



SIGNS

MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

The prominent location and design characteristics of signs make them an important influence on the way consumers perceive downtown and its businesses. Easy to read, well-designed, and high quality signs contribute to an overall feeling of welcome in the downtown area and call attention to your individual business. An effective sign not only communicates the location of your business, but also conveys the business image while complementing the building's design.

A sign is to a building what a signature is to a person. It is not only identification but also an expression of personality. A sign conveys your personal business message. This message should be easy to read and to the point. It should be simple enough to get your message across yet unique enough to stand out against other signs and visual communication. Don't try to out yell surrounding businesses with larger, more colorful signs. The most effective signs are those which draw

attention to the business while complementing the surrounding environment.

Be careful when using signs supplied by national distributors.

While often inexpensive and easy to obtain, these signs may lack the personality and uniqueness you want your sign to convey. They are also typically made of materials (such as backlit plastic) and in sizes which are inappropriate and unsuitable to historic buildings. If you plan to display a distributor's sign, be sensitive to the size and shape of the area where it will be placed. Signs which are too large, too small or the wrong shape can appear added-on to the storefront.

Although plastic, back-lit signs are rarely appropriate on historic buildings, signs constructed of many other materials are. Some options to consider in-

clude wood, metal, solid plastic, stone, neon, canvas, paint or vinyl graphics on glass, paint on brick, and etched or stained glass. Consider the how the qualities



of each might be used to create a sign most suited to your needs.

A suitable sign must also relate well to your building. Consider the following:

Shape and proportion: A sign should fit a building just as a window or door fits. The wrong shape or size of sign for the area in which it is to be placed will detract from its effectiveness.

Location: There are several options for the location of a sign. Lettering and graphics can be painted on storefront windows. Wooden, plastic, metal signs or 3-D letters can be flush mounted above the storefront but below the second story window sills. Hanging or projecting signs can be attached to the facade as well. Awnings also provide an alternate location for signage.

Size: The size of a sign is di-





rectly related to the location of a sign. A window sign should be large enough to be read by a pedestrian but should not obscure the display area. A flush-mounted sign should be contained horizontally by the storefront and should not be more than 2 ½' high. Lettering should be between 8" and 18" tall and occupy no more than 65% of the sign board. It is not necessary for signage to have billboard size letters to be readable to passing motorists or pedestrians. Eight inch letters can be read from a distance of 250' while 12" letters are readable from up to 400'. When using an awning as signage, 6" to 8" letters are sufficient. The size and distance from the ground of a projecting or hanging sign should be carefully considered so that it does not interfere with neighboring signs or violate city codes.

Designing a sign offers you an opportunity to be creative and express the image and personality of the business. Let the color scheme of your building, and to a lesser extent the colors of the surrounding buildings, influence the colors used in the sign. The simpler the sign, the fewer the number of colors that should be used. Three colors are usually enough. A graphic or illustration might allow for some additional color highlights. Generally light colored letters on a dark back-

ground are easiest to read. For window signs, light colored or gold leafed letters with a dark outline are effective.



Lettering should reinforce the personality of your business while maintaining readability. There are three basic typestyles from which to choose.

Serif: Typefaces from this family are historically appropriate and traditional in style.

San Serif: This family is characterized by more contemporary typefaces with cleaner, bolder lines.

Script: There are two styles of script- formal and informal. The elements of formal script are regular and predictable, while informal script is unpredictable and resembles handwriting. Formal script is more elegant; informal script is more personal. Both work best as an accent to serif or san serif type, highlighting one or possibly two words. In either case, upper and lower case should be used to improve readability.

Lighting is another issue which affects sign readability. If you want your sign to be visible after dark, some source of illumination will be necessary. Remember to keep the light source as inconspicuous as possible and avoid flashy or gaudy techniques. These serve as distractions and lessen the effectiveness of the sign.

A final consideration, and perhaps the most important, is **craftsmanship**. A simple, high quality sign is more attractive than an extravagant but poorly made sign. Ask to see samples of other work before hiring a sign maker.

It is a sense of quality, personal service and individuality which attracts people to downtown. Well planned and executed signs can not only enhance this feeling, but also result in a marketing advantage and success for the businesses.

For More Information:

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Additional Reading:

*"Signs for Main Street" -A slide show
and technical bulletin
National Trust for
Historic Preservation
Washington, D.C.
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*"Building Improvement File"
National Trust Main Street Center*