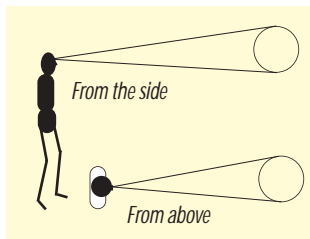


Great sign. But will they see it?

There's a science to putting signs where they will be seen

By Dan Mika

This, of course, seems too obvious to even mention: signs should be placed where people look. But, it bears repeating if we can remind ourselves to sell not only signs to our customers, but expert placement of signs.



If you want people to see something, it must fall into the narrow cone of vision where their attention is focussed.

By selling placement of signs, we get into a discussion about their location and relationship to approaching traffic—and we have the opportunity to sell not only more signs, but also more effective signs.

When you sell like this, you shift the focus from the sign as letters on a board to your ability to solve the business owner's advertising or identification problem. You shift the emphasis

from the price of a sign to the value of buying a sign from you.

There's a science behind putting a sign in the right place, the place where people look. These regions of maximum visibility are called sightlines. Physiologically speaking, sightlines are the place our eyes and our attention are focused while performing a task, like driving a car or walking in a mall. These sightlines form a very narrow cone. Generally, for something to have half a chance to grab our attention, it must be within this cone or very near it.

You can prove to yourself how critical sightlines are with this simple experiment. While driving along, use your "third eye"—that is, watch yourself. Notice what you are looking at. Turn off your other thoughts and observe what your own eyes take in. You'll see that it is a very narrow cone of vision. Those are your



In many downtown areas, the traffic and pedestrians are busy and buildings are close to the street. Banners (or any signage installed or mounted at 90-degrees to the viewer) puts signs where they can be seen.

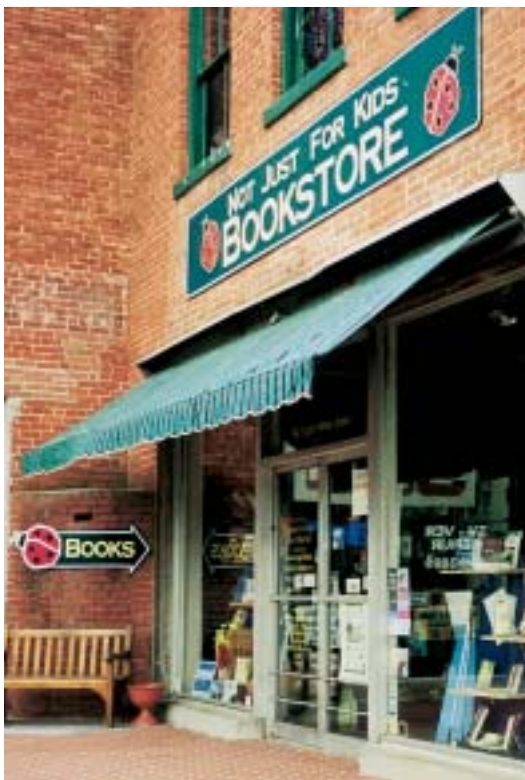


This simple sign was visible to me from way down the street and, unlike the sign on the front of the awning, it allows people time to make the decision to "stop and shop."

sightlines (see illustration at left).

Signs are best viewed at a 90-degree angle to the viewer. Signs on the front of a building are there because they must be viewed from all angles—but they're not always in the best location to get the attention of passersby. Often, a storefront sign is the best way to go, or the only way to go. But, I would trade many storefront signs that I've seen for signs with better sightlines at eye level near the road, or on the building at a 90-degree angle to the viewer.

Once the sign is in just the right place, then the principles of effective sign design can be applied to the layout. The result is a sign that



Here, the small *Books* sign—perfect for pedestrians and motorists—illustrates the point of sightlines so well. It's about 15 percent of the size of the big storefront sign, but was more noticeable to me because of expert placement.

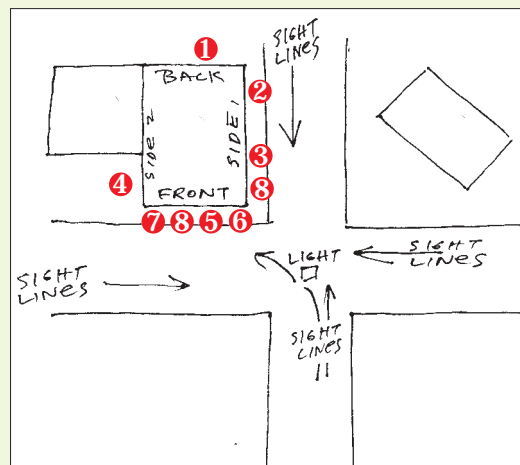
The customer says, “I need a sign for my storefront...”

If a prospective customer drops in and says he or she needs a price on a storefront sign, persuade them to sketch out the location of the building and roads, then lead the conversation in a different direction. Indicate the sightlines. Once the customer sees the sketch, the sightlines usually become more apparent and more significant to them. It's a great tool. You'll usually find opportunities for more signs and better signs as you get them into the sightlines of passing motorists and pedestrians. In the example below, you might suggest several other signs besides a storefront sign.

I'm not suggesting they need all of the graphics below—even if all those signs were allowed. Too many signs are not the answer. The careful selection of the proper sign locations from a wide range of possibilities is what's needed. Sketches and sightline diagramming help afford the customer better advertising value for their dollar.

1 A sign on the back of the building would give approaching motorists time to think about stopping at this business. Once they reached it, they could already be thinking about parking.

2 A projecting sign on the side of the building has great sightlines to those same motorists and reinforces the message.



3 A sign on the side of the building (Side 1) gives those stopped at the light something to read and learn about. Some percentage of viewers will act upon this information.

4 A sign on the other side of the building (Side 2) would be visible to traffic coming from the opposite direction.

5 The original idea for a flat sign on the front of the building would catch the eye of many—especially those turning onto this street.

6 A projecting sign on the front of the building would be visible up and down the main street—especially since sidewalks are narrow and buildings are close to the street.

7 An A-frame would catch the eye of pedestrians.

8 Now for the windows. Traffic on the same side of the street may not be able to see the flat overhead sign. For this same group, window signs and other eye-level signs are effective.

gets seen by the target audience, who then reads the message, thanks to the attractive layout. What about signs that simply can't be placed in the viewer's sightlines? The layout must compensate in size and/or boldness. The fact that it will be out of the sightlines must be the foremost consideration in the layout.

We can't visit every site Now the question becomes how to use what we know about sightlines in everyday sign applications. Obviously, we can't visit every business that we make a sign for. But, with the goal of getting more value from their signs by positioning them in better sightlines, the customer may be persuaded to draw a simple diagram of the site showing the setbacks and roads. Or, perhaps they could bring a few photos of the building or take a few. We need a little



Isn't this a great sign! Right at eye level.

information to determine all possible sightlines of approaching traffic. We want to avoid signage that is out of the sightlines of the passersby. As the old saying goes, out of sight is out of mind.

Most sign jobs could benefit by starting with an analysis of the sightlines—either with a visit to the site when practical, or with the help of the customer if not. I also use a checklist like the ones that follow to make sure I haven't overlooked any potential opportunities for signs.

When buildings are close to the street When a building is built close to the street, with just a sidewalk between it and the traffic moving busily along the street, it's often impossible for motorists and pedestrians to read a sign plastered flat to the storefront. Pedestrians would have to look up to see the sign and drivers—who must negotiate traffic while looking for your customer's business—must turn

their head to look for the sign. If this is the only sign your customer has, there's less opportunity for impulse buyers to drop in, because most drivers will not notice their business unless they are looking for it.

Some streets and highways are nice and wide, have good setbacks and traffic that's not moving too quickly. But even in such places, good placement can greatly increase the effectiveness of a sign.

When a building is close to the street, there are several possibilities to explore:

- Are there favorable facing walls that can hold signs—walls that are at a 90-degree angle to drivers and pedestrians?
- Could a banner or a permanent sign be installed at a 90-degree angle to viewers?
- Could the side of an awning carry a message?



As I approached this business, my question was, "It's great that they're open, but why didn't they letter the side of the awning so that I'd know what's open?"



Passing traffic would completely miss some businesses if not for A-frame signs. Refer to the checklist for other solutions to low-visibility storefronts.



This store is set back off the road, and their storefront sign is partially hidden by a tree. The sightline solution they used was placing this A-frame next to a busy access road.

■ Is there a parking space where a lettered vehicle could be parked? The vehicle would be lettered with this in mind. .

■ Could an A-frame be used? (One shop owner told me he placed his A-frame sign in the middle of the sidewalk so that pedestrians would have to walk around it so that they would notice it! What he had really done was place the sign in the center of their sightlines. He probably placed himself in the center of a potential lawsuit, too.)

■ Are there windows to letter? Windows are down at eye level, rather than 10- to 20-feet up, and are easily read.

When buildings are far from the road When the customer's building sits back off the road and sightlines are poor, a good thing to explore is getting as much mileage as possible from a freestanding sign, if allowed. Determine the setback for the sign, and the maximum square footage allowed. If they're in a plaza, a freestanding sign may not be allowed, or maybe they have used up most of their allowed square footage with their storefront sign.

In this case, here are a few possible solutions:

- Use bold lettering and simple wording to insure that a flat storefront sign catches the attention of passersby (3-dimensional signs and channel letters work well for this).
- Use a lettered vehicle parked near the road.
- Use an A-frame sign.



When buildings are far from the road, vehicles can be placed close to the road, as this one that caught my attention.

■ Position a metal-framed sign of some kind in the sightlines near the road.

■ Illuminate internally, externally or use a backlit awning.

■ Use less (or no) storefront sign.

Restrictions and regulations In our discussion with the business owner (that diagramming the site opens up), we can let our expert knowledge of local sign ordinances work to their advantage. They've probably dealt with sign regulations only a few times—or maybe never. We can work within the regulations to create the best sign package for them—maximizing square footage while placing the signs for maximum visibility. Check your local sign code to see if your choice of signs and placements (vehicle and otherwise) are allowed in your community. Some may not be.

But, this is all the more reason that every allowable sign be expertly placed to maximize its ability to attract attention.

The signs you see here are just a few examples that I've photographed in my travels. I think you'll agree that they illustrate the importance of putting sightlines to work for your customers. "Putting the sign where people look" makes a world of difference in its effectiveness. *SC



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This truck advertises a business that is set back off the street. The message was bold enough and basic enough to spot as I passed at 45 mph.



Signs hanging from awnings can be very noticeable. (Check the code for minimum height above ground level.)