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GLOSSARY OF SIGN TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

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A

Aesthetics: A critical reflection on an item's beauty or artistic value. A design permit for a sign may take into consideration the aesthetics, including how the sign fits into its proposed surroundings.

Amortization: In accounting, this term means the time in which an asset has been depreciated. As it relates specifically to signage, this term also applies to the "grace" period in which a sign must be replaced or removed. In this instance, a sign was in compliance with zoning laws or codes that were then changed; the no-longer compliant sign must be replaced after the amortization period ends.

Animated Sign: A sign depicting action, motion, lights, or color change. Similar to a flashing sign, an animated sign features graphics and illustrations rather than words.

Annual Average Daily Traffic (Annual ADT): The number of vehicles passing a given location each day, an important figure in determining where to place signs if multiple locations are an option. This figure typically can be obtained from a state's highway department.

Awning: A building mounting sign that provides shelter.

B

Backlighting Letter: A channel letter, with an open or translucent back, that is illuminated. Light is directed against a surface behind the letter, producing a halo effect. Also known as a silhouette or halo lighting.

Ballast: An electrical device used in fluorescent lights to stabilize the flow of the electrical current

Banner: A sign composed of lightweight material; often used in a non-permanent setting, such as to announce a grand opening, sale, or special event.

Bench Sign: A sign located on the back of a bench that is placed near the public right of way, such as at a bus stop.

Brand: The mark, label, or image that makes a company recognizable.

Brand Equity (Branding): The intangible value of product or a service in the marketplace, based on the way the business is perceived by consumers.

Building Code: A governmental regulation of a structure's construction or maintenance.

Building Fascia: The part of a building that extends vertically from the grade to the top wall or eaves and horizontally across the width of the building. Signs may be affixed to the fascia.

Building-Mounted Sign: The broad category for signs that are attached to a building; within this category are a number of other signs, which more specifically label where the sign is mounted (fascia, wall, roof, etc.)

C

Cabinet Sign: A sign structure comprised of a frame and face or faces. Though a cabinet sign may include electrical components or support structure, the cabinet sign refers only to the frame and face.

Canopy: A permanent fixture, often made of metal or glass, that is attached to a structure. It differs from an awning in that its aim is not to provide shelter.

Canopy Sign: This term refers to either a building-mounted sign that serves as a marquee, or a sign mounted on a canopy or marquee.

Changeable Copy Panel: A sign composed of individual letters or numbers that are mounted on or in a track system. Also known as a readerboard.

Channel Letter: A three-dimensional letter that may include a light source.

Coated Tubing: Clear glass tubing that is coated with a phosphorous powder on its interior. This produces a variety of different light colors, depending on the mixture of the powders used.

Cold Cathode: A generic term referring to custom interior lighting using a large-diameter tube. Also refers to lighting that uses an electrode to emit electrons, such as neon tubing.

Colored Tubing: Transparent glass that is manufactured with color, mostly in primary colors.

Conforming Sign: A sign that meets federal, state, and local laws and ordinances.

Conspicuity: What sets a sign apart from its surroundings, or makes it more conspicuous.

Content Neutral: Sign regulations that are made without reference to the content of the sign, including where, when and how a sign can be displayed. This may include height, size and location limits.

Contrast: The difference between things having similar or different colors. High-contrast signs are easier to read whereas combinations with lower contrast – such as yellow on white—are more difficult.

Copy: The words displayed on a sign.

Copy area: The area that contains the words on a sign.

Cost Approach (Valuation): A method of determining how much a real property is worth, minus depreciation. This will include the costs of construction as well as softer costs such as interest paid and permitting fees. In signage, this also includes the message delivered to viewers and the costs of replacing it.

Cost Per Thousand (CPM): The costs for an advertiser to reach 1,000 readers or viewers. This is determined by the amount of money spent on the advertisement divided by the number of people it reaches. Signs typically have a lower CPM, meaning they cost less for every 1,000 people they reach.

Coverage: A marketing term that applies to the percentage of the total population reached with a particular advertising message. This is measured monthly.

Customer Acquisition Costs: A calculation that measures the total cost versus the potential return, or how much it costs to bring in a new customer.

Custom Sign: A sign designed to meet the requirements of a specific location.

D

Daily Effective Circulation (DEC): A method of calculating the cost per thousand (CPM) of a sign. This is calculated by averaging the number of daily potential exposures to a sign, counting only the vehicles traveling towards a sign's face, then multiplying that figure by the average number of passengers in a vehicle.

Deck Cabinet: An electrical enclosure that provides mounting and a background for a sign.

Dimensional Letter: A letter, logo, or symbol that has been cut-out, cast, fabricated, or molded from material such as metal or plastic.

Directional Sign: Points the way for pedestrians or drivers and can be especially useful when a business is not clearly seen from the entrance to a complex.

Directory Sign: Used in an office complex or building to identify the tenants.

Double-Faced Sign: A sign with back-to-back faces.

Downsizing: A change in law or regulation that requires alteration in size or height of any existing sign. Downsizing of an outdoor advertising structure (or "billboard") requires compensation as a regulatory taking.

Dynamic Digital Signage: A large screen or series of screens which display a message, image, or series of images.

E

Electric Sign: Any sign that contains electrical wiring.

Electronic Message Center: A sign that uses computer-generated messages or some other means of changing the words. These signs also include lamps, LEDs, LCDs, or flipper matrix.

Embellishment: Any thing—ranging from an image to vicinity landscaping—that enhances the appearance of a sign's ability to convey its message.

Eminent Domain: The power of a governmental agency to take property for public use.

Extensions: An area cut out of a design that extends beyond the basic rectangular space of a sign face or message.

Exterior Illuminated Sign: A sign that is illuminated by a light that is directed towards and shines on the face of a sign; also called direct illumination.

F

Face: The surface of the sign where a company's message is displayed.

Fascia Sign: A sign installed on a building's fascia, the vertical surface that runs from the grade to the roofline and horizontally the width of the building.

Flashing Sign: A sign with an intermittent flashing light source. Generally, a message is continuously repeated, with the sign used as an attention-getting device. One common example would be signage used by a state's highway department to catch a driver's eye.

Flat Cutout Letter: A one-dimensional letter cut from a sheet.

Fluorescent Lamp or Tube: A lighting system that uses glass tubing manufactured in standard lengths.

Font: The typeface, or set of letters and characters that conform to a standard designs.

Freestanding sign: A sign that is not attached to a building.

Frequency: The average number of times a potential customer has the chance to see an advertising message over a set period of time, typically measured each four weeks.

Front Lighted Letter: An illuminated letter with a translucent face; typically used with channel letters.

Full Service Sign Company: a sign company that handles the entire signage project, including design, surveys, permitting, engineering, manufacturing, installation, and maintenance.

G

Ground sign: A freestanding sign with no visible support.

H

H Channel Letter: A letter with baffles at the center to provide support for neon tubes and a location to mount transformers.

Highway Beautification Act: A federal law enacted in 1965 at the urging of then First Lady Lady Bird Johnson. The act provided limits on roadside signage on federal highways and interstates. The act limits signage to commercial and industrial areas.

High-Rise Sign: A tall freestanding sign.

I

Illegal Sign: A sign that fails to meet the current codes and regulations when erected. It differs from a non-conforming sign, which is legal when created, but as laws and ordinances change, it no longer conforms to the codes.

Impulse Buying: An unplanned purchase; studies show that as much as 55 percent of retail purchases are on impulse, making signage that draws customers into a retail operation very important.

Incandescent Bulb: A light that applies energy to a wire filament, with its energy usage measured in watts. This is still the most common type of light bulb in everyday use, though use of energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs is growing.

Interior Signs: Signs that are located inside a building, even though they may be visible from outside.

Internally Illuminated Sign: A light source contained within the sign provides its illumination.

ISA: The International Sign Association, the industry's leading trade association. Its website, www.signs.org, provides a membership directory that is searchable by those looking for sign companies and provides current information on news and legal issues.

J

Joint Tenant Sign: Displays the various tenants of a business complex or shopping center and is most likely located near the entrance to the property.

Just Compensation: When property is taken by the government, the full monetary value—just compensation—must be paid to the property owner.

L

Legibility: How easy a sign is to read. This is based on the characteristics of letters, numbers, and characters that make it possible to differentiate one from another.

Light-Emitting Diode (LED) and Liquid Crystal Display (LCD): Electronic devices that channel light through tubes to create patterns that can produce changing video displays. Both are becoming more common in signage. LEDs often provide more energy efficiency while LCDs provide sharper displays.

Listed Sign: A listed sign indicates that the manufacturer has produced signs in compliance with the applicable standards. These manufacturers are identified on a list published by a nationally recognized testing laboratory.

Logo: A design or symbol that represents a product, identity, or service.

Logo Program (Federal): Road signs that provide information about gas, food, lodging and attractions at an exit. The number of established listed is limited to six at any one interchange. These also are known as specific service signs and, in addition to featuring the logos of the businesses at the exit, provide directional information.

Luminance: The perceived brightness of an illuminated sign. The standard measurement is candelas per square foot.

M

Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD): A manual produced by the Federal Highway Administration that addresses three specific types of signs: guide, warning, and directional. The manual includes minimum size, height, and placement standards to achieve readability and prevent traffic accidents. Though intended for public agencies, the research contained can be used by private signage as well.

Mansard: A type of roof that includes two slopes on each of its sides.

Marquee: A permanent canopy often of metal and glass projecting over an entrance.

Marquee Sign: (1) A sign mounted on a permanent canopy. (2) A traditional industry term for the variable-message section of a canopy sign. (3) An integral sign and permanent canopy.

Menu Board: A variable-message sign that allows a retailer to list products and prices.

Message Center: An electronically or mechanically variable-message sign in which changes are made from locations other than at the sign.

Mobile Sign: A portable sign mounted on a trailer.

Monument Sign: A ground sign with low overall height. (See freestanding sign.)

N

NEC: The National Electric Code, a series of standards to which all electrified devices must comply. Many cities and states reference the NEC in their own codes, though the NEC is not a law in itself.

Non-Conforming Sign: A sign that was legally erected and maintained but does not comply with subsequently enacted sign restrictions. In these cases, the sign may be removed—with compensation provided by the governing agency—or be allowed to remain for a set period of years, called amortization.

Neon Sign or Tube: A sign that uses a cold-cathode gas-discharge tube that may be straight or formed. This is generally referred to as neon, though the gas contained inside may be a mixture of two or more inert gases, such as argon, helium, krypton, or xenon. Neon tube lighting is custom designed and may include letters, tubing, outline lighting, and decorative art. A cold-cathode tube has a relatively long life, compared to a hot-cathode fluorescent lamp or an incandescent bulb.

O

Off-Premise Sign: A sign that is not located on the property of the business which it is advertising. Also known as a third-party sign or outdoor advertising. This is considered out-of-home media.

On-Premise Sign: A sign that is located on the property of the business which it is advertising. On-premise signs are not considered out-of-home media.

Open Channel Letter: A letter that has no face, though a clear face may be used to protect internal components. If illuminated, the light source is visible.

Outside Panel: Where two or more panels are positioned side by side, this is the advertising panel located closest to the edge of the street.

Overlay (Snipe): A paper strip or price designation, which is pasted on the face of an existing advertising panel.

P

Painted Wall Sign: A sign painted directly on a building surface. If the sign is a third-party/outdoor advertising display, it may be several stories high

and designed for high-impact visibility. (See building-mounted sign.)

Pan Channel Letter: One of the most common types of signage; each letter is constructed with four sides—a face, sidewalls and a back—making the letter a solid unit.

Pan Face: A plastic sign face molded into a three-dimensional shape. Also called molded face, molded and embossed face, or molded and debossed face.

Parapet Sign: A sign mounted on the building's parapet, which is a wall or railing that runs along the edge of a roof.

Permanent Sign: A sign that is attached in such a way that it enables the sign to resist wind and is difficult to remove or move. It may be attached to a building or to the ground.

Point of Purchase: A sign or display located at the point of sale. Studies have shown that the right signage can have a dramatic impact on a product's sales.

Pole or Pylon Cover: An enclosure for concealing and/or decorating poles or other structural supports of a ground sign.

Pole Sign: A freestanding sign with visible support structure.

Portable Sign: A sign not permanently attached to the ground or a building, and easily removable using ordinary hand tools.

Post and Panel Sign: A sign which uses one or more visible posts and is unlighted.

Projecting Sign: A building-mounted sign that projects from and is perpendicular to the building's fascia.

Push-Through: A letter or logo that is cut out of a backing material as thick or thicker than the sign face. The material is then mounted on the inside of the sign face so that it is flush with or extends through and beyond the front of the sign face.

Pylon Sign: A freestanding sign with a visible support structure. It may or may not be enclosed by a pole cover.

R

Raceway: An electrical enclosure which can also be used to attach a sign to the structure.

Readability: All of the characteristics of the letters, numbers, and symbols that allow the observer to perceive the right message.

Recall: The ability of a viewer or listener to remember an advertising message. Vehicle wraps offer one of the highest forms of advertising recall.

Recognition: The ability to connect a message with the particular advertiser.

Regulatory Sign: A sign used to convey information about rules, ordinances, or laws.

Retainer: A framing member designed to attach a face to the cabinet and/or to provide a decorative trim. It is mounted around the perimeter of a sign face and attached to the sign cabinet structure.

Retroreflective: The quality of a surface that reflects light directly back toward its original source.

Return: The side of a channel letter.

Reveal: An indented detail on a sign.

Reverse Channel Letter: Letters mounted away from a wall, forming a halo behind the letters, often lighted by neon.

Right of Way (ROW): The area adjacent to a public street. Permanent commercial signs are typically placed on the private land near the public right of way. Local codes may have requirements on how near or far away from the right of way a sign can be placed.

Roof Sign: A building-mounted sign erected upon and completely over the roof of the building.

S

Sandwich Board/Sidewalk Sign: A sign not secured or attached to the ground or surface upon which it is located, but supported by its own frame, which is typically in the shape of an A.

Sign: Any device, structure, fixture, painting, or visual image using words, graphics, symbols, numbers, or letters designed for the purpose of conveying information or attracting attention.

Sign Band: In a complex with multiple tenants, a sign band runs along the top of the building, with room to accommodate each business's signs.

Sign Face: The area of a sign on which words and images are placed.

Signature Building: A building designed and/or painted to reinforce a traditional sign's message or display. It may also be incorporated into advertising programs.

Signcentric Design: Building or site that is designed to make the on-premise signage the prominent visual feature.

Single-Face Sign: A sign with only one face plane.

Snipe (Overlay): A paper strip or price designation, which is pasted on the face of an existing advertising panel.

Solar-Powered: A product which derives its energy from the sun. Solar-powered signage may be a good option in certain circumstances.

Street Furniture: Advertising displays, which may also serve as a public amenity, such as a bus bench. These are positioned in close proximity to pedestrians for eye-level viewing and at curbside to be read by those in vehicles.

T

Target Audience: The most desirable consumer for a particular product or service.

Temporary Sign: Any sign intended to be used for a limited period of time, not for a permanent installation.

Time-and-Temperature Display: A variable-message sign that displays current time and temperature in a stationary or alternating manner. Some also display simple messages.

Tourist-Oriented Directional Signs (TODs): A federal sign program that provides business identification and directional information for businesses and activities that appeal to travelers. Sign content is limited to the identification of the business, service or activity, and directional information. TODS do not include promotional advertising.

Trade Area: The fixed area from which most business is derived, typically either the home or work of a potential client or customer. For most small businesses, the trade area is three to five miles, though a highly mobile society is making clearly defined trade areas difficult.

Trademark (Service Mark): A symbol that distinguishes a business and its products from the competition. This may include a name, symbol, word, or any combination thereof. Trademarks are protected by the federal government and considered to have financial value.

Transformer: Electrical equipment that converts incoming voltage and current to a different outgoing voltage and current.

U

UL: Underwriters Laboratories, Inc., a nationally recognized testing laboratory that provides safety certification.

Under-Canopy Sign: A sign mounted underneath a canopy.

V

Variable-Message Sign: A sign that allows the message to be easily changed.

Variance: An allowance that provides an exception to zoning rules.

Vehicle Wraps: A vinyl graphic applied to a car, truck, van, or trailer, essentially creating a rolling billboard.

Vinyl (Flexible Face): A substrate upon which an advertising message is rendered, either by computer production or hand painting.

Visibility: The physical attributes of a sign and its contents that allow the sign to be seen—if not fully legible—at a given distance.

W

Wall Mural: A display applied directly to a building's exterior. Painting may be the most common method, though a painted or printed vinyl substance may be applied as well.

Wall Sign: A building-mounted sign attached to, displayed, or painted on an exterior wall in a manner parallel with the wall surface, and not projecting more than 16 inches from such surface.

Wayfinding: A type of sign that allows users to find their way, using information provided along the travel path.

Window Sign: A sign that is painted on, attached to, or suspended directly behind or in front of a window or the glass portion of a door.

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