

An interview with Jim Weinel: Looking Back, Looking Forward and Recognizing the Importance of Signage Research

Christopher Auffrey

Professor
School of Planning,
College of Design, Architecture,
Art, and Planning
University of Cincinnati

chris.auffrey@uc.edu

Vikas Mehta

Professor
Fruth/Gemini Chair,
School of Planning,
College of Design, Architecture,
Art, and Planning
University of Cincinnati

vikas.mehta@uc.edu

In the early 1960s, with \$150 of start-up cash, Jim and Sharon Weinel rented 400 square feet of space in a garage, and together began what is now one of the great successes of the American sign industry. Their company, Gemini Inc., based in Cannon Falls, Minnesota is one of the largest producers of dimensional letters in the world (Clark, 2013).

Jim and Sharon have been called the embodiment of the American dream (Keane, 2009). They took a chance, and with their hard work and determination based on their innate intelligence, strong business ethic and determination to treat customers and employees as they would want to be treated themselves, they created a successful business that has both impacted and been impacted by the U.S. sign industry. Their business model was straightforward: they provide a high-quality product with excellent customer service at a fair price, with delivery to the customer as quickly as possible. It was in this way that they created Gemini, Inc., a nationally recognized leader in the custom manufacturing of made-to-order dimensional signage, plates, plaques, cast bronze monuments, and industrial protective cases for the signage industry. Gemini is now a second-generation company that has been in business for nearly 60 years. With headquarters in Cannon Falls, MN, the company employs more than 1,100 workers at 18 plants (Shearer, 2022).

Given their success as part of the signage industry, Jim has commented on numerous occasions how “the sign industry has been very good to us” (Auffrey & Mehta, 2021). Apart from their seeming instinctively generous nature, this desire to see the U.S. sign industry continue to thrive despite changing tastes, technology and regulation may best explain why “giving back” to the sign industry has been an important focus of Jim and Sharon’s

Keywords /

signage; signage research; sign museum;
Gemini Inc.

philanthropy. Given Jim's engineering education at the University of Minnesota, he has a strong appreciation for the importance and impact of academic research. Jim appreciates the potential of using independent academic research and its resultant understandings to inform consequential decision making for some of the most prominent issues facing the U.S. signage industry.

As a result, Jim and Sharon Weinel have generously and strategically invested in a number of significant signage research initiatives. They were major supporters of the Signage Foundation, Inc., and sponsors of a series of National Signage Research and Education Conferences (NSREC) that brought together an interdisciplinary group of academics from marketing, design, planning and transportation engineering programs with sign industry researchers and professionals. About the same time the Weinels chose to endow two signage research chairs at the University of Cincinnati: one in marketing in the College of Business, and the other in urban planning in the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (Swormstedt, 2014).

The Weinels subsequently endowed the Academic Advisory Council for Signage Education and Research (AACSRE) and its major initiatives, such as the Emerging Fellows program focused on creating a pipeline of young scholars engaged in innovative research on signage and wayfinding topics, and its flagship publication, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding. AACSRE is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization focusing on providing independent thought leadership to advance the knowledge base impacting on-premise signage (AACSRE, 2022).

In a similar fashion, the Weinels came to appreciate the importance for the U.S. sign industry of the work of Tod Swormstedt in the creation of the American Sign Museum. The museum exists today in its current form as a nationally acclaimed institution based on Tod Swormstedt's vision and tenacity, and the major support for that vision from the Swormstedt family, and Jim and Sharon Weinel. There is a well-documented academic literature on the importance of museums for preserving and communicating the importance of historical artefacts, events, and trends to the public as well as researchers

(Suarez & Tsutsui, 2004). As such, museums provide an understanding not only about the past, often in engaging ways, but situate that understanding to help us prepare for the future. In this regard, the Weinels have recognized through their support, the American Sign Museum offers a unique opportunity to engage a broad interested public in a better understanding of the history, function, technology, and aesthetics of on-premises signage in the U.S. As such, visitors to the museum are expected to develop an appreciation of signs as expressions of art and culture, in addition to being drivers of commerce. Fundamentally, the museum provides visitors a personal experience with signs that may ultimately inform public decision-making processes regarding signage design, aesthetics, safety, and regulation.

Given Jim Weinel's catalytic role in supporting academic research about signage, in August 2021, an interview was conducted with Jim to explore his thinking about signage research. The publication of the resulting transcript is intended to inform signage researchers about those aspects of Jim Weinel's life experience and perspectives that have served as a major source of support for independent academic signage research over the past two decades. Indeed, it has been these experiences and perspectives that have made possible this independent academic journal dedicated to signage research.

Ultimately, the interview sought to explore Jim's perspectives about signage research and the role for signage in leading and reacting to the changes in social norms and technology. This reflects an understanding of the signage industry's past over the past 60 years as well as sets the stage for what is likely to be an increasingly important role in the future. The transcript below is the result of that interview.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH JIM WEINEL (JW)

DATE: AUGUST 3, 2021

INTERVIEWERS:

CHRIS AUFFREY(CA) AND VIKAS MEHTA(VM)

CA You have been a huge supporter of signage research in academia. Yet, other leaders, industry leaders, have been less supportive. Why have you been so supportive of academic research, and why have other signage industry leaders been less supportive?

JW That is a very difficult question to answer. I can answer my part, but I find it difficult to answer for anyone else because I have really worked to get support for signage research. I just got nowhere, and I can't understand it. But let me say this, that without the sign industry we wouldn't be talking today. The sign industry has treated me very, very well.

JW Over the years a lot of the letter manufacturing in this country has consolidated, particularly with stainless steel letters. Also, the form letter business has consolidated because using acrylics requires the use of a ring form. This means you had to have a vacuum form plus a ring that comes down around the letter. This can be expensive to put in place, plus many companies couldn't recycle the acrylic.

There is a lot of scrap from making acrylic letters. At Gemini we bought an extruder to extrude the scrap and then recycle it. By doing this we have an advantage that makes it difficult for others to compete with us on a cost basis. We became the low-cost producer. That's how we were able to consolidate much of the manufacturing of form letters.

We started the cast metal letter business almost thirty or thirty-five years ago. And there again, we worked hard to become a low-cost producer. By doing this we were able to consolidate that part of the industry, and it's been very good for Gemini. We support signage research because it is important for the signage industry. It is that simple. This is way we can give back to an industry that has been very good to us.

Now, why don't other parts of the industry do

more to support academic research? There are certainly some large companies that do billions of dollars' worth of business in the sign industry, and some do support research to some degree. And yet, I don't understand why those who are clearly able don't do more to support academic research. It's all very puzzling to me. I don't have a clear answer to your question.

CA Okay, well let's move on then. What do you see as the current signage issues where academic research can be useful?

JW Well, let me go back a few years to a registration table in Oklahoma City. And, there we hatched an idea between Patti Herman and Dr. Dawn Jourdan, whom you both know. We talked about how one of the problems facing the sign industry is that the various groups involved often fight amongst ourselves. We didn't respect one another. City planners didn't respect sign people and sign people didn't respect city planners. The planners who wrote the codes were adversaries of the sign companies for a good length of time. If we had to describe the intensity of disagreement between sign industry and the sign regulators on a scale of one to ten it would have been an eight. Right now, through the work of AACCSRE and others, we're now down to a four. The disagreement isn't completely gone but it is greatly reduced. And I think AACCSRE has had a great influence on that. I think they will have more influence as years go by. City planners now realize how signage is an extremely important part of the success of cities, and that wayfinding is critical. Does that answer your question?

CA Yes, thank you.

Are there other signage issues on which you would like to see more research?

JW I can't think of anything other than the work that the University of Cincinnati did some years ago on the importance of moving power lines so motorists could see the business signs. I will never forget that piece of work in a suburb east of you.

CA Yes, it was about Beechmont Avenue in Anderson Township.

JW I think so. On the main commercial street there was an issue about the signage and how hard it was for motorists to see.

JW Well, the work at UC, I forgot who was in charge of that project.

CA Professor Menelaos Triantafyllou was the lead researcher on that study.

JW And they took out the power lines and buried them, you know. The result was like the difference between day and night looking down that street. I think more studies like that could be very valuable for places where they need to make it easier to see the signs and help businesses to be successful by doing simple things such as putting utilities underground if they can and putting that in the development code. I think you need to do more work along those lines and publicize more of that.

I also think there are probably other issues that I am not aware of. We seem to have exhausted the research about LED signage, and that seems to have settled into a pattern now nationally. From what I read, there's no longer wars being fought over digital signs anymore. I think cities have learned that digital signs can be a good thing by allowing changes, you know, a fresh message. This is particularly true since LED signage has come so far. The quality of the displays has improved tremendously. There is some beautiful stuff they can display now. Beautiful things. That would be the only thing I can think of right now.

CA Then let me change the topic a bit. I have a copy of your book, *Made True*, and I really enjoyed reading it. I want to ask about something from the book. A lot has changed in the signage industry since you and Sharon purchased Gemini for "\$150 & a pile of assumed debt" in 1963.

Back when you started Gemini Signs, what were the things that helped Gemini to become the successful business that it is today? You've already touched on the idea of being much more efficient by extruding and being able to reuse the resin with the cast letters. What are the other things that helped make Gemini successful?

JW We have succeeded by reinvesting literally every nickel we made. And never buying anything we couldn't pay for. The banks have never made a nickel off us, basically since 1985, and then, and that was just payroll money that would be paid back by Tues-

day. So, the bank was never a partner in our business. Nor was anybody else taking money out. I never took much money out either. For the first two, two and a half years I took zero. And then, for the next several years I took three hundred dollars a month.

And then, when things really were rolling, [laughs] I went to thirty thousand, and that was ten years or more after we started and, my top pay, was always less than about five or six people in the company [laughs]. I have no need for money, never have had. So, we can say that we didn't have a bank partner and we invested every nickel we had and could make back into the business, and it was just that simple. There wasn't anything complicated.

CA You're trained as an engineer, isn't that correct?

JW Yes, I trained as a civil engineer and my master's work I did was in sanitary engineering. As an engineer my first response was to reinvent everything we ever made. We wanted to know how we can do this better, how we can do it more efficiently.

And YES, I was definitely afraid of debt, and there's a simple reason for that. My father, when he was making twenty-five cents a day and they unionized and I think his pay went to fifty cents a day, which was staggering because pork was a nickel a pound you know. And they worked, they lived on farms and took care of cattle while he worked on the railroad and so their expenses were pretty small. And he bought a home in 1941 and the home was built for \$300 dollars in 1933 and he bought it for \$800. But there's a rule of the railroad that if you got garnished, you would be terminated. So, very few railroaders ever owed any money.

But if you think about it, a railroader has access to a lot of money, a lot of goods, a lot of services, a lot of things along those rails, in those cars. So, they needed people they could trust. And that's kind of the way I grew up. Don't owe any money. Just don't owe money. So, we never did owe any money except when we burned down, and a fellow loaned us thirty-five thousand dollars. Let me tell you we paid that off as soon as we could and that took us fifteen years to get that paid off after the fire.

CA That was an interesting part of your story, how you bounced back from the fire.

JW Yeah, we didn't carry any insurance because insurance was a luxury.

CA Okay, well please let me move on. Are there one or two things that you did not know before and have learned over the years while operating Gemini that have helped make Gemini successful? You knew about the problems of debt before you started Gemini. What did you learn while operating Gemini?

JW Yeah, very simple, very simple. That is a very simple answer. You know, being an engineer, with no offense to either one of you. We're not known as shrewd business guys. We leave that to the attorneys and the accountants. But engineers are never the norm for business. So, I said, when I got started, boy, I don't know up from down. While I was in engineering school, I had never heard the words "backlog," "shipments," "profit," "loss" or "personnel." You can go through the laundry list of business terms, it's a half a block long, and I had never heard the business words once in five and a quarter years of engineering school. Well, we've changed that now. The University of Minnesota now teaches entrepreneurship to engineers. They now teach basic business fundamentals to engineers. How to write a proposal and all those things.

But when I started Gemini, I knew that since I don't know anything about running a business that I'd better find people who do. And I was very lucky to find a distinguished group of people who became directors of the company. We had the vice-president of sales for the Pillsbury company on our board. We interviewed one of the vice-presidents of General Motors if you could believe that. And he was going to take it and he said, well, I've just got too much on my plate. He was in Detroit at the time and uh, he was a marketing guy. We've got a top attorney.

And how did we bond all these people together? Very simple thing. We told them we will take them fishing once a year, for a week. And you would be surprised how many people in this country do not have a long-term fishing buddy that loves to fish. So, over the course of the last fifty years our board has fished from Chile to the north, to the ice packs. From the Amazon to Orinoco. You name it, we've fished there. And it was a great group of people, though we're slowly losing them, as you know

we all age. But Fred is carrying on the tradition of recruiting a great group of directors, and and they're paid by a fabulous fishing trip each year [laughs], where they can go and visit and spend a week doing what they like to do. I really believe that has been a major secret to our success. The Board of Directors. I could call them about any issue. And you'll be surprised, the higher people get in the company, most times, the humbler they become. I think you will probably find that at the university level too. Did I answer that question?

CA Yes, you did, thank you. Please let me follow up by asking more about the signage industry. If you had to name the most important innovations in the signage industry over the past 58 years, since you started Gemini in 1963, what would, what would be those innovations?

JW I think the greatest innovation was brought to the industry by a firm called Gerber Technologies. They introduced computer software to the sign industry and now it is standard operating procedure. Everyone has computers. Now everyone can create a printout of what a sign would look like before you build the sign. It has revolutionized the sign industry. It has revolutionized our business. Now any size sign company in any small town in America can look at the thousands of type sets and type styles.

It helped us at Gemini where we must react to customer requests and make signs for their spec. So being able to do that with the Gerber software has been just outstanding. I can't imagine how we ever got along without it. Before computers could be used, all sign painters would paint up a sketch of a sign. Just think of the labor, and the skill that was required for that. And now you can sit there at your computer and have software that will do all that for you.

VM Jim around when was that? Was it in the 1990s?

JW Oh no, no. That was in the seventies. It started in the seventies, and it grew just like wildfire into the eighties, nineties and by, I would say, by the 2000s if you didn't have a computer in the sign industry you would be in trouble. Nowadays, I don't think you could even be in business unless you were a pinstriper.

Those people will live into eternity. The

pinstriper was one of the most fascinating parts of signage, because they were a select group. They'd have their own gatherings, and they'd paint for fun. They just enjoyed their work; they were artists. But unfortunately, they are a dying breed. They are hard to find. There's a pocket of them up in Ontario, and for whatever reason there is a small town on Lake Huron, and there must be four or five people within ten miles there that are just outstanding pinstripers. So that's a specialty that has survived!

VM What have been the greatest challenges for the signage industry within the last fifty or sixty years?

JW The greatest challenge I would say probably was the sign codes. They became very, very restrictive. We had codes that said you couldn't have a sign more than twelve inches high. Many cities went to that. There were some very restrictive sign codes, though many cities are relaxing them now because they are starting to understand how important signage is for a city's economic well-being.

It makes me think of the research done at UC about the car dealer in Kansas City located along the freeway. I will never forget that, where a Chevy dealer put in an LED sign and his business doubled. It was just, things like that, it's just, so remarkable. So, signage has gone through the centuries from being an art form to an important tool for economic development and wayfinding.

Also there have been some things tried during my career that didn't work. One was the signs on awning. Awning signs became popular around 1980 or something. Maybe 1975 or somewhere in there. They were the fad of signage. The awning sign people just went berserk with the business they had. But it didn't last long. They went out of business for the same reasons they did before that; because awning signs were really the only kind of signage you had in small towns in America or even larger towns in America. Awnings with painted lettering and a hanging fringe were everywhere. But wind and hail, and sea water and other elements were hard on awnings. They have died away for the most part, I hardly see awning signs anymore.

Then sign companies went to foam letters. Foam was the panacea. It was the way to make something very inexpensively. Though that early foam has pretty much disappeared; now we have the much better-quality high-density foam. That old foam just rotted away, and the birds ate it. It was pretty funny. You could go to Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, and all you would see were foam letters. And they would turn black. It was polyurethane and open cell polyurethane, and you can imagine how that fared. The weather would get the best of them, and they'd turn black. Not surprisingly they've about disappeared. You just don't see them anymore.

And that was good for Gemini because we never did follow that path. We saw early on that the foam letters wouldn't last so we get in it.

VM Jim, one thing just to follow up. You mentioned a very important point that one of the biggest challenges for the sign industry was sign codes and so, how do you think that the sign industry, or the business-people wanted to use signs; how did they overcome the challenge of regulation?

JW Well, I think academia had a good part of that. I think that researchers would write papers and spread the word that gee whiz, the sign is too small, and no one can see it.

There are academics at Penn State who came up with a new code based on distance and readability. Gemini supported research there for quite a while with their transportation research center. They do a lot of US Department of Transportation research and showed that sometimes sign letters need to be bigger if you wanted drivers to see them.

The quality and durability of signs is another factor. There are very few junk signs out there anymore; you just don't see many of those. You know the kind that was made from polystyrene? You remember that they all turned yellow in the sun and cracked. They were part of a passing fancy. So, the improved quality of signs has helped a lot too, in the same way. You just don't see many junk signs anymore. Most business owners have learned that it pays to spend money on quality signage. I think academia has had a lot to do with that.

CA So, given that, what are the current challenges

for the sign industry?

JW I talked with someone from Daktronics yesterday and tried to help him sell a church sign. I asked how's business and he said, "for goodness sakes we can't keep up." Neither can we, I said., we're just swamped as well. One day last week we were at two hundred percent of production. And that's tough for us, because delivery is really important in the sign industry. Critically important.

So, what are the current challenges, I really don't know. Fred would probably have a better handle on that than I would because he's more attuned to the last couple, three years. I talked to him yesterday about this call. I said Fred, I feel unprepared to speak on these subjects. He said no, he said you can speak on almost any subject except maybe the last year or so of this pandemic. He said that there are things that happened that you don't have any experience in, and I said that's right. You know what's happened in the last few years.

VM When I spoke to you briefly in April, you told me that sales were out the roof, and you couldn't keep up with demand. I was wondering if the demand is for the same products you were selling before the pandemic, or was it for somewhat different products?

JW No, the products are essentially the same but with a big complication. With the advent of the computer and internet, a sign company in the smallest town in Ohio can pick a font, from thousands of fonts. They can pull them up their computer and the client looks at it and says, "that's the one I want." Then they send the order to us, and we must produce exactly as they want it. If you want to stay in business you have got to produce what the customer wants. So, producing this wider range of fonts has been a big change, but so far, we have managed to keep up. But as for the challenges for the future, I'm not sure what they will be. Fred might have a better handle on that. I don't know where this goes, I really really don't know other than I know that signage is not going to go away and it's probably going to play a larger role in our lives. Wayfinding is terribly important, as you know.

Never heard the word wayfinding up until twenty thirty years ago or so, and now it's common. Good

wayfinding systems in buildings is essential. You know, "where's the men's room." Kind of important stuff.

CA Is the industry concerned about the wayfinding on people's phones? If you want to go to a restaurant or store that you've never been to before, most people will look on their phone to get the directions there and you can ask the phone to give you audio directions. Your phone will tell you to go to the corner and take a left.

JW We all use that, but we still need wayfinding when we get inside the building.

CA You are right.

JW You know that the quality of interior wayfinding has improved a lot. You can see that in motels and in almost any building that's been built nowadays. Wayfinding codes are pretty strong once you are inside buildings and that is a good thing because the cell phone doesn't help you once you get inside.

CA So, your point is that the sign industry doesn't feel threatened by cell phone technology?

JW I can't imagine why they would, and I can't imagine that the signage on freeways is going to change at all. You still need a sign a half a mile down the road when you are travelling 65 or 70 miles an hour that says 4th Avenue is the next exit. Things like that, that's not going to change. Just look at the intersection (I-71 & MLK Ave.) and how that's changed.

Yeah, and I'm kind of proud of that because we worked on that with the with the American Sign Museum. UC worked on that for many years to try to get a decent exit.

JW That's about all I can say about the future. I don't know what challenges are going to lie ahead. I can't see legislation; the country is preoccupied with all kinds of stuff, and I always say we ought to move to Cincinnati the center of signage. Can you imagine going to a senator nowadays and talking signage to him? He would look at you like, are you cracked. We've got issues that put our very nation at risk and they're not going to listen to signage stuff.

CA Hopefully some elected officials are educated about the importance of signage to you but you are likely correct about many politicians' relative priorities.

JW Oh I think many are aware of the importance of signage, but it is still low on their list of priorities right now as far as doing anything. You know, look at the brouhaha with the billboards. Well, go down the highway nowadays and we've got more of them than we've ever had.

CA Yes, you're right.

JW But at least they are better quality than they used to be.

CA Let's move on a little bit more. We've talked about the current challenges. Do you see an issue with the inexpensive imported signage from parts of the world where signs can be produced very inexpensively? Is that a threat to your industry?

JW Up until about 5 to 10 years ago, all stainless-steel letters were produced in Thailand. More specifically, in Bangkok, on the outskirts in factories that were two stories tall. The second story was living quarters for the help. The first story was about the factory. They shipped letters, stainless-steel letters, out of there to a competitor in Boston and Trumbull, Connecticut. That went on for years. Gemini looked at the industry and said, you know, we better get into this business and we need to make them in the US because all the complaints we would hear about when there might be a mistake. In about 6% of all orders there's a mistake, because the sign industry is still a verbal business. If you think of the thousands of combinations of possible colors, materials and fonts. Really, not just thousands, but many, many thousands. Add to those other issues related to mounting methods, and it's easy to see things can get very complicated.

Now consider when a sign company in Cincinnati calls a supplier and assumes the person on the other end of the line knows what they're talking about. And the person at the supplier taking the order needs to assume the person who's calling knows what they're talking about. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. So, what Gemini has done is develop a software system to avoid this problem in communication. In other words, we've reduced the chance of error when the order is made.

Now let's take an order that's going to a sign manufacturer in Bangkok. The U.S. sign company in

Missouri places the order, and within seconds the company in Bangkok has the order. Within seconds, milliseconds. So now they've got to produce a sign that's very bulky. Letters and signage are very, very bulky. So how are you going to get that sign from overseas to the sign company in the United States? Well, you can't ship it directly to the sign company for a very simple reason. The sign company in Missouri isn't set up to handle foreign shipments directly. They're not tuned into that. They don't have the staff. They don't know how to handle international shipments. So, the Thai company sends it via air freight to a U.S. import broker. Understand that 40% of the cost of that sign cost is in shipping. In this case, assume let's assume the Thai manufacturer sends their stainless-steel letters to an import broker in Los Angeles.

Now the sign company in Missouri finally receives the sign from the import broker in Los Angeles but low and behold there's a misspelling. The word "Moon" on the sign has only one "o", not the correct two. Now what do they do? Well, the sign company in Missouri emails the manufacturer in Bangkok and they've got to re-do the sign. Then they must ship a replacement sign, via the import broker in Los Angeles. Again, it goes aboard an air freighter, adding another 40% to the cost of the sign.

So, think about that. What Gemini did was think about how we can best serve our customers, the sign companies. So, we went down to Decora, Iowa, and started a plant to make these letters, but that did not work out. So, we went right across the border from McAllen, Texas to Reynosa, Mexico. We found a beautiful plant down there, it was about 30,000 square feet, and in it we started making these letters. There we found out right off the bat that if we make a mistake, we can fix it and the next day it's across the border and on its way to the customer. One of our drivers takes it to UPS, or FedEx, and the customer has the replacement 24 hours later, not 3 weeks later.

So, if you make a manufacturing mistake in Thailand or China that's the last order you're going to get, because the U.S. sign company says, "oh no, I'm not going to get burned twice." And that's why the supposed low-cost overseas manufacturers will never be able to compete in an industry where quality and service are important.

VM So, in that sense signage is, in many ways, still very local. By local I mean not of individual cities and states, but at least by region.

JW Yes.

VM You know, it really cannot be easily thought of as a global industry.

JW No, it cannot.

VM Interesting.

JW It must be because you find a totally different kind of signage, for example, if you go to Paris, than found in the U.S. You might find old-fashioned, fabricated letters out of acrylic, with a lot of that fabricated in Eastern Europe with its cheaper labor.

VM I see.

JW But you can't ship it, because, if you...you can't ship it country to country, because you must have a central clearing house, which is just another delay in the chain. You can't ship to the sign company. I guess you can if he's big enough, but most of them aren't, most of them aren't internationalist, you know, like Patterson up there. He can do anything he wants but he's still got to have delivery. He still, still must deliver. As a matter of fact, he's one of the easier people to deal with. He knows what delivering quality is all about. You know, Jim Patterson up in Canada.

CA So, it sounds like a key to Gemini's success has been offering high-quality products and service. You can respond quickly to correct problems. You can respond to customers' needs very quickly and that gives you an advantage.

JW Yes. And it's not just Gemini. That is how Daktronics can compete internationally. They made all the scoreboards and timing displays for the Olympics in Tokyo. Well, I'll tell you, if you want to know where the next Olympics are going to be, you look at where Daktronics is buying houses. And they buy houses to the staff to support their signage. At a Super Bowl, they have close to 30 people in their scoreboard. And they are prepared for every emergency they could possibly have.

And the same goes for the Olympics and major events around the world. Many times, they have their people inside their signs, if they're big enough, like in Las Vegas, to maintain them and make sure everything works

correctly. So that's service. They ship their service and most companies can't do that. And of course, they charge for it. So, I don't think foreign competition is in the cards for them.

CA One last question a bit more related to urban planning. Some urban planners are concerned about the aesthetics of signs. They are concerned with how signs can have an impact on how residents and visitors feel about a place, whether a place is where people are comfortable living and raising a family, or where they enjoy visiting and shopping. You talked about cheap foam signs that were falling apart and looked horrible after just a short time. In many ways the design and quality of the signs in a community reflect the community itself. How do you understand the importance of quality signage for making communities better places where people want to live?

JW I'd say that high quality is absolutely essential. I don't think it's just a small part, I think it's a very, very important part. We now have in Minnesota, almost every city now has a welcome garden. And that garden may be three times the size of your desk around a monument sign that's maybe made from bricks and mortar. Tastefully done, architecturally pleasing, and it says, "Welcome to Rosemont, Minnesota". And it may say, "Home of the Twins," or it may say, anything the town is particularly proud of. We have one here, for example, that just burned down, and there was an uproar, I think it said, "Welcome to Minnesota," and somebody set fire to a 30-foot-tall fiber glass Frankenstein that was a destination for people to come and take a picture. I think we're going to see more and more of that. Also, there is good signage along the riverfronts that for years were trashed out, but just look at some of the signage you see along riverfronts now. I think quality signage is a very, very important part of any city.

CA Yet there can be opposition from some businesses near historic business districts where communities require that signs are designed to reflect a historic past. Some feel the historic designs are too small.

JW Well, I can agree that we need to be very careful about restricting sign sizes, but you know, historic districts are nice. I know that when you get to

Richmond, Minnesota you know exactly where you are by just looking up at a sign. You can walk up to this district, and the sign will tell you a little bit about what's going on. The restaurant district in Richmond is well known for its really good food.

I do think it's important to see more and more first-class signage in cities. I think they recognize what signage can do to enhance the city. You know, airports have started to pick up on that.

CA Okay, well I think that's all our questions. Do you have any questions for us?

JW No, I'm anxious to see if any of this is any value to you. It's difficult to realize what I think is of value to anyone. Well, thank you for the work you're doing with AACSR, and we wish you well.

CA Yes, I understand they're planning some expansion.

JW Well anyhow, thank you very much for the opportunity and I hope this is of some value to you. We can go from there, and, when

VM Wonderful, thank you so much Jim.

CA Thank you.

JW Thank you.

REFERENCES

- Academic Advisory Council for Signage Research and Education. (n.d.) *Emerging Fellows Program*. <https://www.aacsre.org/emerging-fellows>.
- Auffrey, C. and Mehta, V. (2021). *Telephone Interview with Jim Weinel*. August 3.
- Clark, D. (2013). *Gemini Celebrates Fifty Years: Sign Builder illustrated*. <https://www.alphabetsigns.com/blog/the-people-behind-gemini-sign-letters/>
- Keane, D. (2009). *The People Behind Gemini Sign Letters: Alphabet Signs Blog*. (<https://www.alphabetsigns.com/blog/the-people-behind-gemini-sign-letters/>)
- Shearer, N. (2022). Nevada's Safety Consultation and Training Section Awards Gemini, Inc.: With Top Safety Honor. Nevada Scats. (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2022/01/25/2372924/0/en/Nevada-s-Safety-Consultation-and-Training-Section-Awards-Gemini-Inc-With-Top-Safety-Honor.html>).
- Suarez, A. and Tsutsui, N. (2004). The Value of Museum Collections for Research and Society: *BioScience*, 54(1), 66–74.
- Swormstedt, W. (2014). The Weinel's Why Not: The octogenarian isn't slowing down. *Signs of the Times*.