

# SIGNAGE

## what does your sign say about your business?

When Dan, the editor, first approached me about doing an article on signage, I wondered what I could possibly tell you that couldn't be covered in a page or so. The more I thought about the topic, though, the more I realized that it's not just about the shingle you hang out to proclaim to all the world that "BOB'S AUTO REPAIR" exists. It's the entire signature that you present to your customers. Just as your handwriting reveals quite a bit about you, your signature or general presentation—including signs, business cards, brochures, bills and your building and its condition—speak loudly to your potential customers. How can you make them talk most favorably about your service facility?

### Eye-Catcher or Eye-Sore?

Why don't you and I step outside and take a close look at the exterior of your building? Suppose that I am a potential customer. Will your sign attract me to your business? Take a good look at it. Is it eye-catching or an eye-sore? Mike Coffey, vice-president of sales for Stout Industries, Inc., of St. Louis, MO, and Lance Lange, president of Sciota Sign Company of Kenton, OH, came up with this list of commonly made signage mistakes.

1) **Buying cheap.** Buying a cheap sign will end up being a costly mistake. Buy the best quality signage that you can afford. That used and abused sign the salesperson is trying desperately to sell you may sound like the deal of the century. But it's no deal if it leaves potential customers joking and pointing as they drive right on by.

2) **Lack of maintenance.** Even a sign needs a thorough wash and wax every now and then. A sign that hasn't been maintained speaks poorly for your entire business. If you can't care for a sign, customers may feel that you can't care for their car either.

3) **Too many words on your sign.** A good rule of thumb for signage? Limit your message to seven words. Your sign has only a split second to impress the passing motorist traveling by at 35 mph. How many times have you passed a billboard or sign on the highway that was so cluttered it left you muttering, "What the heck did it say?"

4) **Too small a sign.** Can your sign be read easily from the street? Can a passing motorist see your sign *without* a set of binoculars?



5) **Too many pictures or logos.** KEEP IT SIMPLE. The passing motorists don't have time to decipher ten different logos and photos. All they want to know is your name and what you specialize in, period! They don't care how many advertisers you back, or what they sell. They care about you and your car-fixing skills.

6) **Strange Colors.** The most readable and popular color combinations are red-on-white and black-on-white. Pastels make a lovely sweater, but they'll leave motorists squinting in the sunlight.

7) **Flimsy materials.** You don't want your sign to flap about in the breeze. Nor do you want it to rust. An aluminum-over-steel or a plastic sign should solve both of these problems. In the case of an illuminated sign, purchase only the best quality plastic to avoid cracks and holes. Coffey recommends signs made of polycarbonates, the latest in high-quality, durable plastic.

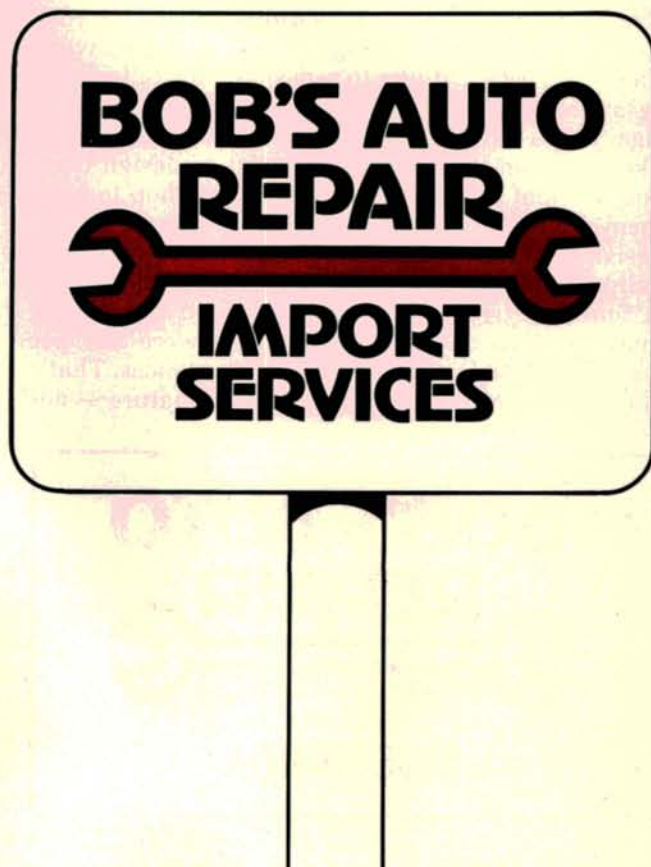
8) **Unsturdy poles.** If your sign is of the freestanding variety, you'll need a pole strong enough to support it and protect it from wind or even hurricanes. Generally, poles must support 25 pounds per square foot, but there are various regulations depending upon your location.

9) **Failing to learn local signage rules and regulations.** It would be horrible to spend money on sign design and then discover that the local authorities prohibited signs of that size, material, or color. There should be a government section in your telephone book. Under a heading such as "Zoning Division," you will find a phone number. Call it and learn what your local regulations are before you begin your sign design.

Let's return to your business. Did you make any of these mistakes? Or, is your sign as noticeable and welcome as the food and rest station signs your children, cranky from a long trip, spot on the highway? If your sign is fine, that's great. But if it isn't, maybe now's the time to improve it. Does it need to be washed or does it need to be chopped down and redesigned?

## Sign Design

If your sign does need to be recreated, where do you begin? First, check with your local zoning departments. The sign company you eventually turn to may know the rules and regulations regarding signs. But if they don't, the burden is on you to know and follow any local rules or regulations. Now, think about your sign. Do you have definite ideas about what you would like? Or, do you need help? Even if you do have ideas, you will still need a sign contractor to help you carry them out. Check your local Yellow Pages under signage. Are there particular ads that attract your



attention? Call those numbers. After all, you are going to ask these companies to help design a sign to attract customers. If they've attracted you with their ad, that's a good first step.

Set up a few appointments to discuss your needs with these sign contractors. A good contractor will help you to identify your signage needs before he spends your money. Look for a complete sign company. By that, I mean one which will take care of everything from sign design to pouring foundations and mounting the sign. Once you've found him, decided what you'd like your sign to look like, and discussed a budget, ask him to provide you with sample sketches. Consider color, materials, and lighting. Weigh the importance of each one before you decide. Also look at changeable-message or static signs, and sign size and placement. Don't be taken in by fancy terms and overly expensive ideas. Coffey reminds us that "the sign attracts by repetition. You want it to be a simple message that will be seen by the most people, most often." Since the purpose of a changeable-message sign is to be non-repetitive, you may want to rule it out. Think about the possibility of using illumination to afford your sign the longest number of viewing hours.

## Coordination

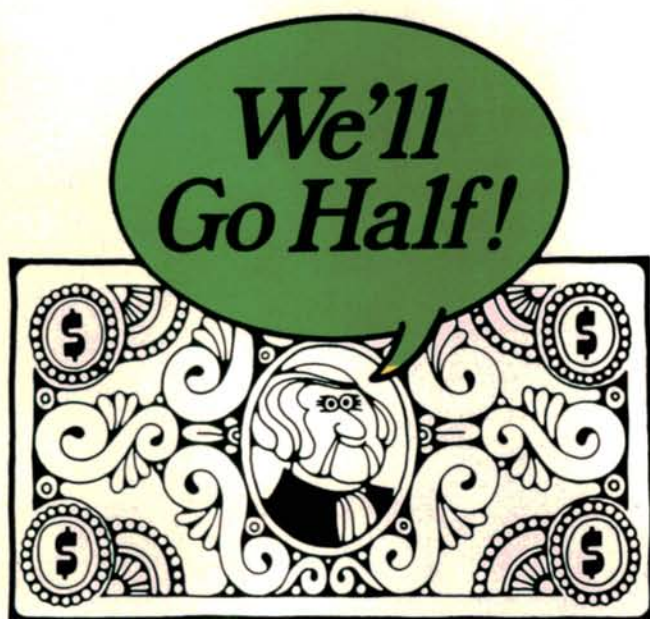
Are you the well-coordinated type — your socks







## Signage...



### Funding

"One thing to keep in mind, if you're concerned about the cost," says Lange, "is that national organizations may underwrite a portion of it." So, if there is a particular product that you're identified with, there may be co-op money available. In addition to co-op money, there are other funds available to you. Under "Government Offices" in your phone book you should find either the heading "Site Improvements," or "Economic Development." In downtown Akron, for example, there is a "Facade Grant Program" through which funds are available for small businesses interested in improving their appearances. Since signs fall into this category, the city of Akron will cover half the cost of your new sign. Similar programs, I was told, probably exist throughout the country. If you cannot find out about a program such as this, several banks do loan money to small businesses for site improvements.

Now your brand new sign is up, and you're feeling mighty proud. You're armed with redesigned bills, business cards, maybe even brochures to keep your customer thinking of you. But let's take another stroll around your building. Your sign is speaking words of praise, but what is your building saying? Keep in mind that no matter how pretty it may be, a gorgeous sign, hanging on a dump, probably won't do much good. Take a good look at your building, parking lots, and grounds. What do they tell your customer about you? Do they suggest that you're neat and orderly? Or, do they suggest that you're sloppy and unorganized?

What do you want them to say about you? And, what are the most cost-effective ways to change the tune your property's singing? Basic maintenance such as painting, roof repair, landscaping, and building clean-up can turn your image around. Yet, they are often overlooked. If business is slow, why not use that time to do some general housekeeping? If upon further

inspection your facility appears as appetizing as some of those fine food places we affectionately refer to as "dives," then maybe it's time for stronger action — remodeling, renovation, change of locale. In another issue, we'll discuss buildings: new, old, renovated, remodeled, rented, and owned.

### Improve Your Image

For now, let's move to the interior of your facility. Your sign and building exterior have attracted potential customers. What do they see when they walk in the door? Take a long look around you. What do you see? Peeling plaster, grease-stained walls, oily floors, dirty pictures leering at you? If that IS what's greeting you, then your customer's seeing it too. **IMPROVE YOUR IMAGE.** When business is slow, give the walls a fresh coat of paint. Pull down those posters. If you must have wall decorations, keep them clean. See that the bays are swept. Provide your customers with a clean place to sit, wait, and read a magazine. Many's the time I've stood, shuffling my feet, for lack of a place to sit down and wait. When your customers do sit down, they shouldn't have to read a trade publication. Invest ten dollars in some interesting consumer magazines to keep your customers occupied. Another important aspect of your facility is the rest room. No matter what you do, this is one area you can't keep your customers out of. So, keep it clean. If I sound like a nagging mom, then I apologize. But I'm sure you won't disagree that you're more apt to do business, and spend money, in a clean, well-kept establishment.

Now you've attracted the customers. They have entrusted their cars to you. Your efforts have paid off and will continue to do so if the final words your presentation speaks are favorable. So, present customers with typed, or computer printed, itemized, understandable bills. I never seem to mind spending money as much if I'm getting something in return. A pretty package, a tidy bill in its own envelope, these things take away the pain. So, make certain the bill is not grease-stained, hand-written, or incomprehensible. Return your customers' cars to them clean. What a pleasant surprise it is to get your car back clean and ready to drive. It's a disappointment when your car returns with a greasy gear shift, muddy floors, and a filthy exterior.

Finally, present the satisfied customer with your business card, and, if you have one, a brochure. If you'd like, try a special promotion. Offer a discount on future maintenance and repair in return for referrals. Make a follow-up call a day or two later to see if the car's running well. Customers will keep you in mind for future use and further recommendations because your sign and building are clean and attractive. The interior of your building is well-kept. Your bills are neat and easily understood. And, your business card and reassuring words are a final reminder that you care about their cars, and their business.

—By Marla Schleider