

Bob Behounek

Redesigning for readability

I spent the past few days in our nation's capital working on union apprenticeship curriculum manuals. While we were bashing ideas around, I found some old design exercises from our apprentice program in my briefcase. I read them

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over and looked through the resulting sketches. The layouts were interesting, to say the least.

I like the exercises to outline the requirements and expectations of these fictitious clients, the surroundings involved, speed limit on the adjacent street if relevant, whether it's a new or established business, colors, and the sign's distance from the street or highway.

There are basic design elements that should be incorporated into the finished product just like building a structure: dominant feature, contrast, proportion, balance, flow, unity. So many signs emphasize the wrong part of the message. Generally the emphasis should be on the product that the client is selling or the service they offer—though sometimes the client's name must be the dominant feature.

Five re-designs

Here are five favorite exercises that were used in the training program some time ago. I'd like to share how they went from one look to another.

Each student received a worksheet that outlined each project, providing the copy and as much other relevant information as possible, so that the finished project will not only look good, but work and read well. After all, if the signage we create doesn't do these two things, we've missed the mark—big time.

Truck lettering

The client has a white pickup truck with an existing design that he would like to update—possibly with a complete new look. Review the sketch that the customer has, and then take about 30 minutes to sketch out a few thumbnail ideas (approximately 2 by 3½ in.).

This design needs one dominant feature to tell his customers who he is, what type of service he provides, and how to get in touch

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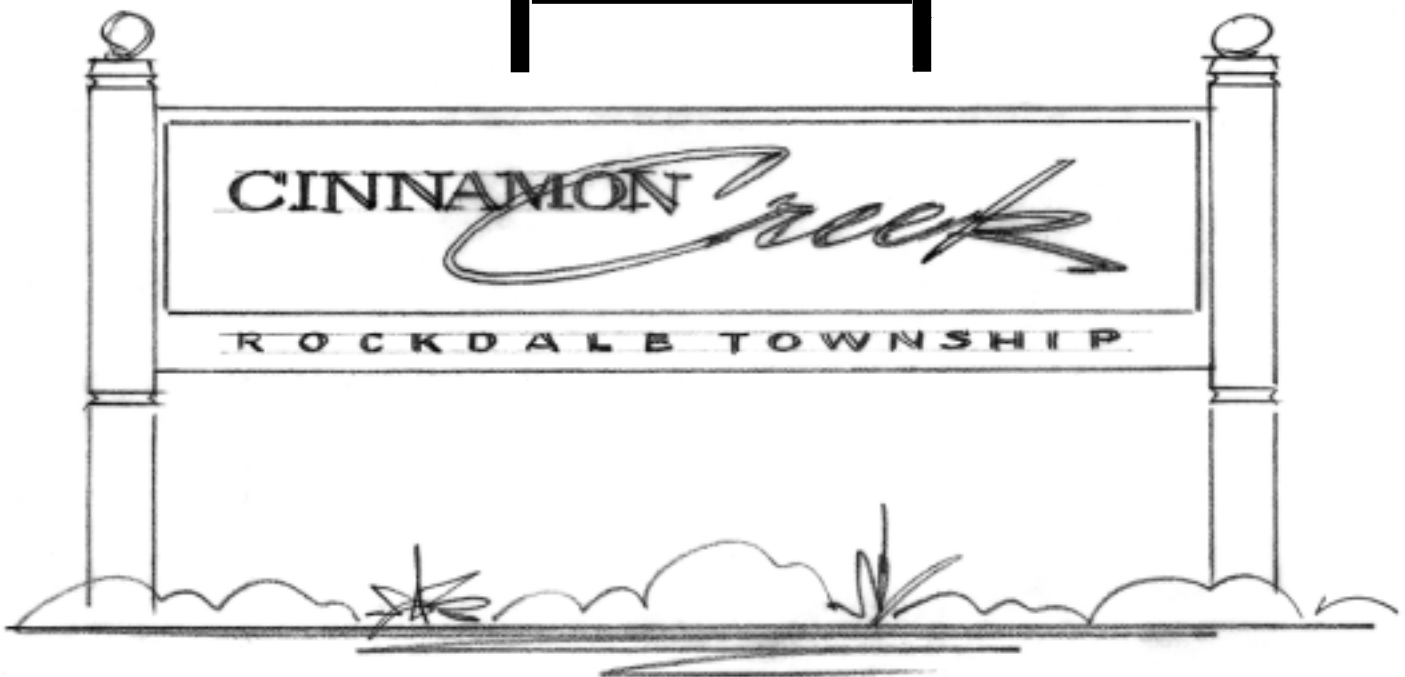


with him. We will review these thumbnails, pick one that works, fine-tune it, and make a full size paper pattern (approximately 18 by 24 in.).

3-by-24-ft. fascia sign

Our client is looking for an updated design. The existing signage was installed 16 years ago and is not only faded, but in disrepair. The new sign will be aluminum faced. The building is 50 ft. long and is cream in color. There are no other buildings in the immediate area, and it is 150 ft. off the road. The speed limit is 45mph (and you know everyone is going faster than that!). There

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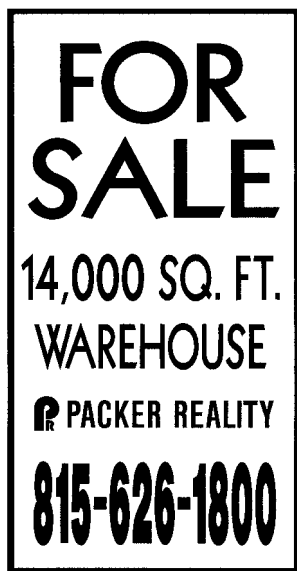
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are no trees or other obstructions to impair the line-of-sight to the sign.

Like the pickup truck, this design needs one dominant feature to tell his customers who he is, what type of service he provides, and how to get in touch with him.

28-by-44-in. showcard

These cards are always one of my favorite re-design projects! The local mall is having a fashion show and wants a simple, easy-to-read card they can post throughout the mall and distribute in the community. They asked if it was possible



There's more on www.signcraft.com

Click on Features to see more of Bob's "Before and After's" in Dealing with Home-Spun Designs from the May/June 1998 issue, Adding Character and Readability to Layouts from the January/February 1999 issue, and Five Curbside Re-Designs from the January/February 2000 issue of SignCraft.



to incorporate a graphic of a fashionable woman or a stylized figure. Their previous showcard was done on one of those "roll and print" machines, so creativity was at a minimum.

Subdivision entrance identification

As legend has it, this 30-in.-by-8-ft. sandblasted sign was originally routed by one of the first homeowners. It was designed by the builder's daughter, who was an art student at the time.

This sign must be redone to the liking of the current homeowners. Nothing fancy—earth-tones, heavy posts, redwood, or cedar. It doesn't need to be read from a great distance, and the speed limit is 35 mph. The surrounding landscaping is mostly evergreens and ground cover.

Upright 8-by-4-ft. overlaid plywood sign

A leading real estate broker in town is selling a vacant warehouse. A new look is required. The existing logo is dated and could also use a re-design. The building is downtown where there are many signs competing for the viewer's attention.

We must let prospective customers know the status of this warehouse, its size, and how to contact the seller—in that order. One of these elements must be dominant and the others must be read at a quick glance.□



Bob Behounek is a sign artist/designer at Van Bruggen Signs in Orland Park, Illinois. His book, Trucks, is available from SignCraft.

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