

Gary Anderson outlines the four factors that guide him through the design process

Try this four-step approach to effective sign design

by Gary Anderson

Design is the single most important element of any sign project. No amount of outstanding craftsmanship can save a poor design. To the contrary, good design can go a long way toward saving poor craftsmanship. It doesn't matter whether the sign is a basic informational sign or a price-is-no-

object custom job, design is what determines if a sign does its job effectively or not.

Design is about solving problems. In the case of signs, our customers come to us with a problem. They may want to sell more widgets, get passersby to notice their business or to advertise their ser-

vices on their trucks. They may have to help customers find their way through an office building, notice a special sale or even tell them where to park. In every case there is at least one problem they hope to solve with a sign—sometimes several problems.

The function of design is to capture the viewer's attention, inform, create or support an image, elicit an emotional response and make efficient use of materials. Design doesn't necessarily mean "fancy," either. It's really just putting common things together in an uncommon way.

For me, there are four major components to effective sign design: pictorial (or graphic), type, shape (or shapes) and color. Once I have identified the client's needs, I use these four considerations to create a design that will hopefully solve their problems. Before we take a closer look at these considerations, let's see how it all gets started.

The design process begins once the client tells me what he or she needs. I begin by asking a few key questions. I need to know what kind of business they are in, where they are and what kind of market they are going after. The kind of



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business and where they are located usually tells me what market they are after. If they're in a metal building in an industrial park and they manufacture set screws, obviously they don't have much walk-

in trade. If they are a hardware store on a side street, then that's a different scenario.

What's the name of the business? Thinking a little about what the name connotes can often lead

you to the design. When the owner of the Hob Knob Corner Restaurant came to me for a sign a few years back, I designed it without a pictorial, using an interesting shape and some different techniques. When it came time to replace it last year, I couldn't resist using a pictorial. The Hob Knob mentality elicits a lot of images. I pictured a street scene with people gossiping on the corner, with the look of an old etching. Since the sign hung 12 feet off the ground, though, that sort of detail wouldn't work. I thought about the image a bit and decided on just a handshake image to pick up on the idea of friends greeting and meeting each other. It was very simple, and it got the point across. I could have also used food and drink. With a restaurant, there are loads of possible images.

Do they have any ideas about what they would like the sign to do? What image do they want the sign to project? I find there is nothing worse than someone who doesn't want to participate in the design process. When that happens, you do a sketch and the client says something like, "That's not what I'm looking for." I then try to find out what they don't like about this concept or why they feel it doesn't work for them. If you get an answer like, "I'll just know it's right when we get there," you know you have your work cut out for you. You have to keep asking questions until you draw something out of them subconsciously.

That's really what you have to do with almost every customer, anyway. You have to draw information out of them that may seem meaningless to them, but is very important to you. These key questions will give you the clues you need to begin to solve the design problem. With experience, you'll get a sixth sense for this type of information.



One important thing to remember is that you need to let clients know that as the designer, you're the one who makes the decisions. They can and should have influence and impact on the process, but it's your job to work it into a design using your expertise. If the client takes over the process, it can get very frustrating. That may be a good time to move on to greener pastures.

Item 1: Pictorials and graphics

The first question that runs through my mind as I begin a design is usually, "Is there an opportunity to use some sort of graphic or pictorial?" By nature, people relate to pictures better and quicker than words. Pictures elicit emotion and involvement much faster than type. When appropriate, there's simply no better way to attract the viewer than with a pictorial or graphic.

When you use pictorials or graphics on a sign it is usually the most dominant design element, so it must be appropriate and lead you into the rest of the design. That's why it is usually my first consideration. Did you ever notice how you can tell when a designer tried to stick a pictorial into a layout just to fill up some open space? It annoys the viewer because his eye wants to go there first, but the designer has already tried to pull him somewhere else.

Look to sources other than sign-trade magazines for pictures that can inspire you. I get magazines like *Metropolitan Home*, *Print* and *Step-By-Step Graphics*. Art books and old books of all kinds are also good resources, as are labels and packaging. Dover Publications (180 Varick St., New York, NY 10014) publishes many inexpensive books of clip art and drawings. Television show titles and MTV are also great references. I get a lot of ideas there.

Look at everything as a potential source of ideas—nature, architectural details, fabric prints. Refer-

ence material loads your conscious and subconscious mind with images and ideas.

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Most of the pictorials I do fall into one of these three categories: a silhouette of an object (such as the deer on the *Mitchell Archery* sign), a flat color pictorial (these resemble a paint-by-number picture like the *Cock & Bottle* or *The Rose Cottage* picture) and finally, a realistic painting. The big difference between these last two is budget considerations. A realistic painting takes more time and consequently costs more than a quick, flat color pictorial. Remember that a silhouette pictorial doesn't always have to depict the entire object—sometimes a leaf can be better than an entire tree, or a creek bank more effective than an entire creek.

If a pictorial isn't relevant, then maybe a bold simple graphic that relates to their business will do the job. Or, consider a monogram incorporating letters from the client's name. There's a lot you can do with all of these.

Item 2: Type

I'm probably one of those rare sign makers who is not greatly concerned with creative type. I feel it's very important that the type fits the personality of the business, but I'm not overly concerned with coming up with a totally unique typeface for every sign.

Type should be legible, and the copy should be organized in order of importance. Remember that the first priority of any sign is to be read. No matter what else you do in the name of making that sign more attractive or effective, the viewer must be able to read it. Every sign has a set of conditions under which it will be seen most often and the type must be legible under those conditions. A billboard will be seen mostly by people in cars going 60 miles per hour, and a showcard in a store window will be seen mostly by folks walking on the sidewalk. This is the sort of information we have to consider to choose type well.

The graphics are only a hook to catch a reader. The type has to impart the information. If you can't read the message in the time you have to view the sign, who cares how wonderful the hook was that caught your eye?

I don't worry much about repeating the same typeface on more than one sign. I actually work harder at not repeating the exact same shape on another sign than repeating a typeface on two signs. Of course, I'm not advocating that you use the same three typefaces on all your signs. What I am saying is that type selection is part of the design, but most of the time it is not the key part. If I'm not using a graphic on a sign, then I do get a little more concerned about the type. Most of my secondary copy is standard type, and often computer-cut vinyl.

Remember that the sign maker has plenty of different treatments that can be used to make type unique. You can outline, inline,



airbrush, marble, convex, highlight, stripe or much more. As long as it is readable and fits the personality of the business, anything goes.

For the actual layout of the lettering, I usually take the approach that Mike Stevens outlined in his book, *Mastering Layout* (available from *SignCraft*). It's a very common-sense, dependable method. I can't explain it all here, but suffice it to say that most of my layouts follow the guidelines he gave us.

Item 3: Shape

Shape is a graphic device that, once you learn how to use it, gives you a lot of design flexibility. The key to remember here is one of the things the late Mike Stevens said all the time: "The problem is the solution." The shape of the type—the silhouette created by the arrangement of the lettering—usually leads you to an interesting shape for the sign. If you draw a shape, then try to fit the lettering and other graphics to it, it probably won't work very well. The shape of the type is not likely to relate to the shape you started with. There's usually something disturbing or disconnected about the finished product even though the shape itself may be beautiful, and the type may be very nice. They're not in harmony.

When the silhouette of the lettering isn't in harmony with the shape of the sign, you usually create a bunch of oddly-shaped spaces between the lettering and the outer edges of the shape. This is the same reason Mike Stevens seldom used lowercase lettering below uppercase, unless the lowercase lettering was very light in weight or spaced relatively far from the uppercase. The silhouette of the uppercase lettering is a block, while the lowercase lettering usually has a very irregular top. Being close to the relatively flat bottom of the line above it

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creates some very abstract shaped blank spaces—areas of negative space—that may attract the eye before the lettering does.

Item 4: Color

Over the past few years, several sign people have mentioned the color combinations I tend to use. That's been sort of a surprise, because it usually seems to me that I'm not doing anything all that unique with color. I can say that I'm always looking for new combinations. I watch for packaging, advertising, etc. There's a lot of interesting use of color all around us. We just need to start looking at it.

For me, color is usually the last consideration of the design process. By then I have a pretty

good idea of the image I'm trying to create with the sign, and I try to use colors that further that. Color creates a mood, so I try to make the mood match that of the design I've done.

If the sign is to be mounted on or near a building, consider the colors of the building, and maybe even the surrounding buildings. Decide how much contrast you will need to support what you are trying to do with the design. You can increase contrast to add emphasis to important elements.

On some signs, you may notice an attempt to use too many primary colors. If you use tints or shades of just two primary colors, you'll be more likely to create color harmony.

Use whatever works

I'm not a purist in any sense when it comes to designing and making signs. I don't cling to any set of traditional approaches for producing my work. Whatever is fun to do, gets the job done and makes you money is what matters. Do the layout on a computer, do it by hand, mix the two, use clip-art images, photocopy a photograph then copy the copy to create a graphic, make the background with a sponge. Whatever works is fair play. What counts is that the sign does its job and looks good in the end.

The techniques, processes and shortcuts that you use shouldn't be apparent on the finished sign. The first thing you notice when you look at the sign should be the



sign and its message—not that someone was just trying out their new computer's compression or distortion function, or that they must have just read an article about creating marble effects or signs of the roaring twenties. When the techniques, processes or shortcuts jump out at you first, they are overwhelming the sign's message.

I use the computer a lot in my work anymore. But my goal is that when people look at the signs, their first comment won't be, "I see you do all your work with the computer." Of course, the computer is used so much for lettering that it's easy to recognize that the lettering was done with the computer, but it should not be the thing that jumps off the sign at you.

Effective signs are much more than just letters on a board. They are powerful means of communication and advertising. Good design is what sets the effective signs apart from the mundane ones. The talent and creativity required to create effective sign designs are acquired skills, and anyone is capable of learning these skills. All it takes is interest, effort and practice. Remember that signs show the economic health of a community.

Beyond the fact that it makes your work easier to sell, learning these skills is satisfying and just plain fun. Solving the design problem posed by a sign is like working a puzzle with many, many possible solutions. To me, it's one of the most enjoyable aspects of sign making. □

Gary owns and operates Bloomington Design in Bloomington, Indiana. His new book, More Signs, Graphics, and Other Neat Stuff, is available from SignCraft Publishing Company.