

Sign Design Guidelines: Creating Signs Your Customers Will Read

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How many of your in-store signs do your customers actually read?

Sign pollution – unfortunately, is alive and well in retail environments today, and the shoe industry is not immune. Too many signs is one of the main reasons customers don't read signs. Especially if they are poorly designed, in too many colors, shapes and sizes, and/or have too many words. Customers' brains will simply bypass reading these signs because it takes too much time and energy to make sense of them.

Creating **"sign design guidelines"** for your store's signs allows you to establish hierarchies so customers can be quickly guided to their desired destination. This is critical to creating a better shopping environment!

Do you have any idea how many sales you may have lost due to poor signage?

Before I tell you how to create these guidelines, you should **conduct a sign audit** to determine: the types of signs you have, the design of those signs, the quantity of them, and how they are installed/posted. Here is a list of the different types of signs often found in today's independent shoe store selling environments:

- > Logo (on the outside of your store, and throughout the inside)
- > Hours of Operation
- > Directional (i.e., to service counter, to transaction counter, to restrooms)
- > Department/Category (i.e., Men's, Work, Outdoor, Comfort, Accessories, Findings)

> Brand/Vendor (name/logo, and information about the brand). Be careful not to become a store of others' brands so that your brand is lost; you should have say over the size and type of sign you want from the brands so you keep some sense of organization over the multiple brands you sell.

> Product Information (benefits and advantages)

> Promotional (i.e., Just In, Staff Pick, Reward Cards)

> Sale (i.e., Anniversary Sale, End-of-Year Sale)

> Services Offered (i.e., special fittings, custom orders, shipping)

> Store Policies (i.e., returns, holiday hours)

> Digital Info (website, social media icons, hashtags)

How many of the signs you have noted are fully coordinated in size, fonts, colors, materials, and in the way they are installed/posted? How many are faded,



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out of date, hand-written, crooked, in broken or mis-matched sign holders, have too much text, and/or visibly taped up? How many are for your employees only and not for the customer? Does it make your head hurt? Now perhaps you see why many signs are not read. The sum of them represents too much visual chaos.

The next step is to create a set of **simple and coordinated design elements** that apply to all your types of signs. These guidelines will create signs that customers will actually read, and their brains will be able to notice and quickly



Good Example: Goodmiles Running Company; Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This photo shows a good use of logo signs, branded department signs, lifestyle photos and messaging along the walls above the product lines. Also, a Stan's logo guides customers to the related neighboring store. All photos taken by Retailworks, Inc.



Good Example: Goodmiles Running Company; Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A state map graphic is a fun message on an accent wall inside a dressing room, attracting attention from the store floor.



Good Example: Modern Shoe; Provo, Utah. A great example of keeping vendor signs from looking chaotic by keeping them inside consistent shapes and using a neutral color scheme.

absorb the information being provided.

These newly designed signs will help sell your store, your departments, your brands, and your product lines. And it keeps all staff on the same page when creating and posting a sign.

Here are some of the 'design criteria' you should consider when designing each type of sign:

- > Overall size
- > Font type and size
- > Maximum number of words

- > Color(s)
- > Graphic(s)
- > Material/finish
- > Frame and/or sign holder
- > Illumination
- > Type of mounting/installation

So for instance, if all your promotional signs are printed on white card stock, with your brand color as a wide border around the sign, with the text in one of your brand fonts/colors, using less than 10 words, and always placed in a 8½"H x 11"W horizontal acrylic frame, your regular customers will start to quickly recognize these signs from a distance, noting that there is a promotion going on in that department. Ditto for your "sale" signs, and "product info" signs.

Additional sign design tips:

- > Less is more.
- > Incorporate symbols, photos, and graphic images to communicate messages without using a lot of words. A smiling human face is one of the most attention-getting elements in a 2-D sign.
- > Don't handwrite your signs unless you or someone on your staff has exceptional pen-

You're training your regular customers to quickly process important information that assists with their shopping experience and decision-making process.

manship. Poor handwriting decreases the value of your brand.

- > Don't scotch-tape signs to anything. Ever. Again, this cheapens the image of your brand. Instead, use frames or acrylic sign holders for a more professional look.

Once you have the design guidelines established, now it's time to **strategically place your signs**. For instance, customers should quickly see department/category signs from your entrance. Once inside the department, clearly post your brands, product info signs, and promotional signs. Your logo should always be on the wall behind your transaction counter and illuminated. Don't be shy about placing your logo in several places throughout your store to reinforce your brand, including your dressing rooms and restrooms. Signs noting policies and services offered

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Good Example: Mitten Running Co.; Portage, Michigan. A good use of the logo inside the store.

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should be posted on or around the transaction counter. If you offer services such as special orders, online orders, custom work, shipping, or gift wrapping, be sure to have this information posted. It's important to tell new customers, but you'd be surprised how many regular customers forget what all you offer.

Finally, designate someone on your staff to be the sign maker/orderer/installer. He/she should become the "sign police" and audit the store regularly to make sure no stray sign made its way onto the selling floor or in the

window. Even with procedures in place, somehow "sign creep" happens, or the store runs out of specified sign holders, and someone ends up improvising. Remember, the consistent use of design elements is key to keeping your sign system looking good, and consistency in implementation is key to keeping the program running smoothly!

So, **think** before you just slap up a sign. Ask yourself: is it necessary, is it well designed, does it match our brand/sign guidelines, and will it be seen by a customer when they need to see it? Knowing you can actually train your customers to find, read and understand your signage via the consistent use of

design elements is a powerful tool! ■

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