

Banish “Sign Pollution”: The 5-Step Guide to Effective Retail Signage

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We’ve all been there. A customer asks a question, only for you to gently point to the giant sign right in front of them that holds the exact answer. Why does this happen?

When customers enter a store, their brains often go on autopilot. If a helpful human is nearby, they stop looking for environmental cues. But there is another culprit at play: **sign pollution**.

Take a look at your selling floor. How many signs are currently competing for attention? Are they all necessary, or are some past their expiration date? When you have too many signs with mismatched designs, customers’ brains simply bypass them because it takes too much energy to process the visual clutter.

Since your sales team can’t be everywhere at once, your signage needs to do the heavy lifting. Well-designed, consistent signs quickly direct traffic, educate shoppers on new vendors, and highlight promotions. By using unified design elements, you actually train your customers to absorb information effortlessly.

Here are five steps to building a retail signage system that works:

1. Categorize Your Signage

Start by defining your permanent sign categories. Be sure to include absolutely everything your customers read, as even temporary signs need a permanent design template. Common categories include:

> **Brand:** Logos and mission statements

> **Directional:** “Restrooms this way,” “Checkout”

> **Informational:** Store history, policies, department labels

> **Merchandising:** Vendor highlights, product price tags, and employee name tags

2. Establish Strict Design Criteria

This is the most critical step in the process. Create strict guidelines for each category regarding size, font, graphics,

color, material, and frame type.

Give each category a differentiating visual cue. For example:

> **Sale Signs:** 5"x7" white cardstock, 16 pt Arial Bold font, red ink, red outline, displayed

in an acrylic holder.

> **Product**

Descriptions:

8.5"x11" white cardstock, 14 pt

Arial font, blue ink, blue outline, displayed in an acrylic holder.

When you use these elements consistently, customers will subconsciously learn that a small red-and-white sign means “savings,” while a larger blue sign



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means “product information.” Compile all of these rules into a master Sign Guidelines PDF or binder.

3. Appoint a “Sign Director”

Designate one team member to over-



ELM Shoes; Greencastle, Penn.

see the creation, fabrication, installation, and removal of all signage. Treat them as the ultimate gatekeeper:

- > No sign goes up without their approval.
- > Vendors must abide by your store's sign criteria and seek permission before placing their own displays.
- > The Director should patrol the store monthly to ensure all active signs are relevant, undamaged, and properly placed.

4. Conduct an Annual Audit

Review your Design Guidelines once a year to keep them fresh and functional. Ask yourself: Do we need to add or remove a sign category? Should we update our design criteria? Is it time to appoint a new Sign Director?

Even with checks and balances, it is easy to slip back into bad habits. A vendor might sneak in a display, or an employee might improvise when you run out of acrylic holders. Remember: consistency in design keeps your store looking premium, and consistency in execution keeps the system running smoothly.

5. The Do's and Don'ts of In-Store Signage

The "Do's"

- > **Keep it brief.** Customers are bombarded with visual stimuli. Use as few words as possible and rely on symbols, photos, or graphics to impart information quickly.



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- > **Illuminate key signs.** Highlight your logo and major department signs with spotlights or downlights so customers can instantly orient themselves upon entering.
- > **Display your logo proudly.** Repetition builds credibility. The more customers see your logo, the more they will remember you as a professional business.
- > **Promote your digital presence.** Place social media icons and QR codes at the check-out, in dressing rooms, and on the front door to keep shoppers engaged between visits.

The "Don'ts"

- > **Don't handwrite signs.** Unless you are a

daily-changing cafe or deli, avoid handwritten signs. Studies show they subconsciously encourage customers to haggle on price.

- > **Don't use scotch tape.** Taping signs to windows or shelves instantly cheapens your store's image. Always use proper acrylic holders or suction cups.

- > **Don't allow vendor takeover.** Never let a brand partner disrupt your store's visual consistency. Make them adhere to your established design criteria.

- > **Don't leave expired signs up.** Leaving holiday or weekend sale signs up past their prime trains customers to ignore your promotional messaging entirely.

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