Using subtle, medium, or high contrasts can create attractive layouts

Contrast adds eye appeal to your layouts

by Dave Correll

I've always felt that it's good to look at photos of signs. Great-looking signs are fun to look at, but it's also good to "take them apart" and try to see what it is that makes them so appealing and effective. Learning to look at signs that way helps us improve our design skills.

In this article I'd like to share a few of the signs I've done recently and explain why I designed them the way I did. Like many designers, I use the design principles explained in Mike Stevens's book, *Mastering Layout: The Art of Eye Appeal*. Mike found a way to explain fundamental design principles and what it takes to make a sign attractive, functional, and readable.

I'd like to take a particularly close look at one term that links these fundamental design principles together, and that's *contrast*. Contrast is a great way to add eye appeal to sign designs. The most obvious example of contrast is color: using light on dark or dark on light. Other design principles that give you the opportunity to bring contrast in to play are line value, alphabet and shape. Using subtle, medium or high contrasts in color and line value creates a foreground, middle ground, and background, all of which serve to increase eye appeal.

So let's take a look at the signs shown here and see where contrast was used as a tool to make a better sign.

Mach Bulk Milk. In this case, the customer requested metallic gold on his red truck. That was okay with me, but sometimes gold doesn't have much contrast on red. To achieve more contrast on the main copy, *Mach*, I added a slight outline and a shadow. Also, the thinline filigree contrasts with the bold script of *Mach*. Another interesting contrast is the warm color of the truck—red and the gold—contrasted with the cool, blue color of the panel.

Coming Soon. Here's a real bread-and-butter type sign: an overlaid plywood 4-by-8-ft. real estate sign. What made this sign a challenge, design-wise, is that is was really two signs in one. The

use of panels and contrast always help with organizing a layout, especially in signs with a lot of copy. On one side you have the *Microtel Inn & Suites* logo and *Coming Soon*, and on the other you have *10 Add'l Acres*.

On the *Coming Soon* side we've got reflex blue on white—very high contrast there—and the bold lettering of *Coming Soon* up against the light *Early 1999*, which is red and doesn't have as much contrast as the reflex blue. These two forms

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of contrast, in color and line value, work together to create foreground, middle ground, and background.

A more subtle contrast is the yellow line between *Coming* and *Soon*. On the *10 Add'l Acres* side, you again have bold lettering contrasting with light lettering and contrasting colors—all very appealing to the eye, and all efficient at organizing blocks of copy.

Judd Ostermann & Demro.
What contrast can we find in this sign? Obviously, there's a lot of contrast in the ivory lettering on the black background, and there's contrast in line value with bold and light lettering. Another interesting contrast is the long, horizontal format of the sign contrasting with the condensed, vertical strokes of the main text.

Trail's Edge Apartments.
Here's a sign that came about a few years after I designed the logo. The logo was designed right after I first saw Gary Anderson's book, *Signs, Graphics, and Other Neat Stuff.* You can tell that I was heavily influenced by Gary at that time.

The contrast in this sign—other than the obvious contrast of the bold lettering in *Trail's Edge* with the light lettering in *Apartments*, and the line value contrast in the outlines—is the geometric shape of the sign contrasting with the more organic, rounded look of the design. It was kind of tricky, because you don't normally do that with a design of that nature— but the sign had to be harmonious with the apartment building itself, so that's what I came up with.

Rice County Historical Museum.
Here's a sign that illustrates the foreground, middle ground, background concept that I mentioned earlier. On this 4-by-4-ft. sandblasted sign I used various weights of text: bold, medium

and light, and various contrasts in color. Red is a subtle contrast against the brown, the gold has a medium contrast, and the ivory has a high contrast.

This combination of contrasts creates a foreground, middle ground, and background. And a real subtle contrast, which I think helps give it a real dimensional look, is the black panel.

Better Air. You see all kinds of contrasts on this pickup. The most noticeable is the contrast in line value; the super bold circulating arrows, the Eras Bold lettering on Better Air, the Eras Medium for additional text, and the fine pin-stripe running horizontally through the design. There's also contrast in shapes; the copy creates a long horizontal panel, while the circulating arrows create an elliptical shape. And last, there's contrast in color. Although red and blue have the same value or contrast on white, the warm red contrasts with the cool blue.

Heckers Millworks. There's nothing really special about this van. The customer had a limited budget and requested that I include this

piece of artwork. There are only two colors involved: black and tan. Even though this is a very simple job, it has a lot of eye appeal due to the fact that we used bold, medium, and light versions of the same letter style. It's extremely readable and to-the-point.

60th Anniversary Sale. This window splash was a fun one to do; let's try to find the contrasts. Besides the obvious contrast of color, we also have a contrast in letterstyles. We have a bold, blocky letterstyle for *60th* and *Sale* contrasted with the extended, flowing
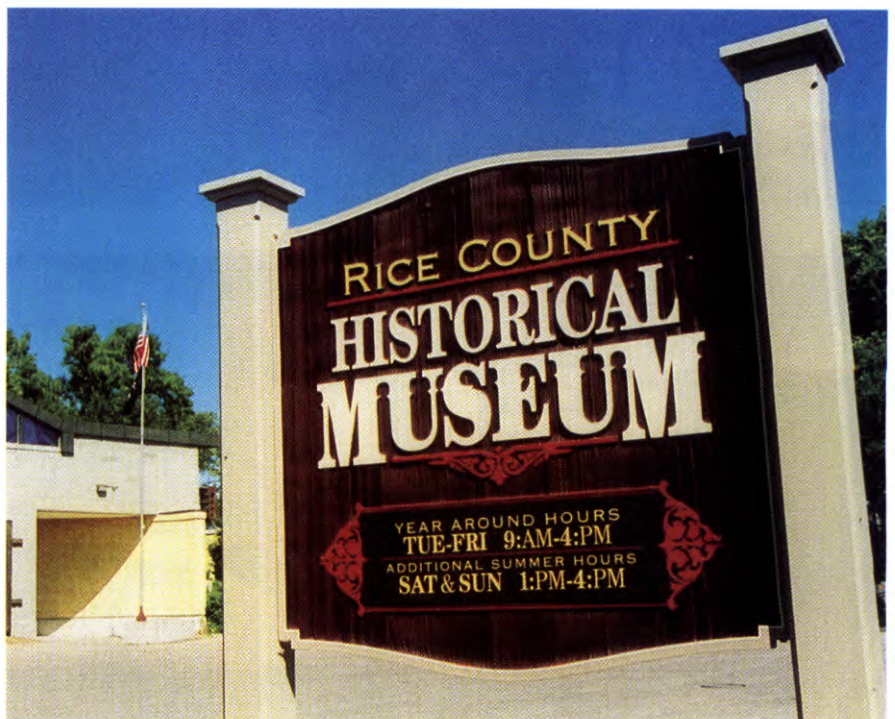
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script of *Anniversary*. I think that adds eye appeal to the sign.

Capri. Here's a sign I did a short time ago. Who was it that said, "Necessity is the mother of all invention"? Well, it's the mother of all design, as well. The format of this sign came about because we had to hide blotches of silicone on the wall that were left from some old plastic lettering above this storefront. What we needed was a long, skinny sign—but the problem is that *Capri* is a relatively short name; it was going to be tough to stretch it out to fit the length that was required.

I decided to use three long, horizontal stripes and the word *Capri* in a very vertically-formatted letterstyle known as *Anastasia*. I had to stretch it out a bit, but it still retained a vertical look. The contrast of the vertical letters and the long, horizontal stripes created an interesting look.❑

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