



1.1 ~ PRINCIPLES OF SIGN DESIGN The computer hardware and software revolution has hurdled sign design into the next century. You can now more easily satisfy your customer's wants and needs with a working knowledge of your design tools. But although a professional sign maker can achieve a professional, unique, and stunning finished product through the use of computer-aided programs, this does not mean that a professional sign maker can ignore certain principles of sign design.

But remember, as we examine some principles of sign design that can assure optimum results, be aware that these are not hard and fast rules. Principles of sign design are meant to guide a professional in making individual decisions to attain a successful end. Topics such as sign location and visibility, the message, letter size, color, type style, logo or graphics, layout, and special effects will be considered.

1.2 ~ Visibility and Location The number one consideration in designing your customer's sign is WHERE that sign will be located, especially if it happens to be an exterior sign. Traffic flow and any obstructions to visibility must be addressed.

If vehicular and pedestrian traffic runs both ways, two signs may be needed for maximum impact. Note where the traffic flow will first notice the sign. Measure that distance. Also calculate how much time that audience will have to read the message. These factors will later determine your choice of type style, color, and size.

Obstruction of visibility may come from other signs, shrubbery, trees, or buildings. The entire sign size or height may have to be adjusted to compensate for these. Too, some signage may actually be obstructed by the driver's vehicle itself if it is not properly positioned.

Interior signs, as well as banners and window lettering, must also be installed where they can be comfortably seen and read. Use the same guidelines and note when the sign will first be noticed and from where it will be read. Obstructions such as lighting, displays, and other factors must be considered.

1.3 ~ The Message

The sign message you convey must be simple and singular in idea. Since signs are scanned for only a short period of time, strive for the impression that lasts.

Decide what it is that your customer wishes to convey since the primary message should be brief -- just a few words. It, nonetheless, should get the idea across. An additional line or so may be added but this should be secondary, not detracting from the main thrust. For example, "Quality Foods" is primary, "Deli -- Pharmacy -- Bakery" is secondary.

Signs that are singular in thought convey one type of message. Too many ideas compete with each other. For example, when advertising "Quality Foods" adding "Free Delivery", "Parking in Rear", and "Photo Developing" all in one breath would be overwhelming. Stick with one main objective. If you "get it", then the targeted audience will too.

A final note: Take care in the use of personal names, and even city or state names on the sign. If they must be used, make sure they do not take away from the emphasis of what the customer wishes to promote. For example, in "Jane Doe's Hair Salon", ask yourself: "Do I notice 'Jane Doe' or 'Hair Salon' first?".

1.4 ~ The Letter Size After you have determined the sign's visual distance, choose a letter size that will be easily seen and carry the most impact. Signs above the ground, such as a pole sign, need this additional size to attract a motorist's attention. The following chart is a standard guideline used by most sign professionals:

Letter Height (in Inches)	Maximum Readable Distance	Distance for Maximum Impact
2"	50'	20'
3"	100'	30'
4"	150'	40'
6"	200'	60'
8"	350'	80'
9"	400'	90'
10"	450'	100'
12"	525'	120'
15"	630'	150'
18"	750'	180'
24"	1000'	240'
30"	1250'	300'
36"	1500'	360'
42"	1750'	420'
48"	2000'	480'
54"	2250'	540'
60"	2500'	600'

Maximum readability and impact is assured with a letter style that is easy to read and colors that contrast highly with one another.

1.5 ~ Sign Color

The color of the lettering and background is an important consideration when designing your customers' signs. The contrast between the two should make the message easy to read, especially if the sign will be viewed for only a limited period of time. There are various combinations but a general rule of acceptance is the following chart.

1.6 ~ INTENSITY OF SIGN CONTRAST COLORS

(WITH #1 BEING BEST) 1 Black on Yellow
2 Black on White
3 Yellow on Black
4 White on Black
5 Blue on White
6 White on Blue
7 Green on White
8 White on Green
9 Red on White
10 White on Red

All the above combinations produce an effective and readable sign contrast, even #10 on the list. The customer may have certain color preferences or leave the decision up to you. Colors not listed above or custom colors that are in the customer's advertising scheme may be used if maximum impact is not required. Just make sure the separate colors look well together and have enough of a contrast.

1.7 ~ Type styles

The selection of lettering styles is virtually limitless, especially since the recent upsurge of graphic design software. But the use of an appropriate type style is very critical in conveying a certain "feel" to an intended audience.

Consider the function of the sign and what kind of business it will be advertising. A movie theater may decide to choose "Broadway", but a printing company may go with "Stencil". Too, there are many bold type styles that do well with many kinds of businesses, such as "Helvetica Bold", "Omega", etc.

How many typefaces should you use in one sign? Too many are confusing. Generally limit your selection to no more than two different styles. Also consider how the two type styles complement each other. Don't try to mix a light style with a dark style.

What are the various styles? Basically there are two categories. One is called sans serif. This kind of lettering is without any short lines of embellishments extending from the tops and bottoms of the letters. The other style is serif and this is the type that has the extra "bells and whistles".

Type styles can be condensed, stretched, and distorted with the newer computer software to fit an area, but some type styles are just naturally smaller or larger in size. This is a consideration if you have a limited area to work with.

1.8 ~ Logos and Graphics

Designed logos and graphics make a sign spicy and interesting. Many signs that grab your attention have a graphic design. Many businesses already have a logo or design and you may be asked to incorporate it into the signage you are preparing. Or, you may be asked to design a logo from scratch.

Scanners, in conjunction with your computer hardware and software, do an excellent job of capturing the existing design and using it in your sign preparation. They are a virtual MUST if you are doing this type of graphic work. Be wary of using photographs for the scanning image and stay with letterheads, business cards, etc. that offer a high contrast and resolution.

So, what if you are asked to design a graphic image yourself? Don't panic. Look around you for ideas. They're everywhere and usually are very uncomplicated. In fact, the simpler the better. Scan sign magazines, newspapers, and even product packaging found at the local grocery store for image concepts. These can be easily modified to suit the customer's need. Pretty soon you'll have a wealth of information that you can file away for other customers' requests, too.

1.9 ~ Special Effects

Once your text is entered, special effects can be used to provide a unique effect. The image can be compressed, stretched, slanted, distorted, rotated to any angle, and arced to fit a curve. The design possibilities are endless.

These features can work hand in hand with logo or graphic design, too.

Some computer software can even slant each individual letter, outline, cast shadows, and weld multiple graphics together. So you see, you CAN be a professional artist!

If using a basic vinyl cutter, color combinations within a graphic design can be handled but each layer is cut separately. Just remember to charge extra for the additional vinyl used and your time to cut each layer. And since the introduction of the revolutionary color vinyl printers and cutters, color work is a breeze. These machines print and cut in one operation saving valuable time.

2.0 ~ The Sign Layout

There are two types of space in the layout of a sign. This space is called negative and positive. Negative space is the space that is blank around your lettering and logo. Actually, negative space is extremely important in projecting a balanced and total appearance.

Where do you want this negative space? For one thing, you will need some for the borders of the sign. A good rule of thumb is about 15% of the height of the sign. So a 10 ft. high sign would require 1.5 ft. top and bottom. Also, negative space must be balanced within the sign from one side to the other. Otherwise, it will have a "something's missing" look.