message or symbol, or the sign background, or both, through a translucent material
- retroreflective materials, such as materials appearing on many public signs along streets and highways.



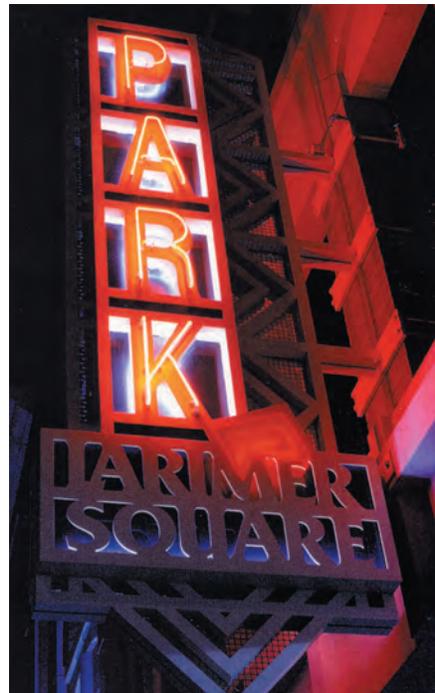
Ultimately you would want to choose something aesthetically pleasing, suitable to the business and area, while still being conspicuous. Ease of maintenance should also be a consideration. A cabinet style sign with internal illumination may be very efficient but may require more maintenance in

the form of changing bulbs and cleaning. If the sign is a pole sign, access may also be an issue – usually such signs are illuminated by ground-based floodlights.

For night driving, illumination is essential for non-reflective signs or reflective signs that may not always fall within the cone of vision provided by vehicle headlights.

As a business owner, you should realize how important the location of light fixtures on your signage can be for their readability. Fixtures located above or beside a sign face can cast a shadow over the sign, obscuring the message.

Lastly, the amount of illumination that you'll require depends on the business district in which you are located. The brightness of your sign will necessarily be greater if you are located in an urban shopping area, with lots of other signs in your vicinity. The brightness will be much less if you are in a rural area.



## Types Of Signs

When adding or changing the sign for your business, you must consider a number of factors. Not the least of these considerations is, "What does your local sign code allow?" Stipulations abound in codes across the country that prohibit specific kinds of signs. Whether or not such codes are constitutionally valid is a matter that will be discussed in Chapter 6, "Legal Considerations".

Other questions include, "Who is my primary customer?" and "How can my sign be placed such that this target group can see it?" Where your sign will be located, along with (of course) how much you are able to spend, will influence the kinds of materials that will be used to build it. For instance, a sign in sunny San Diego should be constructed to best withstand UV rays, while a sign constructed on the oceanside of Cape Cod would need to be built to handle the effects of exposure to sea salt. (The kinds of materials that are available to sign professionals will be referenced in Chapter 5.)

Broadly, you can think of signs as geared mainly towards one of two types of traffic: **automobile** or **pedestrian**. While many businesses are geared to the driving consumer (indeed, much of this book presumes such a business), drawing the consumer from the sidewalk should not be overlooked. Businesses will generally employ more than one option to put its best face forward.

### Automobile-Oriented Signs

These signs come in one of two forms, building-mounted or ground-mounted.

#### Building-Mounted

These types of signs are further classified by where they are installed on the building:

- **Wall (or Fascia)** – A sign that is attached to the exterior wall of a building, projecting *less than* 18 inches from its surface. These are sometimes referred to as "wall mount" signs.
- **Projecting** – A building-mounted sign (frequently double-sided) that is attached to a building face or wall, and projects *more than* 18 inches from the surface.
- **V signs** and **blade signs** are commonly-used projecting signs.



Wall sign



Projecting sign



Blade sign

- **Awning** – A standard awning is a framework, typically sloping outward from the building face that is covered with flexible material available in various shapes and sizes. It is frequently illuminated from the interior. It can add character to an otherwise plain storefront, as well as provide shelter.
- **Roof** – As the name suggests, a sign that is erected on the roof of a building.
- **Parapet** – A sign mounted on top of the parapet of a building. A building **parapet** is a low protective wall that runs along the edge of a roof or balcony.



Parapet sign



Awning

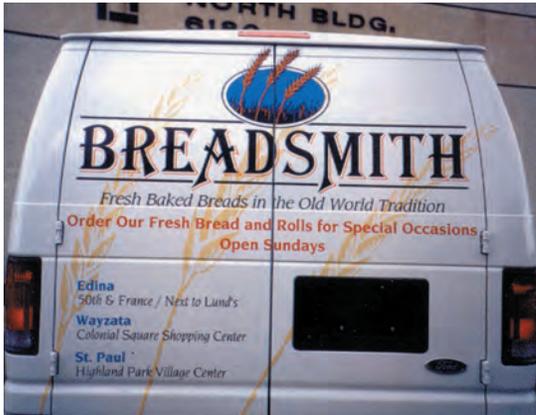


Canopy



Roof sign

- **Canopy** – A sign affixed to the visible surface(s) of an attached or freestanding canopy. An attached canopy is also called a **marquee**.
- **Vehicle Graphics** – A sign code might not allow your store to have a projecting sign at a 90° angle to the road. Instead, you may only be allowed a flat, wall-mounted sign that is flush to your building's façade. As stated before, such a sign does not promote optimum viewing from the road. Having a sign that is perpendicular to traffic is much more effective. An option, then, would be having graphics applied directly to a licensed and operable vehicle (one that is parked legally at a 90° angle in a lot that serves your business). Again, this option may also be specifically prohibited by your sign code. Look for such a clause before considering this.



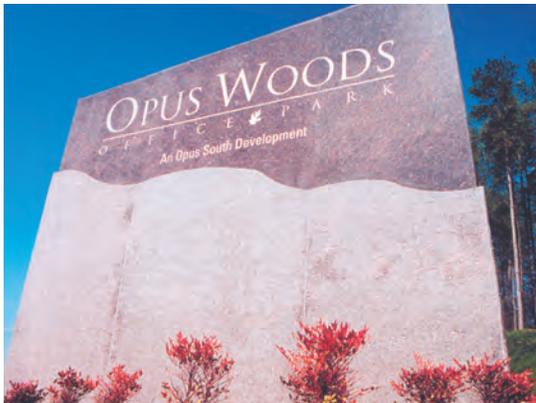
Vehicle graphics

Building-mounted signs may be parallel or perpendicular to the surface of the building. The optimal size and height of these kinds of signs depends on how far back from the street they are located. The optimal size and height also depend on viewing angle, possible obstructions, and the size of your building. These signs are usually used in conjunction with other signs (for example, pedestrian-level window signage).

#### Ground-Mounted

These are signs that are *not* attached to a building:

- **Monument** – A ground sign, with low overall height. Such signs are appropriate to larger buildings, or to a complex with multiple buildings. Such locations typically have on-site parking with access driveways, building entry walkways, and landscaping. Low monument signs can be easily integrated into this type of environment.



Monument sign

- **Pole** – These are freestanding signs mounted on one or more poles or posts. Local sign codes typically specify the minimum and maximum height of a sign of this kind. A **high-rise pole sign** is different mainly in that the maximum height is allowed to be much greater. Such signs are typically found adjacent to businesses that are dependent on freeway traffic.



Pole sign

- **Pylon** – A freestanding sign with a visible support structure, or with the support structure enclosed by a pole or pylon cover.



Pylon sign



Joint tenant sign

- **Joint Tenant** – A sign used to display the names of tenants of a business complex. These kinds of signs must differentiate the various businesses. White space and clarity are essential. The most effective examples use respective logos under a unifying banner.



Electronic message center

- **Directional** – Signs designed to provide direction to pedestrian and vehicular traffic.
- **Electronic Message Center** – A variable message sign that utilizes computer-generated messages or some other electronic means of changing copy. These signs include displays using incandescent lamps, LEDs, LCDs, or a flipper matrix.



Directional sign

As you can tell, ground-mounted signs come in all shapes and sizes. The choice will depend very much on business needs and local regulations. Ground-mounted signs tend to be the most direct and effective method of communicating to the public. They are typically placed close to the road, with the sign face at a 90 degree angle to the street.

Many suburban settings limit the height of signs permitted. In these cases, the low-altitude monument is often suggested. Such signs can provide a solid presence. However, a recent study by the United States Sign Council<sup>7</sup> has shown that

monument signs installed at or below five feet in height cannot be adequately seen by passing motorists, due mainly to obstruction caused by other passing vehicles. If such a sign is installed, it is recommended that its height be no less than seven feet above the ground. This height can be seen much more easily, especially by elderly drivers.

### ***Building as Sign***

This is a method typically available only to franchise or chain retail operations, where the sign is integrated into the design of the entire building. For instance, Shell Oil discovered recently that, all other things being equal, use of their corporate signage and lighting packages (including the signature building concept) increase the business of a gas station 15% in a neighborhood, and 40% along a freeway.

With the signature building concept, the style of architecture is the same for all locations, as are the colors and types of signs used. This method often includes a standard canopy, projecting or pole sign, as well as directional signs that are the same for all locations. This approach is usually tied to a well developed "brand" and overall corporate identity.



*Building as sign*

### **Pedestrian-Oriented Signs**

Pedestrian-oriented signs are found at about eye-level in just about every setting. Waiting rooms, stairwells, shop-windows, and directories are all geared at pedestrians to direct or inform. They tend to be smaller, and should be legible from 15 to 20 feet.

- **Window** – Such a sign can either be attached to the window, or applied directly to its surface. Frequently, a window sign conveys information that, for purposes of space and expediency, would not appear on a primary building- or ground-mounted sign. The window sign, like any sign, should not be too cluttered with text and graphics. It is not uncommon for a sign code to stipulate that only a certain percentage of window space be covered with a sign. Besides, the window is also meant to give potential customers a glimpse of what you have inside.



*Window sign*

- **Small Hanging Blade, or Other Projecting Styles** – These styles extend out from the building and are usually double-sided. This type of sign also covers a wide range of styles and sizes from quaint, nostalgic board signs to building-height neon hotel signs. Typically, this kind of sign is installed beneath a canopy or an awning. They are not often viewable from a passing car,

but are meant specifically to be viewed by an approaching pedestrian.



*Small hanging blade*

### Interior Signs

While the bulk of this handbook has focused on external, on-premise signs and how they can help your small business, some mention of the role played by signs inside your building should be made. While a wealth of research has been conducted on this subject, only a basic overview is provided here.

Interior signage has two major purposes. First, it acts as a means of guiding people through a building safely and efficiently. Another purpose is to provide point-of-purchase advertising, which can strongly influence purchasing decisions.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has had an impact on building layout, as well as the signage required to navigate it, since it came into force in 1992. The ADA imposes legal requirements on signage (among other things), regarding such topics as letter height, use of pictograms, use of Braille, mounting height, and others. If your business is required to comply with ADA (and most of them are), then the requirements of the Act will have an impact on your overall sign strategy. Fortunately, there are qualified ADA signage manufacturers and consultants in most parts of the United States. (You can find one by searching the "Member Companies" link on the Web site of the International Sign Association, at [www.signs.org](http://www.signs.org)).

Examples of interior signs include:

- **Directional Sign** – Designed to provide direction to foot traffic. Many of these signs are mandated by law (ADA, local fire code, etc.).



*Directional sign*



*Directory sign*

- **Directory Sign** – Meant to identify the names and locations of occupants in a multi-tenant building.

- **Regulatory Sign** – A sign that communicates rules, ordinances and/or laws.



Regulatory sign

- **Mall Signs** – Those located in a mall to differentiate one business from another.



Mall sign

- **Point-of-Purchase** – Signs that advertise in the immediate vicinity of a particular product.



Point-of-purchase

## Sign Maintenance

Nothing lasts forever. At some point you will need to repair or replace your sign. Consider the lifespan of various materials when making a choice. (In Chapter 5, greater attention will be paid to the kinds of materials that sign professionals use.) Some will last longer than others but all will require maintenance and eventual replacement. Dirty signs, faded colors, missing letters and faulty bulbs do nothing for your image. All supports, braces, anchors and electrical components should be kept safe, presentable and in good structural condition.

In addition, many cabinet and canopy style signs can be easily updated with a new "face". The original structure that houses the face can be kept in place. It will save you money, while freshening up the look of your business.

*This chapter was meant to give you an idea of the many design elements that can influence the effectiveness of your on-premise sign. This text was also meant to give you an overview of the kinds of signs that can be built and installed to maximize the potential of your business.*

*Throughout this book, reference is made repeatedly to the expertise held by a quality sign company, and how it would be in your best interests to work with one. The next chapter gives you insight into the variety of services that these companies can offer, how they typically function, and how you can evaluate which company is best for your needs.*

**ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 4**

1 Schwab, Richard N. Safety and Human Factors: Design Considerations for On-Premise Commercial Signs. Washington, DC: International Sign Association, 1998.

2 Garvey, P.M., et al. Sign Visibility: Research and Traffic Safety Overview. Bristol, PA: The United States Sign Council, 1996.

3 Schwab, Ibid.

4 Boss, Donna L. "S.I.G.N.A.G.E. S.E.L.L.S." *National Association of College & University Food Services* (Web site), 2002.  
[www.nacufs.org/template.asp?page=resources](http://www.nacufs.org/template.asp?page=resources).

5 Mace, D.J., P.M. Garvey, R.F. Heckard. 1994. Relative Visibility of Increased Legend Size vs. Brighter Materials for Traffic Signs. U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, No. DTFH61-90-C-00015 Final Report, 1/44, p. 8.

6 Signs for Success – Seminar Handbook. U.S. Small Business Administration; Nevada Small Business Development Center, 2002, p. 3.

7 Reinert, Shannon. "The USSC's Sign-Visibility Study – Low-mounted Ground Signs." *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 2003, pp. 82-3.

## CHAPTER 5

# Obtaining Signage

In the Introduction, we wrote that this handbook is designed to give you a basic understanding of signage. Its intent is to make you a more informed business owner on the subject, but by no means an expert. That claim more rightly belongs to men and women who, usually, are small business owners themselves.

We're talking, of course, about the professional sign company. Throughout, we've frequently mentioned these professionals as having expertise beyond the scope of this guide. You'll need their additional expertise in order to create signage that is effective for your business.

Consider these scenarios:

- There is a business in your area that features an attractive, ground-based monument sign, and you want to replicate it for your own shop. After reading Chapter 4, you're probably aware of the meaning of the phrase, "monument sign". You might also know that the U.S. Sign Council recommends that its height be no less than seven feet above the ground. Can you be certain, however, that seven feet is high enough at your *specific* location? Should it be higher?
- You've sketched a picture of a logo that you'd like to become the symbol of your business. Again, from the previous chapter, you may have learned which color combinations work best for helping consumers see your image. In addition, in Chapter 2 you learned how signs, combined with other advertising, help create "top-of-the-mind" awareness for your brand in the heads of consumers. Do you know of someone who can reliably reproduce your new logo? Will they provide an electronic version, so that you can use it when creating letterhead, or business cards, or anything else?
- From Chapter 3, you might remember the results of a survey of Pier 1 Import stores that, among other things, revealed that a new pole sign with the firm's name increased revenues from 5% to 12%. Who knows? It might work for your business, too. There might be a problem,

though. Does the sign code in your community allow for pole signs at your location?

In each of these cases, a reliable and experienced sign company will have the answers.

We'll focus this chapter, then, on sign companies – the types of sign companies that exist; the services they offer and the products they make; the types of materials that are used to make them; and, finally, how to choose (and physically locate) the company that works best for your needs.

### Types Of Sign Companies

The sign industry is very competitive, with numerous types of companies vying for a piece of this estimated \$5.1 billion market.<sup>1</sup> There is no shortage of companies that say they can do the job for you. Just as there are many kinds of signs, there are many kinds of sign companies. No two companies are alike, and you'll have to research them in much the same way you'd hire an accountant, or find a reputable contractor.

Not all companies are equal. Some are more committed to improving themselves than others. A sign company that reproduces anything you submit – without providing any insight as to whether or not it might work – is not doing you any favors. When looking for a company, seek out those that can explain to you why something works, and how it can impact your profits. Companies that can do this can rightly be called **sign professionals** – they demonstrate a commitment to their profession, as well as to you, their client.

Here are some things to look for when researching a sign company:

- Does the company belong to a sign industry trade organization, like the International Sign Association or the U.S. Sign Council? Unlike other professions, in the sign industry there is no organization that has the authority to anoint its members as being "certified". You cannot

assume, then, that each of their members are of equal quality. However, members that take advantage of books, seminars, research studies, and other services offered by trade groups are seeking to educate themselves about their chosen profession.

- Does the sign company subscribe to industry publications, like *Signs of the Times* or *Sign Business*? These publications present information on the latest research, technologies, materials, and trends affecting the industry.
- Can the sign company explain to you **top-of-the-mind awareness**, as discussed in Chapter 2? Can it show you how to use graphics to create **recall** and **recognition** in the mind of the consumer, as explained in Chapter 3? These are concepts important to those in the advertising industry, and your sign is your most constant advertisement. A company should be able to explain to you how their products can maximize these concepts for your business.



*When searching for a sign company, look for one that has as much passion for their work as you do for your business.*

Are you considering a sign company that is a student of its industry – one that strives to improve itself? When you're looking to hire someone, wouldn't you rather be working with someone who has as much passion for their work as you do for your own?

Below are descriptions of types of sign companies. Regardless of the category that suits your business, seek out one that is dedicated to its craft.

**Full service companies** offer complete assistance

with business signage. Such companies come to a business location and immediately survey the surroundings. They'll likely have an in-house design department that can adapt any existing artwork, or assist in designing an image. They'll provide insights as to the kind of signage that works best for the location. Before building the sign, they'll help in obtaining the proper permits. Within some larger sign companies, a separate division exists to help companies pursue a variance, should it be necessary (see Chapter 6 for more on this subject). Once the sign is built, a separate crew can install it on the business' premises. Over the life of the sign, ongoing maintenance can be provided.

Full-service companies are located primarily in more densely-populated areas. In addition, full-service companies are especially equipped to handle the signage needs of chains or larger small businesses. The "mom-and-pop" small businesses don't usually require all the firepower that a full-service company has to offer.

There are a number of sign company **franchises**: Sign Pro, Sign-A-Rama, Fast Signs, Signs Now, and others. If you look in your *Yellow Pages*, you're likely to see one of these companies listed. If your research includes one of these companies, know that there are also a great number of independent sign shops as well.

Companies can also be defined by the method in which they produce signage. Some are known to focus primarily on custom-built signs. Other companies are known as "quantity sign producers," or "mass producers". Such places provide a showroom that presents a variety of styles that, with some modification, can be sold to your business.

Some of these **mass producers** have a trained network of dealers (modeled much like the auto industry) across a wide geographic region, or, in some cases, the entire country. These dealers represent a line of signage products that a mass producer has perfected over years of experience. In smaller communities, these dealers might be the only means to sign production available to a small business.

Experienced mass producers, by initiating or

responding to industry research, have identified over time the most effective physical elements when constructing certain sign types (projecting, awning, etc.). Their manufacturing plants, then, have been designed to efficiently mass-produce these signs. When purchasing a sign from a dealer, a specific small business can then have its individual look applied onto it. Indeed, dealers frequently offer their manufacturer's design services as a free addition for purchasing the sign. This type of arrangement is known as a **semi-custom** sign.

Mass producers do not usually get involved in the installation process. Instead, their signs are designed such that most small sign companies or electricians in your local area have the capacity to perform that function for you.

Mass producers cannot easily create a one-of-a-kind sign. If you have your heart set on a unique shape, you'd probably require the services of a shop that provides **custom** services. However, like any product or service, the more customization you want, the more it will cost you.

**Sign brokers** exist as middlemen between your business and providers of sign services (design, manufacturing – more on this in the next section). Customers tell a broker of their signage needs. A reputable sign broker would then solicit the services of the company (or companies) deemed most suitable for the job at hand. Instead of researching individual sign companies on your own, you would be putting your trust in a broker to have greater familiarity with the local sign industry, and knowing which parts of it can work best for your business. Be sure, then, to exercise caution before selecting a broker before placing this trust.

Still another avenue for signage advice for small businesses is the **professional sign consultant**. Up until now, we've been describing types of sign companies that apply their knowledge of the sign industry to a wide variety of businesses. Sign consultants, however, are experts on the signage needs of a specific industry, and typically cater to businesses within that industry.

By adapting contemporary sign industry research to



*Signs vary in price according to several factors, but don't let price be your only consideration when choosing a professional sign company. For instance, the PVC plastic sign for World Karate Academy is listed at \$400. The Globe sign, with its eye-catching, conspicuous shape and legible text, was priced at \$7,830.*

the personality of a specific industry, these specialists maximize the tailoring of a sign program for best results. Some consultants can complete the task by placing the order for you and following the process through to installation.

Not all industries have such experts at their disposal. To see if there are any working in your field, try contacting a trade association for your industry.

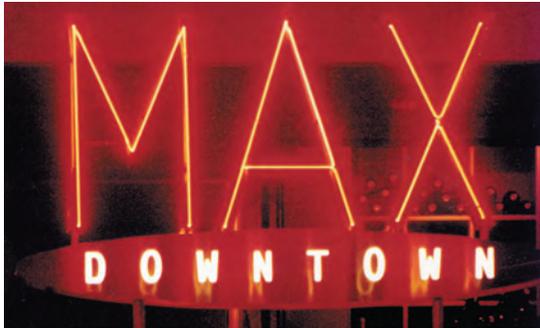
It goes without saying that you should choose the company that will back up its work. Decisions that are made primarily on cost savings are sources of frequent regret. Quality, reliability, and durability of materials are key considerations.

## Typical Services

A sign company can offer a variety of services. Most companies offer at least one of the following:

- Sign Design
- Permitting
- Manufacturing
- Installation
- Sign Maintenance
- Job Costing/Estimating

Again, some companies are not large enough to offer all of these services under one roof. Let's consider each of these services more fully:



*A sign company offers many services, but collaboration is common. In this example from Connecticut, the logo was created by one company, while another was responsible for design, and a third handled the architecture.*

### Sign Design

*"Design is the single most important element of any sign product. No amount of outstanding craftsmanship can save a poor design."*

Good design begins with a survey of the business location and the building's architecture. Frequently, photos are taken of the façade of the building, as well as the surrounding environment. Traffic volumes and patterns are noted. The sightlines of passing cars and people are considered, as is the color of the building. A respectable sign company will work to ensure that your sign has optimal **visibility, conspicuity, and readability.**

There is often at least one person considered to be

the art department within a sign company. The larger the company, the larger the art department. The site visit team makes suggestions to the art design team. The art design team will have design software at its disposal. Some of the larger sign companies have actually created their own software, to better serve the needs of their clients.

If you already have an existing design, the art design team can help adapt that image to your signage. If you don't have a logo or unique type style, the professional designers on staff can help develop one that you can use throughout your business to reinforce, or "**brand,**" your business (see Chapter 2). For help in doing this, ask if the final graphic can be made available to you in electronic format.

Initial drawings of the sign will be presented to you. If there are changes you'd like to make, then the design team will make them. Designing your sign should be a collaborative process. The idea is to blend your new sign so that it works in conjunction with your overall marketing plan.

### Permitting

When you have committed to a sign, the sign company can help in obtaining the necessary sign and electrical permits required. The information required to complete the permit varies from place to place, but, generally, you'll need to inform your town of the construction and installation plans you have in mind. Reputable sign companies don't begin construction on your sign until the proper permits have been obtained.

Many communities will require that the sign company be a licensed contractor before they'll issue the permit. It is recommended that you only work with licensed contractors.

**Variances** will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6, "Legal Considerations". Pursuing a variance takes a great deal of time, patience, money and work. It is not something to consider lightly. However, if a variance is something that you are willing to pursue, then you should work with a sign company that offers assistance in organizing and presenting your needs to the appropriate officials.

### Manufacturing

Proper construction of your sign, which conforms to local and national codes, is essential for a long-lasting asset. Good workmanship is a must. Visit your sign company. Look at the condition of their factory and the quality of the product they build. Ask for references, then take a critical look at other signs they've built in your community, and talk to the business owners about their signs. If you are considering an electrical sign, ask if the contractor is UL listed. The "UL" (for "Underwriters Laboratories") mark is a readily-identifiable symbol that confirms quality standards have been met.

Design, production and installation of signage does not happen overnight. It may require 6-8 weeks to complete the process, depending on the size and type of signage you choose. Plan accordingly.

### Installation



*Here, a sign company provided both fabrication and design services. This 40 by 50-in. wall sign incorporates a sandblasted and carved redwood panel with carved Sign Foam® artwork and 23K gold lettering with a blended enamel finish.*

Not all sign companies provide installation services. In many cases, you can hire contractors from outside the sign industry to do the job.

Regardless of who does it, communities often require that the installer be a licensed contractor before they will issue a permit. Sign installation often requires specialized equipment, and safety is essential. These are additional reasons to work with licensed contractors whenever possible. Since

whoever handles your installation will be working on your property, ask for their certificate of insurance. You don't want to assume the risk for their crew's safety.

### Sign Maintenance

Signage is a visual device, and customers must be able to clearly read your signs. The condition of your sign is, in the mind of the consumer, a reflection of the condition of your business. Will the sign company be able to keep the sign in good condition (such as touch-up painting, or bulb replacement)? Did they engineer the signs for economical maintenance (for instance, is the sign face readily removable)? Do they have the equipment necessary to perform this service? Make sure you are satisfied with the answers.

### Job Costing/Estimating



*At some point you will need to repair or replace your sign. Consider the lifespan of various materials when making your choice. This sturdy sign was built from galvanized steel panels and wire mesh.*

It is typical within the sign industry to expect 50% of the price up-front, with the balance due upon completion (or within 30 days from the date of the final invoice). It is not uncommon for this percentage to be lower if you have an existing relationship with the company. Most sign companies will perform a credit check before building a sign.

Determining the cost of designing, building and installing a sign depends on numerous variables: size, the materials used, the sophistication of the design, the location of your business, and others. Some sign companies have an estimating department that, through years of experience, grows adept at identifying the cost of specific jobs.

Some companies rely on the Official Sign

Contractors Pricing Guide in determining an overall price. It is published and updated annually, and is meant to have a national perspective. This guide features suggested costs for *very* specific jobs (like applying vehicle lettering, or a logo on both sides of a school bus), as well as for using particular materials, installation costs, labor rates, and travel charges. The data is compiled from job costing work orders supplied by sign industry professionals.

This isn't a guide that's used by all companies, but it's the only pricing guide currently in use in the industry. Because it's national in scope, there are likely to be wide fluctuations in price, depending on your local market.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy, this guide is available through Signwriters Publishing Company, at (406) 252-2214 (or on the Web at [www.signwritersusa.com](http://www.signwritersusa.com)).

#### *Buy or Lease?*

When possible, a small business should buy its sign outright. However, leasing is a financing option that makes sense for small businesses that might not have the funds to buy a sign outright. It typically requires a down payment (10 to 20% is common), with the balance spread over the term of the lease. Leasing is not offered by all sign companies, so be sure to ask beforehand.

### Products Offered, Materials Used

Earlier, we discussed how sign companies can be independently-owned, or part of a franchise. They can be full-service, or limited-service. Within each of these, a company can specialize in creating custom-made signage, or manufacturing them in quantity.

Regardless of this, sign companies are defined by those in the industry as being one of two types: **electric** and **non-electric**. Those in the non-electric segment are sometimes known as **commercial** sign companies. This doesn't mean that the company singularly belongs to one category or another. For instance, nearly every electric shop also makes non-electric signs, and vice-versa. A company is categorized based on what they primarily manufacture.

Here are brief descriptions of what electric and

non-electric sign companies offer, and the materials used in making them.

#### Electric



*Nearly every electric shop also makes non-electric signs. As an example, consider these two signs. The same company made both of them.*

Signs categorized as "electric" are those requiring electricity to function. While that is pretty obvious, the variety of technologies used in creating such signs is anything but mundane. Types of signs in this genre include electronic message centers, backlit awnings, illuminated cabinets, and many, many others.

The most popular material used in illuminating such signs is neon, with fluorescent lighting also widely used. LED (light-emitting diode) technology is popular, but the range of colors offered with this technology is limited compared to neon. HID (high-intensity discharge), incandescent, and fiber-optic lighting are other techniques used to illuminate electric signs.<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned earlier, if you are considering the use of an electric sign company, be sure that they are UL listed.

#### Non-Electric

At the risk of being too obvious (again), non-electric signs are simply those that do not require electricity. Throughout this handbook, we have referred to signs mainly as on-premise communication tools that are attached in some way to your building. However, sign companies (particularly non-electric companies) provide a variety of other products as well.

According to a recent survey,<sup>4</sup> the service most frequently offered by non-electric sign companies is vehicle graphics. In addition, other very common products offered by these shops include banners and window lettering.

When making classic on-premise signage, commercial sign companies utilize rigid plastic, metal, wood (or synthetic wood), or magnetic backing. It isn't uncommon for commercial sign companies to make electric signs as well.

The dominant decorative material used in the non-electric field is **vinyl**.<sup>5</sup> So dominant is this feature that it is often used as a term of description – companies that use vinyl to make signs are commonly known as "vinyl shops". Vinyl is a substrate onto which messages can be applied, either digitally or by hand (although hand-painting is becoming less common). Advancements in vinyl technology have made it more versatile, and thus longer-lasting. Adding to its popularity is the fact that it is available in a wide variety of colors.



This vinyl sign is a 7 by 7 ft., aluminum cabinet with dimensional Sintra letters with reflective black vinyl faces.

In addition to vinyl, non-electric shops employ other decorating techniques: painting, sandblasting (usually on wood or glass), carving or routing, airbrushing, gilding, pinstriping, and others.

Whether a sign company is primarily electric or non-electric, the signmaking industry is constantly evolving through advancements in technology. For example, digital imaging techniques are being used throughout the industry; not long ago, they were the exclusive province of only the largest companies. Also, improvements in vinyl, paints, and sealants have had great impact in extending the life of a sign. And something known as electronic digital signage (EDS) is the way of the future, where changeable content for signs can be fed via cable from a central information location and displayed on digital-projection devices.

EDS might be beyond your scope right now. Regardless, though, of the sign that you choose for your business, it is likely that it is an improvement on what could have been done for you just ten years ago.

Remember, it's the *quality* of materials used – rather than the *type* of material itself – that has the greatest effect on the life of a sign. There are numerous examples of this: a sign made primarily from wood can last anywhere between 3 to 15 years; cold cathode neon signs, when properly maintained, can have a life of several decades; signs made with baked porcelain last longer than plastic.



Sign shops use a variety of materials and methods. In the first example, the cedar sign is handcarved with a sandblasted interior. The Endless Possibilities sign, also of hand-carved wood, was designed so that its face could be detached and used at tradeshows.

If you're buying a sign based solely on the price quote that you obtain, then you run the risk that you're paying for lesser quality.

## Selecting The Right Company

The right sign company can serve you for the life of your business. As in any successful relationship, each party should have a clear understanding of what the other expects of them.

*Among the different materials that make up this single-faced freestanding sign are a concrete base, a Fiberglas® fabric panel, faux-copper cut-out letters, and mahogany with sandblasted and carved type.*



## What You Should Look For in a Sign Company

We touched upon some tips earlier in the chapter. In addition to those, here are a few others (in no particular order):

- The design process is critical. Some companies, particularly if they're very busy, will simply reproduce what they're given. This might work out fine, especially if your business has had an established design for years. If you're just starting out, or if you're looking for an overhaul, you'd be better off with a company that is a bit more forceful in terms of what they think will work.
- If your sign company has its own art department, ask whether they own the copyright of the artwork they have on file, or whether they have permission from the original creator.
- Companies with experience in negotiating variances can be of great benefit. A company

may not pursue variances because it simply does not have the staff. Some companies, though, are equipped to challenge local codes. A company with this attitude, combined with contacts in the right places, can be quite valuable should you pursue a variance.

At the end of this chapter, we've attached a copy of an **evaluation tool** developed by an experienced signage consulting firm. It reiterates much of what has been said already. Keep it handy when you begin shopping for the firm that's right for you.

## What a Sign Company Looks For in You

The creation and installation of a sign should be a collaborative effort. We spoke to a few owners of sign companies around the U.S., and asked them what a small business owner can do to make the process run more smoothly. Here's a sampling of what they told us:

- Have a passing familiarity with your local sign code. A copy of this can usually be found within a planning or building department of your local government.
- If you have an idea for your logo, or have a logo and want it on your sign, it's best if an image of it exists electronically. It is very difficult to reproduce accurately an image when its source is as small as a business card, or as murky as a faxed image. Ultimately, the signage service will need camera-ready artwork for any logo or design.
- If you've no idea for your logo, you should still put **some** thought into it. The process will go much faster if the sign company's design department has some parameters.



*Be mindful that some logos are trademarked. If you take a liking to an image on a sign and want to mimic it in some way, be careful that reproducing it won't infringe upon its rightful owner.*

- Be mindful that some logos are trademarked. If you like an image on a sign in your community and want to mimic it in some way, be aware that reproducing it might infringe upon its rightful owner.
- Have an awareness of the customers you're hoping to attract with your sign. Are you more likely to draw pedestrians, or customers from passing vehicles? Are you geared more towards luring the impulse buyer, or are you an appointment-only service operation? Knowing your primary customer has an impact on how the sign should be designed.
- If cost overruns occur during the construction of your business, don't be so quick to cut your sign budget. A sign should not be viewed as an expense, but as an investment. You pay for the sign once, yet with proper maintenance it will last for years, and will return your investment many times over.
- Some local sign codes can affect how you design your building. If your architect draws up plans without referencing the local code, there could be problems. For instance, there is a code for a town in Maryland that only allows commercial signs to be displayed at curbed entrances in the front. If you build with an entrance on a street **without** a curb, then your lack of signage could be fatal to your business.
- Prospective small business owners need to take a good look at the community in which they're considering a location. Is the town business-friendly? An unfortunate trend in some communities is to "suggest" that, in return for a sign permit, a business pay for certain public projects (such as park enhancements, or the paving of a street) adjacent to their building. Obviously, this abuse of the power inherent in applying a sign reveals an unfriendly business community.
- Don't focus primarily on price. If you do, you're more likely to purchase a lower-quality product with limited life expectancy. Replacing a sign every few years is needlessly expensive, when better quality materials, along with routine maintenance, can increase the life expectancy of your message.

## Where To Find Sign Companies

When faced with a need to find a sign company, most people would reach for the *Yellow Pages*. It's an understandable impulse to look there. However, more targeted methods are at your disposal.

As mentioned earlier, a great source for finding a sign company is you, using your own senses. If you're driving around town and see a sign that you like, and feel it might work for you, then ask that business owner about the company that made it. If you contact that company, then ask them why they built the sign the way they did. Use what you've learned in this handbook to probe further.



*Effective signs in your local business district can provide excellent leads when building your own. If you admire one in particular, then ask that business owner about the sign company that built it.*

Another source are trade associations that serve your particular industry. Remember, there are **sign consultants** that work within particular industries. Yours might be one of them. Even if there are no consultants in your industry, there might be someone within a trade group who can identify sign companies that come highly recommended by members. **Word-of-mouth** from your peers can be very persuasive.

Sign companies frequently advertise in sign industry publications. A few of these are listed in the "Contacts" section of this book. You might want to read these magazines for more than the ads. Stories appear that frequently put successful and/or innovative companies in the spotlight. Reading about them can inspire ideas on what it is you're seeking.

The International Sign Association is a pre-eminent organization within the sign industry. On their Web site is a feature that allows you to search the worldwide membership of the ISA for companies who may help you. Go to [www.signs.org](http://www.signs.org), and click on "Search for ISA Member Companies". You can search for companies that offer specific products and services, and that are located in a specific area.

Throughout this chapter, we've cited material from *Signs of the Times* magazine. Its Web site ([www.signweb.com](http://www.signweb.com)) also has a feature that allows you to search for sign shops. When at this site, click on "Find A Retail Sign Shop". You can search for companies that offer specific products or services in a particular area.

Still another Web site you can try is sign-search (and, yes, it's supposed to be all lower-case letters). The site can be found at [www.signsearch.com](http://www.signsearch.com).

And when you find a company, be sure to ask, "How did you decide on *your* sign?"



*When considering a sign company, be sure to ask, "How did you decide on your sign?" This example shows one sign company's efforts to market their business in style.*

*Sign companies offer a remarkable breadth of services. Such places are storehouses of information that goes beyond what you can find in this book. The glimpse that we provide may be more than you want to know. You may just want to know only what works best for you. However, now that you know some of the nuts and bolts, you're in a better position to actually know what works best for you.*

*There are numerous legal and regulatory issues that affect your signage rights. You should definitely know more about this subject. By reading about these basics, you can avoid costly mistakes in judgment, time, and your checkbook balance. This is the focus of Chapter 6, "Legal Considerations".*

#### ENDNOTES

1 Swormstedt, Wade and Shea, Carol. "2002 Electric State of the Industry Report." *Signs of the Times*, July 2003, p. 84.

2 Anderson, Gary. "Try This Four-Step Approach to Effective Sign Design." *Signcraft*, Nov./Dec. 1992, p. 72.

3 Swormstedt & Shea, July 2003, p. 90.

4 Swormstedt, Wade and Shea, Carol. "2002 CAS/Commercial State of the Industry Report." *Signs of the Times*, August 2003, pp. 88-102.

5 Swormstedt, Wade. "2002 Vinyl Survey: Vinyl Equals Stability." *Signs of the Times*, Feb. 2002, p. 90.

## A TOOL FOR SELECTING A SIGN COMPANY

Signage is your first – and one of your best – opportunities to communicate with the public. Signage *must* be effectively designed, well manufactured and correctly installed to optimize your message. Signage is an important investment, so take your time and get answers to the following questions when shopping for a sign company – and other related professionals – to meet *your* needs.

My Business Name / Address:	
The type of sign(s) I am considering:	
Contact Name:	Contact Phone #:

Sign Company Name / Address:	
Contact Name:	Contact Phone #:

<p><b>1. What services does your sign company offer?</b> <i>(Please check all that apply.)</i></p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Site surveys <i>(location, site and/or building)</i></td> <td style="width: 50%; border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation of existing signage</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Design Services <i>(sign, logo, etc.)</i></td> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Obtaining Required Permits</td> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Sign Installation</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Variance Services <i>(Planning, others)</i></td> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Sign Maintenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Financing <i>(Leasing or Rental)</i></td> <td style="border: none;"><input type="checkbox"/> Other:</td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> Site surveys <i>(location, site and/or building)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation of existing signage	<input type="checkbox"/> Design Services <i>(sign, logo, etc.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing	<input type="checkbox"/> Obtaining Required Permits	<input type="checkbox"/> Sign Installation	<input type="checkbox"/> Variance Services <i>(Planning, others)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Sign Maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/> Financing <i>(Leasing or Rental)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
<input type="checkbox"/> Site surveys <i>(location, site and/or building)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation of existing signage									
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<input type="checkbox"/> Obtaining Required Permits	<input type="checkbox"/> Sign Installation									
<input type="checkbox"/> Variance Services <i>(Planning, others)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Sign Maintenance									
<input type="checkbox"/> Financing <i>(Leasing or Rental)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:									
<p><b>2. What steps will you follow to provide the services indicated above?</b> <i>(Please include your pre-design work, pre-manufacturing permitting, etc., as well as typical timelines for each.)</i></p>										
<p><b>3. Does your company allow plant visits to that I may evaluate your abilities, equipment and proficiencies?</b></p>										
<p><b>4. If you manufacture, list the product types that your company provides:</b></p>										
<p><b>5. How can you assure me that my sign will be legal and meet all required codes, regulations, etc.?</b></p>										
<p><b>6. What type(s) of sign(s) do you believe will be most effective for my business, and why? How much experience does your company have with manufacturing the type of sign I am looking to purchase?</b></p>										

7. How will this sign affect my business/traffic?
8. Are you licensed and registered as a contractor in my community? Are your signs UL (Underwriters Laboratory) listed? Do they comply with the structural requirements of the Building Code?
9. Describe how you engineer the signs for economical maintenance.
10. If your firm will also install my sign, are you insured? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Can I obtain a copy of your certificate of insurance? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
11. How will you keep my sign(s) in good condition? Do you provide monthly maintenance contracts?
12. What payment methods do you offer? Do you require down payment deposits? What percentage?
13. What information or documents will you need from me to design, manufacture and install this sign? <i>(The sign company may need your logo, colors, and related artwork, or other information.)</i>
14. What are some local examples of your signs? Does your firm specialize in any specific type of sign?
15. Please provide a list of three to five business references with names and phone numbers. <i>(Attach a list if necessary.)</i>

## CHAPTER 6

# Legal Considerations

By the time you've reached this chapter, you've (hopefully) been convinced that a sign can have a measurable impact on your bottom line, as well as on the community in which you live. Your sign is a form of advertising, as well as a form of free speech (so long as it is truthful information about a lawful activity). If you have a storefront, perhaps you're now considering an upgrade. If you're in the process of starting a business, hopefully you'll recognize that the sign budget shouldn't be something you can skip on.

You've learned about the kinds of signs that are available, and which design features work best. Lastly, you understand the importance of selecting the right sign company. You recognize the services it offers, and that its staff has the expertise to guide you through the creation of your sign.

As an example, one service that a good sign company provides for its customers is knowledge of the sign code that applies to the city or town in which your business is located. Their awareness has an impact on whether or not you'll receive a permit to construct and install your sign.

As has been mentioned throughout this handbook, there is no one standard sign code that applies to every community. Each city has a board to create such a code, composed of other citizens who have a vision of how the city should look. Almost all local governments control how signage can be built. However, there are a few states that don't allow local authorities to do this. In these places, a state has a **zoning enabling act**, which tells its cities how to write a code. A reputable sign company in your state will know who authored your local code.

Sign codes are written with this local vision in mind, and may incorporate restrictions on sign size, the kinds of signs that can be used, the number of signs you can install in and around your location, whether or not the sign can be illuminated, the kind of information that can be expressed, and numerous other restrictions.

From a legal standpoint, some sign codes are better than others. Consider a business owner who, perhaps in conjunction with a sign company or consultant, has analyzed a site's physical constraints, available sign options, costs, and so forth. After this analysis, it is not uncommon that the business owner learns during the permitting process that the proposed signage will not be allowed on the site due to a restrictive sign code. On too many occasions, rejection is based on arbitrary and subjective standards with little, if any, regard for the communication needs of the business.

With that in mind, this chapter:

- features the general types of sign codes that exist in American communities;
- discusses the procedure by which you can obtain an exception to your sign code (known as an "exception," or a **variance**);
- reminds you of your legal rights as a sign owner; and
- describes the means you have at your disposal should legal action ever be necessary.

The design of a sign can start out with the best of intentions. However, such intentions are of little use if you are not aware of the law that governs them.

### Common Features Of Sign Codes

As mentioned earlier, sign codes are typically written by local authorities. The text becomes part of the overall municipal law that governs your community. A copy of the local code should be available from the responsible department. For instance, the sign ordinance for the city of Albany, New York can be obtained by contacting the city's Division of Planning.

Sign codes were originally intended to impose order in communities and minimize signage abuses taken by businesses. Photographs of cityscapes from fifty, sixty, or eighty years ago show business districts that were chaotic and uninhibited in their capacity to

advertise. However, in too many cases, the zeal to regulate within local government has swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. Many small businesses, attempting to communicate with customers through on-premise signs, have encountered difficulties with restrictive sign code provisions.

There are "good" sign codes, and there are some that are not. For the most part, however, sign codes generally address three main community goals: traffic safety, land use (or **zoning**), and aesthetics.

### Traffic Safety

In communities that take traffic safety seriously, regulations are designed not only to control signs, but also promote the safe passage of vehicles. These goals are achieved by setting physical limits on sign type, size, and placement, as well as time, place, and manner conditions (more on this later). Standard regulations in this category are based on **minimum** size and height measurements. These standards specify that a sign must be at least a certain size or height if it is to be safely seen and reacted to by passing motorists.

Unfortunately, many communities, while promoting traffic safety as a goal, craft regulations that do exactly the opposite. As mentioned in Chapter 1, such codes are rooted in the thought that commercial signs are capable of distracting drivers, and can also mask the visibility of highway signs. Such regulations still exist in many places, despite research by such groups as the Federal Highway Administration and the Institute of Traffic Engineers that shows that it is the regulations themselves that are the risk.

For example, a code may state that an on-premise sign cannot be more than six feet off the ground. In many circumstances, parked cars or idle traffic will obscure this sign from the view of drivers who are in the left lane or on the opposite side of the street. When this occurs, not only does the sign fail in communicating its message, it encourages unsafe traffic maneuvers by those who may be looking for it.



*Some sign codes limit content in the name of increased traffic safety. By restricting information, however, such regulations become a potential menace. For example, the local code governing this business limits the height of monument signs. It also carefully monitors the removal of trees and landscaping. As a result, this business is easy to miss. The effort required to find it could result in risky driving decisions.*

### Land-Use (or Zone) Regulation

Community authorities carve up the land within their boundaries and designate each part for a specific purpose. Zoning recognizes certain areas as available for business locations, while other areas are designated as strictly residential, school, or for some other non-business purpose. Commercial zones must have certain features – for instance, a defined geographic buffer to separate it from residential areas – in order for businesses to function there.

Businesses must abide by the local commercial sign code regulations. These regulations generally concentrate on sign type, size, height, placement, and source of illumination. Such provisions should, at their best, be designed to encourage businesses to function at their fullest capacity. When business volume increases, so does the efficiency of existing retail space. This is especially of interest to communities looking to limit urban sprawl.

Effective signage is an important tool for accomplishing this goal. Signs can help turn a site that is not productive into one that is well-used and valuable – one that generates higher sales and pays more in taxes. Each business site has particular

communication needs if it is to function at its maximum. The selection of a specific kind of sign – such as pylon, projecting, awning, etc. (see Chapter 4) – depends on where it will be installed. A good professional sign company can help figure this out for you.

A sign code that restricts particular sign types – for example, those that prohibit projecting or roof signs – denies some businesses the ability to communicate effectively, which restrains their business activity. For freeway-oriented sites or districts, a tall sign can be especially beneficial for the city. The sign can attract impulse customers who otherwise would have bypassed the site and done business elsewhere.



*There have been sign codes that prohibit pole signs. Codes that selectively ban one type of sign over another are viewed with increasing skepticism by the courts. If such a prohibition is challenged, then the burden of proof falls on the government to cite any compelling public interest in keeping the ban.*

### Aesthetics

Many communities are concerned with appearance, and write sign codes to protect against visual clutter. Such codes must comply with the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of expression because signs, including a business' on-premise signage, are a constitutionally protected form of expression.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that a sign code must be "**content-neutral**" – in other words, it can only be concerned with signs based on issues of time, place and manner. **Time** refers to "when" a message may be displayed; **place** refers to "where" the message may be displayed; and **manner** refers to "how" the message may be displayed.

The Court also has stated that time, place and manner restrictions on commercial speech are permissible if:

- (1) they are justified without reference to the content of the speech;
- (2) the restrictions serve a significant government interest; and
- (3) they leave open ample alternative channels for communication of the information.

Many sign codes do consider a sign's content, however, to treat signs differently. It is up to the town to prove that sign restrictions based on content are in the best interests of the community. Failure to do that, in the eyes of the courts, makes that restriction unconstitutional.

For example, the town of Moreno Valley, California, once had a sign code that gave a local official the power to approve or deny a sign permit based on this standard: "[the sign] will not have a harmful effect upon the health or welfare of the general public . . . [and] will not be detrimental to the aesthetic quality of the community." In 1996, a federal district court found that this standard gave the government official too much authority in determining what the "aesthetic quality of the community" should be. If allowed to stand, the code would have legalized a form of censorship by letting the official approve or deny a sign based solely on its content. The code was deemed unconstitutional, and struck down.

Sign codes are effective when written with respect for aesthetics in economically vital zones. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the town of Barberstown, Ohio offered bonuses to businesses for custom sign designs. The town successfully rehabilitated its business district by encouraging merchants to incorporate their messages on one, custom-designed sign. Businesses were not severely restricted as to

which materials, fonts, colors, and other embellishments they could use in expressing their unique messages. This is an example of a sign code that was written intentionally to achieve visually attractive signage, without imposing a series of restrictions and punishments.

At minimum, if the commercial site and its signage are to function at their best, then the governing sign code should reflect these principles:

1. It should reasonably relate to normal business activities and communication needs so that legal conformity is the rule and not the exception. In other words, the code should not try to apply standards to business districts that are more applicable to quiet residential areas.
2. It should be clear, concise, and objective so that discriminatory interpretation is prevented. More information on this can be found in the "Legal Rights of Sign Owners," below.
3. It should be based on prescribed time, place, and manner limits.

## Variations

When you and/or your sign company have committed to a sign, a permit must be obtained from a zoning or building official in your local area. Usually, the application has detailed instructions on completing the form, and outlines specific criteria that the sign must meet. Requirements vary from place to place, but, generally, you'll need to inform your town of your construction and installation plans.

If your business is to be located in an historical district, you'll need the additional permission of the local historical commission. If you sign an agreement in order to develop your business in a planned use development (PUD), then be aware that any sign restrictions in the agreement will supersede your city's sign code.

On occasion, you might wish to obtain an exception, or **variance**, which is an entirely different procedure from obtaining a permit. A variance is the authority to use a parcel or structure in a way that would otherwise violate a city ordinance.

Pursuing a variance requires an investment of your time, resources, patience, and money. It is not something that you should seek lightly. If you cannot commit to the process, it is wise to compromise between what you want and what your town allows.

If you are willing, then below is a description of what you (and, if you're wise, the sign company that you've hired to help) can expect.

In a given locality, there may be multiple boards that hear variance requests: the zoning board of appeals, the housing board of appeals, the building board of appeals, the city planning commission, the historic district commission, etc. Variances may only be granted by these boards after a finding is made that the variance request meets certain standards set out in both the ordinance and state law.

Some basic concepts in both state law and city ordinances are that variances can only be granted when the property owner has a **hardship or practical difficulty** (based on something physical), making it difficult (if not impossible) to reasonably use his or her land. Another important concept is that the hardship or difficulty cannot be self-created.

Situations in which a sign code imposes a practical difficulty include the requiring of a minimum distance that a sign must be set back from the curb, or a maximum height from the ground, or strict size dimensions, and so on. If your business is located behind a grove of trees, and those trees obscure a driver's view of your sign, then you might want to pursue a variance to allow the sign to be installed lower to the ground.

Another motivation for obtaining a variance is to allow a small business to better compete with franchises that have national advertising. For instance, McDonald's asks for very few variances, but, because of their signcentric design (described in Chapter 2), their entire building acts as a sign. To compete, smaller restaurants ought to consider a variance (most likely to obtain a sign with larger dimensions).

You might want to approach an application for a variance with one of these strategies:

- Illustrate the benefits that the sign will bring to the **land**, not to your business. For example, if you are in an older building, point out the proposed sign will contribute to the revitalization of the business district as a whole. If you can demonstrate that the sign will improve the area's tax base, then your community might be more inclined to grant your variance.
- As has been written earlier, traffic safety is a paramount concern to a community. Don't simply lament to a variance board that your sign won't be able to communicate to potential customers. Instead, remind them of the studies mentioned in Chapter 1 that concluded that signs that cannot be readily seen and understood are a menace to passing motorists.
- Should your business be located in a business district with a "theme," know that many jurisdictions are agreeable to variances that permit the renovation of a building's face in order to better fit the theme.

Pursuing a variance can be time-consuming. In many places, boards that make the decision meet infrequently, and may have only a select number of slots on their docket to hear your case. If there are no open slots, then you must wait until there is one. In addition, the process requires a certain amount of diplomacy – greater familiarity with persons on the board might improve your chances of success.

If interested, it's in your best interest to work with those who have the experience. Some states (such as New York or New Jersey) mandate that you have an attorney present. If your state doesn't require an attorney being present, there are consultants who offer their services in this field. For example, larger sign companies often have staff that help with variance requests.

Pursuit of a variance is really a negotiation – you can propose a suggestion, but be prepared to compromise. Your willingness to do so has an impact on whether or not you'll succeed. Other factors that influence your chances of getting a variance include how far your request deviates from the code, and the town's history in granting them, and the level of resources that you use to obtain one.

Another factor is the current economic climate of your community. If landlords are having difficulty in leasing office space, they might be more inclined to consider signage exceptions. Keep in mind, though, that such exceptions are not free. As one consultant based in New York City said, "We advise our clients right up front that altering their signage requirements might mean higher rent for retail spaces."

The cost of a variance depends on your state and city, and is influenced by the number of meetings that must be attended, the level of preparation, the amount of the filing fees, and whether or not you choose to use a sign company consultant or an attorney. It is also recommended that you consult a signage valuation expert to construct a cost/benefit analysis before applying for a variance.

In addition, since the procedures and requirements for variances differ substantially between municipalities, it is recommended that you consult a qualified attorney if you have any questions or uncertainty regarding practices in your community.

A sample sign variance application appears on the next page.



## Legal Rights Of Sign Owners

### The First Amendment - Signs as Free Speech

Several years ago, a law in Virginia stated that pharmacists were banned from advertising prescription drug prices. In *Virginia State Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Counsel* (1976), the U.S. Supreme Court declared this to be unconstitutional. In its opinion, the Court stated that "[t]he fact that the advertiser's interest in a commercial advertisement is purely economic does not disqualify him from protection under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Both the individual consumer and society in general may have strong interests in the free flow of commercial information."

This decision began a reversal of a trend. Up until the mid-1970s, it was common for a city to have an ordinance that banned commercial speech (that is, advertising) from printed public notices. Advertising was considered to be an occupation, not a form of expression, and small businesses had to carry the burden of proof that such regulations harmed them. After the mid-1970s, the courts began to recognize that the First Amendment applies to commercial speech – including signs that simply identify a business and/or advertise a lawful product.

In 1980, the Supreme Court greatly expanded on the *Virginia Board* case in their ruling on another case involving commercial advertising. In *Central Hudson Gas & Electric Corp. v. Public Service Commission* (1980), a challenge arose to a New York state law that prohibited public utilities from advertising. In their ruling, the Court devised a four-part test to determine when regulation of **commercial** speech is allowed:

1. Does the commercial speech contain "truthful information" about a "lawful activity"?
2. Is the government interest served by the regulation "substantial"?
3. Does the regulation "directly advance" the governmental interest asserted?
4. Is the regulation "no more extensive than necessary" to serve that interest?

In cases from the early 1990s, the Supreme Court refined further the *Central Hudson* test to require the government to show that:

- a substantial government interest justifies the regulation;
- the regulation directly advances that interest;
- the regulation is narrowly tailored to achieve that interest, although it doesn't have to be the "least restrictive means," and
- the regulation leaves ample alternative avenues of communication for those it affects.

With each passing year, the Supreme Court has provided additional rulings that further advance these tests. As a result of these precedents, lower courts have become increasingly critical of local government sign regulations that make distinctions based on the content of on-premise signs. Because the First Amendment has been found to protect commercial speech, the burden of proof is now placed on the local government to prove the merits of its sign code regulations. By applying these stricter standards, more and more codes – either whole or in part – are being struck down for their unconstitutionality.

### The Fifth Amendment – Due Process & "Takings"

The Fifth Amendment contains two separate guarantees for property rights: the due process clause and the "takings" clause.

The due process clause – "No person shall . . . be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law" – protects citizens from government action that arbitrarily deprives them of a fundamental right. The "takings" clause – ". . . nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation" – is designed to prevent the government from forcing individuals to bear public burdens which more fairly should be carried by the general public. These provisions apply not only to the federal government. For over a century, the Supreme Court has interpreted the due process clause as applicable to the actions of state and local governments as well.

When signage is affected by a "takings," it is generally the result of either a) its location being condemned or b) a change in the regulation that makes a previously legal and conforming sign suddenly illegal.

Compensation is due whenever property is taken by government for a valid public purpose. It is well-established that business signs possess a measurable dollar value, but compensation depends on the kind of sign. For example, the various federal Highway Acts mandate fair compensation for owners of outdoor advertising (i.e., billboards, generally). However, compensation for regulatory downsizing, removing, condemning or banning is relatively new to on-premise signage.

Some progress for on-premise signage is being made. Currently, thirty-five states have some type of statute recognizing and protecting the real property value of on-premise business signs. Also, recent case decisions have said that, yes, local governments may undertake zoning or regulatory actions – even those that diminish property values (which include on-premise signage) – without being required to compensate for the diminution. However, when the government takes "too much," compensation must be paid.



*A small business often cannot afford the costs of regulatory "takings" enforced retroactively. If a court decides that the takings result in no benefit to the general community, and are driven more by enforcing a biased viewpoint or particular aesthetic preference, then the argument for requiring just compensation is particularly strong.*

As studies continue to expand our understanding of the significance of signs in the economic survival of a business, and as attempts are made to retroactively downsize signs below the visual level of the average consumer, the federal government should extend its present compensatory protection of outdoor advertising to include on-premise signs as well.

### *Nonconforming Signs / Amortization*

From time to time, local governments revise sections of their sign codes, or change them entirely. As a result, a number of existing signs that complied with the "old" code would not be approved under the new one. A sign in this situation is known as a **legal non-conforming sign**.

Generally, the owner of such a sign is not required to comply with the new code, and can continue to maintain and repair it as seen fit. This is an example of being "**grandfathered in**". In addition, in



*Grandfathering of sign structures can lead to poor sign design, such as the LaQuinta example. The city in which this sign is located would not allow a new sign with a more appropriately shaped face, even though the square footage would have been the same, because its new sign code prohibited signs of this size (for safety and aesthetic reasons). This meant that the new owner was forced to rework the existing structure left by the Hawthorn Inn, rather than being allowed a professional-looking sign that was more readable from the freeway and more aesthetically pleasing.*

most cases if the owner sells the business, the new owner has the right to retain the non-conforming sign, although some sign codes make it illegal to change text or design without making the whole sign conform to the new code.

Keep in mind that it is perfectly constitutional for a new sign code to prohibit an increase in the area or height of a non-conforming sign, or to require a conforming sign to be built when the old structure is removed.

Some sign codes contain provisions requiring the removal of non-conforming signs within a specified time limit – anywhere between two to ten years. This is commonly known as the **amortization period**, and is based on what a local government considers to be a sufficient passage of time to allow the owner to have recaptured the cost of the original sign. A majority of state courts have found to date that amortization is a constitutionally acceptable method of removing non-conforming signs without having to compensate their owners.

(This is not the case on the federal level. Congressional legislation states that amortization is an impermissible method for compensating owners for signs that are removed or relocated as a result of the federal Highway Beautification Act. In addition, federal law says that an owner is required payment whenever his or her sign is removed, or obscured, as a result of roadway improvements that involve federal money.)

On the state and local level, you should be aware that amortization is a hotly debated area of the law. More and more, legislatures and courts recognize that an on-premise sign is worth far more than its original cost – it's been adding value to the business since it was first erected. Amortization, then, is not seen as a way of fairly compensating the owner.

If you are told that your non-conforming sign must be removed because its amortization period has ended, you might want to consult an attorney before agreeing to do so.

### The Fourteenth Amendment – Prior Restraint

The Supreme Court has also ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment makes the First Amendment's guarantees enforceable against actions of state and local government. A local sign code, therefore, must comply with the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of expression.

In addition, regarding the regulation of commercial signs, the Fourteenth Amendment is often applied with issues regarding the sign permit procedure. In order to be considered constitutionally valid, the permitting, licensing or variance request procedure must be written for easy understanding of requirements. Also, reasonable application fees, speedy decision on the application, and the opportunity to swiftly appeal a denied application must also be available to all.

Because a sign is essential to communicating your business' presence and effectively competing in the marketplace, a failure in any of these minimum due-process requirements can give rise to a **prior restraint** issue. Prior restraint occurs when the right to communicate is subject to the prior approval of a government official.

While the Supreme Court has not yet applied the prior restraint doctrine to a sign code permitting issue, it made the following points clear in *Freedman v. Maryland* (1965):

- The decision to issue a permit must be made within a specific, brief period.
- The scheme must also assure a prompt final judicial decision, to minimize the possibility of an interim (and possibly erroneous) denial of a license; and
- The censor must bear the burden of instituting judicial proceedings, and providing that the expression is unprotected.

In the case *North Olmsted Chamber of Commerce, et al. v. City of North Olmsted* (1998), filed in a U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, the Court found that the city's sign ordinance was written in such a way as to give government officials too much discretion in awarding permits.

In other words, the ordinance did not abide by the points made above. For this and other reasons, the Court found the ordinance unconstitutional in its entirety.

### Copyrights, Patents and Trademarks

There are federal laws protecting a sign company or business owner when someone tries to "copy" the design, artwork, or wording of a business sign without permission. For example, an innovative method for constructing a sign may be protected by a patent, the original artwork on a sign may be copyrighted, and a unique business logo may obtain both trademark and copyright protections.

When you are looking to design a sign, it is common to research the styles already in use by other businesses. It is one thing to be influenced by what you see; it's quite another to copy outright without getting permission. Be careful of the latter. You run the risk of being sued for **infringing** on that sign owner's copyright, patent and/or trademark. If found guilty, the cost could be a death knell for your business – for instance, infringing on copyrighted works can result in having to pay the copyright owner monetary damages, attorney's fees, substantial financial penalties, and on, and on. Six figure judgments are not out of the ordinary.

Other useful tidbits of information on this subject include:

- Pictorial graphics, pictures, and company logos are entitled to copyright protection. Typefaces are not.
- Information on obtaining a copyright can be found at the Web site of the U.S. Copyright Office ([www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov)).
- Patents have been issued for innovations in designing sign frames, building materials, attachments, and so on. Those who infringe on a patent by using these innovations without authorization can be sued by the patent holder. If found guilty, the patent holder is entitled to, at minimum, a court order that bars further infringement, as well as compensation for any lost revenues.
- A trademark is any combination of words, phrases, symbols or designs that are meant to uniquely identify a product or service.

- It is the responsibility of the holder to vigorously defend its trademark. Stories routinely appear in the press about corporations like Disney threatening a small organization that may have incorporated an image of their characters on a document, a Web site, or wherever. At first glance, these cases appear to be heavy-handed (though they are usually settled quietly, for a nominal use fee). They act in this manner because courts will not rule a trademark has been infringed if its owner is indifferent in protecting it.
- Trademarks can be filed with a state, the federal government, or both. Federal protection provides the most advantages. In the eyes of the law, a federal trademark presumes nationwide ownership.
- Laws, fees, and other information on patents or trademarks can be found at the Web site of the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office ([www.uspto.gov](http://www.uspto.gov)).



*A trademark or logo is protected under the 1958 Lanham Act. No sign regulation can require a company to alter a trademark as a condition of obtaining a sign permit.*

### *The Federal Lanham Act*

The federal Lanham Trademark Act protects federally registered trademarks. The plain language of this law prohibits federal, state and local governments from requiring the **alteration** of a registered trademark or copyrighted slogan as a condition of obtaining a sign permit. (Sign ordinances can, however, outright ban the display of a registered trademark or logo.)

A recent case involving this is *Blockbuster Videos Inc. & Video Update v. City of Tempe (AZ)* (1998). In *Blockbuster*, the city required that mall signage conform to certain color schemes as set out in a comprehensive sign plan approved by the city in concert with shopping center owners. Neither registered color scheme of the video stores conformed with the city's color scheme, and sign permits were not granted to allow the trademarked colors to appear.



*The Lanham Trademark Act prohibits the government from requiring a business to alter its federally registered mark, name, or colors. A city may not force McDonald's to change its sign colors to match the décor of the city.*

### Legal Means

During this chapter, several court cases were cited. Trying a case requires great expenditures in time and money, and the plaintiffs mentioned had sufficient resources to pursue their interests in legal proceedings. For example, the plaintiff in the *Central Hudson* case was (and still is) a major

electrical utility that services parts of New York State. One of the primary plaintiffs in the *North Olmsted Chamber of Commerce* case was a major Dodge automobile dealership. The *Blockbuster Videos* case, cited earlier, obviously refers to the national video rental chain.

There are several instances like this. However, what if your small business is not a member of the Fortune 500, and does not have such deep resources at its disposal? What recourse do you have?

First, such cases should be entered only after exercising a great deal of caution. It is unlikely that you and your cause, standing alone, will get very far. Notice, again, the name of the plaintiff in the *North Olmsted*. The suit was originally brought by the Chamber of Commerce in that Ohio city. It was a collective of numerous businesses, each of whom ostensibly were faced with one hardship or another when dealing with the local sign ordinance. There's strength in numbers.

Also, legal proceedings should be your last resort. If you want to take on City Hall, are you prepared for the possibility of some form of reprisal? Again, the legal path should only be taken when both sides are at an impasse.

The American Civil Liberties Union uses as its motto, "Defending the Bill of Rights". This chapter has discussed how some of those rights pertain to commercial free speech, including on-premise signs. If you are among a class of businesses in your community that feels its speech is being restricted, then the ACLU is an organization that might be interested in assisting you. Their Web site is [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org).

Lastly, keep in mind that town planning/building boards are not necessarily your enemy. Their interests and yours need not be exclusive of one another. As was mentioned in the section on variances, oftentimes you and your town can come to a compromise that benefits both parties, without the time, effort, and money that comes with legal proceedings.

## Summary

There's a catchphrase from an old advertisement that sums up the intent of this handbook: *The best customer is an educated customer.* Hopefully, after reading these chapters, you're now a more educated small business owner. You should now be equipped to know that there is power inherent in an on-premise sign that is effectively designed, installed and maintained.

Let's review what you've learned. After reading Chapter 1, you'll know that signage, while not readily known as a "sexy" subject, is of paramount importance in your interactions with potential customers. From Chapter 2, you should now have a sense that your sign is an extension of your overall marketing mix – indeed, your sign is your most constant advertisement. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, it is also your most cost effective option, and potentially quite profitable.

Chapter 4, with its blend of science and consumer psychology, lends insight into how design elements, if applied intelligently to the right kind of sign structure, can make your business more conspicuous to a wide audience. It also should help you in narrowing down what signs would work in your location. Chapter 5 identifies the difference that a reputable sign professional can make, and provides you with a guide on how to find the company that best complements your new-found knowledge. Lastly, Chapter 6 discusses the features common to sign codes, and reminds you of the legal rights that you have as a sign owner.

Given all of this, you should know be in a better position to obtain the right sign from the right company. Signage is critical to the success of your business, and should not be an afterthought. Use the information that you've discovered in this handbook, and put sign companies to the test. Those that are most qualified, and most committed to your needs, will make themselves known rather easily.

The rest of this handbook exists as reference tools. The section called "Contacts" not only identifies associations and publications that are preeminent in the sign industry, it also provides the means to locate a **Small Business Development Center (SBDC)** nearest you. While this book can help you better understand signage, there are many other challenges that you'll face as a small business owner. The advisors of the SBDCs around the country can help you meet those challenges.

Also included is a list of the many resources that were used in writing this book. Feel free to refer to them yourself. There is much more information available than that which is presented here.

Lastly, a Glossary of terms common to the sign industry are presented, many of which are used throughout this guide.

A good sign, by itself, can do its part to help your business. A bad sign, by itself, can almost certainly ruin it. Good luck!

# Useful Contacts

As written in the Introduction, the field of signage is remarkably complex. It encompasses a wide variety of fields – psychology, lighting, transportation studies, and others. In addition, this handbook is designed to provide the basics, which means that not every conceivable signage scenario can be addressed. This section lists organizations who can be of further help.

As mentioned earlier, the Web site of the International Sign Association (ISA) has a feature where you can search for member companies with particular skills. Below is contact information for the ISA, should you wish to learn more about them:

**International Sign Association**  
707 N St. Asaph St.  
Alexandria VA 22314  
Phone: (703) 836-4012  
[www.signs.org](http://www.signs.org)

There are a number of signage-related trade magazines. By reading them, or by visiting their Web sites, you might garner further understanding of the issues considered important by the sign industry:

**Signs of the Times**  
S T Media Group Intl.  
[www.signweb.com](http://www.signweb.com)

**SignCraft**  
SignCraft Publishing Co., Inc.  
[www.signcraft.com](http://www.signcraft.com)

**Sign Business**  
National Business Media, Inc.  
[www.signshop.com](http://www.signshop.com)

**Sign Builder Illustrated**  
Simmons-Boardman Publishing Corp.  
[www.nbm.com/signbusiness](http://www.nbm.com/signbusiness)

Since 1979, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) has administered the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) program. This program is a cooperative effort of the private sector, the educational community, and federal, state and local governments. SBDCs provide consulting, training and technical assistance to current and prospective business owners. There is an SBDC program – sometimes more than one – for every state and territory in the U.S.

If you seek assistance on issues (including effective business signage) facing your business, an SBDC advisor is available to help. Their expert assistance can be applied to business planning, learning better marketing techniques, help with financial analysis, market research – and dozens more. Over 500,000 small businesses are helped each year.

The information below for each state headquarters of the SBDC program is current as of March 2004. Contact the one that serves your state to learn of a center near you.

**Alabama SBDC**  
2800 Milan Court, Suite 124  
Birmingham AL 35211  
Phone: 205-943-6750  
[www.asbdc.org](http://www.asbdc.org)

**Alaska SBDC**  
430 West Seventh Ave., Suite 110  
Anchorage AK 99501  
Phone: 907-274-7232  
[www.aksbdc.org](http://www.aksbdc.org)

**American Samoa SBDC**  
American Samoa  
Community College  
P.O. Box 2609  
Pago Pago, American Samoa 96799  
Phone: 011 684-699-9155

**Arizona SBDC**  
2411 West 14th St.  
Tempe AZ 85281  
Phone: 480-731-8720  
[www.dist.maricopa.edu/sbdc/](http://www.dist.maricopa.edu/sbdc/)

**Arkansas SBDC**  
University of Arkansas  
at Little Rock  
2801 S. University  
Little Rock AR 72204  
Phone: 501-324-9043  
[asbdc.uarl.edu](http://asbdc.uarl.edu)

**California SBDC:**  
Tri-County Lead SBDC  
California State University Fullerton  
800 N. State College Blvd. LH640  
Fullerton CA 92834  
Phone: 714-278-2719  
[www.leadSBDC.org](http://www.leadSBDC.org)

San Diego District Regional  
Southwestern College SBDC  
Southwestern Community College  
900 Otay Lakes Road, Bldg. 1600  
Chula Vista CA 91910  
Phone: 619-482-6375  
[www.sbditc.org](http://www.sbditc.org)

Northern California SBDC  
San Jose State University  
College of Business  
84 W Santa Clara Street, Suite 100  
San Jose CA 95113  
Phone: 408-287-2310  
www.norcalsbdc.org

Fresno District Regional  
UC Merced Lead Center SBDC  
550 East Shaw  
Suite 105A  
Fresno CA 93710  
Phone: 559-241-6590

Golden State SBDC Program  
California State University – Chico  
35 Main St., Room 35  
Chico CA 95929  
Phone: 530-898-5443  
gsbdc.csuchico.edu

Los Angeles District Regional  
California State University SBDC  
18111 Nordhoff Street  
Northridge CA 91330  
Phone: 541-954-1387

**Colorado SBDC**  
1625 Broadway, Suite 1710  
Denver CO 80202  
Phone: 303-892-3864  
www.coloradosbdc.org

**Connecticut SBDC**  
University of Connecticut  
School of Business  
2100 Hillside Rd., U-1094  
Storrs CT 06269  
Phone: 860-486-4135  
www.business.uconn.edu/csbdc/

**Delaware SBDC**  
University of Delaware  
Delaware Technology Park  
1 Innovation Way, Suite 301  
Newark DE 19711  
Phone: 302-831-1555  
www.delawaresbdc.org

**District of Columbia SBDC**  
Howard University School  
of Business  
2600 6th Street, N.W. – Room 128  
Washington DC 20059  
Phone: 202-806-1550  
www.dcsbdc.com

**Florida SBDC**  
401 East Chase Street, Suite 100  
Pensacola FL 32502  
Phone: 850-473-7800  
www.floridasbdc.com

**Georgia SBDC**  
University of Georgia  
1180 East Broad Street – Chicopee  
Complex  
Athens GA 30602  
Phone: 706-542-6762  
www.sbdc.uga.edu

**Hawaii SBDC**  
University of Hawai'i at Hilo  
308 Kamehameha Ave., Suite 201  
Hilo HI 96720  
Phone: 808-974-7515  
www.hawaii-sbdc.org

**Idaho SBDC**  
Boise State University  
1910 University Drive  
Boise ID 83725  
Phone: 208-426-1640  
www.idahosbdc.org

**Illinois SBDC**  
Illinois Department of  
Commerce & Community Affairs  
620 East Adams Street, S-4  
Springfield IL 62701  
Phone: 217-524-5700  
www.ilsbdc.biz

**Indiana SBDC**  
One North Capitol, Suite 900  
Indianapolis IN 46204  
Phone: 317-234-2086  
www.isbdc.org

**Iowa SBDC**  
Iowa State University  
340 Gerdin Business Building  
Ames IA 50011  
Phone: 515-294-2030  
www.iabusnet.org

**Kansas SBDC**  
Fort Hays State University  
214 SW Sixth Ave., Suite 301  
Topeka KS 66603  
Phone: 785-296-6514  
www.fhsu.edu/ksbdc

**Kentucky SBDC**  
University of Kentucky  
225 Gatton College of  
Business & Economics  
Lexington KY 40506  
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SBDC.html

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# Glossary of Sign-Related Terms

The language of the sign industry can be very precise. Words and phrases exist to describe sign types, or describe regulatory methods, or the actions of professionals related to the field.

The following is a list of terms that you might come across when dealing with sign experts. Not all of them appear in this handbook. However, familiarity with them is useful, especially if you are considering the creation or re-design of your business signage.

**ADVERTISING MEDIA:** The means by which an advertising message is carried to potential customers, including Internet, magazine, newspaper, radio, signage and television.

**AESTHETICS:** A term dealing with form, design, and/or quality of construction of a particular sign, building, site or structure, that presents a judgmental statement concerning the level of beauty or artistic value.

**AMORTIZATION:** 1) In accounting terms, this refers to the method in which an intangible asset is depreciated over a specified period of time. 2) In terms relevant to signage and urban planning, it conveys the "grace period" beginning on the date a sign owner is notified that removal of a previously conforming sign has been ordered, and ending on the date removal is required. This process makes a structure,

which was legally erected with all permits, legally non-conforming for a period of time. After an amortization period, the sign becomes illegal and non-conforming. Amortization has often been found to be a form of regulatory taking. The legality of amortization depends on state law and numerous other conditions, and is frequently unenforceable.

**ANIMATED SIGN:** A sign depicting action, motion, light or color changes through electrical, mechanical or environmental means. Although technologically similar to flashing signs, the animated sign emphasizes graphics and artistic display.

**ANNUAL AVERAGE DAILY TRAFFIC (ANNUAL ADT):** Measurement representing the total number of vehicles passing a given location each day. These counts can usually be obtained from your State Highway or Transportation Department.

**APPRAISAL:** Method by which an asset (like a sign) has a value placed on it. With signage, there are three traditional methods: **COST (of Replacement), MARKET APPROACH, and INCOME FLOW.**

**APPROACH DISTANCE:** The distance measured along the line of travel of a passerby, from the point where the sign first becomes visible to the point where copy is no longer readable.

**AWNING:** An architectural entity that projects from, and is supported by, the exterior wall of a building. It is composed of a covering of rigid or non-rigid materials and/or fabric that rest upon a supporting framework that may be either permanent or retractable.

**AWNING SIGN:** A sign displayed on or attached flat against the surface or surfaces of an awning. It also can function as shelter.

**BACKLIGHTED LETTER:** An illuminated reverse channel letter (open or translucent back) so light from the letter is directed against the surface behind the letter producing a halo lighting effect around the letter. Also referred to as "silhouette lighted" or "halo lighted".

**BALLAST:** An electrical device required to operate fluorescent lamps.

**BANNER:** A sign composed of lightweight material. Promotional banners include those used to announce open houses and grand openings, make special announcements, or communicate events. Ornamental banners use images or colors of a decorative nature.

**BENCH SIGN:** A sign located on the seat or back of a bench or seat placed on or adjacent to a public right-of-way. A type of **STREET FURNITURE.**

**BILLBOARD (OUTDOOR ADVERTISING STRUCTURE):**

A large, standardized 3rd party/off-premise structure displaying advertising intended for viewing from extended distances, generally more than 50 feet.

**BLADE SIGN:** A projecting sign, generally 8 square feet or smaller in size, either lighted or unlighted, designed to be suspended from a **CANOPY** or to project from a wall or post above a walkway to aid pedestrians in locating store entrances.

**BRAND EQUITY (Branding):**

The intangible, but real, value of words, graphics or symbols that are associated with the products or services offered by a business. Developing branding of a site includes the presentation of signage and architecture to create a unique awareness and memory by the potential customer of the products or services offered at that site. Brand equity for a particular business is similar to the goodwill of an enterprise.

**BUILDING CODE:** State and/or local regulations governing public health, welfare and safety of construction and maintenance.

**BUILDING FASCIA:** That portion of any elevation of a building extending vertically from the grade to the top parapet wall or eaves, and horizontally across the entire width of the building elevation, including slanted wall surfaces sometimes referred to as a mansard.

**BUILDING MOUNTED SIGN:**

A sign that is applied or attached to a building.

**CABINET SIGN:** A sign structure consisting of the frame and face(s), not including the internal components, embellishments or support structure.

**CANOPY (Attached):** A multi-sided overhead structure or architectural projection supported by attachment to a building on one or more sides and either cantilevered from such building or also supported by columns at additional points. Also referred to as a **MARQUEE**.

**CANOPY (FREESTANDING):**

A multi-sided overhead structure supported by columns, but not enclosed by walls.

**CANOPY SIGN:** A sign affixed to the visible surface(s) of an attached or freestanding canopy.

**CHANGEABLE COPY PANEL:**

A section of a sign that functions like a changeable copy sign.

**CHANGEABLE COPY SIGN:**

A variable message sign whose content can be changed by manual or electrical means.

**CHANNEL LETTER:** Fabricated or formed three-dimensional letter that may accommodate a light source.

**COATED TUBING:** Clear glass tubing, coated on the interior surface with phosphorus powder. Coated tubing produces a variety of different light colors, dependent upon the specific mixture of phosphorus powders utilized.

**COLD CATHODE:** 1.) Electric discharge lighting, which uses an electrode with a large metal mass to emit electrons. Neon tubing is a cold cathode type. 2.) Generic term employed to specify custom interior lighting produced through the use of larger diameter cold cathode tubing.

**COLORLED TUBING:** Transparent glass tubing manufactured with color pigments, typically color examples include ruby red, canary yellow, green, and midnight blue.

**CONFORMING SIGN:** A sign that is legally installed in accordance with federal, state, and local laws and ordinances.

**CONSPICUITY:** The characteristics of the sign that enable an observer to differentiate the sign from its surrounding environment.

**CONTENT NEUTRAL SIGN CODE (TIME, PLACE and MANNER):** Consistently applicable non-discriminatory sign regulations that specify, without reference to the content of the message, when, how and where a sign can be displayed. Such regulations should also include physical standards (including, but not limited to, height, size and location) that allow the sign to be readable.

**CONTRAST:** The difference or degree of difference between things having similar or comparable natures, such as light and dark areas, colors, or typefaces.

**COPY:** Those letters, numerals, figures, symbols, logos, and graphic elements comprising the content or message of a sign.

**COPY AREA:** Areas that enclose the actual copy on a sign.

**COST (of Replacement)**

**APPROACH (Valuation):** An approach to estimating the value of real property whereby the appraiser determines the production cost of the property, minus any accrued depreciation. This approach does not merely include the hard costs of construction, but includes all soft costs such as interest, permits, and fees. In sign appraisal this concept includes the cost of replacing the message delivered to viewers.

**COST PER THOUSAND (CPM):** Refers to the cost for an advertiser to send a message to 1,000 receivers. The measure is calculated by dividing the amount of money spent for a given advertisement by the number of people exposed to it. (Based on this measure, signs are usually considered to be the least expensive form of advertising.)

**COVERAGE:** A marketing term that refers to the percentage of the total market population reached by an advertising message displayed in a given medium, measured at least once a month.

**CROSS-READ:** An advertising display that is visible across traffic lanes on the opposite side of the roadway.

**CUSTOMER ACQUISITION**

**COSTS:** Basic value calculation used to measure the cost versus return from the presence of signage – the cost of acquiring a customer.

**CUSTOM SIGN:** A sign designed, manufactured and installed to meet the requirements of a specific location.

**DAILY EFFECTIVE**

**CIRCULATION (DEC):** The average number of daily potential exposures to a display or group of signs, determined by counting only those vehicles traveling toward the face of the sign, and then multiplying that number by the average number of people per car during the hours the sign is visible. Pedestrian and mass transit circulations are not included. This is the basic measure in establishing cost per thousand exposures on signs. The basic traffic numbers can usually be obtained from your State Department of Transportation.

**DECK CABINET:** Similar in detail and use as a **RACEWAY**, except larger in cross section to provide a background area.

**DIMENSIONAL LETTER:** A specification description of a letter, logo or symbol – either cut out, cast, molded or fabricated in material such as metal or plastic – to create a raised condition.

**DIRECTIONAL SIGN:** Signs designed to provide direction to pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

**DIRECTORY SIGN:** A sign that identifies the names and locations of tenants in a multi-tenant building or in a development made up of a group of buildings.

**DOUBLE-FACED SIGN:** A sign with two parallel opposing (back-to-back) faces.

**DOWNSIZING:** As it applies to signs, a change in law or regulation that requires alteration in size or height of any existing sign.

**ELECTRIC SIGN:** Any sign containing or using electrical wiring.

**ELECTRONIC MESSAGE**

**CENTER:** A **CHANGEABLE COPY SIGN** that utilizes computer-generated messages or some other electronic means of changing copy. These signs include displays using incandescent lamps, LEDs, LCDs or a flipper matrix.

**EMBELLISHMENTS:** Letters, graphics, mechanical devices, lighting, extensions, landscaping, or any other special-effect addition to a sign that will enhance its appearance and ability to effectively communicate its message.

**EXTERIOR ILLUMINATED SIGN:** A sign that is illuminated by a light source that is directed towards, and shines on the face of a sign. Also called direct illumination.

**FACE:** The surface area on a sign where advertising copy is displayed.

**FAIR MARKET APPROACH:** An appraisal method that measures the highest price at which a property could be sold given a reasonable exposure period in the market. The price is arrived at by a willing seller and willing buyer, neither being under duress to act.

**FASCIA:** The portion of any elevation of a building extending vertically from the grade to the top parapet wall or eaves, and horizontally across the entire width of the building elevation.

**FASCIA SIGN:** See **WALL SIGN**.

**FLASHING SIGN:** A sign with an intermittent or flashing light source. Generally, the sign's message is constantly repeated, and the sign is most often used as a primary attention-getting device. Government highway departments frequently use flashing signs to improve highway safety.

**FLAT CUTOUT LETTER:** A dimensional letter cut from sheet or plate stock.

**FLUORESCENT LAMP OR TUBE:** Electric-discharge lighting utilizing glass tubing manufactured to standard lengths.

**FONT:** A set of letters, numerals, and shapes, which conform to a specific set of design criteria.

**FREESTANDING SIGN:** A sign that is not attached to a building.

**FREQUENCY:** The average number of times an individual has the opportunity to see an advertising message during a defined period of time. Typically measured over a four-week period.

**FRONT LIGHTED LETTER:** An illuminated channel letter with translucent face.

**FULL SERVICE SIGN COMPANIES:** Sign companies that complete the entire signage project, including surveying, designing, engineering, permitting, manufacturing, installing, and maintaining signs.

**GROUND SIGN:** A freestanding sign with no visible support structure.

**H CHANNEL LETTER:** A dimensional letter with baffles at the center of the cross-sectional shape for support of neon tubing and mounting of transformers.

**HIGH-RISE SIGN:** A tall freestanding sign.

**ILLUMINATED SIGN:** A sign characterized by the use of artificial light, either projecting through its surface (internally illuminated), or reflecting off its surface (externally illuminated).

**IMPULSE BUYING:** An unplanned or shifted purchase.

**INCANDESCENT BULB:** A lamp that produces light through the application of electrical energy to a wire filament, which glows as it is heated.

**INCOME FLOW:** A sign appraisal method that is used to determine the present value of the anticipated future income generated by a piece of property over its remaining useful life.

**INTERIOR SIGNS:** Signs that are located inside a building or other facility.

**INTERNALLY ILLUMINATED SIGN:** A sign that is illuminated by a light source that is contained inside the sign.

**JUST COMPENSATION:** The full monetary value to be paid for property taken by the government in accordance with the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Just compensation is generally determined by obtaining an appraisal.

**LEGIBILITY:** The characteristics of letters, numbers, graphics, or symbols that make it possible to differentiate one from the other. See **CONSPICUITY**.

**LIGHT-EMITTING DIODE/DISPLAY (LED) and LIQUID CRYSTAL DISPLAY (LCD):** Electronic devices that channel light through tubes to create patterns that can produce changing video displays.

**LISTED SIGN:** A sign labeled to indicate that the manufacturer of the sign is identified in a list published by a National Recognized Testing Laboratory as producing signs in conformance with the applicable American National Standard.

**LOGO:** A design that represents goods, identity or service.

**MALL SIGNAGE:** A wide variety of typical on-premise sign types located within the interior of a multi-tenant building or mall.

**MANUAL ON UNIFORM TRAFFIC CONTROL DEVICES (MUTCD):** This manual, from the U.S. Federal Highway Administration, establishes minimum standards of placement that a sign must achieve to accomplish readability and conspicuity. The manual covers a range of traffic control devices – specifically signs – which it breaks into three categories: guide signs, warning signs, and directional signs. It is based on the principle that signage deficiencies cause traffic accidents.

**MARKET APPROACH:** A sign evaluation approach that refers to the highest price at which a property could be sold given a reasonable exposure period in the market.

**MARQUEE:** See **CANOPY (Attached)**.

**MARQUEE SIGN:** 1) A sign mounted on a permanent canopy. 2) A traditional industry term for the variable message section of a canopy sign. 3) An integral sign and permanent canopy.

**MEDIA MIX:** The combination of different media forms into a single advertising program to meet the overall objectives of the advertiser. Signage can enhance the overall effectiveness of a media mix, particularly by increasing **REACH** and **FREQUENCY**, and by establishing brand continuity over time.

**MENU BOARD:** A variable message sign that allows a retailer to list products and prices. For example, the bill of fare for a fast food restaurant.

**MESSAGE AREA:** The area within the sign panel describing the limits of the message.

**MESSAGE CENTER:** An electronically or mechanically variable message sign enabling changes to be made from locations other than at the sign. (See also **VARIABLE MESSAGE SIGN**.)

**MOBILE SIGN:** A portable sign mounted on a trailer.

**MONUMENT SIGN:** A ground sign with low overall height. (A kind of **FREESTANDING SIGN**.)

**NEC:** National Electric Code

**NEON SIGN:** A sign manufactured utilizing neon tubing, which is visible to the viewer.

**NEON TUBING:** Electric discharge, cold cathode tubing manufactured into shapes that form letters, parts of letters, skeleton tubing, outline lighting, and other decorative elements or art forms, in various colors and diameters and filled with inert gases.

**NONCONFORMING SIGN:** A sign that was legally erected and maintained but does not comply with subsequently enacted sign regulations. Generally, the owner of such a sign is not required to comply with the new code (i.e., is "grandfathered in"), and can continue to maintain and repair it as seen fit.

**OFF-PREMISE SIGN:** Any sign that is not an accessory to the use of the property, a product sold, or the sale or lease of the property on which it is displayed, and that does not identify the place of business as purveyor of the merchandise, services, etc., advertised upon the sign. Also known as **OUTDOOR ADVERTISING**.

**ON-PREMISE SIGN:** A communication device whose message and design relates to a business, an event, goods, profession or service being conducted, sold or offered on the same property as where the sign is erected.

**OPEN CHANNEL LETTER:** A dimensional letter that has no face and, if illuminated with the light source, is visible. A clear face for physical protection of internal components may be used.

**OUTDOOR ADVERTISING:** See **OFF-PREMISE SIGN**.

**PAINTED WALL SIGN:** See **BUILDING MOUNTED SIGN**.

**PAN CHANNEL LETTER:** A dimensional letter that is constructed with side walls, back and a face. This makes the letter a solid integral unit, with the side walls and back having a pan-shaped cross section.

**PAN FACE:** A plastic sign face molded into a three dimensional shape. Also called molded face, molded and embossed face, or molded and debossed face.

**PANEL:** An outdoor advertising display with a standardized size dimension.

**PARAPET:** A low protective wall along the edge of a roof, bridge or balcony.

**PARAPET SIGN:** A sign mounted on top of the parapet of a building. (A type of **BUILDING MOUNTED SIGN**.)

**PERMANENT SIGN:** A sign attached to a building, structure, or the ground in a manner that enables the sign to resist environmental loads, such as wind, and lessens the ready removal or movement of the sign.

**POINT-OF-PURCHASE SIGN:** Frequently, a form of interior signage that advertises a product at its point of sale, or "point of purchase" location.

**POLE or PYLON COVER:** An enclosure for concealing and/or for decorating poles or other structural supports of a ground sign.

**POLE SIGN:** A freestanding sign with visible support structure.

**POP (Point of Purchase):** See **POINT-OF-PURCHASE SIGN**.

**PORTABLE SIGN:** A sign not permanently attached to the ground or building, with a power-cord for connection to an electrical source, and readily removable using ordinary hand tools.

**POST AND PANEL SIGN:** An unlighted sign fabricated by using one or more visible posts to support the sign body.

**PRIOR RESTRAINT:** An attempt to prevent publication or broadcast of any statement, which is an unconstitutional restraint on free speech and free press (even in the guise of an anti-nuisance ordinance). With regards to signage, it can be argued that prior restraint occurs when the right to communicate is subject to the prior permit approval of a government official.

**PROJECTING SIGN:** As opposed to a **WALL SIGN**, a sign (frequently double-sided) that is attached to a building face or wall, and projects more than eighteen inches from the surface.

**PUSH-THROUGH:** A letter or logo cut out of a backing material that is as thick or thicker than the sign face material, and mounted on the inside of the sign face so that the backing material's thickness extends flush with or through and beyond the front plane of the sign face.

**PYLON SIGN:** A freestanding sign with visible support structure or with the support structure enclosed with a pole cover.

**RACEWAY:** An electrical enclosure that may also serve as a mounting structure for the sign.

**REACH:** That percentage of the total target audience who will be potentially exposed to an advertising message one or more times during the advertising program. Reach measurements are common to all advertising media.

**READABILITY:** The quality that enables the observer to correctly perceive the message. In transportation engineering, this word is being replaced by **CONSPICUITY**.

**RECALL:** In signage, this refers to the ability of a viewer to remember the message even when they are not viewing it.

**RECOGNITION:** Refers to the ability of a viewer to identify the message.

**REGULATORY SIGN:** A sign having the primary purpose of conveying information concerning rules, ordinances or laws.

**RETAINER:** A framing member mounted around the perimeter of a sign face, and attached to the sign cabinet structure. It is designed to attach the face to the cabinet and/or intended to provide a decorating trim piece.

**RETURN:** The sides of a channel letter.

**REVEAL:** An indented detail on a sign.

**REVERSE CHANNEL LETTER:** A fabricated dimensional letter with opaque face and side walls.

**REVOLVING SIGN:** A sign that revolves three hundred and sixty degrees about an axis.

**RIGHT OF WAY (ROW):** The land on which a public thoroughfare is located and certain lands adjacent thereto. Permanent commercial signs are generally located on private land adjacent to the public right of way.

**ROOF SIGN:** A sign mounted on, and supported by, the main roof portion of a building, or above the uppermost edge of a **PARAPET** wall of a building and which is wholly or partially supported by such building.

**SETBACK:** Generally, the distance between a fixed object (for example, the outwardmost edge of a sign) and the pavement edge line of its adjacent roadway.

**SIDEWALK/SANDWICH SIGN:** A moveable sign not secured or attached to the ground or surface upon which it is located, but supported by its own frame and most often forming the cross-sectional shape of an A.

**SIGN:** Any device visible from a public place which displays either commercial or noncommercial messages by means of graphic presentation of alphabetic or pictorial symbols or representations.

**SIGN BAND:** A horizontal area above a multi-tenants' building's entrances, architecturally designed to accommodate signage in a sign-centric manner.

**SIGN FACE:** The area of a sign on which copy is intended to be placed.

**SIGNAGE:** A system of placed-based communication devices and graphics intended to relay information or attract attention. Such systems include signature buildings and product displays and dispensers, as well as traditional projecting, wall, roof, and freestanding signs.

**SIGNATURE BUILDING:** Architectural design of a building or structure that reinforces signage.

**SIGNCENTRIC DESIGN:** Building architectural design which makes the signage the prominent visual feature.

**SINGLE-FACE SIGN:** A sign with only one face plane.

**SMALL HANGING BLADE:** A sign attached to the underside of a canopy or marquee. Also known as an "Under Canopy" or "Under Marquee" sign.

**STATIONARY SIGN:** A sign with a power-cord for attachment to a source of electrical power that is not readily moveable or portable.

**STREET FURNITURE:** Advertising displays, many which provide a public amenity, positioned at close proximity to pedestrians for eye-level viewing or at a curbside to reach vehicular traffic. An example is a **BENCH SIGN**.

**TARGET AUDIENCE:** The profile of the most desired consumer prospects for a product or service, listed by characteristics such as demography, lifestyle, brand or media consumption, purchase behavior, etc. This is common to all media, including signs.

**TEMPORARY SIGN:** Any sign not intended for permanent installation, such as banners and signs at construction sites. They may be incidental or miscellaneous in nature, such as political and real estate signs.

**TIME AND TEMPERATURE**

**DISPLAY:** A variable message sign which displays current time and temperature in a stationary or alternating manner. Some also display simple messages.

**TIME, PLACE and MANNER REGULATIONS:** See **CONTENT NEUTRAL**.

**TRADE AREA:** Most retail businesses have a relatively fixed area that customers come from to do business at their store. In general, the trade area is either the living or work locale of the potential customer or client. The selling zone of place-based retail business will be dynamic for two reasons: the customer is moving residences or jobs, or the customer is passing through on a trip that intersects the trade area. The trade area for most small businesses is 3 to 5 miles. However, the high mobility of the consumer population makes it difficult to establish all potential sources of business.

**TRADEMARK:** Used by a business to distinguish itself and its products from the competition. A trademark may include a name, symbol, word or combination of those. They are protected by the federal government and considered to have financial

value. The circled "R" or "Reg. T.M." printed with the mark indicates that it is a registered trademark. See United States Trademark Act 15 U.S.C. Section 1127 (1988).

**TRAFFIC COUNT:** The recording of the vehicles and pedestrians passing a given point, usually in a day.

**TRANSFORMER:** Electrical equipment that converts input voltage and current to a different output voltage and current.

**UL:** An abbreviation for Underwriters Laboratories, Inc., a Nationally Recognized Testing Laboratory.

**UNDER-CANOPY SIGN:** A sign designed to be mounted underneath a canopy.

**V SIGN:** Signs containing two faces of approximately equal size – erected upon common or separate structures – positioned in a "V" shape, with an interior angle between faces of not more than ninety degrees.

**VARIABLE MESSAGE SIGN:** A sign that includes provisions for message changes. Also called changeable copy panel, changeable copy sign, time and temperature sign, electronic message center, or menu board.

**VARIANCE:** Special administrative procedure by which one may obtain an exception to zoning rules such as height, setback and type of use.

**VINYL (Flexible Face):** A substrate upon which an advertising message is rendered, either by computer production or hand painting.

**VISIBILITY:** The quality of a letter, number, graphic, or symbol, which enables the observer to distinguish it from its surrounds or background.

**WALL SIGN:** A sign that is in any manner affixed to any exterior wall of a building or structure and that projects not more than eighteen inches from the building or structure wall. (Also known as a **FASCIA SIGN**.)

**WAYFINDING:** Enabling a person to find his or her way to a given destination thru the use of effective signage.

**WINDOW SIGN:** A sign affixed to the surface of a window with its message intended to be visible to and readable from the public way or from adjacent property.

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## **About the Authors**

### **The New York State Small Business Development Center**

Currently celebrating its 20th anniversary, the New York State Small Business Development Center (NYS SBDC) has been the premier small business assistance service in New York State since 1984. Since then, it has delivered high quality, *pro bono* business counseling, training and research to those New Yorkers who either have, or aspire to have, their own small business. It is funded in part by the U.S. Small Business Administration and the State of New York, and is administered by the State University of New York (SUNY). The New York State SBDC has 23 regional offices throughout the state, located on the campuses of SUNY, the City University of New York, and private universities. As of March 2004, the New York SBDC had worked directly with over 213,000 businesses, helping them to invest over \$2.4 billion in the state's economy. These businesses, in turn, have created or saved over 101,000 jobs.

The text of this handbook was written primarily by **Darrin Conroy**, director of the NYS SBDC's Research Network. Significant contributions in researching, writing and design were made by **Mary Beth Bobish** and **Josée Fonseca** – both of whom are Information Specialists with the SBDC.

### **The Signage Foundation for Communication Excellence**

According to its Web site ([www.signagefoundation.org](http://www.signagefoundation.org)), “the Foundation is a non-profit educational group specializing in educational and informational efforts about on-premise signage and other forms of place-based communication, graphics, and design systems.” The Foundation has worked with the American Bar Association, and has funded papers by transportation organizations, industry authors, and, now, the New York State SBDC. Among other things, its members a) work with Federal regulators on signage-themed issues, b) offer continuing education courses for appraisers, c) write and distribute signage-related manuals and white papers, and d) supply information to municipalities that are preparing to draft on-premise regulatory guidelines. In addition, the Foundation helped create the signage section on the Web site of the U.S. Small Business Administration ([www.sba.gov/starting/signage/](http://www.sba.gov/starting/signage/)).