



Communicating brand identity through signs

By Jacquie De Almeida

Sign design is a critical part of a retail environment. When handled correctly, it sets the shopping mood, creates brand identity, and communicates directly with potential customers. For the jewellery retailer catering to a specific clientele, creating the right shopping ambiance is imperative to running a competitive and profitable business.

Design philosophy

Designing a successful exterior sign begins with examining the store's location and the type of product it carries, says Dan Hansen, president of Signs of the Times in Victoria, B.C.

"It also depends on the kind of store it is," he notes. "You have to look at the store's architecture and [its interior] to get a flavour for what the owners want to reflect. Once you have some idea of what that is, things start to come together pretty good."

Several variables come into play when successfully designing an exterior sign visible from the street, including the type, its size, and its placement. Other factors are obstructions such as trees, how far back the store sits from the sidewalk, as well as how the sign appears to pedestrians walking across the street and traffic driving by from either direction. The view for a person walking toward the sign on its side of the road will also affect the overall design.



Putting brand names directly on a sign is one way of conveying a store's identity.

According to the experts, signs should be clear, concise, entertaining, and pleasing to the eye, while also reflecting and enforcing the retailer's brand message. They should never be designed according to personal taste, but rather with the customer in mind and creating the right first impression, says Boris Kaminsky, vice-president of sales and marketing for Gregory Signs and Engraving in Vaughan, Ont.

"When you think of jewellery, you think of something that costs more," Kaminsky explains. "Right away, you think of materials like brass or stainless steel for the sign, something that adds to or complements what the store sells."

Collaboration is key. "It has to be," says Hansen. "In a way, I'm tailoring a suit to a person's body... There's no use trying to do a cheap sign if they're selling \$50,000 pieces of jewellery. It just doesn't work. The sign must represent who they are and what they sell."

While creating a customer-friendly retail environment is important, developing a unique identity is also paramount and takes into account factors such as planning, overall design and communication, materials, fonts, colours, and illumination.

Forming a plan

Kaminsky says brainstorming is key to defining a store's image and character. During the planning stage, he makes it a priority to conduct a site visit and meet with the designers, architect, and owner. It is important to find out as much information as possible about the type of jewellery sold, price points, and the market in which the store is situated.

"I like to go to the site to see what it looks like, take some preliminary measurements, and get a feel for the environment and the client," he says. "Then, I have the client come to our facility, where they can actually see what the materials are like. We have many samples in our showroom, so they can get a better idea of whether they should go with a lit, backlit, or non-illuminated sign."

Next, Kaminsky sits down with his designers to come up with some recommendations. However, sometimes the process can take on a life of its own. "You can easily go on forever designing with the client," he notes. "By the time you finish, you realize the design cost you more than the sign because it took so long. So you really want to try to narrow down the direction before the designer starts working." Hansen follows a similar process and will even take samples of the client's letterhead, business cards, and brochures—anything that can help capture the store's personality and possibly incorporate as a design feature.



A sign should reflect a store's brand identity. Materials, fonts, and colours should be considered in its design.



Meeting mall criteria is one factor that influences a sign's design.

"I think I know quite well what they might be looking for," Hansen says. "But a lot of the time, the customer will have something in mind that might not be suited for the kind of jewellery store they are. Some people fall in love with a sign, but it may not reflect who they are."

Sending a message

Gregory Signs and Engraving has produced signs for numerous Magi Jewellery locations. While the script at each store is the same, the signage itself differs to reflect the clientele and local market. Most of the company's signs are stainless steel with very thin script.

Magi's sign at its Yorkdale Shopping Centre location in Toronto was influenced by the mall's criteria, but also designed to be elegant and friendly to appeal to all age groups. Channel letters are on top of the bulkhead and the blade sign is brushed stainless steel, routed out and backed up with acrylic, and featuring light-emitting diodes (LEDs). The mirrored sign band follows the store's contour and the aluminum-script 'Magi' letters are mounted right onto it.

While designing a mall sign can be restrictive given the criteria that must be met, Hansen says it can also allow freedom from certain design elements or considerations, such as ensuring legibility for drivers speeding by. "You're also not fighting with the weather. Water isn't an issue indoors and ultraviolet rays don't affect the paint," he explains.

Having unique signage designs according to location can be very effective when done correctly, says Kaminsky. While marketing experts may frown on this when it comes to branding, he believes it's possible to customize signs for a particular space while still keeping brand identity intact. He says the retail industry may be changing to keep up with consumers who don't want to see the same store everywhere they go. "I know I get bored of it," he adds.

For retailers wanting to design or redesign their signage, Hansen advises they do their homework and look at several firms before settling on one. "That means find out what they're doing, who they've done work for, what type of work they do, and decide whether you can do business with them," he says.

Once that's done, the client has to decide how much money he or she is willing to spend. "[The sign] is going to be their silent salesman for the next five to 10 years," Hansen explains. "It should not only last five to 10 years, but it should look good. And that's why the materials that go into it are critical. You only want to spend your money once."

Mixing materials

Kaminsky admits there is always a struggle between budget constraints and wanting to design the best-looking sign. Many jewellery retailers prefer brass signage, but when they find out how much it costs, they often change their minds.



Many jewellers choose metallic colours for their signs to mimic the products they carry.

For anyone who wants the brass look but isn't willing to pay the hefty price, Kaminsky recommends octolux-finished acrylic. As long as the sign is protected from the elements, acrylic can be laminated with a thin layer of octolux, which is imitation brass. Kaminsky paints the edges gold to match the face as closely as possible.

Certain materials may also not be practical for specific applications. For instance, polished metal in an exterior sign requires too much maintenance. "It also grabs too many reflections," Hansen explains. "Ninety per cent of the time, polished metal is very difficult to read outside. And when it becomes difficult to read, clients can't find you." Instead, he suggests gilding a round- or prismatic-shaped letter to create definition. "You create shadows and highlights," he says. "When the sun is on the sign or a building across the street reflects sunlight onto it, the letters can just gleam and it will stay consistent as you're driving by it. A polished metal letter, on the other hand, disappears completely."

Meaning in the message

Sign fonts should be carefully chosen and kept consistent throughout the store. For example, serif fonts are generally considered more formal than sans serif fonts. They also have non-structural details on the ends of some letters and symbols, which give them a more stylized appearance. Therefore, serif fonts work best for higher-end jewellery stores, while sans serif is better suited for trendier jewellery retailers offering lower price point merchandise.

The use of all uppercase letters is usually understood as shouting and should be limited only to messages that warrant it, such as 'SALE' or 'FREE.' Exclamation marks should generally be avoided for the same reason. Mixed-case type is friendlier and easier to read.

Size also matters. Fonts should always be large enough to be clearly legible from wherever the customer is reading the sign.

Modifying fonts to cater to a store's essence is one way to set it apart, says Hansen. He often adds a swirl to the horizontal bar on the letter 'A' or a design to the centre of an 'O' to create a unique identity. "Font selection is very important because you can't do a jewellery store and then throw in a big square Helvetica letter that really belongs on a trucking company's door," he explains. However, depending on the colour of the sign's background, Hansen says some heavier fonts can also work well.

Common colour 'language' in retail is always something to keep in mind when designing retail signage. While yellow and red usually indicate a sale or a promotion, blue is normally conducive to a corporate environment, and green is often used to highlight a company's 'eco' message. However, many jewellery stores choose metallics to mimic the tones of their products. Brush finishes in stainless steel or gold are very common. For example, Peoples Jewellers' exterior signs complement the gold in its jewellery with gold returns on the letters and a gloss finish that creates a mirror-like reflection.

Lighting the way

Illuminated signs help attract attention to a store, but as with all signage tools, they should be considered on a case-by-case basis and only used when there is a valid reason. In a mall setting, the landlord may standardize lighting. In particular, contracts may stipulate only LEDs are permitted, as they are low-voltage and save money on energy. Often, Kaminsky cannot recommend another lighting option since many malls are trying to be more energy efficient and environmentally conscious.

When there are no restrictions from the landlord and the sign is for an exterior storefront rather than inside a mall, Kaminsky considers nearby ambient lighting in his design. For example, strip malls often incorporate strong halogen lamps to light up parking areas, which may overpower even the brightest sign. While he suggests using some lighting to add brightness during evening hours, he advises a minimalist approach to save the client money. Another option is to add some architectural lighting around the sign, such as eyebrow lights or gooseneck lamps. ♦

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