



Is Your Storefront Readable?

Three Visibility Concerns for Retail Storefront Signage

Signage Provides the “Can”

The nation’s largest city, (and 25th in the world), is concerned about the success of their retailers and the appearance and attraction of their area. And they very well should be, and so should our cities and towns here in Virginia. As a former small business owner, I knew not having enough capital was the top reason for a small business to fail, but I also understood the value of marketing capital and the one visual asset that can make or break a retailer’s location: and that is *storefront signage*.

“When executed well, the storefront can serve as an invitation to the shopper, increasing business for individual merchants and improving the overall shopping experience. Well-designed storefronts can create an environment where people will want to linger, shop and return again,” according to a brochure written by the New York City Department of Small Business Services.

Notice the word “can” as it appears twice in the above quotation. It is an important auxiliary verb offering positive results only under certain circumstances, as in this case when executed well, or in other words, it works if you know the right recipe. Good signage is an important ingredient of a retailer’s success, or “can”, so let’s look at what makes good storefront signage for retailers by analyzing what does not...



Contrast

These days there are lots of materials to choose from for storefronts! Brick, block, stone, stucco, painted wood and metal, glass, natural woods and metals, and plastics to name several options, and the list goes on. It is good to select materials that fit the brand, but be careful that the colors of the facades don’t detract from the readability of the signs placed upon them. Work with a professional sign consultant or sign manufacturer that understands contrast. Sometimes in the name of good contrast, a standard brand has to be modified to fit a location. This could mean changing the colors or adding contrasting color bands between the letters and the background.

The example shown is a set of gilded dimensional letters on a plain white wall. During the mid-day sun, the lettering is so bright that it is hard to read against the light-colored wall. Low-key, high quality design may be part of their brand statement, but perhaps visibility could have been improved by adding a dark rectangular backer panel, or by adding dark-colored “clouds” behind each gold letter to make them stand out from the background.



Obstructions

I noticed that several stores had trees planted right in front of their main identity signs. Don’t misunderstand that landscaping adds great value to the ambiance of a shopping space, but it is important to plan for plantings outside of a sign’s viewing angle. Trees, especially as they mature, can completely block the valuable icons that lead shoppers in, preventing any return on investment. To eliminate the chances of having future branding obstruction, developers should coordinate early on with city planners and landscapers just where certain trees should go or not go by delineating planned signage viewing zones on the site plans.



Shadows

Depending on the graphic design, shadows can either create negative or positive readability. If the letter faces are white, shadows usually help the letters pop off the wall. If, however, the background walls are light color and the letters are dark without an outline, the effect of the shadows can make it nearly impossible to read because the letters and the shadows all blend together like in the example shown. The shadow challenge can be overcome by incorporating light color faces with outlines and dark returns.

Another design strategy is to keep the widths of the letter strokes wider than the shadows, if possible, to help with legibility in bright light and shadows. Letter width also affects the viewing angle at which the lettering can be read. The wider the stroke of a letter, the wider the horizontal viewing angle. Viewing angle is important for sign visibility by potential customers passing at close proximity of storefronts.

I recently walked through a new lifestyle center in Central Virginia and noticed the pros and cons of the center’s interesting array of storefront signs. The above cases highlight 3 areas of concern from a visibility point of view.

**“Well-designed
storefronts
create positive
shopping environments.”**

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Is It Readable? You Be the Judge. Other Examples from the Same Trip to the Store...



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