



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Your Church Sign Shows 'The Way'

by Thomas Donnachie

We see them wherever we go. They tell us how fast to drive. They tell us where and what to eat. They tell us what makes for happiness. They tell us what we can and can't do.

They come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Their numbers seem to be increasing. And there's probably one securely situated on your church property. Its reason for existence is to communicate some information about your church to the public.

Your outdoor church sign is one of dozens of signs most people see daily. How well is yours reaching the people? What does it say about your church and its ministry? Are people able to read the sign?

Besides the church's structure and outward appearance, the church sign, sometimes called an outdoor bulletin board, can help create a favorable impression about your church. Yet most church signs are outdated. They were erected when the church was built and haven't been updated or evaluated since. They haven't adapted to a mobile audience that no longer walks casually past the church, taking time to read carefully the information on the sign. Today people move by signs in a matter of seconds, and seldom have an opportunity for a second look.

The Search for Signs

The other day I drove past several church buildings to make some casual observations about church signs. Here's what I found:

- There were signs with fancy script lettering. They looked nice but reading was very difficult.
- Some signs were surrounded with shrubbery to the point that information was hidden.
- Some lettering was so small that I had to reduce my speed drastically in order to read the sign. That did not please the drivers behind me.
- Some signs contained so much information I had to drive by several times to read them.
- There were those signs that were not illuminated. I figured they must be day-time churches.
- Some signs were so far back from the road I needed a pair of binoculars to read them. I wondered if they had some well-kept secret.
- Then there were the signs ready to collapse. This made me question the shape and condition of the church's ministry.

Signs that KISS

Church signs usually don't receive much attention. In most cases, it's only after the sign falls down or is knocked down that it gets any attention at all. But just in case your church is thinking about its signs and their part in the total communications scheme, here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

1. Present a big idea.

Have the sign, its appearance, placement and message convey a positive image of the church. It should at least contain the church's name and denomination. Short direct phrases such as, "You are welcome" or "We care about you" will say something positive about the church and its people. If space and time permit, some catchy saying may be used to gain attention and to provide an opportunity for personal reflection.

Use your sign to announce something new. Keeping it simple and direct, something like "New singles group" will say to the public that your



church is responding to real needs. This will strengthen your church's image.

What about listing the pastor's name or sermon title? I suggest using your sign space for more valuable information.

2. Keep it simple.

Advertisers call this the K.I.S.S. formula—keep it simple, stupid. In other words, make every word count. The less the better.

This also means avoiding “Niebuhr nuggets of theological jargon.” Remember, most of your readers will not have theological degrees. Don't make them feel stupid.

The sign structure itself should also be simple. If people focus more attention on the architectural design than on your message, your sign has failed its purpose—to communicate a message. Also be aware of the flowers and shrubs adorning your sign. They may be beautiful, but they may also be a distraction from the sign and its message.

The lettering on the sign should be bold and the typeface simple. The appearance of special typefaces may look nice but they are very difficult to read from a moving car.

As for color, simplicity is once again the rule. The best color combination for readability is black on yellow, followed by black on white.

The Head-on Approach

3. Use the location to your advantage.

Think about the length of the approach. Since most people will read your sign from a moving car, the more time they have to see your sign, the better for you. A long approach will permit more than average information to be displayed. Remember that letter size will also be important. To be readable at 10 feet, letters should be at least 3 inches high.

Even better than a long approach is a signal-controlled crossroad. If you have the benefit of such a location, give drivers and passengers plenty of



information about your church. Reading about your church can be more enjoyable than waiting for the light to change. Place the sign as near the roadway as ordinances permit and make sure the sign can be seen from all directions. This may call for a multi-panel sign placed at proper angles.

And while on the subject of angles, let's talk about the number one problem with most church signs—an improper angle placement. In days gone by when people walked past the church or rode by in horse and buggy, a sign parallel to the roadway was satisfactory. For today's driver, the sign and its message would only appear as a blur. Take a lesson from the professional billboard people—use a head-on approach.

Judgement Day

4. Take a test drive.

With your sign and its message in place, it's time for judgement—the test drive. The sign cannot truly be evaluated from your office or by standing in front of it. Drive past at the normal rate of speed. Does the sign convey the intended message and image? Are you able to read all the information? Ask other parishioners to test drive the sign and get their comments. Also test drive other church signs for new ideas.

Church signs are a small part of a

church's total outreach-communications strategy. Unfortunately, they are seldom recognized for their worth and potential. They can stand as a sign and an invitation to those who are really looking for “the way.”

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Planning Guide

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