The Technology of Signage: A Historical Perspective

Good afternoon. I trust everyone had an excellent lunch & that the lions are not yet asleep!

Today, I’ve been asked to speak to you about the technology of signage from a historical perspective. When Ken asked me to speak on this topic, he said I was the only one he could think of that was old enough for whom much of this history was current events!

For us to truly understand the technology of signage and the tremendous changes that have taken place in our industry over the last half century or so, I think we should consider the wide diversity of uses to which signage is applied.

The first and most common usage of signage is to identify a place of business. Over time this has also been the purpose for which sign companies offered their product.

If we were to turn the clock back to the 1800’s we’d see how that thinking evolved. Picture a cowboy riding into Dodge City needing a shoe on his horse replaced. What did he look for? The blacksmith, of course. It was an easy process because there was only one blacksmith in town. If he wanted to wet his whistle he sought out the only saloon in town and if he needed a shave and haircut he sought out the only barbershop, etc.

Of course in the competitive world of today identification alone is not only impractical but also potentially deadly to a business.
Another growing purpose for signage is wayfinding. Right here at the University of Cincinnati we see wayfinding signs directing folks about the campus. Many communities are beginning to use this type of signage to direct visitors to historic districts, sports facilities and the like.

A third purpose for signage and one we’ve seen for years is public service. Banks led the parade when it came to providing time and temperature components to their signs.

Interestingly, American Sign and Indicator, a Washington company, which literally owned the market for time and temp sign components in the 60’, 70’s and 80’s is non-existent today. Electronics have changed so radically that perhaps they failed to or chose not to keep up with changing times.

Today, more and more retailers and sign companies alike are recognizing the true advertising value, hence purpose, of the on-premise sign. The retailer’s sign is truly their face in the marketplace. And, because of the typical driving patterns of consumers it is the first and most often repeated impression that the consumer has of a particular retailer. Therefore, design and maintenance play a key role in enhancing the value of the display. In fact, design alone, even in the absence of words, can play a key advertising role for the retailer.
This becomes very apparent when we consider the **branding** role of signage. Consider the Nike swoosh, the Colonel or the McDonalds arches. Are the words Nike, K.F.C. or McDonalds required to communicate who the retailer is...I think not.

In fact today, in much of McDonald’s media advertising, the word McDonalds doesn’t even appear nor does it on many of McDonald’s signs.

Further evidence of the role signage plays in branding is the ubiquitous Coca Cola logo. I’ve traveled the world over and I can tell you that I’ve never visited a nation where the Coca Cola logo wasn’t present. And, it’s always presented in exactly the identical manner...there’s never a question as to whether or not that’s the same familiar Coca Cola that we get back home.

Lastly, let’s touch on signage as an **expression of speech**. While we may not always agree on the issue or the manner in which folks express themselves thru signage, we do recognize their right to do so. Our founding fathers recognized this right as so important that it was incorporated into our Constitution in the very first article. And that right has been upheld by the Supreme Count on many occasions.

I think we could all agree that signs, in their many forms, serve an exceptionally wide diversity of purposes. I’ve only discussed a few but hopefully those that are germane to your interests here today.
So, how has signage changed over the years?

Since the abstract for this presentation referenced as far back as the 50's, I’d like to begin with the advent of the Interstate Highway System. And the impact it’s had not only on the travel industry but also on the way those serving travelers had to adapt.

When I was a young child my family loved to travel. Every summer we’d pile into the family car and head off on vacation, sometimes traveling thousands of miles, always on the U.S. Highway System. Think of U.S. 30 traversing our nation from the George Washington Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge. We traveled that highway passing thru small towns all along the way. And if we wanted to stop for the night the travel court beckoned us in. Today, the travel courts of old are virtually non-existent.

When Dad needed gas we’d stop at a service station in town…when was the last time any of us stopped at a service station? If we needed to refill the cooler we’d stop at the grocery store. And, like the travel courts of old the small town country café has no place on interstate highways.

No doubt the Interstate Highway System changed travel. No longer did we drive by the travel court or the country cafe, we now wondered where could we spend the night or buy some lunch meat and bread. No more Mail Pouch painted barns; no more bird houses advertising Rock City; no more sayings like, “We're widely read and often quoted, but its shaves, not signs, for which we're noted!” Who might that have been?
No, the interstate system spelled the demise of the travel court and many other businesses but, at the same time gave birth to a tremendous growth of new businesses serving the traveler.

Kemmons Wilson launched Holiday Inn the same year that President Dwight Eisenhower pushed for passage of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways…1952. Soon, motels like Ramada Inn, Holiday Inn, Best Western and the like sprouted up at the interstate interchanges. Petroleum responded with a gas station in every quadrant. This was, truly, an exciting time for the retail community as they responded to this new emerging market of long distance highway travelers.

And, of course, a whole new genre of signs were developed to serve those retailers…the Interstate hi-rise sign was born. Now travelers would know that their favorite brand of gas or their preferred motel existed at an upcoming interchange in time to safely maneuver off the highway.

A side note. I think it’s important that we distinguish between the billboards which we saw along rural I/S highways and the electrical signs that retailers used and continue to use.

Although the perception as to their utility to the consumer runs parallel, as we move into more urban environments planners and zoning boards may tend to lump them together to the detriment of the retail community. I believe off-premise and on-premise signs serve very different purposes and should be dealt with much differently.
The explosion of growth in the retail community had a tremendous impact on the sign industry as well. The industry grew and developed into a much different industry that it had historically been.

Think about not only the growth of the lodging chains but also the growth of fast food retailers such as Hardee’s, Burger King, Wendy’s etc. I remember the first McDonalds arriving in my neighborhood in about 1957. Today, there’s a McDonalds in almost every town in America. I remember Phillip’s 66 advertising in the 60’s that there was a Phillip’s station in all 50 states. The automotive programs; Ford, G.M. and Chrysler all were developed in the 60’s. It was a time of plenty for the sign manufacturer.

But as times changed, we saw the demographics of the sign manufacturer change as well... as they adapted to a changing market.

Interestingly, in those days the sign industry was a cottage industry and today, to a great extent, it still is. The industry was made up of thousands of small companies many of whom were commercial sign painters. In those days a fellow with some artistic talent who could afford a pickup truck, a bucket of paint and a ladder could be in the sign business. Do commercial sign painters still exist today? Of course they do, but in far fewer numbers than in years gone by.
Certainly, there were a number of electrical sign companies, even in those days, but as the market exploded so did their prevalence. Segmentation became real, although nobody was using that word in those days, and we saw local, regional and national sign manufacturers develop. Many commercial sign shops morphed into local sign companies as they developed skills in electrical manufacturing.

As supermarkets, fast food and other retailers expanded the growth of regional sign companies followed suit. Many, very successful regional companies today, started out building the first sign for Holiday Inn or McDonald’s and grew as their customers grew.

As the automotive and petroleum programs became reality national manufacturers developed to serve their needs. Buyers would place orders for hundreds of signs at a time and the national companies would build them, crate them up and store them on a back lot so they would be available to ship when required.

Obviously, this type of a production oriented factory was beyond the scope of many companies, so even at their peak, there probably weren’t more than perhaps two dozen such national companies.

Unfortunately, a significant national economic condition developed in the late 70’s and early 80’s that spelled the demise of many of the national producers as we knew them. Deep recession, coupled with a prime interest rate of plus 20%, made the inventory of quantities of signs for immediate shipment impractical.
Instead of buying hundreds of signs rather intermittently, buyers began buying smaller quantities more frequently. Many national sign manufacturers closed up, merged or were broken up as a result.

However, as the major national sign producers faded, a vacuum was created which the regional companies were quick to fill. Today, these companies are greatly defined by their customer base such as Menards Lumber in the upper Midwest; Jack in the Box Restaurants in the west and southwest and a local Cincinnati company, Fifth Third Bank.

Commercial sign companies still exist today although for many their market has changed as well. Vehicle wraps, banners, murals and the like have become staples. Indeed, many of these companies have aligned themselves with the franchise companies such as FastSigns, Signs Now or Signarama.

As the market changed, so did the culture of industry participants. I think this is true in 5 or 6 major areas, human resources being a significant one.

In the old days the sign company owner probably started out as a sign painter, a neon tube bender, an artist or some other related skill. The point being, that while they may have been highly skilled technicians they may or may not have had a founding in management skills. For the most part they were blue collar workers and that in no way demeans them.
Today, we see sign company owners, often the children of the founders, with significantly different skill sets. Many, if not most, are college educated and rarely, are they technically inclined but they have learned the importance of management and, more importantly, leadership skills. They’re all computer literate and understand the concepts of automation.

Their management and leadership skills are put to the test as they deal with today’s Gen X’s; Y’s or the Millennia’s all of whom respond to very different gratifications. It’s pretty clear that the old days of “yell, scream and holler” are over.

Today’s employees are being pressured by very different societal impacts than their parents were and as a result, their perspectives are much different. For example, we’re all experiencing time compression. The importance of being home with the family is much different than in the early days of my career and the sheer economics of raising a family are vastly different. All of these, plus many others, are giving rise to a very different type of employee and their management.

Financial practices have also evolved over time. In the 60’s and 70’s the owner concentrated his efforts on the top line. In other words, if the sales were there somehow everything else would be all right and indeed for the most part it was. But as automation arrived in the 80’s sales wasn’t enough; the company had to focus on profits.
Another major shift has now occurred as business has become increasingly complex and capital intensive. Now, we find a very real emphasis on cash management. Companies are recognizing that all the sales in the world; all the profits in the world are inadequate for survival if one doesn't manage cash.

A change that we sometimes take for granted but, frankly, shouldn't is the increasing importance of quality. Phil Crosby, one of the early advocates for quality, wrote a book entitled, “Quality is Free”. His premise, which I subscribe to, is that if one can build quality into a product at each step of the manufacturing process the savings more than offset the costs associated with remake later on.

Dr. Joseph Juran worked extensively in Japan, primarily with Toyota in developing their quality practices. Think of the incredible paradigm shift that has occurred concerning “Made in Japan”. At one time that meant junk...today it might mean better than “Made in America”. In fact, many of our everyday products are not even made in America.

And, in the last 10 or 15 years “Lean” has taken on a completely different meaning. More and more sign companies are investing in Lean technologies understanding that the concepts of Lean apply not only on the shop floor but also in almost every facet of a business operation.

Another change is outsourcing which has become much more common. As the manufacturing environment has become increasingly complex and capital intensive,
companies are recognizing that they, simply, cannot be all things to all people. Outsourcing would have been a dirty word in the 70’s in our industry. Today, company management better understands the total cost of ownership and the contribution that specialized companies can bring to the economic health of their own companies.

Thankfully, integrity has found a home in the electrical sign industry. I’m certainly not going to suggest that in the old days management didn’t “walk the walk” but I will suggest that it’s more evident today. Management recognizes the import of their vendors as well as their customers and that if they wish to develop true partnerships, integrity must play a role.

Kudus to today’s sign company management!

As the velocity of technological change and the multiplicity of societal impacts have occurred and as the competitiveness of the marketplace has increased, management has had to broaden their “comfort zones”… or wither on the vine. For many this is not a challenge but for others it’s monumental. The successful sign manufacturer, today, sees themselves in the business of visual communications rather than from the narrow viewpoint of sign manufacturing.

Some of the greatest evolutions in the sign industry have occurred in the area of materials and manufacturing technologies. Bear with me as I walk down memory lane.
We first turn the clock back to 1923 when a Frenchman named Georges Claude introduced a product he had invented in 1910 into the U.S. market. The product, of course, was the neon tube and this was, perhaps, the first true revolution in sign manufacturing that the U.S. had ever seen. It was the first replacement for the incandescent lamp, the means by which signs had been illuminated prior to neon's introduction. It was also the first of, at least, three major changes in sign lighting that we've seen. Today, neon continues to be used although, for the most part, in very different applications than sign lighting, specifically in architectural uses.

Prior to the advent of neon most signs were manufactured using porcelain enamel and gooseneck lamps. If you’re old enough think of the Mobil Pegasus or the Texaco Star. In fact, the first Holiday Inn “Great” sign was porcelain enamel with exposed neon and remained in use until the early 1980’s when flexible materials came into vogue and Holiday Inn changed their logo. We still see exposed neon used in signage although to a much lesser extent than historically. In reality, a relatively small number of sign manufacturers, today, have in-house neon tube bending operations. For the most part the product is outsourced.

The third major change that evolved in signage was the advent of plastics following W.W. II. Although clear plastic materials had been invented as far back as the late 30’s there was no material available for anything other than the war effort until the late 40’s or early 50’s.
Seeking new applications for their products the plastics manufacturers, notably, Rohm and Haas, saw the sign industry as an excellent opportunity. Sign manufacturers readily adopted the product as a less expensive way to build a better quality sign. Signs, internally illuminated with fluorescent lamps, still represent a common method even today.

Flexible materials, notably introduced by 3M, arrived in the industry in the 70’s and today plastic, in its many different forms, and flexible materials are the most common sign facing materials used by sign manufacturers.

The 70’s saw another major revolution in the sign industry with the arrival of the computer. Its first application was in the front office and Signs of the Times magazine ran a series of articles in 1976 describing how Mel-Web, a Florida sign company, had installed not only the computers but also the software so they could gather more data about their accounting as well as their manufacturing operation than ever before. The management of that company had a vision as to how this could improve their operation long before it became commonplace.

Soon computers were introduced to the manufacturing environment in what would become as significant to our industry as had the introduction of neon.

In 1983, Gerber Scientific introduced the IVB vinyl cutting device at the then NESA Convention and that product spread across the nation like wildfire.
Soon to follow were a number of companies that introduced cutting machines for the plant floor, mostly for metals, woods or plastics. The sign industry was coming of age!!

Uniform knife cut vinyl films for application to almost any surface gave the sign manufacturer tremendous latitude, lower cost and significantly improved quality of production. Regrettably, it further contributed to the demise of the sign painter as signs could be produced, trucks could be lettered or banners fabricated in a fraction of the time required by hand painting. Truly this was not evolutionary but rather revolutionary in the way signs were produced.

Soon, Adobe and others introduced graphic design software that provided the art departments and the employees that worked in them extraordinary design freedom. Photoshop® and Illustrator®, just two of those software products, are still in widespread use in our industry today. Regrettably, once again, we saw a significant reduction in the need for creative artists on the drawing boards of art departments.

The reality is that as companies automate the result is oftentimes a reduction in the labor input into manufacturing and that certainly was the case with the introduction of computerization into the sign company operation.

In the early days of my career I spent the first few years in the outdoor advertising field. I observed sign painters spend hours and hours painting a rural or metro bulletin. Then,
in the early 1990’s companies introduced the first of many digital printers for the production of billboards.

Just imagine, in a few short years the thousands of billboards that were being hand painted in studios all over the U.S. were now being printed in a matter of minutes. The total transition, nationwide, from paint to print occurred in less than 3 or 4 years!

Soon digital printing technology, albeit in a much improved format, was being introduced for the production of on-premise sign faces. Years of research and development brought us to the point where, today, I can say that I’m proud that my company was and continues to be a leader in the development of these technologies.

Today it’s possible for us and others like us to deliver near magazine quality print production with outstanding exterior durability and at competitive pricing to the electrical sign industry.

Designers working for sign manufacturers now have total design freedom that allows them and their employers to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace thru the use of creative design. No pun intended but this technology has the potential to change the face of our industry!

I spoke before of the significant advertising value of the on-premise display and no technology has enhanced that value more than the advent of electronics.
Time-o-Matic, now Watchfire®, has been a leader in this technology and has experienced outstanding growth as sign manufacturers all over America have incorporated electronics into their sign fabrication.

Even if we were to accept the most significant role of the on-premise sign is identification, one can’t deny the incredible power of electronics to enhance its advertising value.

I commented that the on-premise sign is the first and most often repeated impression that the consumer has of a retailer and that impression is enormously enhanced thru the incorporation of electronics.

Research has shown that consumers have fairly typical driving patterns. By this I mean that we tend to drive back and forth to work using the same routes; we drive to the supermarket along the same streets; we drive our children to school or soccer the same way most of the time. As a result we’re exposed to the advertising message on an on-premise display repeatedly over the course of the messages life.

This is not unlike seeing the same ad time and time again in the newspaper, on TV or wherever, with one very major difference…when we see the ad on TV we’re not in a position to act upon it, but in the case of the on-premise display we certainly are able to and immediately.
In research circles this is referred to as creating “top of the mind” awareness or what is often described as “tiny little footprints on the surface of the mind”. Because we’re exposed to the on-premise signs advertising message repetitively, those footprints become embedded in our memories. In fact, many psychologists would say that “share of mind” approximates and often equals “share of market” further evidencing the advertising power of the on-premise display, enhanced by modern electronics.

The most recent major product introduction into our industry has been the L.E.D. As a light source they’re being widely used in channel letters, in lieu of neon. And we’re beginning to see their use in sign cabinets as well. Unfortunately, this further contributes to the demise of the neon tube bender. So, here we have the crescendo of sign lighting from incandescent to neon to fluorescent to L.E.D. Who knows what the future might hold??

Taken as a whole, all of those changes have had a major impact on our industry. But there is yet another coming from outside of our industry which has the potential to impact us even more. And that is the involvement of marketing, advertising and design firms in the design and fabrication of signage.

Extremely discerning, some might say demanding, these people are used to the flexibility of design departments and the tweaking of their designs until they’re absolutely satisfied. Even more importantly, they tend to believe that one can “snap their fingers” and new designs appear. So if a sign manufacturer has been used to
three, four or five weeks to build a sign they better decide to adapt to this time compression or “pack up their tent and go home”. I believe that while this evolution might represent difficulties to some, it also represents a huge opportunity for those who can adapt and respond.

So, while I believe the advertising value of an on-premise display is tremendous, I also believe that the economic value is substantially underestimated. I can’t imagine one arguing that properly designed and maintained on-premise displays do not contribute to the economic wellbeing of the community. Their contribution to the vitality and vibrancy of the community, in my opinion, is simply not subject to debate.

Research has consistently established the public’s perception of the high value of on-premise displays as they allow consumers to navigate their way about town, seeking and eventually finding the retailer sought. For this reason planners and zoning boards need to consider their market in relation to and in competition with other communities or markets nearby.

Research conducted by the University of Wisconsin has shown that, with regard to shopping malls, an extraordinary percentage of the cars in the parking lots came from a radius of only 5 to 7 miles. With time as precious as it is folks simply will not drive long distances to get the products they want. Clearly, the on-premise display with its advertising value; its branding value and its economic value are an asset to the community. While reasonably regulated, signs should be seen as an asset not a liability.
Further, this gives rise to a different thinking as to the definition of a market. In reality Cincinnati is made up of a huge number of markets, not just one or two. Folks in Newport are surely not driving to Blue Ash to do their shopping.

Well, the retailer says, “everyone knows me and where I am, so why do I need to have an expensive on-premise display with those fancy electronics?” That also belies a fallacy because the U.S. Census Bureau reports that, historically, as many as one in five households relocate every year...some within the same community; some within the same state and some to a totally different state. So, “that passing parade of prospects” driving by a place of business every day is made up of some folks who, indeed, do know the retailer and some who don’t have the foggiest idea who they are.

Of course, every community wants to be comprised of successful businesses. The city fathers understand that those businesses represent jobs, tax revenue, affordable goods and services, consumer convenience, an enhanced commercial environment and overall a better place to live.

So we need to do a better job of educating planners, in some cases educating the educators and even the sign community so that they can more convincingly and effectively present their story to the village zoning boards, etc. That’s why the work of The Signage Foundation and this conference is so important.
Shakespeare once said, “the past is prologue”. So what does the future hold for those of us in this exciting industry?

First of all, we have to ask ourselves is a sign a sign or is it an advertising display? I believe the answer is obvious and perhaps 100% of folks would agree. But it’s one thing to agree and a completely different thing to put forth the effort to train our sales people and perhaps even ourselves to learn to speak this new language.

One thing you can be sure of is that if we don’t learn this language; if we don’t accept this paradigm shift and put it to practice, our products will become commodities. And if we allow that to happen, social media will “eat our lunch!”

Think about Amazon vs. Borders. I can remember not too long ago there were 4 or 5 booksellers in the market…who’s left? Unless I’m mistaken Barnes and Noble may be the only one.

None of us would dispute the idea that signs are critical to a successful business. Many national retail companies include the possibility of adequate signage in their real estate models. Signage is so important that these companies will not buy a piece of real estate if adequate signage is not possible.
So, one of the challenges ahead is to find ways to encourage the planning community to become advocates rather than adversaries. We have the ammunition; the research is clear; the need is evident, so let’s get at the task.

I believe these are exciting, extraordinary times for those in the onset of their careers. The future is incredibly bright. I can’t begin to imagine the technologies that will evolve in the next fifty years but I believe they’ll be mind boggling.

Who knows? One day we might even ask a young boy what he wants to be when he grows up and his response will be, “I want to be a sign man!” I doubt it but you never know!

I’m deeply grateful that I had the opportunity to be with you today and to speak about a subject that’s dear to my heart. If I sound enthusiastic it’s because I am!

And so I close, not with a Burma Shave slogan, although that would be fitting, but rather with a limerick from my own heritage, and that is that it is my hope and prayer for each and every one of you, as you depart here today, that you may live as long as you want and never want as long as you live!

Thank you, very much!