Clutter kills:
6 points for cleaner sign design

Clutter robs your designs of impact

By Bob Behounek

I believe most clients feel their signage is the only sign that people would see. Most assume the reader has unlimited time to comprehend the message. But signs are like no other form of advertising. Most are seen from passing vehicles—or are on moving vehicles themselves. In most cases, readers must understand the main thought within two to three seconds.

When text goes over photographs, we seldom have time to comprehend both at once. I'm sure you have heard the phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words." But drop a few words over or through a picture and all you see is a smeared mess.

There are way too many over-designed ads, with way too much information for readers to comprehend in a limited amount of time. I'm sure there are places for intense backgrounds, bold pictures, exaggerated type and such. But for our everyday signage, legibility is critical.

Clients want us to give them direction. Most of the time, they need us to compose clear, readable ads. Of course, sometimes we don't have much of a choice. When a client brings us a completed design to use on a sign, the challenge we are faced with can be unnerving. Sometimes we just have to reproduce what was given to us.

The technology we have at our fingertips today certainly gives us plenty of design options. It's tempting to play with all the features and effects. Anything you can imagine can be created. But the big question remains:

Can they read it at 45 mph?

I was just thinking how the sign business operated when everything was hand painted. I know what you are thinking: this approach is fossilized. No, not really. Back then, when creating a sign design, we took into account the amount of time and work it would take to produce the sign. Every element added more time to the finished product and that transferred

Example A

Example B : Simplified

Example C : Even simpler

directly to the cost to produce it.

It's incredible how the sign designers would create a layout that not only was powerful but somewhat simple to paint, too. Knowing that they had to be creative yet functional (and affordable) at the same time kept their finished products clean, crisp and readable.

I know there are many sign people today who never had the opportunity to pick up a brush and hand-paint a sign or vehicle. I believe that exercise really helps you understand what should and shouldn't be designed into our signage.

Too much to eat?

Let's look at a simple analogy. If you were to cook dinner for your family, you would choose the right amount of healthy, great-tasting food. You wouldn't cook loads of each food for everyone to pick from—like a smorgasbord offers. It would be totally wasteful and it would take all day to prepare. Likewise, a well-designed sign also is supposed to offer one good meal without any waste.

What today's technology offers us as designers can be similar to a smorgasbord: too much to pick from. I have to admit, even in the past, many sign painters tried to put all they knew into every sign design. It was a common mistake, especially for beginners. After working in the trade for a while, most of us learned "when-to-use-what" if we wanted to design readable signage.

Six points for success

For best results, a client should trust their sign designer. Earning this trust starts with a smile and a handshake, and an honest appreciation for the client's needs. Like it or not, you will usually have to do a little investigation to determine those needs, followed by a little education to help them understand what they need.

1. **Accept that the ad must be read and understood quickly,** or it will be a waste. Help the client understand this essential point. (Even some sign people struggle with this!) Let's be as realistic as possible. With all the graphic competition surrounding our signage, we must stand out and be in somewhat of a contrast to nearby ads.

2. **Explain that a dominant attention element must be determined first,** whether it be text, graphics or a shape. This element subject must dominate the design in size. It must instantly give the reader the key message of the ad. Next, it must draw readers into our message, helping them "step into" what they are reading.

3. **The second element is always the most difficult to choose.** You must consider the time readers will have to view this ad. More than anything, this will determine how many elements we can justifiably include in our sign composition.

Example A

Example B : Simplified

Example C : Even simplier

Example A

Example B : Simplified

Example C : Even simplier

4. **Visualize this new sign on the battlefield with all its competition**. We know readers have about three seconds to view it. We understand the difficult task our readers face.

5. **Customer supplied art can be risky**. When this occurs, I find it best to ask the client if he or she is open to some alternative ideas to help promote their services. Remember, there must be a basic trust here so that they can trust your opinion—be it good or bad.

6. **Simplicity is the key**. Whether we are placing this new sign in town or out on the highway, less is always more. Look at the effective signs that you see in your travels, the ones that attract your eye and that you can understand in those few precious seconds of viewing time. I'm sure you'll see that they are fundamentally simple designs.

Take it away

One way to improve your layouts is by subtraction. Remove one or more elements and see if the design "falls apart"—begins to lose appeal or look disjointed. If not, then that element is not necessary, and will probably work against the effectiveness of the layout.

Here are a few examples I put together to show how to do this. This simplistic approach certainly creates a non-cluttered, clean, crisp design with hard contrasts in design and color. By thinking through our initial design first and bringing our most important message into an attention-grabbing position, we eliminate confusion. We allow readers to move into and out of our design and underestimate the message.

Orland Oasis is an A-frame sign placed near the street. The logo represents who the company is. *Serving* is the action word—it pulls our readers into what is being served. Our shape at the bottom tells us when this action is happening. The speed limit is 30 mph.

In Example A the blends, stars and extra elements compete with the message. Example B eliminates most of our unnecessary outlines and color blends—and is more readable. Example C is basically the same layout, streamlined even more. If one more element was removed, it would fall apart. The Mother-Daughter Banquet and Kessel signs show more of the same.

We all know how important it is to sell a great service to our clients. Putting our best design forward right from the get-go can ultimately gain us the trust of our customer. It lets them know that their best interests are our main concern.

I'm sure all our best intentions for clean, crisp readable signage cannot be achieved 100 percent of the time. But it's always worth the effort. It just makes it better for all involved when we, as sign designers, try to build a solid foundation for every job from the outset. •SC

Bob Behounek has spent over 40 years as a sign artist and pinstriper in the Chicago, Illinois area. More of his articles can be found at www.signcraft.com by clicking on *Archives*.