

**MARKETING OF RETAIL SIGNAGE IN DIFFERENT
ENVIRONMENTS**

A Senior Scholars Thesis

by

MAI PHUONG LE

Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

May 2012

Major: Environmental Design

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ABSTRACT

Marketing of Retail Signage in Different Environments. (May 2012)

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The primary purpose of this research is to look into the design of signage in different retail locations to see how each place adapts its visual presentation to accommodate its consumers. It is clear that signs are designed differently from one region to the next, depending on the demographic that the stores are catering to. My research began with an extensive literature review on signage and its impact on the surrounding environment, what makes a successful sign design and the importance of signage for retailers. I gathered my data by taking numerous photos of shop signs from a college town, an ethnic district, urban downtown, a master planned community, and a small town. I did find the style of signs to be different among the communities. There was some marketing tactics as far as the signage was concerned, but the type of stores that settled in each city appeared to be the bigger factor.

DEDICATION

Thank you mom and dad, and Lynh for your continuous support and love, always.

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I would like to thank Prof. Rodney Hill, my advisor, for your advice and guidance throughout my whole college career. Thanks for being so welcoming with an open door anytime I needed something. I would also like to thank Dr. Mark Clayton for helping me choose a topic and building the foundation for my thesis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Building and properly managing brand equity has become a priority for companies of all sizes, in all types of industries, in all types of markets (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005)”. Kevin Lane Keller, a chief expert in branding, explains the importance of brand equity with this statement. Brand equity can be defined as the value of the text and images linked to the goods or services offered by a business (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). Signage can help businesses develop their brand by communicating a message of selling to the bystander; therefore, they are considered a contribution to a company’s brand equity (Ewald, 1971). While signs are omnipresent, there is a difference in the overall design of signage from one location to the next. This has to do with targeting strategy for consumer markets. The primary purpose of this research is to look at different types of communities and do a comparison on the signage of each location. I am hoping that the data collected will show if there are marketing techniques involved in sign design, thereby revealing how the signage of a particular region is affected by its population.

Introduction to literature

A substantial literature review included themes on the history of environmental graphics,

This thesis follows the style of *Art, Design, and Communication in Higher Education*.

signage as marketing devices, and the role of branding and design. My research confirmed that the store signs of an area are marketed to appeal to the demographics of the people living around that particular region. Variables such as demographic, geographic, psychographic, and behavioristic can be used to determine the type of consumer market that needs to be addressed. The most important variables under demographics are age, income, and education, urban, suburban, or rural for geographic, lifestyle for psychographic, and brand loyalty for behavioristic (Ferrell & Pride, 2012). While there may not be as much flexibility in the design of signage as there is in packaged products (ie. food, cosmetics, etc.), there is still a need for research into what kind of audience is being targeted.

History of environmental graphics

Signage dates back to the Roman Empire, where they served as a display to capture the traveler's attention and inform him. While signs began as primitive, basic designs that relayed information, they evolved to such importance by the 1300s that merchants and innkeepers of major cities in Europe were required to hang them outside their businesses (Houck, 1969). Environmental graphics evolved into a discipline that contained architecture, industrial design, light, graphic design, and signage (Hunt, 1994).

Today, the main idea behind the sign remains the same; however, many factors shape the thought process that goes into the creation of one. Size, height, placement, illumination are all things that goes into ensuring a sign's visual conspicuity (Taylor, Claus, and

Claus, 2005). It is important to consider health, safety, morals and the general welfare when designing signs as well. Albeit, every region has different rules set for the signage of that area.

Like anything else displayed in public property, there are rules regarding environmental graphics. Street graphics in the United States of America are controlled by a combination of federal, state, and local regulations. “In order for any graphic display to communicate a message, it must first be seen by the audience for which it is intended” (Ewald and Mandelker, 1977). The authors note that the prime audience for most street graphics is the motorist, so it is important the sign is effective enough to draw attention quickly. Princeton psychologist George A. Miller has found that the human span of attention is limited to recognizing about six objects at one glance (Ewald and Mandelker, 1977). This is an important fact for designers to consider since this means there are limitations for the amount of information that an individual can retain.

In his book, Ewald details an analysis of sign design that was conducted in Baltimore County. The elements studied were location, size, height, design, which are also things I will be looking at in my research. Studies on color, font, size, shape, lighting, and location can be done to determine the differences between cities (Ewald and Mandelker, 1977). Guidelines we can look at to determine the difference between effective and ineffective street graphics are: whether the sign expresses the community’s identity, if the sign is appropriate to the business, whether or not it is compatible with the visual

character of the surrounding environment, and if the sign is legible in the circumstance in which it is seen (Wheeler, 2009).

The type of store will affect the sign's visual aesthetics. High end retailers will be located around each other; stores like Gucci, Burberry, and Tory Burch will be surrounded by like brands. It is unlikely that a brand like Wal-Mart would be found in the same location as these stores. On the other hand, a fashion retailer like Benetton would allow a larger number and variety of stores to be around it, due to its more modest pricing (Davis and Ward, 2002). The physical location of stores is another factor that plays a part in the visual pattern of signs in an area.

Signage as marketing devices

“Signs serve as valuable wayfinding devices, guiding customers safely through traffic to their intended destination” (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). Motorists driving on the highway rely on signs to lead them to the intended destination. Similarly, on-premise signs guide people to stores. On-premise signs are permanent signs that are located on the same site as the business. It is important for the designer to keep in mind how the signs will be seen by people driving along on the street in addition to making sure the client is pleased with the end result.

While on-premise signs have undergone changes through the years, one thing remains the same: it is mainly used by small businesses. These businesses are what make up a

community, and it is interesting to see how each business sign adds to the overall appearance of the area. Another factor that goes into the installation of signage is making sure rules and regulations are followed. Because signs are everywhere, that means there are differences in visual presentation between types of communities, from a college town, to an ethnic district, to urban downtown, to a master planned community, to a small/old town. Each type of retail location must adapt its aesthetics to adhere to the city regulations as well as to accommodate its consumers.

“Signage is not only considered as being important for wayfinding, but also for drawing attention and encouraging sales” (Smitshuijzen, 2007). Brand equity, which entails words, graphics, and symbols, is important for all businesses. Signage has four important functions when it comes to marketing a business: communicating the location, reinforcing advertisements, branding the site, and enhancing store image. They help build business brands through the visual field that’s perceived by the brain and human eye. That is why it is essential for retailers to have a strong visual identity. Signage becomes an important part of brand recognition. For a small business, focusing on the graphic design of the sign is especially important because it becomes a way for the store to “begin a conversation that can lead to a transaction with members of the public” (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). Obviously, not all businesses observe this idea, and this is something I will be looking at when comparing the signage of the different regions.

Having a memorable and interesting sign is important for business success. Since many small business owners do not have graphic designers to rely on, they have signs that are unsuccessful in communicating the brand. Because of today's exceedingly competitive world full of marketing and social media, an improperly marketed service will not be able to compete (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). The importance of a sign to a business is undeniable; properly designed, sized and placed signage helps "to facilitate equal opportunity in the marketplace for all Americans" (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). In 1997, a sign company created a survey asking "How did you learn about us?" taken 30-45 days after an installation of a new sign. The results were telling—50% of people responded "sign". This shows the significance of having signage that is easily readable as well as providing appropriate information. The location of a business definitely plays a role in the willingness of the owner to offer a sign of this nature. Depending on what the surrounding store's competitors are doing, the proprietor may or may not consider the value of good signage as being that high.

Branding and design

Color is a key part of a sign's design. Using the appropriate color(s) is vital in producing a readable sign, and could be the difference in success or failure. Using colors with distinct brightness levels is crucial for legibility. Blue or black text on a white or yellow background is the optimal color combination for easy reading (Taylor, Claus, & Claus, 2005). Many stores are chain retailers with set brand colors, but there are also numerous

small business owners who are left with the task of choosing their own color, typeface, style.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

The logistics

After reading multiple books on retail signage and environmental graphics, I decided the best way to do a comparison on the signage of the different locations was to take numerous pictures of individual signs. This type of data collection would best supplement my literature review. I documented signage in Bellaire (ethnic district), The Woodlands (master-planned community), Tomball (small city), and College Station (college town and home to Texas A&M University) by taking numerous pictures of retail signs from one end of town to the other. In each place, I tried to get a variety of images of signage that was a good representation of the atmosphere. I focused the shot on the store sign, and sometimes window signage if it was applicable. Figure 1 shows examples of one image of many from each of the locations. My method of capturing the signs was to focus in on the name.



Figure 1. Signage from Bellaire, College Station, The Woodlands, and Tomball

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Observations

After sitting down and comparing the pictures I took in each area, I found that the differences in sign design were not as substantial as I had initially thought they were going to be. There was a major difference between the aesthetics of the signs in The Woodlands and the other three cities, but Tomball had some signs that could be found in Bellaire or College Station, and vice versa. It was not so much the difference in signage as it was the type of stores that differentiated one neighborhood from the other. As a master-planned community, The Woodlands was developed to “entice city slickers looking for far-flung suburban quality of life” (Schadewald, 2010). Because the city plan was premeditated, the stores that opened were more controlled—there was a purpose and already set target market for this community. For instance, The Woodlands are home to many more higher-end stores; places like Tiffany’s, J. Crew, and Brooks Brothers (Figure 2) are not found in College Station, Tomball, or Bellaire.



Figure 2. Woodlands signage

These types of stores have nicer signs because of their overall brand equity, and resources to hire a designer. The people who shop at these retailers are generally in the upper middle class, with higher income levels. These stores will be found at locations with higher quality architecture, which contributes to the overall atmosphere of a nicer area. On the other end of the spectrum, a small town like Tomball does not have luxury brands, simply because of the different target market. There is more of a focus on small boutiques and local “mom and pop” shops, as Figure 3 shows.



Figure 3. Tomball signage

A probable reason for this is, the city of Tomball began to develop when people desiring a less hectic life migrated from the city to the countryside. Today it is still very much a

“country” area with a small town feel. In addition, it is unlikely for many shop owners located in Tomball to have the money to hire a graphic designer to design a sign. And even if they did, it might be completely unnecessary for the market that they are selling to. There are quite a few antique stores and small shops. The architecture reflects the atmosphere; it is obvious that many of the retailers have been around for awhile, and the style has not been updated. The regulations for signage do not appear to be very strict. There are only basic rules regarding size and placement--not so much on design and appearance (Code of Ordinances, 2006).

In addition to its premeditated planning, The Woodlands is the newest community of the four areas compared. Because environmental graphics has been a newer idea, the older communities are behind in that sense (Hunt, 1994, p.9). This idea plays a role in the conclusion that the signage in The Woodlands is more modern and more cohesive as a whole. Even the largest chain of retailers will have customized signs that are designed to fit within the aesthetic of the community. For instance, a state-wide brand such as H-E-B has its own logo that is used for all their stores. While most stores around Texas keep the standard “look”, the store in The Woodlands distinguished themselves by personalizing the sign a bit more, as shown in Figure 4.



College Station H-E-B

The Woodlands H-E-B

Figure 4. HEB

The majority of the population in College Station is college students, as it is the home to Texas A&M University. Compared to the other three places, there are a higher number of small, cheap restaurants throughout the city--fast food chains in addition to local eateries. There is not a uniform “look” throughout the city as the strip malls were built at different times. A lot of casual places with unique names are definitely designed to attract the younger population. Because the target audience here is college aged students, it would not make sense for a store selling expensive, luxury goods to locate themselves in this town. Places that are local and less recognizable brand-wise have to do more to make themselves stand out. Funny or unique names will get students talking and drive traffic to the store (Figure 5). The signage rules here are more focused on safety than aesthetics (City of College Station, 2012).



Figure 5. Localized retail signage

Cici's Pizza and Double Dave's (Figure 6) are just regular chain restaurants that most everyone has heard of, and are fitting for this type of town because of their laid back, casual atmosphere.



Figure 6. Larger chain restaurant signage

In addition to the many eateries, there are a lot of places that give themselves a name related to Texas A&M University (Figure 7). I can see that the strategy behind this is to make localize themselves more, making them special and unique to College Station.



Figure 7. Texas A&M related signage

After much observation and data reviewing, I feel like there are several possibilities for the way the aesthetics of an area is characterized. Besides the rules/regulations, established brands, and overall city appearance, it seems that there could be a set standard when it comes to the strip malls within a community. It would make sense for a new shop coming in to a location would try to “match” the aesthetics of the surrounding stores. You will often see that all the stores in one strip center will have the same or similar signs. The reason for this could be a result of the landlord’s rules, in addition to the city signage rules, which adds another factor into this signage study.

Bellaire is home to Chinatown, which began in the late 1980s in an effort to diversify the Houston economy. As the majority of the population are of Chinese/Asian descent, it only makes sense that the signage are in a language most people will understand. I noticed that many of the signs had Chinese characters as well as English. Figure 8 shows

how many of the shops in Bellaire have added a Chinese or Vietnamese translation in addition to the English name. Asian supermarkets, restaurants, and dessert cafes make up most of the town. In comparison to the other three cities, I found that Bellaire had the least uniform and unaesthetically pleasing signage throughout the city.



Figure 8. Bilingual signage in Bellaire

Sign rules and regulations

I went online and found a set of rules that signs had to adhere to in each of the cities. The Woodlands and College Station had very detailed requirements, while the ones for Tomball and Bellaire were more general. This is interesting to note because I would consider the signage in The Woodlands and College Station to be more visually

appealing than the other two. The only “design” standards set for the city of Tomball were related to wind load pressures (Code of Ordinances, 2006). Bellaire’s city ordinance presented signage regulation as a relatively short document without much specification (City of Bellaire, TX, 2012). On the contrary, The Woodlands’ set of regulations were very in depth. For example, “Signs must be kept in good repair and must be in keeping with the character of The Woodlands” (The Woodlands Commercial Planning and Design Standards, 2012). An example of a sign following this rule is shown in Figure 9. A subtle, painted Exxon logo on wood is not something you would see in most other places. It makes more sense that the rules here are stricter because of the fact that it is a planned community.



Figure 9. Exxon sign in The Woodlands

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

In the end, I found that the overall results from my observations did not reveal as much as I had hoped. There was some marketing tactics as far as the signage was concerned, but the type of stores that settled in each city appeared to be the bigger factor. The design of the signs was affected by the store—depending on the type, if it was a local business or part of a large franchise, and the target demographic of the store. As creative director Neil Hogan states, “Good signage should be seen and understood ...easily...There is no excuse any more for signage that is ‘tacked on’ in the later stages of a project” (Chang & Wu, 2011). More often than not, it seems like the signs in Bellaire, Tomball, and sometimes College Station were an afterthought. There is no connection between the store and the sign, and definitely no identifiable branding mark. Figure 10 shows how there is no real identity for any of the stores. They obviously are located in the same strip center—the same color and font are used for all the signs, making them uniform to the strip center, but not unique in any way.



Figure 10. Bellaire signage

It appears that it is not as important in Bellaire to have strong brand identity, as many of the businesses have survived for years. In this sense, the city of Tomball is the same way. The businesses in both places are established and have customers coming back, so their appearance may not be as important. There are so many stores, especially food places competing against each other in College Station, so it is more important for them to grab the attention of people from the street. In The Woodlands, it is more about appealing to the lifestyle that has been established there. Marketing to the standard of living seems to be the formula each city has, and the signage is something that comes along with the retailer's identity.

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