

## Put Your Best Sign Forward – Signage Tips

Signage is one of the most prominent visual elements in a streetscape. Signs provide information regarding products, services, directions, identification, safety, and function. Well-designed and fabricated signage can add interest and variety to the streetscape as well as attract customers. Signs can also, more than any other feature, detract from the streetscape and create visual clutter.

Less is More...

...and subtle is better. A sign must be clear, concise, professionally made, and legible to ultimately be effective. Signage is much more effective when it is simple and direct, not overly large and garish. Multiple, redundant, and ambiguous signage competes with each other and can create sensory overload and ultimately, be confusing to the public. This clutter can also just be a plain turnoff to potential customers, create the impression of an economically stagnant area, and be a disincentive to business and economic development.

All too often businesses feel that the more signage, the better for business and attracting customers. This could not be further from the truth as excessive and competing signage creates a sense of chaos. Signage design should be simple and direct in terms of “the who and what.” Graphic symbols or simple verbal messages are generally most effective. Easy readability is key.

Location and size are also important factors. Bigger signs do not necessarily mean better signs. Signage must be visible but it should never dominate the façade of a building, nor obscure architectural details. Signage needs to reflect context and signs located for example in historic downtowns should reflect a scale suited for pedestrians and/or slow moving traffic, not suburban sprawl development that is primarily vehicle oriented where overly large signs are often used to attract business.

Signs should also work in concert with other signs on the building as well as adjacent buildings. Signs should not obstruct views to other signs and should be located to avoid visual confusion, often at the same height as adjacent signs. Buildings present very apparent architectural locations for signage (sign bands/lintels, windows, etc.) and these locations should be identified in planning for signs.

### Making the Point

Well-designed signs are those that can present their information simply and legibly. Simple messages work best as too much information only clutters the sign and confuses anyone looking at it. A common mistake is trying to cram every bit of information into a sign. The best sign uses the least information and keeps messages as simple and brief as possible, often using supplemental logos or pictorial symbols to add interest and garner attention. Remember to keep it simple, neat, and brief as this will improve visibility and legibility.

Lettering style and size are also as critical as the size of the sign itself. Lettering that is properly chosen and spaced can go far in making the sign more readable. Fonts that are simple are easier

to read and are less cluttered. As with the size of signs, lettering size should reflect context and what works out in the sprawl development is not necessarily appropriate in the historic downtown. Large letters and graphics do not necessarily lead to greater visibility.

### A Sign of the Times

Signage design must reflect the construction era of the building for which it is proposed. Context is key in determining elements such as scale but thought also must be given to what period that context represents. Just as buildings are products of certain eras and represent various architectural periods, sign design is also reflective of distinct eras. What works on a building of one period does not necessarily mean so across the board. Period signage types work best on period buildings and contemporary signage types work best on contemporary buildings. This applies to materials, colors, lettering styles, and illumination.

Just because a building or proposed new construction is located in an historic district does not mean that every sign in that district needs to be “historic.” For example, that Victorian style sign with the external gooseneck light fixtures on the newly built office building can look as out of place as the internally-illuminated box sign located on the commercial building built in 1890 on Main Street downtown.

What is important to keep in mind is be aware of when a particular building was built and utilize signage design and fabrication options available at that time. Be true to the building’s era with regard to signage and do not mix apples and oranges.