

Changeable copy signs deliver buyers

The messages these secondary signs carry mean sales

By Dan Mika

A changeable copy sign—also called a reader board—can be a profitable investment for many businesses. It has the power to turn passersby into shoppers and can give buying ideas to those who had already planned to stop. Changeable copy signs “open up” a business by revealing what’s going on inside. During a hot spell, an appliance store can tell everyone that passes by that air conditioners are on sale. Information like that gives a new look to a business every time the board is changed.

Usually, changeable copy signs near the road have the advantage of better “street visibility” than temporary promotional signs

on the building. They deliver results. For example, a local carpet store who has both high-volume traffic and traffic signals at their corner (which, of course, increase reading time) has customers fill out a form after a purchase. The results reveal that 25 percent of their buyers are prompted to come in after seeing the changeable copy sign message. That’s a pretty good return for a one-time investment in the sign and letters.

Selling changeable copy signs Just a mention from a sign maker may spark the business owner’s interest in a changeable copy sign, especially if the competition has one. If a



This is an unusual 2-line, 6-in.-character changeable copy sign application on a 12-by-16-ft. double-faced pylon sign. The sheet-metal cabinets and retainers are painted; the sheet-metal pole covers and embellishments have a texture paint finish. The graphics are 3M translucent film on white polycarbonate faces. Montana Signworks, Helena, Montana



Changeable copy signs can help “open up” the individual stores in a plaza to passing traffic. When each business shares a very limited space on a main sign, a changeable copy sign helps to solve their visibility problem. The tenants in this plaza “chipped in” to add this changeable copy sign and receive time shares based on their contribution. Santoro Signs, Buffalo, New York



The key to a changeable copy sign's effectiveness is the same as the key to the value of a good piece of real estate: location, location, location! Santoro Signs, Buffalo, New York

business has good traffic volume and enough to say so that they'll change the board often, it may be a great opportunity to sell a changeable copy sign either as an add-on to an existing pole sign or as part of a new installation.

When you do a drawing for a new sign, consider including a changeable copy sign option (see Bob Darnell's presentation technique in *Using CorelDraw for sign design*, *SignCraft*, July/August 2001). It may open up a discussion about the benefits of a changeable copy sign. Even if the customer can't afford the sign right away, they may add it later. Designing for the additional sign from the start lets you engineer the structure and plan for permitting. Knowing the maximum sign allowance for a business will help determine if a changeable copy sign is a good choice in reaching that maximum. Gemini [800-538-8377, 507-263-3957, www.signletters.com] offers a helpful 35-page *Technical Guide To*

There's more on www.signcraft.com

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“The right sign often prompts an unplanned stop, or changes a customer’s mind once he is on the premises. Changeable copy signs and temporary window signs are especially effective in encouraging variation from the accustomed consumption patterns. Because temporary or variable message signage is relatively inexpensive, the dollars generated by such signage usually represent pure profit.”

From the Small Business Administration’s excellent Web site devoted to signs:
www.sba.gov/starting/signage/text/index.html

Changeable Copy Signs at no cost. It includes sales ideas such as this one, along with face-production options and more.

Size of the letters The number of lines of copy and the size of letters on a changeable copy sign should be based on the amount of traffic, speed of the traffic and the width of the road. Busy traffic restricts the normal sightlines into an even narrower cone of vision—this requires larger and fewer letters if they are to be read.

Four-inch letters are rarely sufficient in height to be read by moving traffic unless the sign is very close to the street, at eye level and has a brief message. As a general rule, a 6-in. letter is read well from both sides of a two-lane road with steadily moving traffic. An 8-in. letter is visible from both sides of a busy four-lane road with steadily moving traffic. Larger letters in either case can give more punch, but may seem out of place. If traffic is slow mov-

ing, the messages are short, or if the board needs to be read from only one side of the road, a smaller letter may work.

As a rule of thumb, ¼ inch of height for every ten feet of reading distance provides maximum impact. (A rough-and-ready way to measure distances is to use your own stride length to pace off measurements. It’s handy for rough measurements of maximum impact distances, building frontages and setbacks. To get your stride length, and some exercise, measure a mile on your vehicle’s odometer, walk it, and then divide the steps into 5280 feet. My stride length is, conveniently, 2½ feet.)

While it’s true that using condensed and/or smaller letters allows a changeable copy sign to say more, that can hurt the number of clear impressions—the number of times that the sign is actually read—and that’s what really counts. Creative editing of the message may be a better solution than going to smaller or condensed letters.



The letter track on this sign was set up to receive larger price panels without having to jump over a track.

Sources for: Changeable letter and sign cabinet manufacturers

Changeable letter manufacturers:

- **Change-Ad Letter Company**, 800-304-4632, www.change-ad.com
- ★ **Gemini Inc.**, 800-538-8377, 507-263-3957, www.signletters.com
- **Wagner Zip-Change, Inc.**, 800-323-0744, 708-681-4100, www.wagnerzip.com

Letters from one or more of the above manufacturers may also be available through your local sign supply wholesaler.

Sign cabinet manufacturers:

- **5 Star Signs**, 877-505-7827, 954-974-7827, www.5starsigns.com
- ★ **Barnesigns Co.**, 800-267-9193, 727-849-1301, www.barnesigns.com
- ★ **Econochannel**, 800-991-2669, 305-266-9222, www.econochannel.com
- **Esco Manufacturing, Inc.**, 800-843-3726, 605-886-9668, www.escomfg.com
- **Freddies Plastics**, 800-345-7229, 813-754-5567
- **Howard Industries**, 800-458-0591, 814-833-7000, www.howardindustries.com
- ★ **Preferred Sign Cabinets**, 888-434-0006, 603-382-4413
- **Sign Builders, Inc.**, 800-222-7330, 205-925-9400, www.signbuilders.com
- **Signs Direct**, 888-565-4467, 954-742-6171
- **Sign Faces**, 800-800-3223, 205-591-7777, www.facesinc.com
- **U.S. Signs & Letters**, 800-357-7933, 727-862-7933
- ★ **Vis Com Systems, Inc.**, 800-457-1229, 828-837-6673
- ★ **Wayne Industries**, 800-225-3148, 205-755-5580, www.wayneindustries.com

You can also order sign cabinets and extrusions through your sign supply house.

★ Denotes companies advertising in this issue. *SignCraft* tries to make sure all source lists are complete, but occasional omissions are inevitable. Please let us know of any so we can update readers. Source lists are compiled by *SignCraft* and are included at their discretion. —Editors



30-by-60-in. changeable copy sign cabinet in DesignStone structure [Howard Industries, 800-458-0591, 814-833-7000, www.signweb.com/howardind] by Empire Signs, Colorado Springs, Colorado

As with any sign, the changeable copy sign should be put in exactly the spot where the most people will read it. This can be determined by viewing the proposed installation from the point of view of passing traffic. After the sightlines have been analyzed, that place should be evident. Sightlines not only go from side to side, but also up and down (see *Great sign. But will they see it?* *SignCraft*, July/August 2001). A changeable copy sign should be positioned low enough to be easily read. The letters on a changeable copy sign may also be much smaller than those on the main sign, so it's not unusual for the two signs to be separated with a wide gap.

Fabrication and installation Changeable copy signs can be built in-house or subcontracted to a fabricator. Your local sign supply wholesaler can probably supply sources for changeable copy signs at any stage, from a knockdown kit that you assemble yourself to a ready-to-install sign. The latter might include a welded, wired UL approved box with letter track already mounted to the plastic faces. Check your sign code—most codes require UL certification of the cabinet. You'll also find a list of sources included here.

If you're not equipped for the installation, your local sign supply wholesaler can probably put you in touch with sign erectors and installers who can do that for you. They're equipped with boom trucks and should be capable in electrical/lighting and structural aspects. Once you hook up with a qualified installer, they'll be able to answer technical questions during all phases of your sign project.

Make sure you are adequately covered by



Changeable copy signs can be a suggestion as a stand-alone sign apart from the main-identity sign. Regulations in this town allowed for both signs, but the maximum area had been reached with the main sign. Advision Signs, Cheektowaga, New York



The look of a basic, changeable copy sign can be endlessly varied by the use of foundations made of different materials and in different shapes. The stonework below this sign matches the building. Advision Signs, Cheektowaga, New York



When track is mounted onto metal or wood (as on this nonilluminated 4-by-8-ft. sign), oversized slots should be drilled into the track and the screw left loose (see "Changeable letter pointers" on page 45). This allows for the expansion and contraction at a different rate between the plastic track and the face material. Sign maker unknown.



Even a one-line changeable copy sign can be worthwhile advertising. A lot can be said with creative editing. The box structure, though it adds "presence," doesn't count against the maximum sign-face area. In this town, just the main face area counts. Santoro Signs, Buffalo, New York



This customer liked the sandblasted look, but also wanted an illuminated changeable section. Note the drip edge above the illuminated cabinet to keep the water out. Overall size is about 5 by 10 ft. on 6-by-6-in. posts. Visual Impact Signs, E. Aurora, New York

Changeable letter pointers

Here are a few helpful ideas on working with changeable letters:

- Some sign companies work out a contract to change the letters for the business on a periodic basis.
- The most common mistake when fabricating the face is installing the track upside down (from Gemini's *Technical Guide to Changeable Copy Signs*).
- Some letter manufacturers will fax you a height chart showing how high the overall face panels need to be for a given number of lines of changeable copy. They'll also tell you the average width of their letters so you can plan the width of the panel.
- Remember to offer a letter installation pole. Advise customers, in writing, to keep the letter installation poles away from power lines.
- Letter storage boxes are available from Change-Ad, Gemini and Wagner.

■ Use an oversized hole when using plastic track with nonplastic faces (i.e., wood or metal). This will allow the dissimilar materials to expand and contract at a different rate without warping the track (from Gemini's *Technical Guide to Changeable Copy Signs*). Leave the screws $\frac{1}{4}$ turn loose. Once the screws are in, you should be able to slide the track left and right a little.



This sign uses back-to-back changeable copy signs, fabricated with Lexan faces on an extruded aluminum frame. Santoro Signs, Buffalo, New York

liability insurance when selling this or any other sign structure. If the sign should ever result in damage or injury, your company would likely be held liable. Likewise, if you subcontract the installation, make sure the subcontractor is licensed and adequately insured. •SC



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