

Signs of the Times

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Signs get human beings organized through direction and education. Without signs, we are lost. How many new customers will enter your store this year and be unable to find what they're looking for? What signs are ideal for your retail establishment? How do we obtain effective signage? Before addressing how to create the "perfect" sign, we'll focus on the importance of signage at four different levels: directional, departmental, marketing and information.

Directional Signs

As the name implies, directional signs point customers to your place of business. Directional signs are large and attract attention through color and simplicity.

Billboards: Advertising on large billboards can spark the shopping experience miles away from the establishment. Business information (company name, directions, products and services) and attractive pictures are essential on billboards. Lettering should be large enough to catch the eye of fast-moving vehicles. Lighting the billboard gives you an added advantage, as it extends advertising time into the evening.

Entrance signs: Effective entrance signs are crucial, because they form the first impression customers have of your business. Unique and seasonal entrance signs prepare customers for the shopping experience by creating a sense of excitement and anticipation. Having welcoming statements on the entrance sign helps customers know that your business is friendly.

Entrance signs that can be changed weekly or bi-weekly are great because you can easily highlight weekly specials, new items, and upcoming seminars and workshops.

Entrance signs can also provide answers to customers who are shopping for gifts or searching for garden improvement ideas.

Be careful with entrance signs. In the eyes of customers, a poorly maintained entrance sign is a sure sign of a sloppy business. Conduct routine maintenance by applying a fresh coat of paint or removing vines and brush that hinder the customers' view of the sign. Brightly colored, low growing plants that can withstand the abuse of drought and other harsh environmental conditions should be used around the sign. Mulch or weed barrier should also be placed around the entrance sign to avoid weed buildup and constant maintenance.



Information signs are most effective when placed close to the product.

Customers may encounter other directional signs before entering the retail area, and in the retail area itself. These may include signs for parking, the display garden, restrooms, the office, and the production greenhouse. These areas should be clearly marked for good traffic flow.

Departmental Signs

Departmental signs categorize types of plants or hard goods that you sell

and are more specific than directional signs. Departmental signs are located inside the business, are usually located above the product, and are highly visible to customers. Good departmental signs avoid the constant bombardment of customer questions such as "Where are the petunias?" and "Do you have any perennials?"

Banners: Banners can disguise unsightly buildings or other bland spaces on the property. Several large plant firms are now selling banners with their point-of-purchase (POP) marketing packages. Also take advantage of local

sign making companies that can create banners of plastic, nylon, or canvas. Banners set out near the entrance sign can also list specific plant material that is available or special seasonal services (mulch, holiday wreaths and roping, aquatic plants, etc.). Banners should always be stretched tightly so that the lettering is visible to customers.

Handouts, maps, and icons: Handouts and maps should be placed in a weatherproof structure that is near the main entrance. Handouts may contain specials or coupons, along with plant information and tips on garden care. Maps are particularly good on large properties that contain several retail structures. Retail greenhouses should be assigned numbers or letters for ease of directing customers. Another way to communicate to shoppers is by displaying icons that present a list of destinations on the property. For example, wooden cutouts of animals can be used to describe and direct customers to different locations in the retail area.

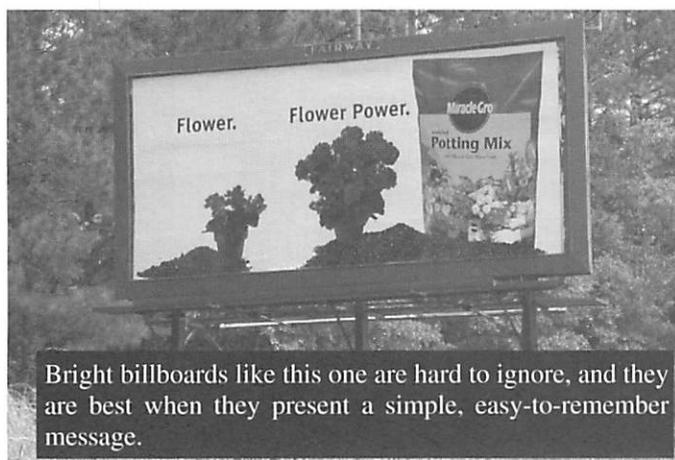
Service signs: Service signs tell customers what the retail center can do for them in addition to selling quality plants. Repotting, plant boarding, fertilizing, pruning, leaf polishing, landscaping, plant rentals, and delivery are all examples of services that a grower-retailer may provide for his customers. Service signs need to be located above the service area.

Another great place to advertise services is at the cash register, where customers spend time waiting to check out. Policies can also be displayed in the cash register area. Use fast food restaurants as your example, and display pertinent information on a large sign behind the cash register. Customers can associate with this type of signage strategy.

Marketing Signs

Marketing signs attract customers to displays, so they should be colorful and easily transported.

A-frame signs: These can be set up and taken down quickly, so they are ideal for advertising special deals for the week or month. Discounted items or "buy one, get one free" deals can be displayed on A-frame signs.



Bright billboards like this one are hard to ignore, and they are best when they present a simple, easy-to-remember message.

Cardboard and corrugated plastic signs: These signs are often part of the POP marketing programs mentioned above. Generally, these signs are 3 to 4 feet tall and advertise specific brands that customers can quickly identify. The Flower Fields, Simply Beautiful, and Proven Winners offer these signs to retailers to establish a focal point in a display.

Dry erase boards and chalkboards: Dry erase boards and chalkboards can be written and changed quickly, but always put the marker in the hands of someone with a creative flair and good penmanship. These erasable signs are great but mean little to customers if they are hard to read.

Information Signs

Information signs describe the product for the consumer. They provide details on planting information and care of the plant.

Card signs: Besides the 11x7 inch pedestal signs used by most retailers, there are bench cards and hanging cards. These are very effective because they can be placed directly beside the product. The container industry is now incorporating a slot for card signs in bedding plant trays. Hanging card holders can be hung from a greenhouse truss or purlin. Placing cards between baskets is a great way to provide plant information to the customer.

External pot signs: Laser printed pots or injection molded thermoform pots, stickers, and paper rings are all examples of external pot signs. Laser printing on pots may be the most effective tactic available to growers. A good example of highlighting a specific brand on a pot would be the Wave petunia series offered by Pan American Seed Company. Printing directly on pots also offers an opportunity to showcase your logo and store name. Printable stickers that are waterproof and contain plant information are an alternative to laser printing. One advantage of stickers includes cost; the disadvantage is the amount of time spent applying stickers. Paper rings that surround the pot are a new method for marketing plants. These pot sleeves are easier to apply than stickers, but **still cost less than** printing on pots. This may be an ideal solution for small grower-retailers.

Tags: Tags are signs, too! Large, colorful tags and locking-type tags are increasing in popularity because they are more visible to customers and do not detract from the plant. Large tags that are one half to one third the size of the final product are appropriate because they show in great detail how the mature plant will look in the garden.

The do's and don'ts of signage

There are several common mistakes that occur with signage. Here are just a few that we've observed.

Lack or misplacement of signage. *Problem:* Face it, sometimes we put all of our energy into growing and not on the retail necessities. Yes, we have established the price list, but are the prices and plant information in front of the customer? Signs are easy to forget, since they are usually the last thing that's taken care of, especially in a special display such as an endcap. Often, we put up a sign and then forget to move it along with the product. This is easy to do when we are condensing product, so we end up with the colorful and informative sign that announced geraniums now over the petunias. *Solution:* Make the signs easy to move along with the product. Have signs that can be re-used from year to year, so that you're investing in signs rather than replacing them. Don't forget the most important attribute of many signs in a retail establishment...PRICE!

Weathered and overused signs. *Problem:* The elements can take a toll on signage, especially if you don't have a place to store them. Don't doctor the price and re-use the sign: customers will instantly realize that the price has increased. *Solution:* Find a dry, protected area for storage. Use grease pens or Sharpies and laminate homemade signs. Expect to replace signs that are constantly exposed to direct sunlight, or purchase UV-protected signage.

Crossed-out items. *Problem:* This happens when there is a long list of products on one sign. Without doubt, the one item that is crossed out will be the one somebody wanted more than anything else on earth. *Solution:* Avoid this phenomenon, either by making a new sign or completely removing all traces of the missing merchandise from the sign. Or, list numerous products only on erasable signs.

Misspelled words. *Problem:* Have you seen the T-shirt that says, "Bad spellers of the world...Untie!?" *Solution:* Proofread all of the signs that are made by your employees, and make sure that someone checks your work as well. Even good spellers can drop words, so read every sign carefully.

Plant tags that give no useful information. *Problem:* Plant tags that say "foliage plant" or "flowering annual" are useless. *Solution:* Good signs and tags should educate the consumer and help her feel good about making a purchase.

The Ideal Sign and Tag:

Have a large sign in the vicinity of the product that mirrors what is listed on the plant tag. This will increase interest in the plant, and elderly customers can more easily read the large sign.

If you want to create your own plant signs and tags,

remember to include the following:

- Price
- Picture
- Name (common and botanical)
- Flower or foliage performance (multi-seasonal)
- Growth habit
- Classification in your area (e.g., tender perennial, hardy annual)
- Hardiness/Heat Zone
- Sun/shade (e.g., prefers eastern exposure, deep shade, needs afternoon shade)
- Soil requirements
- Garden care
- Interesting facts about the plant (e.g., Perennial Plant of the Year, butterfly plant, heirloom plant)

Although this is a lot of information, it can be neatly and simply presented so that the signs are still inviting.

Developing Your Signage Program:

The overall goal is to produce waterproof, informative, colorful signs that stimulate purchases. There are several strategies for creating signs. The technology to create these signs is available, but how far you want to go with signage depends on several variables. Refer to our website for contact information and links to some of the firms that can provide the entire marketing package.

Here are a few pointers when considering a signage program.

1. Ask yourself if your time would best be spent developing your own signage program or using one that has been developed by a firm specializing in this area.
2. Consider your finances. What quality level can you afford?
3. Talk to other growers about what they use. Did they find it necessary to develop a unique signage program, or would they have been better served to use an established one?
4. Choose a company that suits your needs and develop a good relationship with them.
5. State agencies can also assist businesses with their signage programs. For example, the Marketing Division of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services provides free pot stakes, posters, and bench cards to growers who are members of Goodness Grows, a program that focuses on locally grown agricultural products.

Summary

Signage directs customers, divides plants into useful categories, informs consumers, and sells product. It's never too early to begin creating signs. Use the slow months to prepare them, and consider how they will shape the retail layout. Use signs not to replace employees, but to eliminate or reduce the number of times employees are

asked, “How much does this cost?” or “Will this grow well in the shade?”

There’s a common saying in academia...If the research was never published, it may as well never have been done. If you have quality plants but customers can’t find them,

you may as well never have grown them. Invest in signs, the silent salespersons. They are ready to work for you.

Additional retail signage photographs can be viewed at the North Carolina State University website, listed under the Retail Reflections icon: www.floricultureinfo.com

