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The Importance of Signage

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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.

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:

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 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, however, 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. 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."

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.

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 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 underachieving. 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.

© Book Reference: "What's Your Signage." The New York SBDC