

**Providing brand guidance for independent businesses:
A supplement to District Signage Standards**

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Abstract

If downtown retail districts are to compete with franchise-heavy commercial districts and malls, their small independent businesses must communicate a vibrant, alternative message through graphic identities. The identity that represents each business is the most important aspect of this message, and it needs to be planned and implemented with great care. Based upon our research we propose ways to assist business owners and communities with graphic messaging and its application to signage by providing the communication guidance that is missing in design standards and sign regulations. Through an understanding of communication theory and examining both positive and negative examples of business signs and community design standards, we demonstrate how communities and regulations can be improved to better serve of the unique communication needs and goals of small, independent businesses and the community.

Introduction

There are approximately 29 million small businesses in America, of which 2.5 million (or nine percent) consist of very small retail establishments (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017). These small retail businesses tend to be found in downtown retail districts in cities of all sizes throughout the country. If downtown retail districts are to compete with franchise-heavy commercial districts and malls, their small independent businesses must communicate a vibrant, alternative message through graphic identities. The identity that represents each business is the most important aspect of this message, and it needs to be planned and implemented with great care. Recent research indicates that appropriately designed and located signage is an important factor in determining visibility (Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017) and retail business success (Rexhausen et al., 2012). Although they lack the enormous budgets that large franchise stores spend, by carefully researching and applying attractive brand messages on their signs, small independent retail establishments should be able to utilize the same graphic design techniques used by larger companies to effectively communicate a visual message about their business through signage. But this rarely occurs. Two reasons help to explain why:

1). Lack of awareness of the role of graphic design

Designing effective sign communication is a specialty area within the field of Graphic Design. However, due to limited budgets, small independent retailers often forego graphic design expertise, going instead straight to a sign fabricator who will then become responsible for making important decisions about their graphic identity. The fact that fabricators place little emphasis on visual communication theory¹ is overlooked in exchange for what many describe as ‘free design services’ if you use their fabrication services. Sign fabricators consider the print type and images to be the main ingredients of a sign, and tend to rely on these instead of crafting an authentic message that conveys the essence of the business. This typically results in confusing or inaccurate messages since the sign fabricators are not informed about the communication process.

2). Lack of guidance from the District or City

Signs serve an important role as a communication device within a community in terms of wayfinding (Calori, 2007) and also to advertise businesses (Taylor et al., 2005). Just as the use of signs particularly for businesses is long standing, likewise communities have long placed restrictions on signage (Jakle and Sculle, 2004). Many cities and downtown business districts have adopted design standards, including sign regulations, as a means by which to enhance or create places that people want visit, live, shop and invest (Morris, 2001). However, most, if not all, of these regulations fail to consider the marketing functions of signage and lack any guidance about the message that is on the sign (Anderson, 1983; Kuhn et al., 1997; Weinstein, 2001). Instead, the standards consider the sign as an object rather than a message-delivery system and

¹ Of the 32 job listings by sign design companies for ‘sign designer’ found online in November 2017, only two mention the phrase ‘visual communication’ as a required skill, and none mention ‘communication theory’ anywhere within the job description.

focus on controlling the number, size, shape, color, height, placement, orientation, location and illumination of the sign (Duerksen and Goebel, 1999). While these sign regulations may contribute to making a coherent and compatible look for the district, they often fail to guide each business in terms of how to promote sign visibility, as well as express their individuality, both of which is critical to their ability to attract customers and differentiate themselves from their competitors (Taylor et al., 2012; Rexhausen et al., 2012; Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017).

Small independent businesses are a vital component of any downtown commercial shopping district. Encouraging and supporting small businesses and entrepreneurship is a typical economic development tool utilized by cities of all sizes (Leigh and Blakely, 2013). Thus it is critical for communities and planners alike to fully understand how they can provide guidance to business owners about effective graphic messaging and its application to signage through the use of design standards and signage regulations. Incorporating information for business owners about developing an effective graphic identity and would be easy to do since these methods are already implemented in advertising, branding, and visual communication. Modifying how sign regulations are written will not only support the independent retailer's ability to thrive, but will also encourage an eclectic streetscape that communicates an important message of diversity and uniqueness for a downtown commercial district as well as contribute to enhancing community economic development and vitality.

Downtown Commercial Districts, Sense of Place and Economic Development

The downtown is the heart of the city as a community, a reflection of its economic health, image and identity (Burayidi, 2001; Orvell, 2012). As a physical space, the downtown serves as the city's historic civic and business center, and consists of a sizeable component of the community's tax base (Robertson, 2001; Walzer and Kline, 2001). One of the features that

distinguish downtown commercial shopping districts from other commercial districts is the presence of small independent businesses that are unique to that community. For decades research has shown that small businesses contribute significantly to job creation and economic prosperity, generate tax revenues and provide access to goods and services (Birch, 1987; Leigh and Blakely, 2013; U.S. Small Business Administration, 2017). However, small businesses, which are the heart of downtowns, have long faced ever-increasing competition from chain stores, mail order catalogs, e-commerce, shopping malls, and big box stores (Stone, 1995; Halebsky, 2009; Orvell, 2012; Flora et al., 2016). As a result, economic development officials and planners have worked to support and retain small businesses within their communities by utilizing a number of different strategies such as providing and improving infrastructure (such as high-speed internet connections, improved streetscapes or small business incubators), hosting training programs for entrepreneurs and small business owners, and expanding access to capital and incentive programs for small businesses (Leigh and Blakley, 2013). Rarely, however, do these strategies include training programs on brand identity or signage, perhaps due to a misconception that ‘brand’ refers only to large corporations or a lack of awareness of how important signage is to business success and a commercial district’s economic vitality (Taylor, 2005; Rexhausen et al., 2012).

While one of the keys to having a healthy downtown is that it should be multifunctional, having a strong retail and service sector is critical (Robertson, 2001). Big box and chain stores often will not locate downtown due to limited space and regulations that they find to be expensive and constraining to their requirements (Burayidi, 2001). Thus downtown retailing tends to be dominated by small, local independent businesses that are more flexible in terms of their locational requirements (Robertson, 2001). It is the dominance of these small independent

businesses that contributes to the uniqueness of the downtown as a shopping district. Small businesses also help to create a sense of community by building strong relationships with customers. They also have a greater tendency to buy local, invest and support activities within local community. Research has shown that more of the money spent in small businesses tends to remain within the community when compared to chain stores (Martin and Patel, 2011). Added to the presence of these independent businesses, are the distinctive development pattern, history, and architecture (often historic), which combine to give the downtown its own individual character that make these places attractive to both residents and tourists.

Another commonly utilized economic strategy related to downtowns and community building involves creating or enhancing a ‘sense of place’. The term ‘sense of place’ or ‘placemaking’ refers to the process of enhancing community identity and increasing social connections and relationships among people as well as to a specific physical place through community-based revitalization projects that are based on local values, history, culture and the natural environment (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995; Zelinka and Harden, 2005). Placemaking brings a space together in “a matrix of meanings” (Fleming, 2002). It is believed that each community is unique based upon its place in the landscape and the people who have lived there and shaped it over time. Having a strong sense of place is the foundation for successful downtown development in small cities (Robertson, 2001), thus investing in projects that contribute to enhancing a downtown’s sense of place has been a widely adopted community economic development strategy (Arendt, 1994). Communities of all sizes have focused on making physical and aesthetic improvements to their downtowns as a means to make and keep them as economically vibrant public spaces (Morris, 2001; Leigh and Blakley, 2013). Examples of these types of physical improvements may include landscaping, and the addition of street

furnishing and/or public art (Hinshaw, 2001). Areas that are physically appealing attract more customers and businesses and contribute to stable or increasing property values (Morris, 2001). To assist with these efforts, cities may also choose to established design standards as a means to enhance a district's sense of place. However, all too often the implemented design standards and sign regulations fail to achieve what was intended. Instead of enhancing community character and contributing to creating a unique sense of place, these regulations result in uniformity and homogeneity that ultimately robs the individual businesses, and the downtown district as a whole, of their distinctiveness (Hinshaw, 2001). Often absent from these regulations is the recognition of the vital role that eclecticism plays in conveying downtown's sense of place (Hinshaw, 2001; Rexhausen et al., 2012). If independent retailers are each able to convey their unique point of difference, the resulting message is that of a 'nowhere else' cascade of offerings, which is ultimately the goal of placemaking.

Design Standards and Sign Regulations

The establishment of design standards and sign regulations is a popular practice to support and enhance downtown commercial districts. Design standards refer to a set of regulations regarding the architectural appearance of a building that governs its alteration, construction, or improvement (Davidson and Dolnick, 2004). Design standards are often used in conjunction with design review, which involves the comprehensive evaluation of a development and its impact on neighboring properties and the community as a whole, from the standpoint of site and landscape design, architecture, materials, colors, lighting and signage, in accordance with a set of adopted criteria and standards (Davidson and Dolnick, 2004; Hinshaw, 1995). Design standards allow certain specific things may be done and that other things cannot be done. Design controls can be part of the zoning ordinance or established as a design review process

which involves projects and proposals being reviewed against certain standards and criteria established by a city's or district's design review board or committee. Communities typically adopt design standards as a means to enhance the aesthetics of an area and help unify, distinguish, and improve the overall character of a district, and by so doing support the businesses located there. Along with design standards, the establishment of policies and guidelines that encourage creative business signs can do much to personalize and add unique elements to commercial districts (Zelinka and Harden, 2005). Although there has been limited research on understanding how signage and sign regulations impacts business success and sales, recent findings indicates that signage can influence the success of a business (Taylor et al., 2005), especially in the case of a small independent business (Rexhausen et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2012; Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017). Research supports the conclusion that improvements in signage and building appearance have a positive effect on business sales (Rexhausen et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2012). However, not all signage is created equal and the visibility of signs varies widely, especially when local business signage is compared to national and regional businesses (Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017).

Within a commercial district business signage serve a specific purpose. Signs are used to identify and advertise a business, as well as its location to potential customers (Kuhn et al., 1997). Signs also help to attract customers, communicate information about the store's image and atmosphere and serve to distinguish a business from its competitors (Berman and Evans, 2007; Kellaris and Machleit, 2016). For very small businesses, signage is often the most important means of communicating with potential customers and the most effective and affordable means of advertising (Morris, 2001; Kelly, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012). In addition, signage benefits consumers by informing them of possible locations to obtain needed or desired

goods and services. Signage also positively benefits the broader community by supporting economic growth through increased sales, income and property taxes (Rexhausen et al., 2012).

Not surprisingly poor sign quality can undermine the ability of a business to attract customers or reach its full potential. In fact poor sign quality does not just adversely impact a business but it can also exacerbate a negative image for an area and contribute to its decline (Hinshaw, 2001). Thus planners and communities need to understand and recognize how signage influences business and economic success and how their signage regulations could impact businesses and the economic well-being of their community, yet most do not.

Instead the focus of most planners and communities when it comes to sign regulations tends to be limited to aspects of safety, aesthetics and the legality of the regulation (Kuhn et al., 1997; Jourdan et al., 2013). Signage is considered a somewhat complicated area for many communities since the regulation of signs raises issues of freedom of speech related to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Duerksen and Goebel, 1999). However, since signs exist in public settings, they are subject to public opinion and regulation (Morris, 2001). Commercial signs are a form of constitutionally protected speech but most courts have accepted traffic safety and community aesthetics as a justification for sign regulations (Jourdan et al., 2013). As a result, state legislatures have granted local governments the power to control signs and other items related to community aesthetics (Weinstein, 2011). While governments may not restrict the content of the speech or sign, they may control the number, size, shape, color, height, placement, illumination, orientation and location of the sign so long as these appear to be reasonable and do not discriminate based upon content (Duerksen and Goebel, 1999; Walker, 2009). However, local governments are under increased scrutiny, by the courts, to show that their sign ordinance directly accomplishes their stated goals of improved traffic safety or aesthetics (Jourdan et al.,

2013). This is due to the fact that aspects of size, illumination, contrast and location all combine to influence the visibility of a sign and thus its effectiveness as a communication device (Hawkins, 2011; Jourdan et al., 2013; Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017). Thus planners and communities need to have an awareness and understanding of how aspects of sign design and placement can impact the ability of signs to communicate and serve as an effective marketing tool for businesses (Kellaris and Machleit, 2016).

In developing signage regulations, planners are typically advised to write the standards and regulations in plain English so that they are easy to understand and will more likely be adhered to by sign companies and businesses. It is also recommended the sign ordinance should state the purpose for which it is being adopted, since this will help to ensure its ability to withstand judicial scrutiny (Duerksen and Goebel, 1999; Hinshaw, 2001). The use illustrations and diagrams are also often advised in order to clarify and explain the standards (Arendt, 1994; Hinshaw, 2001). Hinshaw (2001) recommends that sign regulations should be developed which

- Promote/ensure the visibility and readability of signs;
- Support the local economy and nurture small businesses;
- Are consistent with and strengthen the identity of the community and encourage creative designs that adds character to the streets, district, as well as public and private spaces;
- Protect historic areas, landmarks and public views;
- Reinforce or encourages signage that is consistent with the architecture of the buildings; and
- Encourages well-designed graphics.

In addition, a community's sign regulations should be flexible to the needs of the various types of businesses and locations. For example, many sign standards instituted in downtown districts limit the size of the signs to a percentage of building's façade area rather than try to establish a one-size-fits-all-approach to the district's sign regulation (Walker, 2009). Good sign regulations need to take into consideration the scale of the sign and the context (Kelly, 2010), since a sign's readability is often determined by effective reading distance (Bertucci, 2006; Russ, 2009; Hawkins, 2011). For instance, the size, location and scale of signs in a pedestrian commercial area should be different to those found along a highway commercial district where traffic is moving at a considerable speed and drivers will need sufficient time and the ability to read, process and then react to the sign information (Hinshaw, 2001; Conroy, 2004; Bertucci, 2006). But as Hinshaw (2001) notes, good signage standards by themselves do not produce good designs, rather sign regulations should stimulate creativity.

However, despite these recommendations, upon reading and examining sign regulations from communities across the country, they appear to reflect a desire of restricting business owners from doing something that might ruin the feel or appearance of the district rather than the expected goal of helping businesses to thrive within the district (Morris, 2001). Here is an example of a typical sign ordinance:

Signs should be visually interesting and informative. They should be distinctive and eye-catching yet simple, avoiding cluttered designs and excess advertising. Signs should complement the architecture of the building and also provide a unifying element along the streetscape. The size, scale and style of signs should be determined by the scale of the buildings of which they are a part and the scale and speed of the intended viewer (pedestrian vs. vehicle). Along traditional multi-story commercial streets, the best placement for signs is along the lintel or sign frieze (generally defined as the area between the ground floor storefront or windows and the upper story windows or cornice) (City of Palm Springs, 2005, p. 53).

As this example illustrates, design guidelines and signage standards are usually limited to considerations such as size, materials, and contextual sensitivity – such as the placement on the building. Thus these standards consider the sign as an object rather than a message-delivery system. The marketing function performed by on-premise business signs is typically not discussed or recognized within the regulation (Anderson, 1983; Weinstein, 2001; Kellaris and Machleit, 2016). However, Jourdan et al. (2013) believe that municipalities and planners should treat on-premise signs as a form of commercial communication. Others, such as Kuhn et al. (1997) have developed model guidelines for on-premise signs that utilize the research concerning sign visibility as a means by which to improve sign regulations and educate planning and zoning officials. In 2006 the International Sign Association commissioned a draft evidence-based sign code utilizing the best available empirical research on readability and visibility of on-premise commercial signs (Jourdan et al., 2013). In addition, Bertucci and Crawford (2016) have utilized recent research on sign functionality and legibility, reviewer detection, response and comprehension, and traffic safety to develop a *Model Sign Code*, to provide municipalities with a means to understand and regulate the use of on-premise signs.

Despite this advancement, what is usually *never* offered as part of an ordinance is any advice about crafting an effective message, even though relevant techniques for this are well established in the fields of visual communication and branding (Kellaris and Machleit, 2016). An authentic and unique message for each business allows them to speak to potential customers, while at the same time contributing to an eclectic expression of individuality for the district as a whole.

Based upon our research we propose ways to assist business owners and communities with graphic messaging and its application to signage by providing the communication guidance

that is missing in design standards and sign regulations. Through an understanding of communication theory and examining both positive and negative examples of business signs and community design standards we demonstrate how communities and regulations can be improved to better serve of the needs and goals of both the independent businesses and the community. By modifying how design standards are written, they can support the independent retailer's ability to thrive, and also encourage an eclectic streetscape that communicates an important message of diversity and uniqueness for the commercial district and one that contributes to enhancing economic development.

Learning from Visual Communication

The field of graphic design has long understood the complexities of visual communication, where “the meaning of a message is not fixed and absolute; it is produced by an interaction between communicator, the recipient, and the context” (Morgan and Welton, 1986). The intended meaning of a message can be either *connotative* or *denotative*. A business sign, for example, can denote “that to which it explicitly refers. The denotation of a word is what appears in the dictionary...” (Davis, 2012). It offers no information about the subjective experience that words or images can conjure in one's mind. Thus, a denotative message on a business sign limits its own potential by merely stating the literal. *Connotation* refers to the associations and affiliations that are likely called to mind by certain words and images. The connotations of a sign are the “totality of recollections (and emotions) evoked by it.” (Davis, 2012) Graphic Designers are very attentive to the connotations of the messages they create, and apply visual communication theory to ensure that their messages evoke relevant and positive memories and affiliations from the audience. Without careful consideration, a sign can limit its potential if it is

merely denotative (i.e. *this is a restaurant*); it can also, however, fall short by accidentally conveying inaccurate connotations (i.e. *our product line is outdated*).

Applying Communication Theory to Identity Design

Basic theories/principles of visual communication as they are applied to identity design (sometimes called branding) can be incorporated into design guidelines to assist businesses with their graphic image and sign design. These theories explain how visual communication works – in other words how messages are communicated through visual imagery. There are several communication models (Morgan and Welton, 1986); Berlo's model shows communication as a pathway from *sender to message to channel to receiver*. Berlo's and most other communication models could be interpreted simply as: *Who.... says what...to whom?* In the field of branding, which applies these communication models to identity design, this is adapted to be: *Who are you? Who needs to know? How will they find out about you? Why should they care?* (Wheeler, 2013).

Communication theory is relevant to downtown businesses and their need to communicate with their customers. Using Berlo's model, the *sender* in this case would be the independent business owner; the *message* would be how they describe themselves through their graphic identity; the *channel* is the media that carries the message, or in this case the sign; the *receiver* is the intended audience or customer. This path from sender to receiver to be a simple process, however, it is rarely straightforward. Messages get mixed up, distorted, or muffled in the process, leaving business owners wondering why they did not reach their intended audience. A clear understanding of how visual communication works is essential to assuring that the retailer's message is correctly received and interpreted by potential clientele.

Components of a Message

While each step of the communication process has its challenges, the trickiest part is always the *message*, since it can often fail to communicate if it is ill defined or poorly executed. For this reason, Berlo's communication model (Morgan and Welton, 1986) breaks the message down into its fundamental components of *content*, *elements*, *structure*, and *treatment*. Each of these requires careful consideration, as they are the factors that influence the connotations evoked in the mind of the audience. Examining some individual sign design examples demonstrates each of these four components of a message.

1. The *content* of the message:

This refers to the information, or subject, of the message. A business could simply show a literal image of their product (denotation: *we sell this product*). This fails to tell the consumer much about the store's point of distinction, however; it might be more memorable and appropriate to allude to a feeling or narrative instead. Safran Bar (figure 1) has chosen a medieval image to represent itself (connotation: *we are a traditional drinking establishment*).



figure 1: Rouen, France 2012. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

A fish restaurant (figure 2) might have merely shown an image of a fish (denotation: *we serve fish*), or they might instead choose content that tells a story by using an animated neon image that shows chef holding a flapping fish (connotation: *everything we serve has 'catch-of-the-day' freshness*).



figure 2: Seattle WA 2015. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

2. The *elements* of the message

These are the individual items or visuals used to express the message. Selection of appropriate elements is pivotal to successful communication. One might simply show a bicycle (denotation: *we sell bikes*) or surprise the customer by choosing elements such as a rusty old bike as in figure 3 (connotation: *we aren't just here to sell you a new bike! We know that you might love the one you've got. We just love biking*).



figure 3: Boulder CO 2015. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

A wine store (figure 4) might simply show a bottle of wine (denotation: *we sell wine*) or they might include elements such as wine casks in the shape of a grape clusters (connotation: *we have a playful attitude toward wine; you don't need to be a wine connoisseur to shop here*).



figure 4: Cedar Rapids IA 2017. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

Dada (figure 5) promises an unconventional experience through its selection of elements for the storefront. The inclusion of disconnected letters, distorted faces, and neon sign seem to be intentionally at odds with each other (connotation: *our product line appeals to an alternative audience.*)



figure 5: Dallas TX 2009. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

3. **The structure of the message**

This involves the visual arrangement of the elements in a way that reinforces the message being communicated. For example, Buon Appetito Italian restaurant's signage (figure 6) arranges bold typography in an asymmetric and informal way (connotation: *expect a contemporary take on Italian fare*). Basswood Trading Company (figure 7) employs a classical arrangement of type and image on their sign (connotation: *expect traditional clothing and gifts from our store*).



figure 6: San Diego 2014. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

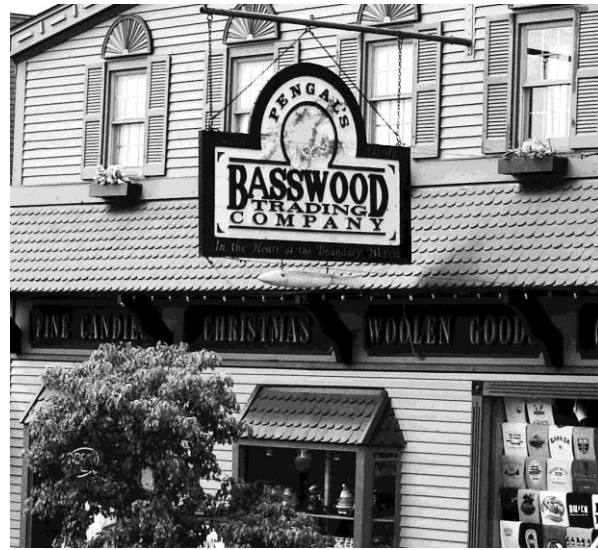


figure 7: Ely MN 2016. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

4. The treatment of the message:

Here we consider how the selected styles and materials of the images, text and surfaces influence the message. Subtle decisions here may impact the overall success of communicating the message.

Flashback store (figure 8) evokes 1960s era nostalgia with its fluid typeface treatment and its psychedelic imagery (connotation: *we sell vintage clothing*). The Spirits Bar sign (figure 9), incorporates historical treatment, using a traditional font choice in painted gold leaf and an artistic ironwork treatment (connotation: *expect an elegant interior and a sophisticated experience*). This is a far different association than is made at Shakespeare and Co (figure 10), where a whimsical treatment of hand painted images, rugged lettering and chalkboard quotations fills the storefront (connotation: *it's really fun and informal in here*).



figure 8: San Diego 2014. Photo by Lisa Fontaine



figure 9: Dublin, Ireland 2015. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

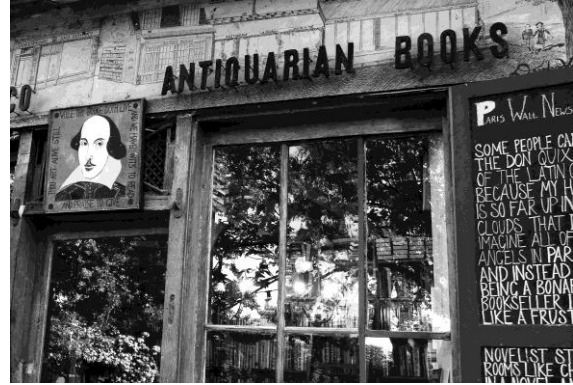


figure 10: Paris, France. 2017. Photo by Lisa Fontaine

These examples of the components of a message show clearly conceived, thoughtfully executed signs that have effectively and successfully communicated their message about their shop or business. However, this is not what is typically seen on the main streets of most cities. Instead we see signs that fall far short of communicating authentic, inviting and unique messages. When retailers receive no guidance about the message they are communicating, however, the resulting signs are a disappointment, not only for the business owner but also for the district as a whole.

Solutions and Recommendations

On-premise or business signage is one of the most basic, yet complex, forms of visual communication (Rexhausen et al., 2012). Local sign regulators must recognize the need for a creative approach to signage both for business and community success. Restrictive signage regulations make it difficult for businesses to be creative and effective with their signage, limit

their ability to communicate effectively with their customers and often willing not withstand legal scrutiny (Bertucci and Crawford, 2016).

Planners and municipalities often fail to appreciate the potential economic and fiscal impacts of sign restrictions on their businesses and to their community. Sign regulations should balance community design objectives with the full knowledge of how sign design, visibility, and location impact business success. Planners and communities need to understand the important communication/marketing role that on-premise business signs play. While on-premise signage is important to all business, sign design is particularly important for small specialty stores to communicate their brand and niche. Signage for these small, independent businesses needs to communicate the “promise” of value for a product or service that is not commonly found elsewhere (Rexhausen et al., 2012). Planners and local officials also need to understand that the purpose and uses of signs differ for single establishments, small companies and big businesses. Small, single establishments are more dependent on signs as a means of communicating their existence, location, and products or services to potential customers. Regulations that allow for flexibility and creativity, are content-neutral, and provide guidance and information on the important communication role signs play may help small businesses to be more competitive (Bertucci and Crawford, 2016; Kellaris and Machleit, 2016). However, restrictive sign regulations can constrain and disadvantage small businesses in relation to big businesses (Rexhausen et al., 2012; Auffrey and Hildebrandt, 2017).

As a result, we recommend the use of sign guidelines instead of rigid standards – specifically simple, general sign guidelines that promote creativity and provide flexibility for both the business and that community. Most importantly, these sign guidelines need to be developed utilizing the research concerning how signage operates, and how it is processed by

viewers to result in effective communication. Retail businesses should be encouraged to use signs in creative, even whimsical ways (Hinshaw, 2001). However, small businesses, planners and regulators will need to be educated and nurtured through the development and use of these new sign guidelines. Fortunately model guidelines for on-premise signs have already been developed (Kuhn et al., 1997; Jourdan et al., 2008; Bertucci and Crawford, 2016). These guidelines are more likely to produce the desired outcomes of effective communication, along with variety and creativity while avoiding miscommunication and the uniformity that tends to result with standards.

Planners need to recognize that signs are a critical design and communication element in their community and create sign regulations that aim to improve the built environment and support local businesses. This is well understood in the field of visual communication/graphic design and this information needs to be incorporated and shared through the development of improved sign codes.

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